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Joyful Games of Meaning-Making:
Role-playing Games and Postmodern Notions of Literature

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"It is the time of the Conjunction of the Million Spheres and that means change – profound alterations in the nature of existence. Perhaps that was our function – to rid the Fifteen Planes of its silly gods and their silly schemes."

"But the Balance…?"

"Let it swing up and down with a will. It has nothing to weigh now. You are on your own, mortal – you and your kind. Farewell. […] Now you can make your own destiny."

--- Michael Moorcock: *Corum - The Coming of Chaos* (1971)

[A]ll three of them like symbolic characters from some irritatingly pompous morality-play whose original moral had somehow been scrambled and compromised and lost and was now, to audience and participants alike, anybody's fucking guess.

--- Richard Morgan: *The Steel Remains* (2008)

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Introduction: The Joyful Games of Meaning-Making[1]

Before art, before society, before language even, there was play. This radical claim, emerging as its quintessence from Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938), puts play at the centre of cultural development, at the heart of what it means to be human in the first place. If the process of cultural creation and development is taken as the defining feature of humanity, one could rephrase this idea in an ironic, post-Cartesian way: We play, therefore we are human.

What is it then that gives play this immense power over the human mind, over our societies, and our forms of expression? Playing is acting 'as if', in a sheltered space(-time). It happens outside life as such, but is always at the same time intrinsically connected to it, as the players that define the rules of this 'other' space and time necessarily bring the outside world with them into the magic circle. It is also necessarily deeply ironic, in Linda Hutcheon's sense (c.f. 1995). Pretending, taking on roles, make-believe, these are activities that are all about saying or doing one thing, but meaning another. A doubleness, an ambiguity opens up between life and play, between inside and outside, between the self and the other, truth and non-truth. This conceptual space of circumscribed freedom is the origin of the creative energy produced by play.

Play has accompanied humanity through history, but since the late 20th century, the quality and quantity of its influence on Western culture has changed until it is now more pervasive than ever before. Gradually, it has developed into the cultural dominant of European and North-American societies: Gamification is the catchphrase of contemporary cultural and social life, and no longer do games try to be more like life, life is supposed to become more like games (c.f. McGonigal, 2011). Like Oscar Wilde, the creator of the original quote, did with the rise of Modernist literature and art during the late 19th century, the contemporary observer witnesses massive social and cultural change linked to the ascendancy of gaming as the central cultural practice.

[1] Parts of this thesis have already been published as "Negotiating Realities – A Brief Introduction to Role-playing games" in: Stephanie Grossmann and Peter Klimczak [Eds.]. 2010. *Medien – Texte – Kontexte*. Marburg: Schüren. 241 – 255.

The radical political, social and cultural changes World War II inflicted upon Europe and America on both the collective and individual level resulted in an initially subtle shift in the perception and construction of reality away from earlier belief in concepts such as objective truth, the absolute, and the unified self towards subjectivity, the relative, and fragmented identities. The collapse of traditional dichotomies in the ethical and moral chaos of the war shattered certainties, creating an increasing distrust of ideologies that had claimed to be the only true explanation of the world around us. During the late 1960s and early 1970s these diffuse developments – analysed and articulated by French Structuralists, Deconstructionists and Poststructuralists such as Althusser, Barthes, Derrida and Foucault – became the centre of attention for cultural critics at European and American universities and a new body of criticism and theory emerged that found one of its essential expressions in Lyotard's *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* of 1979.

Only five years earlier, in 1974, a completely new form of game, a so-called 'role-playing game', was released by a small private publisher in the US – *Dungeons and Dragons*. By 1978 this obscure storytelling/wargame hybrid had sold enough copies for the company – TSR Hobbies Inc. – to move out of its founder's basement and into proper offices, and to be able to afford employees and radio commercials. A new medium was born and soon gathered momentum attracting public awareness so that by 1980 *Fortune* magazine called it "the hottest game in the nation" (Fine, 1983: 15). The next twenty years saw a radical increase in the complexity and diversity of role-playing games, and the advent of the computer and the internet as mass technologies led to an extension of the concept into completely new virtual worlds that today are regularly frequented by millions of players all over the world.

It is this historical coincidence between the slow emergence and ultimately the formulation and debate of Postmodern theories and the just as emergent creation of role-playing games (or RPGs for short) that originally triggered my research interest in this field. Having been a role-player myself for more than twenty years now, I noticed similarities, echoes of the theoretical ideas and demands the leading thinkers and critics of the Postmodern had towards traditional literature: opening the text up to interventions by the recipient, talking back to and deconstructing the monological voice of the author and the discursive power claimed implicitly or even – the

unbelievable hubris of the omniscient narrator! – explicitly, dissolving authorship in a collective and collaborative, a social effort. Bringing art back *into* life.

I have encountered pervasive ignorance about and disrespect towards RPGs, something I cannot understand (in the sense of condone) as the medium has grown up enormously over the years, and since the early 1990s has openly aspired to the status of a serious artform. Over the years I have made many memorable experiences while playing, and I can see how I and many of my friends have been affected and changed by those: We have developed a keener sense of criticism along with a deeper ability to empathise with others, since we would come together once a week to walk in someone else's shoes for a while, think their thoughts, live their lives, at the same time never losing the meaningful connection to 'real life'. We have also formed a tightly knit, pseudo-tribal group, as we got to know each other quite intimately through sharing the production of narrative and meaning, and the medium has helped us develop social and mediatory skills that would in turn help us get over rough patches that exist in ever human relationship. Like the stories we have created, like life – and this is a connection made by Gary Alan Fine in his landmark study of RPGs (c.f. Fine 1983: 8), the group has developed and changed, but it has always continued somehow. Some of the people that reunite around that table once a week now have been there for years, others are 'newbies'. All of this, the personal growth, the growth as a group, the development of critical and mental skills, the continuity and the memories we have created, all of this has shown me that this medium is extremely powerful in its means to affect people's lives. If there was a form of cultural expression of such power, how did it come to be and when? And why at this point in cultural history and not decades or centuries earlier, since all it takes to engage in pen&paper role-playing is exactly that: a pen, some paper, and a group of people willing to share a narrative.

There has not been very much academic and critical literature on RPGs yet, although the situation has started to change since the 1990s and more and more academics pick up on this curious and fascinating medium. I will not be able to do it justice with this text, and even though there is so much more to say and write about it, I will therefore try and focus my attention on a set of three central questions. Like all cultural artefacts, games can be analysed on three basic levels of meaning: form,

content, and context. Each of those participates in their respective ways in the shaping of a given instance of cultural expression, and it is at their intersection that the experience as a whole happens. This is why I have defined three sets of questions, one for each aspect.

In order to understand the form of RPGs, I will be guided by the need to first understand the narrative and ludic process as such and the question of player agency:

> Is the process of textual and narrative production in RPGs truly a self-organising narrative and social system oscillating between creative freedom and restrictive structure, or is this agency the players experience only an illusion?

This will bring up issues of the nature of the medium as such, the problematic localisation of 'the author' in the collective experience, as well as the intersemiotic web of connections extending from a single given text and the social web of participants and how discursive power is distributed between them.

On the level of content, I will look into what kinds of stories RPGs as narrative games, or ludic narratives, tell and why this might be:

> Can the strong orientation towards religion, mythology, mysticism and magic in the medium's contents be seen as a hint to a non-religious ritual function hidden behind the entertainment aspect? Could such a collective, cooperative and configurative reflection of the values and norms of our societies lead to a new understanding of what society can be and ultimately the Postmodern itself?

The focus here is mostly on RPGs as critical texts that challenge or at least address and question fault-lines in their cultures of origin. As procedural narratives, RPGs seem to serve the purpose of metafictionally reflecting on the act of storytelling, or more generally speaking meaning-making itself. They could also be seen to exhibit Carnivalesque aspects of contained or authorised transgression, a circumstance that becomes especially relevant if they are understood as elements or 'moves' in the Cultural Wars between Liberals and Conservatives that have disunited academia and the world outside the ivory tower since the end of the last century.

Finally, situating RPGs in society and culture, the context will help me to bring all of these questions together and come to an appreciation of the impact they have on gamers and their environment. The central question will be:

> Are RPGs a symptom for a fundamental change in the culture of meaning-making in our societies, an expression of Postmodern voices in all their ambiguous, marginal and fragmented nature, or does the medium only provide non-electronic but nonetheless virtual Bohèmes, social and artistic spaces that contain and disperse dissent in a manner tolerated and condoned by the system?

This third and most important research interest ultimately deals with issues of socio-political responsibility. I will look beyond the superficial concepts of escapism that are frequently held against games as a medium for social, cultural, and political expression, and will therefore look at the delicate balance between entertainment and critical impetus that is inherent in all games, but most of all in RPGs.

The structure of my argument - and accordingly also this paper - is fairly simple and determined by the second part of the title itself: "Role-playing Games and Postmodern Notions of Literature". It will therefore be separated into two Parts, one on RPGs and the other on Postmodern theory, framed by the present Introduction and the Conclusion that will serve to draw the two sides of the argument together and identify possible connections.

Part 1, Words of Power: Understanding Role-Playing Games, provides the necessary contextualisation of RPGs as a playable medium by establishing a basic understanding of the central theories of Huizinga and Caillois about the nature of play and game, before I depart on my first (but not last) interdisciplinary endeavour of this thesis and attempt an appropriation of the concepts and terminology of (Video) Game Studies for my research into RPGs (Chapter 1). Since, as I will argue, the two media share so many commonalities beyond the obvious difference in platform - electronic media here, verbal interaction there - insights produced for the design and analysis of video games can easily be adapted and adopted to suit the needs of RPG Studies as well (even though no such area of research exists as of now). Once the theoretical context is thus established, the medium itself needs be defined and

analysed (Chapter 2): Starting with a general set of definitions, I will focus my interest on the extraordinary procedural and collective process of narrative creation that drives RPGs, and especially the role of the hub-player necessary to coordinate the narrative and social experience. No other medium, not even other playable media, shows such an intricate and dynamic distribution of discursive power, and resulting from it such instable textual authority. This rather technical chapter will end on a very brief overview of various theoretical approaches from the 1980s until today that have more or less successfully tried to come to an understanding of what RPGs are, what they do, how they do it, and maybe even why. For a fairly new medium, the historical chapter, charting the development of the medium from its earliest roots to the contemporary complex and contradictory situation, is quite substantial (Chapter 3). Using and adapting a system of classification into six Generations of RPGs (c.f. Porter, 1995), and bringing this systemic and descriptive conceptualisation together with a more contextual one talking about the medium through a history of its production and producers (c.f. Appelcline, 2011), I will attempt to create an impression of the dominant movements in design and play over time, although I am fully aware that it is impossible for me to provide my readers with a comprehensive and complete account of almost forty years of cultural production. Through my sources, as well as my own professional affiliation with the disciplines of British, Postcolonial and North-American Studies, this history and the rest of this present thesis will almost exclusively discuss European (British, French, German) and North-American (US-American, Canadian) examples.[2] Following the historical overview, I will present and analyse three of the dominant schools of RPG Theory (Chapter 4), attempts to describe the medium that originated *within* the RPG community not in academia and that have found wide support among gamers. They should make it possible to work out in more detail what the specificities of RPGs as playable, narrative medium are, and also show various possible styles of play and engagement with the process of playing RPGs and how they affect theoretical positions. The last chapter of this part

[2] This is not to imply that no RPG communities or history of RPG publication exists in South-America, Asia, Australia, or Africa, and I know for a fact that they *do* in the first two of those, but my own restricted knowledge of languages and familiarity with the respective cultural contexts would make it academically and professionally questionable for me to talk about them.

will then be dedicated to alternative perspectives on RPGs that I deem to be fruitful for a discussion of the fundamental nature of the medium (Chapter 5). Once familiarity with the principles that govern the RPG experience and its essential elements is established, I will try and appropriate theoretical concepts from Communication Studies, Cultural Anthropology, Postcolonial Studies, and Economics, activate them for my own discussion of the medium and also provide hooks for possible subsequent interdisciplinary research in other fields.

Part 2, The Power of Words: Understanding Postmodernism, not only mirrors Part 1 in title, it is also supposed to set up a creative theoretical tension with it. The first indication that conceptions of the Postmodern and Postmodernism are (still) problematic and hotly debated after decades of academic discourse already emerges from a closer look at the terminology in use and its historical development (Chapter 6). In the second chapter of this part, the crucial and unresolved question of where to draw the line between the Modern and the Postmodern, Modernity and Postmodernity, as well as Modernism and Postmodernism takes centre-stage (Chapter 7). Following the respective arguments of several of the most influential voices of Postmodern theory should make it possible for a general understanding of the problematics to emerge, even though the absence of a 'master-theory' is one of the core features of Postmodernism to begin with. Based on this emergent approximation of an answer to the question of what is Modern and what Postmodern, a kaleidoscopic review of the most influential theories and conceptions of Postmodernism from Lyotard to the Victoria and Albert Museum spanning several decades will provide a sound basis for the subsequent attempt to bring RPGs and Postmodernism together (Chapter 8).

In the Conclusion my set of research questions defined in the introduction will be answered, using the material that results from my deliberations earlier. I will refer back to concepts established in Parts 1 and 2, bringing in concrete examples of primary texts, that is: printed RPG books. The essential connection I perceive to exist between the medium and Postmodernism will be explained both on the level of form – i.e. the nature of the medium, its peculiar narrative situation (Chapter 10), as well as its social and cultural/textual conception on the level of the contents conveyed – the settings, stories and ideologies they communicate (Chapter 11). In a closing piece I will

then try and answer the problematic and complex question of the socio-political engagement of RPGs (Chapter 12): Are they only games played for fun, or is there a potential for socially and politically effective dissent in them?

This thesis will attempt to construct the medium of Role-playing Games as an example of a deeply Postmodern cultural practice, incarnating the basic concepts of its Postmodern theoretical and socio-cultural context on both the formal level as well as the level of content. It is my hypothesis that the 'coincidence' between the rise of Postmodern theory into public discourse and awareness and the emergence of this new medium is not a coincidence in the first place. Many of the core issues of Postmodern thought inform the very structure and processes that make the medium, as I will attempt to show. And even though it did not start out as a platform for cultural critique and the questioning of dominant discourses, it has most certainly become one in the meantime.

It took film and TV decades to be taken seriously as valid forms of cultural expression beyond their mere entertainment value, and yet today hardly anyone would deny the artistic and critical potential of films such as Orson Welles's CITIZEN KANE (1941) and Ari Folman's WALTZ WITH BASHIR (2008), or TV-series such as SIX FEET UNDER (2001 – 2005) and BATTLESTAR GALACTICA (2003 – 2009). Slowly but noticeably, even video games emerge from the obscurity of wilfully imposed academic and critical silence, as games such as the MASS EFFECT trilogy (2007 – 2012) show that they have something important to say about society and life, and can do so in a way no other medium can. But almost no-one outside of the community is familiar with the powerful and revealing reflection of the state of Western culture that is the RPG *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991), or the insightful commentary on the Québécois Quiet Revolution in *Tribe 8* (1998), ominously subtitled "The Past is Dead, Your Future Begins Now", let alone the vibrant, neo-baroque and 'post-Structuralist' appeal for the power of artistic expression to free the mind and the individual from manipulative political forces that is *Agone* (1999). This thesis is intended to contribute to the process of raising awareness of the medium in general and some of its most interesting artefacts specifically.

As a seasoned role-playing gamer and a somewhat less seasoned academic myself, I do however know that before I can start developing my argument (or story), I have

to establish the set of rules. There are some aspects of my *modus operandi* that need to be clarified beforehand in order to avoid misunderstandings or misreadings later (as far as that is possible, c.f. Chapter 3.3).[3] To begin with, there is the question concerning possible imprecisions in the use of terminology: What is the difference between 'Postmodernity' and 'Postmodernism' that are often employed interchangeably? Madan Sarup, for example, sets these two terms neatly apart and applies the same logic to Modernity and Modernism: "Postmodernism is the name for a movement in advanced capitalist culture, particularly in the arts. There is a sense in which one sees modernism as the culture of modernity, postmodernism is the culture of postmodernity" (Sarup, 1993: 131). Modernity and Postmodernity (along with their adjectives Modern and Postmodern) are thus historical and sociological categories, whereas Modernism and Postmodernism (or Modernist and Postmodernist) refer to cultural or aesthetic discourses or styles associated with individuals and societies that exhibit Modern or Postmodern aspects respectively. I am aware that a Postmodernist artefact is always one that was/is produced within a Postmodern context as historiographic, sociological, cultural and aesthetic discourses intersect to create meaning from the processes of production and reception. Nevertheless, I will adopt this differentiation for my own deliberations.

[3] The terminological problems with Postmodernism already start with the spelling. Some critics hyphenate in order to avoid the 'conceptual violence' of the one-word compound (c.f. Jencks, 2011), I do not. In the decades of its usage, for me the term has become *one* word by force of habit. I can still see and acknowledge both the 'post' and the 'modernism' in Postmodernism without the need for a hyphen, and I do not feel I violate the spirit of hybridity the term itself suggests by using one word. After all, hybrids are also *one* new unit bringing together two different pre-existing concepts within a shared conceptual space. Another matter is the capitalisation I use throughout: 'Postmodernism', not 'postmodernism'. I am aware that I am in a minority position here, but this is not about being right or being wrong, and I do not want to imply with any of my 'house rules' – a typical RPG thing, as I will explain later - that other critics' approaches are insufficient or erroneous. They are just different. For me, however, the capitalisation adds a possible layer of meaning, and I like my arbitrary signifiers to be as potentially open to the expression of new meanings as possible. Consider the difference between the adjectives romantic and Romantic. One is an expression of a general idea, the other a reference to a specific period of cultural history and the arts. I find this helpful and easy to use, and I am convinced there is a conceptual difference between what is 'postmodern' and what is 'Postmodern' that will emerge from my discussion of relevant theory later that cannot be expressed as easily or elegantly without the use of capitalisation.

Besides these terminological issues, there is also a theoretical and conceptual bias I would like to point out in my approach. As I will explain in exhaustive detail in Chapters 3.2 and 3.3, there are two fundamentally opposed understandings of the effect Postmodernism has had on the processes of meaning-making: an implosive, destructive one (silence), and an explosive, creative one (cacophony). Even though these are only the extreme points of reference and most critics and theoreticians actually move across certain parts of the spectrum in between them, I could be counted among the proponents and supporters of the creative branch of Postmodernism, which will be evident when I set up my theoretical tool box or palette later. While for example Jameson's reading of the Postmodern as sterile, superficial and ultimately devoid of meaning (c.f. Jameson, 1999) does not appear to be very helpful to me for an appreciative understanding of the world we live in, Hutcheon's ludic and ambiguous Postmodernism, constantly oscillating between complicity with and critique of the dominant socio-cultural condition (c.f. Hutcheon, 1999 and 2000), resonates much more strongly with me, not least of all because I immediately recognise the subject of my present analysis - the medium of RPGs - in that conceptualisation. As a self-confessed Postmodernist, I am aware of the subjective quality of my theoretical preference and refuse *all* truth-claims, but under the present circumstances and given my research interest, I find the creative, explosive, cacophonic approach more helpful and viable to make meaning of the recent changes in how we as societies in turn make meaning. I am also willing (and hopefully able) to question authors that come closer to my personal construct of Postmodernism if I find elements of their theories insufficient, not only those whose theories I generally experience as unhelpful or unsatisfying.

Finally, I also would like to anticipate and if possible dissipate criticism of my methodology. This thesis on the nature of Role-playing Games as inherently Postmodern(-ist) artefacts was written by an enthusiastic practitioner of this fine and creative art (this is how *I* perceive the medium). Like the theoretical bias I admitted to earlier, this will necessarily colour my impressions of the medium, its elements, processes, and texts, the people creating and playing it. Dispersed throughout the text, anecdotal material will be used that I know does not and cannot constitute evidence in the sense of the scientific method. There is, however, good practical

reason for my violation of the dictum of scientific objectivity, besides my theoretical position as a Postmodernist that denies the existence of true objectivity in the first place. Role-playing Games are, as the name already suggests, games where participants assume fictitious identities and personalities and play these roles (c.f. Chapters 2.2 and 2.4). As cooperative games, RPGs are interactive and driven by the players' freedom to make meaningful decisions within the game world - this is called 'agency' in Game Studies. As performed procedural narratives, RPGs draw their players into the game world through identification and the experience of flow – this is what 'immersion' is. In order to experience agency and immersion, to understand them and the immense power they hold over the individual, one has to participate in an RPG. Observing what goes on from the outside will not only make it impossible for a researcher to talk meaningfully about the experience (since agency and immersion are essential to it), it will – and here is the first instance of the anecdotal 'evidence' I announced earlier – also deeply affect and change, sometimes even destroy the experience for everyone involved. Like in quantum mechanics, a researcher wanting to observe the *actual* processes of the medium RPG will alter these processes by the mere fact of his or her observing them and therefore come to erroneous conclusions about the object of his investigations. In order to avoid this effect (or at least minimise it), I used the method of participant observation for my research (c.f. Spradley, 1980). I am not the first academic interested in RPGs faced with this conundrum (c.f. Fine, 1983: xi - xiv), nor will I be the last.

Closely related to this issue is the question why I did not use transcripts or recordings as textual 'evidence', and once again the answer lies in the very nature of the medium or, to use a metaphorical expression, 'where RPGs happen'. First of all, by making notes or recording the audio and/or video of a gaming session, a researcher will not get a record of an *RPG*, he or she will get a *record* of an RPG. The textuality of RPGs is dynamic, procedural, collective, oral, and ephemeral; a transcript is static, finalised, individual, written/printed, and lasting. The written transcription of oral storytelling is an age-old problem in studying cultures. Some representatives of the Canadian First Nations, such as Dr. Richard Atleo (Atleo, 2009), claim that writing a story down 'kills' it, i.e. withdraws it from the constant and on-going process of change that is life. As a regular participant in RPGs, I can understand this idea and

where it comes from. Playing an RPG is the *process* of creating a shared narrative. By trying to transpose it to another medium (writing, print, video-, or audio recordings), it ceases to be an RPG. The essence, the 'magic' of the medium is gone. Strictly speaking, this is then no longer an RPG. One could actually make a good point about how this medium, by its very nature, defies the Modern(-ist) concept of scientific objectivity, tapping into pre-Modern ideas about narrative, truth, reality, and identity, and by re-contextualising them in a Postmodern setting, becomes a deeply Postmodern medium, maybe even the most Postmodern medium available in contemporary culture.

I will develop these ideas further later on in my argument, but it is essential that the framework, the context of this thesis is fully established before I can engage in the process of meaning-making myself. I sincerely hope that by the end of my conclusions this seemingly arcane medium and its, in my opinion, existential connection to the Postmodern condition are comprehensible. And maybe, just maybe, this thesis also acts as an impulse for some to pick up an RPG, gather a small group of people they feel comfortable with, and engage in the joyful games of meaning-making themselves.

In his introduction to *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* (1992), Mark Rein•Hagen[4] observes the quintessential connection between art and life in RPGs and the unique power of the medium to affect people quite keenly:

> What you hold in your hands is a game of make-believe, of storytelling. It will allow you to assume the role of a Werewolf, a tortured creature of rage and pride, and to tell stories about your adventures. In the end, however, this game is more about you than it is about Werewolves, for it is of you that the stories are told.
>
> [...]
>
> These stories may well be grimmer and darker than the fairy tales that you might remember (though those too were rather grim if you think back), and they will likely capture your imagination and involve you far more deeply than any play or movie. This is because you're *inside* the story as an active participant, not just an observer. It is an experience unlike any other.
>
> (Rein•Hagen et al., 1992: 21)

[4] This is *supposed* to be a dot, he is a bit of an eccentric.

It quite *is*, and I will try and explain, as well as I can, why this might be the case over the following pages. But going beyond this narrow focus, understanding RPGs could be of relevance on a more general socio-cultural level also: If play is the motor of cultural development, understanding play is understanding culture. And if a sound argument for RPGs as quintessentially Postmodern artefacts can be made – a narrative space where Huizinga meets Hutcheon if so to say – then understanding RPGs beyond their mere entertainment value would mean understanding Postmodernism better and the power they both hold over the individual, society, and their mutual relationship. This is what these joyful games of meaning-making could teach us.

Part 1 – Words of Power: Understanding Role-playing Games

The central aphorism in Will Hindmarch and Jeff Tidball's kaleidoscopic collection of gaming wisdom *Things We Think About Games* (2008) is the brief and succinct "Know why you play games" (2008: 101), a fact that is underlined subtly but openly by the number 101 that is attributed to it. In a nutshell (thus the 101), this is what gaming is all about: reflecting upon your motivations, finding a group that will let you live them out, and then behaving accordingly in the game space that is created in order to find satisfaction and fulfilment.

Before I can take the step onto the metalevel of Postmodern literary and cultural theory and follow Hindmarch and Tidball's advice trying to explain how, in my opinion, there is a good argument to be made about conceptual and experiential connections between this set of theories and the practice of role-playing gaming, I will have to create a basic understanding of what games in general, and especially role-playing games, are (definitions), how they work (systemic descriptions), and why we as a species engage in such an activity that might seem like an utter waste of time if survival in primary reality is the only criterion used for 'meaningful' action (sociological and cultural context). A historical overview of the development of the relatively new medium of RPGs, as well as an introduction to existing theoretical approaches from within and outside of the gaming community will help to further establish the object of my investigation.

1 – Homo Ludens: Theories of Play From Huizinga to Game Studies

It is neigh impossible to write meaningfully about games without taking into consideration Johan Huizinga's essential contribution to Game Studies in his seminal study *Homo Ludens* (1938) whose subtitle "A Study of the Play-Element in Culture", or even more so "*Vom Ursprung der Kultur im Spiel*" in the German translation (2011: 3), already hints at the, according to the author, ontological connection between culture, as the quintessentially human endeavour, and play.

1.1 – Huizinga: The Origin of Culture in Play

"Play is older than culture", Huizinga starts his deliberations on the nature and significance of play in and for culture, "for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing" (1971: 1). It is important to notice that the author here uses the term 'play' and not 'game', and the reasons for that choice will become apparent later with the definitions for these concepts that are closely related but also distinct in meaning. Even if play (unlike games I would argue) is, according to Huizinga, not only a human activity, it is also not only mindless escapism: "It is a *significant* function – that is to say, there is some sense to it. In play, there is something 'at play' which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something" (ibid.). Play thus goes beyond the requirements of existence in primary reality (or 'real life' in a more materialistic terminology), beyond the basic needs for food, shelter, and clothing, and beyond issues of social recognition and status, as it opens up a secondary, or sometimes even a tertiary reality that is given existence and meaning by purely symbolic exchanges, proliferating the meanings contained within and shaping the semiosphere. Play establishes a framework separate from that of everyday existence, but it is not devoid of meaningful interactions with it. This is why culture, using Huizinga's argument, needs the free space of play, even though play – as he shows with his animal example – does not require culture.

Another central aspect of play that the author brings up early on in his argument is its enormous power over the player, an element that is essential to an understanding of RPGs, their function and (possible) impact: "This intensity of, and absorption in, play finds no explanation in biological analysis. Yet, in this intensity, this absorption, this power of maddening, lies the very essence, the primordial quality of play" (1971: 2). When Huizinga speaks of intensity and absorption as the essence of play, this clearly sets up Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as his spiritual or ideological inheritor with his concept of the 'flow', exhaustively described in his eponymous book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990). Going beyond the sphere of play and games

and taking it into the everyday lives and actions of people, Csikszentmihalyi defines the experience of flow as follows:

> The optimal state of inner experience is one in which there is *order in consciousness*. This happens when psychic energy – or attention – is invested in realistic goals, and when skills match the opportunities for action. […] 'Flow' is the way people describe their state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for its own sake.
> (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 6)

This sense of intrinsic motivation that flow produces, is already present in Huizinga, when he objects to purely biological and evolutionary models of understanding play. Play does not have to fulfil a purpose in primary reality, it brings forth its very own meanings, value systems and relational frameworks - the "power of maddening", of behaviour according to a 'non-normal' or 'non-real' set of rules. And yet it *can* do so, if the players engaged in the activity agree upon such a motivation and participate accordingly.

Since this power of play has always been very attractive to human beings, we have kept it alive and integrated it into the cultures we have created since the development of civilization. So it is that Huizinga argues that the propensity towards play is a human universal, the existence of "a well-defined quality of action which is different from 'ordinary life' […], as a 'significant form', as a social function" (1971: 4). He goes on to claim that the "great archetypal activities of human society are all permeated with play from the start" (ibid.), be it language, or the general processes of meaning-making and conceptualisation in the semiosphere, a "second, poetic world alongside the world of nature" (ibid.), through it. On a secondary and tertiary level, Huizinga extends this omnipresence of play into the spheres of myth and ritual, where "the great instinctive forces of civilized life have their origin: law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom, and science. All are rooted in the primaeval [sic] soil of play" (1971: 4). Thus, even though it predates civilization and is not exclusive to human behaviour, play is constructed as the nucleus, or better even the motor of human civilization. And play is, according to Huizinga, what ultimately brought forth language, society, and art. It is the power of immersion or flow and the

motivation they provide, as well as the thinking beyond existing structures that make play the energetic, creative space at the origin of human civilisation.

Ironically, however, play (and games for that matter) are frequently seen as the opposite of seriousness, a position fiercely attacked by Huizinga who comes to the conclusion that "[p]lay lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly, and equally outside those of truth and falsehood, good and evil" (1971: 6). Transcending or rather existing in the space between these easy dichotomies, play is not about either/or, it is more about both/and, and this is one of the central theoretical axes that tie play and games together with the Postmodern experience and the demands of Postmodern theory, as I will show in exhaustive detail in the second chapter. Games are not serious or unserious, they are not true or false, good or evil, they are *both* serious *and* unserious, true *and* false, good *and* evil, to a more or less intensive degree depending on the context, the participants, and even the point of time observed in a given ludic process. Games are thus contextual and procedural, which makes them inherently amoral, not in the popular sense of 'preferring vice over virtue', but more in a sense expressed by the OED definition: "Not within the sphere of moral sense; not to be characterized as either good or bad; non-moral" (OED online). This intriguing circumstance is remarked upon by Huizinga himself when he writes: "Although it [i.e. play] is a non-material activity it has no moral function. The valuations of vice and virtue do not apply here" (1971: 6). Even though this aspect of play makes it highly suspicious to philosophies that are grounded on metaphysical truth-claims (such as religions, ironically including atheism, or political ideologies), it has logically taken a central position in Postmodern cultural practice that refuses answers in favour of asking questions.

The same non-answer Huizinga gives to the question of the morality of play, he also provides for the aesthetical qualities of the activity: "Many and close are the links that connect play with beauty. All the same we cannot say that beauty is inherent in play as such" (1971: 6). Play can be an aesthetically pleasing, or even artistic activity, but this is not necessarily the case either. Just as it can, but does not have to produce moments of truth, play can but does not have to produce instances of beauty. Where is the beauty in a game of poker? But things already get less clear-cut with Chess, let alone physical games such as soccer, or narrative games such as RPGs.

Ultimately, Huizinga's attempt at a definition of play from outside the sphere of play must come to the only possible conclusion:

> [P]lay is a function of the living [sic], but is not susceptible of exact definition either logically, biologically, or aesthetically. The play-concept must always remain distinct from all the other forms of thought in which we express the structure of social and mental life. Hence we shall have to confine ourselves to describing the main characteristics of play.
> (Huizinga, 1971: 7)

He also furthermore restricts his subsequent investigation to what he calls "the higher forms of play", or "social play", in opposition to the "more primitive play of infants and young animals" (ibid.), because they are "more distinct and articulate in form and their features more various and conspicuous" (ibid.). The more systemic and abstract quality of social play thus allows for an easier and more productive analysis, while primitive play sooner or later encounters the dead end of the "irreducible quality of pure playfulness" (ibid.). Huizinga's category of social play is not equivalent to games, it is of a higher conceptual order and thus includes social activities such as "contests and races, […] performances and exhibitions, […] dancing and music, pageants, masquerades and tournaments" (ibid.).

In order to grasp the complexity of the concept, Huizinga sets up a catalogue of the basic characteristics of play (c.f. Table 1):

Play has to be …	***What does it mean?***
…voluntary (a)	Freedom vs. necessity
… disinterested (b)	Separated from life
… limited (c)	Circumscribed in time and space
… defined by rules (d)	Structured experience
… secret (e)	In-group activity

Table 1: *Huizinga's Characteristics of Play (c.f. Huizinga, 1971: 7 - 12)*

It starts with the most essential element (Table 1, a): "First and foremost, then, all play is a voluntary activity. Play to order is no longer play: it could at best be but a

forcible imitation of it. By this quality of freedom alone, play marks itself off from the course of the natural process" (Huizinga, 1971: 7). While other human activities are driven by biological (food, shelter, sexuality) or social necessity (earning a living, establishing and maintaining status or social relationships), play is a purely optional behaviour. Participants engage in play because they choose to do so, and they are free to quit the experience at their leisure. Even though social play cannot and does not permit absolute freedom, because social activities always necessitate rules and the binding forces of social relations, it is still done during 'free time', it is *otium*, to use a Latin term. When play becomes a task, it becomes work and ceases to be play, as play is quintessentially defined by the fact "that it is free, is in fact freedom" (1971: 7). This conceptual connection between play and freedom, that is already rooted in language and our understanding of the term 'play' in English (or '*Spiel*' in German for that matter), is also essential to Eric Zimmerman's attempt at a definition that I will come back to later in this chapter (c.f. Zimmerman, 2004).

The second dimension in Huizinga's definition of play is – as he explains himself – closely related to the first one (Table 1, b): "[P]lay is not 'ordinary' or 'real' life. It is rather a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own" (1971: 7). The result of this separation between primary and the secondary realities created, akin to Coleridge's 'willing suspension of disbelief' (c.f. Coleridge, 1973), is what the author calls the "*disinterestedness* of play" as a "temporary activity satisfying in itself and ending there" (ibid.). Motivation to play is largely provided within the framework of the activity, even though there can also be external, social factors motivating participation, and the consequences of actions are also only applicable within the game space. Yet, Huizinga does not argue for anti-social or asocial play: "It [i.e. play] adorns life, amplifies it and is to that extent a necessity both for the individual – as a life function – and for society by reason of the meaning it contains, its significance, its expressive value, its spiritual and social associations, in short, as a culture function" (Huizinga, 1971: 8 – 9). Even though play happens on an ontological level different from 'real life', namely in the semiosphere of shared cultural significance, the meaning it produces on both the individual and communal level, as well as the relationships that result from engaging in these activities together as a group, add to 'life', enriching it.

Unlike 'real life', and this is Huizinga's third dimension (Table 1, c), play is also defined by "its secludedness, its limitedness" in locality and duration: "It is 'played out' within certain limits of time and place. It contains its own course and meaning. Play begins, and then, at a certain moment, it is 'over'. It plays itself to an end" (1971: 9). Even though one could argue that life itself shares these qualities of local and temporal limitation on a much larger scope, not only is its limitation in time a much stronger one, play, just like ritual, also happens in an 'other space', "within a play-ground, marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course", these play-grounds act as "forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain" (ibid.). This spatial separation can be a physical one, just as a football pitch, or a game board, but it can also be a conceptual, a virtual space, such as the audio-visual narrative architecture of a video game, or the collaborative narration of an RPG. When play invades primary reality, it again ceases to be play and it becomes something else: political, ideological or commercial manipulation, designed not to give players the freedom of choice that is the very first condition of gaming, but to shape, restrict, and ultimately take away this freedom of choice *outside* of the playing environment, in primary reality. This is a violation of the disinterestedness Huizinga claims to be at the heart of play, and even though it might appease critics who constantly argue that games are dangerous because they show a lack of moral rectitude, it destroys play and reduces it to a technique of conditioning, no matter if benevolent or malevolent. Using Huizinga's argument, I would claim that *this* is the real danger: the *abuse* of the power of play. In order for a play-ground to remain a play-ground and not become a battle-ground of competing ideologies, we need to be clear about the nature of these 'worlds apart': "All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart" (Huizinga, 1971: 9).

Important for the nature of social play, and structuring the play-ground and the experiences it provides, are the rules that regulate and restrict player behaviour, Huizinga's fourth dimension of play that he sees in its effects on the experience (Table 1, d): "Inside the play-ground an absolute and peculiar order reigns. Here we come across another, very positive feature of play: it creates order, *is* order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited

perfection" (Huizinga, 1971: 10). Within the confines of the delineated play space, defined by the players and separated from primary reality and its inconceivable complexities, the participants create order and harmony, or the experience collapses. Due to the restricted size of the play space, it is possible (or almost possible) to preserve an overview of the processes at work and attempt to regulate them, as the effects of the choices made are immediately observable and restricted in nature. Also, this ordered space creates tension, according to Huizinga: "Tension means uncertainty, chanciness; a striving to decide the issue and so end it. The player wants something to 'go', to 'come off'; he wants to succeed by his own exertions" (1971: 10). The interplay between tension and resolution is much more immediate and concrete in play than it is in 'real life', as the results of choices made become understandable much quicker. In order to preserve a fair experience, rules are essential so that circumstances are the same for everyone, or at least clearly delineated before choices are made: "All play has its rules. They determine what 'holds' in the temporary world circumscribed by play. The rules of a game are absolutely binding and allow no doubt. [...] Indeed, as soon as the rules are transgressed the whole play-world collapses. The game is over" (Huizinga, 1971: 11). While up until this point in his argument, Huizinga has always used the term 'play', as soon as he talks about the rules organising the experience he switches to the use of 'game'. In anticipation of Zimmerman's definitions of 'play' and 'game' (2004: 159 – 160), which I would like to propose and adopt myself later in this chapter, it is the rules that make up the essential difference between (informal) play and (formal) games, even though not all formal play is necessarily also a game (think of sports events, dancing, or theatrical performances, just to name a few examples).

The fifth and last aspect in Huizinga's definition of social play is the social context, exemplified by a tendency towards secrecy and in-group distinction from non-players (Table 1, e). "The exceptional and special position of play is most tellingly illustrated by the fact that it loves to surround itself with an air of secrecy", he explains (1971: 12). Like on an ontological and a spatio-temporal level, on a social level play is an activity that creates and thematises separations between the Self and the Other, Us and Them, in-group and out-group. As the rules and conventions of everyday life are suspended within the game space and other rules take over, allowing players to

perform social roles they would not normally (be able to) perform in primary reality, a parallel reality is established. Huizinga points out the close logical connections not only to rituals and rites of initiation, but also the counter-world of carnival where all primary reality concepts of authority and discipline are questioned in topsy-turvy inversion (1971: 12).

To come full circle and lead me back to my original intent to understand RPGs as instances of social play, the author finishes his attempt at a definition of 'play' by explaining how the "'extra-ordinary' nature of play reaches perfection" in the act of dressing up: "The disguised or masked individual 'plays' another part, another being. He *is* another being. The terrors of childhood, open-hearted gaiety, mystic fantasy and sacred awe are all inextricably entangled in this strange business of masks and disguises" (Huizinga, 1971: 12). Even if the masks in RPGs are not material, or physical in nature but only words, ideas, and imagination, there is a close connection in the experience of disguising the identity that participates in primary reality behind a construct of a secondary reality. Like in masquerades and carnivals, players of RPGs play another part, adopt a secondary identity different from their primary one, and enjoy the freedoms of the narrative game space delineated by social ritual, rules and shared experience. This reading is supported and reinforced by Huizinga's explanation of the two basic functions of social play "as a contest *for* something or a representation *of* something" that can sometimes also be combined (1972: 13). As I will explain later when I take a detailed look at the nature of role-playing games, they are a hybrid form of game-stories or story-games, where the emphasis on the one or the other in a given, concrete experience depends largely on the tastes and discursive power of the participants to influence the creative process: the competitive, configurative aspects of gaming and the aesthetic, representational categories of storytelling come together, making RPGs a prime example for the synthesis of Huizinga's dual functions of social play.

What is interesting about Huizinga's theory is that even though play is a self-contained, self-determined space parallel to life in primary reality, it feeds into culture and vice versa. "The view we take in the following pages", he writes, "is that culture arises in the form of play, that it is played from the very beginning. […] It is through this playing that society expresses its interpretation of life and the world" (1971: 46).

More than that, Huizinga claims that in this feedback loop "play is primary" (ibid.). It is through play that culture is initially defined, it is in play that new ways of thinking and behaving are tested, judged and eventually adopted into the cultural canon or dropped from it. Play becomes a Third Space, and here I borrow Homi Bhabha's terminology (2010: 53), a connection that will be developed in more detail later (c.f. chapter 2.5.3). Play becomes the place of negotiation between the old and the new, Huizinga argues, and as changes are accepted and stabilised, this Third Space is subsumed by other spheres of cultural life: "the play-element gradually recedes into the background, being absorbed for the most part in the sacred sphere" (1971: 46). As social and cultural life becomes normalised or naturalised – to use an ideologically charged Postmodern term - when ideas, norms and values are no longer questioned, freedom of play is restricted, sets of binding rules for primary reality are codified, and the results of play turn into knowledge: the decisive step is from the configuration of systems (play) to the interpretation of texts (narrative). "The original play-element is then almost completely hidden behind cultural phenomena", Huizinga concludes his argument (1971: 46), yet he does not represent this as a permanent, an end state: "But at any moment, even in a highly developed civilization, the play-'instinct' may reassert itself in full force, drowning the individual and the mass in the intoxication of an immense game" (ibid.).

This analysis of the complex interrelation of culture and play is essential to my argument, far beyond the mere definition of play that reverberates even today in critics like Zimmerman and most of the contemporary Game Studies movement. Not only does it establish the essential role of play for culture, an activity not normally valued very highly in a profit-oriented, capitalist society (as it does not produce anything sellable), it also posits a close connection between play/games and language, as well as narrative cultural phenomena - a fact that ludologists like Espen Aarseth utterly disregard (c.f. Aarseth, 2004). Additionally, it strongly supports the reading of the Postmodern, or rather postmodern moment I will construct in the following chapter, the questioning and rethinking of acquired cultural content in an upsurge of creative, ludic content-oriented experimentation and renegotiation. Play, as the predominant Postmodern/postmodern form of engagement with the cultural sphere, becomes the motor of cultural and social change, the Third Space where it

happens first, and the ultimate democratic, carnivalesque, and empowering form of cultural expression. And in the restricted framework of this investigation into the medium of RPGs, I will try and argue that they are a symptom of these developments, and a possible cause of change.

1.2 – Caillois: The Four Dimensions of Play

Roger Caillois's *Man, Play and Games*, a clever translation of the book first published as *Les Jeux et les Hommes* (1958) that takes into account the conceptual difference between 'play' and 'game' in the English language, is another essential study of the close relationship between the spheres of play and culture.

In his analysis, Caillois acknowledges Huizinga's contribution to the definition of play and a deeper understanding as to how play is not only present in but also central to "animating the essential aspects of all culture: in the arts as in philosophy, in poetry as well as in juridical institutions and even in the etiquette of war" (Caillois, 2001: 3). At the same time, he criticises his predecessor for not providing a "description and classification of games", arguing that "[h]is work is not a study of games, but an inquiry into the creative quality of the play principle in the domain of culture" (2001: 4). Caillois then sets out to remedy this perceived situation, basing his own research firmly on Huizinga's previous work and using the definition of play explained earlier to come up with his own.

Play has to be …	***What does it mean?***
… free (a)	Joy, not obligation, as motivation
… separate (b)	Separated from life in time and space
… uncertain (c)	Player agency determines result
… unproductive (d)	Must not result in material products
… structured (e)	Governed by rules
… unreal (f)	Situation of make-believe

Table 2: *Caillois's Characteristics of Play (c.f. Caillois, 2001: 9 - 10)*

Caillois's definition of play clearly shows his conceptual debt to Huizinga, but his attempt is more systematic and comprehensive. He also expands the catalogue of the characteristics of play from five to six (c.f. Table 2).

Play is first of all necessarily free (Table 2, a), an activity "in which playing is not obligatory; if it were, it would at once lose its attractive and joyous quality as diversion" (2001: 9). This is also Huizinga's first dimension of his definition of play, and both authors agree that this is the *sine qua non* of play: the freedom to play or not to play, to withdraw from the process at any time if desired, and the preservation of the joyful engagement with the secondary reality.

The establishment of such a secondary reality as a play-ground, the separate nature of play, is the second aspect Caillois takes over from Huizinga (Table 2, b): play has to be "circumscribed within limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance" (2001: 9). It is thus not part of primary reality, everyday life, but happens in a parallel space and only for a certain amount of time. What Caillois adds to Huizinga's more basic definition is that this special space-time must be determined before play begins so that all participants know beforehand what they sign up for: Do they have the necessary time to spend? Will they feel safe enough to let go of the certainties of 'real life'? These are essential questions that must be answered before players enter the secondary reality.

The question of safety might look a bit exaggerated at first, but Caillois also names uncertainty as the third aspect of play (Table 2, c), describing it as a process "the course of which cannot be determined, nor the result attained beforehand, and some latitude for innovations being left to the player's initiative" (2001: 9). Thus all play is, by its very nature, unsafe, a risk that has to be taken, a danger zone that has to be entered. The certainties of the crystallised social and cultural rules of primary reality do not apply to the circumscribed space-time of play, and even though this is exactly the reason for its creative potential (and the effect on cultural and social change Huizinga observes), it also has the potential to destabilise cultural, social and individual identities. The players have to be aware of this, accept the inevitable uncertainty and willingly engage with the process in order for it not to collapse.

Caillois's fourth defining aspect of play (Table 2, d) is in seeming contradiction with its creative energy, since play is seen as "creating neither goods, nor wealth, nor new

elements of any kind; and […] ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game" (2001: 10). Taking a closer look at the argument that leads to this conclusion, however, the critical reader can immediately see that Caillois only talks about material production, so at the end of play "[n]othing has been harvested or manufactured, no masterpiece has been created, no capital has accrued. Play is an occasion of pure waste" (2001: 5). It is interesting to note that following this argument, the creation of material works of art (a written or printed text or piece of music, a painting, a statue, a building) is not play, whereas the 'production' of ephemeral works of art (a story told, a concert, a theatre or dance performance) are. This is a very clever distinction to make, and it firmly roots RPGs, or to be more precise: the ephemeral textualities produced in the process of playing RPGs, in the realm of play. It also, once again, explains the hostility that most capitalists and economically-minded people show towards play, as it is "an occasion of pure waste" (ibid.), which *per definitionem* is anathema to efficient economic processes.

With his fifth aspect (Table 2, e), Caillois again picks up a more abstract idea of Huizinga's and finds a clear and concrete formulation: play must be "[g]overned by rules", it must happen "under conventions that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establish new legislation, which alone counts" (2001: 10). This is Huizinga's aspect of order and tension in play, as rules provide both: they order the game space and delineate the possibilities of interaction, yet they also establish a framework for the negotiation or conflict of different interests that happens in play. Again it is emphasised that play suspends the rules and convention of the primary reality outside the play-ground, and so the rules also serve to reassure the participants of the conditions provided by the framework for the process they are about to engage in. The rules thus mitigate the effect the aspect of uncertainty has on the players.

The sixth and last aspect, make-believe, is Caillois's answer to Huizinga's (literal and metaphorical) masquerade and the carnivalesque dimension of play (Table 2, f). He claims that play is "accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or a free unreality, as [set] against real life" (2001: 10). So players need to be aware of their status as players, they need to consciously (not only willingly) act within the confines of the second(ary) reality circumscribed by the rules of play, and they also

need to be aware of the separation from 'real life' and that their actions will not affect their primary cultural, social and individual identities directly.

With his concise and precise set of categories for a definition of play, Caillois manages to build upon Huizinga's invaluable insights, while at the same time providing an easy to handle and sturdy framework for researchers in Game Studies, who necessarily have to start with a firm understanding of what play and game actually are. He furthermore points out that all of these qualities he defines are purely formal in nature and thus "do not prejudge the content of games" (2001: 10). It is thus that they can be productively applied to analyses of a whole set of vastly different situations – from football games to video gaming.

His second central achievement is a classification of games into four basic categories or types (c.f. Table 3), something that he found lacking in Huizinga's theories: "I am proposing a division into four main rubrics, depending upon whether, in the games under consideration, the role of competition, chance, simulation, or vertigo is dominant. I call these *agôn*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx*, respectively. All four indeed belong to the domain of play" (Caillois, 2001: 12).

Types of Games	***What does it mean?***
agôn (a)	Determined by competition
alea (b)	Determined by chance
mimicry (c)	Determined by simulation
ilinx (d)	Determined by vertigo

Table 3: *Caillois's Typology of Games (c.f. Caillois, 2001: 9 - 10)*

But this system is not as static and simplistic as it might seem at first glance, since Caillois immediately after setting up his frame of reference for classification explains that it will (a) not be enough to cover all instances of play, and that (b) individual games do not fall into either one category or the other, but actually are "placed on a continuum between two opposite poles" (2001: 13). In an interesting cross-link, this way of classifying gaming experiences is also evident in RPG Theory in the various approaches to typologies of RPGs and their players. It shows Caillois's awareness of

and reluctance to fall into the trap of oversimplifying the object of his inquiries: "I do not intend", he writes, "in resorting to these strange concepts, to set up some kind of pedantic, totally meaningless mythology" (2001: 13), but he also expresses his conviction of a need for such cornerstones of classification for seemingly very different games to be able to "better demonstrate their fundamental kinship" (ibid.). In his able negotiation between the necessity for structure and the fear of the tyranny of the system, Caillois demonstrates an emerging Postmodern sensibility and mentality, that is also expressed very clearly in his fascination with play and games. It is thus that he is most fitting as a frame of reference for my own investigation into the conceptual connections between the Postmodern and the creation of a new playable medium.

The first category of games Caillois proposes is *agôn* (Table 3, a), defined by competition, "like a combat in which equality of chances is artificially created, in order that the adversaries should confront each other under ideal conditions" (2001: 14). From sports events to classic war-games such as Chess or Go these competitions can be physical and/or mental in nature. The aim of games dominated by the spirit of *agôn* is to get recognition of superiority in a given area of expertise: "That is why the practice of *agôn* presupposes sustained attention, appropriate training, assiduous application, and the desire to win. It implies discipline and perseverance" (2001: 15). Here the players are the sole focus of attention, they are pitted against each other and their qualities are tested as challenges are overcome. The motivation to play is the urge to win. These are thus mostly zero-sum games (with winners and losers) based on skill.

In opposition to this first category, *alea* designates games of pure chance (Table 3, b), this includes "all games that are based on a decision independent of the player, an outcome over which he has no control, and in which winning is the result of fate rather than triumphing over an adversary" (2001: 17). Even if these games can also be competitive in nature and driven by the urge to win, winning or losing is not based on player skill and therefore is not reason for triumph. The appeal here is frequently "the very capriciousness of chance" (ibid.), not the testing of one's capabilities or limits. It is the thrill of not knowing and the irrational hope of winning despite meagre odds that drives and motivates the playing experience. This is why, the author argues,

"*alea* negates work, patience, experience, and qualifications" (ibid.), and he goes on to set up a stark contrast, or maybe even a complementary set of concepts: "*Agôn* is a vindication of personal responsibility; *alea* is a negation of the will, a surrender to destiny" (2001: 18). What determines both forms of play alike, *agôn* and *alea*, is the level playing field, the equality between participants and a clarity of circumstances that is unavailable to the individual in primary reality: 'real life' is too complicated and the ramifications of our actions carry much further than we can actually perceive. Games of *agôn* and *alea*, both in their very distinct ways, provide a manageable secondary reality where players know all the options and can anticipate the possible effects of their actions. "Play, whether *agôn* or *alea*", Caillois concludes, "is thus an attempt to substitute perfect situations for the normal confusion of contemporary life" (2001: 19).

The next logical step in the author's categorisation is the one from stepping outside of primary reality into a secondary one to stepping out of our primary *identities* into secondary ones: this is what Caillois terms *mimicry* (Table 3, c): "Play can consist not only of deploying actions or submitting to one's fate in an imaginary milieu, but of becoming an illusory character oneself, and of so behaving", the author explains (2001: 19). This category then subsumes all sorts of games of make-believe, and the choice of terminology, borrowed from biology, is deliberate, "so that the fundamental, elementary, and quasi-organic nature of the impulse that stimulates it can be stressed" (2001: 20). The motivation and enjoyment these games or instances of play create is largely based on the inherent pleasure of "passing for another", Caillois argues (2001: 21), and while *alea* is supposedly very difficult to reunite with *mimicry* (a position I will falsify utterly when I describe the process of role-playing later), *agôn* frequently is included in such spectacles (ibid.). Another aspect of Caillois's analysis of *mimicry* collapses under the weight of textual and experiential evidence from RPGs, and in this case it actually serves to further integrate his paradigm, as it gets rid of an anomaly in his system of classification: Unlike *agôn* and *alea*, *mimicry* does not exhibit "the continuous submission to imperative and precise rules […] – rules for the dissimulation of reality and the substitution of a second reality" (2001: 22). Here again, RPGs fill a conceptual gap as they unite game and narrative, rules and story, in one hybrid medium. This makes Caillois's theories very

attractive for an analysis of this medium, and there is also what he has to say about *mimicry* (one of the core aspects in my understanding of RPGs later) that reinforces this connection:

> *Mimicry* is incessant invention. The rule of the game is unique: it consists in the actor's fascinating the spectator, while avoiding an error that might lead the spectator to break the spell. The spectator must lend himself to the illusion without first challenging the décor, mask, or artifice which for a given time he is asked to believe in as more real than reality itself.
> (Caillois, 2001: 23)

This "incessant invention" and the creation of a secondary reality that appears "more real than reality itself" both describe the procedural creation and the power of immersion typical of playable media such as video games or RPGs.

The fourth and last category of games is *ilinx* (Table 3, d), "those which are based on the pursuit of vertigo and which consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind" (2001: 23). Even though the examples given by the author are mostly of a physical kind (whirling dervishes or the rides in amusement parks), there is also a mental, a psychological, an emotional aspect to *ilinx* that will be more applicable to my argument about RPGs. Caillois calls this "a vertigo of a moral order, a transport that suddenly seizes the individual" (2001: 24), and he goes on to explain: "This vertigo is readily linked to the desire for disorder and destruction, a drive which is normally repressed" (ibid.). The destruction of the stability of perception is at the heart of Caillois's *ilinx*: it is when the familiar frames of reference break down that the human mind experiences the exhilaration and terror of freedom. The spatial disorientation of the dervish shatters assumptions about the nature of reality so that he can experience the incomprehensible in his mystic quest. The rush and fear people experience on a ride at an amusement park shatters their assumptions about the safety of existence in 'civilized' society. The emotional flow the players of RPGs experience when their self-perception and the perception of primary reality as *primary* is shattered intensifies the feeling of participation and immersion in the secondary world created. Caillois's *ilinx* is a celebration of humanity's inborn

tendency towards disorder and destruction that constantly needs to be negotiated with the need for order and stability. Based on this idea and Victor Turner's theories on the importance of ritual in human societies (c.f. 1975 and 2008), RPGs can be seen as ritual renegotiations between structure and anti-structure.

Like for Huizinga before him, play and games for Caillois do not exist in a sphere utterly disassociated and distanced from the social or cultural: in fact, one of his central arguments is the "interdependence of games and culture" (2001: 82). Games, he claims, depend on the cultures in which they are played, but they also, in turn, "affect their [i.e. cultures'] preferences, prolong their customs, reflect their beliefs" (ibid.). The games members of a given group like to play not only represent and express the tastes and concerns prevalent in that group, they also confirm and convey them to their players: "Thus", Caillois concludes, "a game that is esteemed by a people may at the same time be utilized to define the society's moral or intellectual character, provide proof of its precise meaning, and contribute to its popular acceptance by accentuating the relevant qualities" (2001: 83). Or put differently, we play the games that we play, because we play the games that we play. There is a constant feedback-loop of mutual change and adaptation between games and players within a society, even stronger than in passive, non-playable media that tend to change much more slowly. And so Caillois, after conceding the impossibility of describing a complex system such as a whole society through the keyhole of its games (What is a society in the first place?), maintains his idea of an interdependence: "Whether an expression or a contradiction of social values, games seem necessarily related to the patterns and functions of different cultures. The relationship is rough or exact, precise or diffuse, but nevertheless inevitable" (2001: 85). Games as systems of patterns and functions themselves are inevitably well suited to represent and even affect the patterns and functions of the systems found in primary reality. They rely on simulation, not interpretation, they are dynamic, not static, so while they are inherently amoral - not putting forward *one* way of behaviour as the right one and all others as the wrong ones, they can and will be shaped by members of societies to express their own values and norms, while still highlighting the procedural nature of the choices made and the system itself that constrains player behaviour.

It is this recognition of the propensity and unique opportunities of the systemic, simulational nature of games to talk meaningfully about the systems we encounter in primary reality, as well as his extraordinarily helpful system of categorisation of games that make Caillois the second central pillar besides Huizinga of the argument I want to construct about the story-games of RPGs, and how they can be seen as expressions of an emerging Postmodern sensibility.

1.3 – Games People Play: A Brief Introduction to Game Studies

Bridging the gap between Huizinga (1938), Caillois (1958) and today, one look at more recent publications, especially in the field of Game Studies, suffices to see that their theories still serve as a shared groundwork for attempts to come to a deeper and richer understanding of contemporary forms of art and cultural expression, such as video games, or role-playing games for that matter. The leading questions here are: How is the creative process in games different from other media? Why do we need to understand these differences? And why do we play games in the first place?

But Game Studies is itself a beast of many heads - some of them viciously attacking each other - and not easily pinned down. In his *Introduction to Game Studies* (2008), Frans Mäyrä tries to give a general definition of Game Studies: "*game studies is a multidisciplinary field of study and learning with games and related phenomena as its subject matter*" (2010: 6; original emphasis). While this is a very general definition indeed, it seems impossible to come up with anything more specific, since Game Studies do not (yet?) have a very distinct and stable identity in and of themselves. The first problem is pointed out by Märyä's definition: Game scholars do not normally receive a formal education in Game Studies, they are intellectual migrants who after a start in a wide variety of possible programmes – "literary, film or media studies, […] communications research, sociology, psychology, computer science" to name but a few (Märyä, 2010: 5) – apply their own terminology, concepts and ideological positions to the study of games. This leads to a second problem, namely that these differences in background very frequently produce situations where mutual understanding is impossible, even on so basic a level as the definition of the subject

of Game Studies itself: games. Strictly speaking, there *is* no such thing as Game Studies at the moment, and this is also why Märyä comments: "Game studies is faced with the double challenge of creating its own identity, while at the same time maintaining an active dialogue with the other disciplines" (2010: 5). What could be its greatest strength, the multidisciplinary approach, still is the greatest problem for Game Studies. But the possibilities for research are highly relevant to understand the cultural practices and social lives that dominate contemporary Western societies. Märyä identifies three core research foci: the *domestication* of information and communications technologies and their integration in everyday life; what games can teach us about human nature and our urge to *interact*; and the *effects* these interactive experiences have on the human mind and eventually on human societies (2010: 6; my emphases).

As if the intellectual dispersal and lack of mutual understanding created by the multidisciplinary origin of Game Studies was not bad enough, there is also an ideological war raging within the ranks of game scholars: the infamous "ludology-narratology debate", as Märyä euphemistically calls it (2010: 8). Two texts, published in the same year (1997), serve as figureheads for this conflict: Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* in the ludology corner, and Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* in the narratology one. Aarseth's investigation of (then) new, interactive textualities is focused on a simulationist (ludological) understanding, and the title of his book already sets up the two core concepts that he develops from his analysis: Interacting with a 'cybertext', "a machine for the production of a variety of expression" (1997: 3), or put simply "texts that involve calculation in their production of scriptons [i.e. text as it appears to the reader]" (1997: 75), the reader creates textuality in an ergodic process, where "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1997: 1). Unlike Aarseth, Janet Murray, as *her* title already gives away, is more interested in the narrative side of the argument, and how narrative adapts to new technological and conceptual interactive possibilities. Central to her theory is a concept that I will use for my own description of role-playing games, as well as the connection I perceive with Postmodern literary and cultural theories: procedural authorship. Murray's definition is on one level very similar to Aarseth's, but it also

differs from it in a crucial way: it is more producer-oriented and attributes less of a role to the recipient in the process of meaning-making itself.

> Procedural authorship means writing the rules by which the texts appear as well as writing the texts themselves. It means writing the rules for the interactor's [i.e. the reader's] involvement, that is, the conditions under which things will happen in response to the participant's actions. It means establishing the properties of the objects and potential objects in the virtual world and the formulas for how they will relate to one another. The procedural author creates not just a set of scenes but a world of narrative possibilities.
> (Murray, 1997: 152)

Going far beyond this difference in mere perspectives (author/reader, or producer/recipient), the bone of contention in the systemic debate it has triggered in Game Studies is the status of games as an independent medium itself and the nature of their relation to narrative. Mäyrä traces the origins of the dispute back to Aarseth and Murray, but they only provided the material. It was Jesper Juul whose master's thesis "A Clash Between Game and Narrative" (1999) put fire to the fuse and ignited the simmering conflict when he claimed that there was an unbridgeable gap between "the player-controlled interactivity happening in present time, which is at the heart of games, and narrator-organized representations of events, at the heart of narratives" (Mäyrä, 2010: 9). Even if it is true that games are *not* interactive novels, but a different medium that has to be defined according to its own set of rules, the complete and unquestioning refusal of narrative in (video) games that Juul proposes to me is an untenable position as well. Applied to the study of RPGs, I will show that Juul's position becomes less adequate still, and I will look to Henry Jenkins's idea of games as 'narrative architecture' in my search for a model that will allow me to appreciate the unresolved but productive and creative tension between game and narrative in RPGs (c.f. Jenkins, 2004). If pragmatic and differentiated positions such as Jenkins's gathered more support in the Game Studies community, a respectful consensus on the unresolved and unresolvable dual nature of video and role-playing games would be possible in spite of the on-going and necessary discussions of the concepts and methods of this new field of academic research. As a Postmodernist myself, I do not wish for a master theory, only for the necessary amount of negative

capability within the parts of academia concerned to accept a dynamic both/and approach in favour of the now prevailing and static either/or one.

One of the most essential publications of Game Studies is Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan's collection of essays and articles *First Person: New Media and Story, Performance, and Game* (2004) that manages to assemble contributions from well-known and important critics such as Janet Murray, Espen Aarseth, Henry Jenkins, or Jesper Juul to establish a basic overview of the predominant debates in that still fairly new and dynamic discipline. In the meantime there have been two sister volumes (*Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*, 2007; *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives*, 2009) that show how diverse, comprehensive and controversial the body of academic literature in Game Studies already is.

I will use some of the articles from *First Person* (2004) as my theoretical update to Huizinga's basic definition of play and Caillois's system of game classification, even though they were originally written on the basis of and for the analysis of video games. Many of the concepts developed to describe and understand the audio-visual game spaces of video games can just as easily be applied to the narrative game spaces of pen&paper RPGs, and where necessary I will draw attention to necessary adaptations and differences between these two playable media.

Eric Zimmerman's article "Narrative, Interactivity, Play, and Games: Four Naughty Concepts in Need of Discipline" (2004) is a very helpful overview of four of the most essential terms in Game Studies and a largely successful attempt at providing satisfying definitions for each of them, even though Jesper Juul, himself a fervent proponent of the ludologists camp, cannot - or does not want to - appreciate the functional beauty and the simplicity of these definitions (c.f. "From Jesper Juul's Online Response: Unruly Games", Zimmerman, 2004: 155). Zimmerman himself has also become a known quantity in Game Studies since he co-authored his *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (2004) with Katie Salen, providing a very comprehensive basis for the discipline and the first iteration of the conceptual work refined in the article I want to focus on.

Before even the first definition is presented, Zimmerman immediately gives a set of disclaimers, the first – and most important - of which states: "In presenting these

four terms (games, play, narrative, and interactivity), I'm not creating a typology. […] They are 'things to think with'; […] they represent a network of ideas that flow into and through each other" (Zimmerman, 2004: 155). In spite of the fact that the author is a self-confessed "closet Modernist" (2004: 156), he is well aware of the inherent aporia of all definition: that there is always something left on the margins, or left out completely, something that does not quite fit in.

His first attempt at a definition, 'narrative', is rather uninspired. Zimmerman takes over a very general definition from J. Hillis Miller's essay "Narrative" in *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (1995), arguing that it takes a broad and inclusive understanding of narrative in order to be able to bring it together with the concept of gaming and to explain interactive, playable narratives. There are three parts to the argument: (1) narrative is a series of events, (2) represented in a medium (language e.g.), and (3) structured by patterning and repetition on the levels of both content and form (2004: 156 – 157). This three-partite structure is reminiscent of Gérard Genette's Structuralist model based on the author's initial statement that "[w]e currently use the word *narrative* without paying attention to, even at times without noticing, its ambiguity, and some of the difficulties of narratology are perhaps due to this confusion" (Genette, 1983: 25). In order to remedy the situation, Genette suggests three different terms for the three different meanings of 'narrative'. There is the *story*, the "succession of events, real or fictitious, that are the subjects of this discourse, and […] their several relations of linking" (1983: 25), this is equivalent to Miller's (and Zimmerman's) first part of the definition of narrative. Then there is the *narration*, "the act of narrating taken in itself" (1983: 26), the production of a text and its context as in part two of Miller's system. And finally, Genette talks about *narrative* proper, Miller's third part, the discourse or text itself determined by how the story is represented, the choices of the storyteller (1983: 25). Story, text and context come together to provide a structured narrative representation, or what Zimmerman calls a narrative, and it is an interesting aside that the crypto-Modernist Zimmerman uses a Structuralist (and thus Modernist) conceptualisation of his subject.

The extensive work he has done in *Rules of Play* shines through more clearly in the other three definitions. Both Huizinga and Caillois are mentioned as essential pre-texts in the original conception of his and Katie Salen's understanding of play (c.f.

Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 75 and 82), so it is interesting to see how many of their ideas surface not here, but in the subsequent definition of game. In his article, Zimmerman first sets up a system of three categories of play phenomena, noting that "the latter categories contain the earlier ones" (Zimmerman, 2004: 159), creating a structure like an onion. Category 1, the one at the core of this 'onion' of play, and the most specific case, is "*Game Play, or the Formal Play of Games*" (ibid.: original italics). This is focused game-play by one or more players. Category 2, the middle layer of the 'onion', is what the author calls "*Ludic Activities, or Informal Play*" (ibid.: original italics). Here are subsumed all non-game ludic activities that are less formalised than game-play proper, only using a fairly simple and basic set of rules. Category 3, "*Being Playful, of Being in a Play State of Mind*" (ibid.: original italics), covers all playful behaviour, also in the framework of non-ludic activities, or simply put: "injecting a spirit of play into some other action" (ibid.). So, using Zimmerman's suggested categorisation, engaging in a duel of witty repartees with a friend while having a coffee during lunch break would be Category 3 (*Being Playful*), racing the same friend on a track would be Category 2 (*Ludic Activity*), and playing a game of Chess with this friend would constitute an instance of Category 1 play (*Game Play*). The amount to which the activity is formalised, structured and defined by a set of agreed upon rules, increases from one example and category to the other. And it is this interplay (no pun intended) between freedom and structure that forms the core of Zimmerman's suggested definition of play: "Play is the free space of movement within a more rigid structure. Play exists both because of and also despite the more rigid structures of a system" (Zimmerman, 2004: 159).

First of all, the author is playing a language game here, using the polysemy of the term itself to conceptionalise it. By hinging the definition on an abstract and even metaphorical understanding of play as a "free space of movement", this takes it beyond the immediately apparent experience of play and into the realm of ideas and the conceptual. How far this is removed from an everyday understanding is clearly shown by the OED entry "play", where it is only fifth in line: "Free action; freedom, opportunity, or room for action; scope for activity" (OED online: 5.a.); "Free or unimpeded movement, esp. from or about a fixed point; the proper or possible movement of a mechanism or a part of a living body" (OED online: 5.b.); "Esp. in a

joint, mechanism, etc.: freedom or room for movement; the space in or through which a thing can or does move" (OED online: 5.c.). All of these definitions also highlight the role of freedom and movement in the concept of play, *and* how it is related to limitations imposed upon them. No limitations, no structure, no system: no play. But if a system becomes all-encompassing, if structure defines all spheres within a system, and free spaces are eliminated: no play either. Following this definition of play, it becomes an activity not of either/or, but of both/and, an approach typical of Postmodern conceptions of systems. Play, according to Zimmerman (ironically a self-proclaimed Modernist) is a deeply postmodern (and thus Postmodern) activity, which is well in the line of thought established by Huizinga and Caillois before him.

This idea has a strong impact on the author's understanding of game design, especially in the case of interactive narrative:

> The challenge [...] is to design the potential for play into the structure of the experience [...]. And the real trick is that the designed structure can guide and engender play, but never completely script it in advance. If the interaction is completely predetermined, there's no room for play in the system.
> (Zimmerman, 2004: 160)

As long as there is player freedom of choice within a given narrative structure, there is play. Play requires action, 'inter-action' to be more precise. So this is also why Zimmerman needs to define interactivity, before he can finally attempt a comprehensive definition of game.

Taken over from *Rules of Play* (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 59 – 60), the suggested model differentiates between four kinds, or modes of interactivity. The first mode is "*Cognitive Interactivity; or Interpretative Participation with a Text*" (Zimmerman, 2004: 158; original italics), and this is the basic hermeneutic engagement of the recipient with a fixed text. The second mode is "*Functional Interactivity; or Utilitarian Participation with a Text*" (ibid.; original italics), the handling of the material artefact as such: holding a book and turning the pages, switching on the TV and choosing a channel, etc. The third mode of interaction is "*Explicit Interactivity; or Participation with Designed Choices and Procedures in a Text*"

(ibid., original italics), which means participation in a simulation or making choices in an interactive experience. And the fourth and last mode of interaction is "*Meta-interactivity; or Cultural Participation with a Text*" (ibid., original italics), interacting with a text beyond the limits of its textuality, adding to the text and participating in social groups associated with it, "propagating massive communal narrative worlds" (ibid.), like fan fiction or fan culture in general. If we accept these categories and use them to take a closer look at games and how their interactive nature differs from other media, like printed books for example, it becomes immediately apparent that Cognitive, Functional, and to a lesser degree also Meta-interactivity are shared by all forms of cultural expression and representation: I interpret and make meaning of a play (Cognitive Interaction) that I go and see at a theatre (Functional Interaction), and then I get together with my friends and discuss the production, comparing it to other ones that I have seen, and maybe even write a review or comment on my blog (Meta-interactivity). The quintessential difference is in the presence or absence of Explicit Interactivity - making meaningful choices in a simulational environment, but even that can be a question more of degrees than of a binary yes/no, present/absent dichotomy: If the performance of a play includes the audience and relies on their participation, does it stop being drama and start being a game? Still, it is important to have a clear understanding of what we mean when we speak about interactivity, and Zimmerman's four categories help to achieve that clarity.

After defining narrative - the structured representation of a series of events - and play - the free space of movement because and in spite of a structure, and identifying Explicit Interactivity - making meaningful choices in a dynamic simulation - as the kind of play that we are looking for when we speak about games, Zimmerman finally gives his definition of what a game is after all, and again it is largely based on his deliberations and earlier definition in *Rules of Play* (c.f. Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 80): "A game is a voluntary interactive activity, in which one or more players follow rules that constrain their behavior, enacting an artificial conflict that ends in a quantifiable outcome" (Zimmerman, 2004: 160).

Many of the components of this definition are familiar from Huizinga and Caillois – the voluntary nature, the presence of rules, or the separation from 'real life' and the limitation in time and space ("artificial"). Caillois's principle of uncertainty in play (c.f.

2001: 9) surfaces again, differentiated further into the interactivity of games - the necessity of player participation - and the notion of conflict - negotiating an outcome between different interests that is not fixed beforehand. However, this conflictual definition of gaming, and the notion of teleology, playing in order to win or achieve a certain score, sets Zimmerman's definition of games clearly apart from Huizinga and Caillois's definitions of play. Even though the latter includes *agôn* as one of the four kinds of games (c.f. 2001: 14), he also sees other motivations and structures in gaming experiences - *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx* - that are absent from Zimmerman's conception. I am not entirely happy with this fixation on conflict and outcome, because it ideologically overemphasises certain kinds of gaming experiences and thus eclipses others, namely those preferring a cooperative and procedural approach, as will become clearer when I focus on the different possible ways of playing RPGs later and the conflict between narrativists and gamists. But using Zimmerman's highly functional definition and expanding it with Caillois's more differentiated perspective seems to me a perfect conceptual framework to describe RPGs and what they can and cannot do.

Taking a step into this direction himself, Zimmerman also concedes that, using his definitions, not only is it possible to "frame games as narrative systems, or as interactive systems, or as systems of play" (2004: 161), but that completely different perspectives would also be possible: "games as mathematical systems, ideological systems, semiotic systems, systems of desire" (ibid.). What is essential here is that games are formal systems, structured by rules. They are not necessarily narrative in nature, but they *can* be used to convey narrative. Or as Zimmerman puts it: "we need to ask not just how games can be narrative systems, but we need to ask how games can be narrative systems in ways that other media cannot" (2004: 161 - 162). What he is looking for is "ways that only games can signify, drawing on their unique status as explicitly interactive narrative systems of formal play" (2004: 162), and I am convinced that RPGs are prime examples that shed some light on the question of how games can negotiate creatively and productively between the structural needs and capabilities of both narrative and simulation, establishing a new medium in the process.

In his article "Videogames of the Oppressed: Critical Thinking, Education, Tolerance, and Other Trivial Issues", Gonzalo Frasca, who is credited by Märyä and himself with the introduction of the term 'ludology' in analogy to narratology in 1999 (Märyä, 2010: 8; Frasca, 2004: 86), focuses on the relationship between game and narrative. His perspective is mostly biased in the direction of the ludologists' side of the argument ("I explore the possibilities of non-Aristotelian game design"; 2004: 85), and in spite of his concession that "games and narrative do share many elements" he expressly names Espen Aarseth's cybernetic (ludologist) approach as the basis for his own argument (2004: 86). Frasca develops a set of dichotomies describing games in opposition to narrative: While narrative is defined as "a fixed set of actions and descriptions", a game "need[s] the active participation of the user [...] for accessing its content" (2004: 86); narrative uses only "semiotic representation" to convey meaning, but games "also rely on simulation, understood as the modelling of a dynamic system through another system" (ibid.); narrative is concerned with the past, simulation looks towards possible futures (ibid.); and finally, narrative is static and is thus used for statements, value judgments and interpretation of external reality, whereas simulation is "dynamic and its essence is change" which predisposes it more "to explore the dynamics of mechanic systems" (ibid.). "Simulation is an ideal medium for exposing rules rather than particular events", Frasca concludes (2004: 87). Put together in a simple table for easier reference and understanding, the oppositional relationship between narrative and game according to Frasca looks like this (c.f. Table 4):

Narrative	***Game***
Fixed descriptions	Active participation
Semiotic representation	Systemic simulation
Past	Present
Static	Dynamic
Exposing events	Exposing rules

Table 4: *Narrative vs. Game (c.f. Frasca, 2004: 86)*

Most of these concepts are immediately understandable based on first hand experiences with the different media: A novel contains fixed descriptions in semiotic representation, it is a static text that exposes events and is necessarily a thing of the past, because it needs to be written in order to be read. A video game on the other hand is a dynamic, systemic simulation requiring player input and interaction to progress, and through this participation it happens in the now, exposing the rules underlying the experience. However, I sincerely doubt that the case is as clear-cut as Frasca's argument wants us to believe: What about oral storytelling? Does it not happen in the present, and does it not dynamically adapt stories to the context of narration? Does the design of the options for interactions offered by a game not happen in the past - in relation to the point in time of the playing? Does that design not provide a static corset for my dynamic interactions? And is there not a strong component of semiotic representation in contemporary video games that rely on cinematic aesthetics - graphics, sound, 'cinematography' - to expose the events that take place in the secondary reality created rather than the rules of the game itself?

Still, as a tool, an approximate frame of reference, Frasca's oppositional dichotomy is helpful. It can be seen as a representation of an 'ideal state' for both game and narrative, as long as it is accompanied by the awareness that real manifestations always fall somewhere in between, or combine elements of both ends of the spectrum to varying degrees. The simplified and simplistic argument of passive narrative and interpretation on the one side, and active simulation and configuration on the other will not take us far in a comprehensive critical appraisal of the potential of story-games (or game-stories), but it provides a starting point.

There are two other concepts I would like to borrow from (Video) Game Studies and apply them to my research into RPGs: immersion and agency.

Michael Mateas harks back to Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997) to define three basic aesthetic categories necessary for the analysis of interactive media in his "Preliminary Poetics for Interactive Drama and Games": "immersion, agency, and transformation" (2004: 21). Immersion is seen as related to Coleridge's 'willing suspension of disbelief', a state where players "are willing to accept the internal logic of the experience, even though this logic deviates from the logic of the real world" (2004: 21). And then there is also a second, a more emotional and perceptional, and

less logical or systemic aspect to immersion, as a "feeling of being present in another place and engaged in action therein" (ibid.). This ability of the human mind to project into secondary worlds a sense of self and to create an intuitive state of identification with characters, events and setting could be linked to the human capacity for "theory of mind", as it is called by Jeremy Hsu in his article "The Secrets of Storytelling", the ability to "attribute mental states – awareness, intent – to another entity" that is seen by the author as the basis for both communal living and our enjoyment of narrative transport (2008: 48). Immersion thus becomes a central building block of human nature and all of our social and cultural constructs.

"Agency", Mateas writes, "is the feeling of empowerment that comes from being able to take actions in the world whose effects relate to the player's intentions" (2004: 21). Interaction alone is not sufficient to produce agency, the experience must be carefully designed to give the player the feeling that his actions also meaningfully affect a given system. That means that (a) on a quantitative level the impact on the system the player interacts with must be strong enough and noticeable, and (b) on a qualitative level an expression of what the player aimed to achieve in the first place. The author also postulates a primacy of agency in a Neo-Aristotelian poetics of interactive experiences, since "[w]hile immersion and transformation exist in some form in noninteractive drama, the audience's sense of having agency within the story is a genuinely new experience enabled by interactivity" (2004: 23). This echoes Zimmerman's search for the new ways in which games can signify in comparison (and addition) to older media because of their status as configurative, simulational interactive experiences. Games as instances of formal play are subjected to certain rules and constraints, and Mateas adopts the Aristotelian concept of material and formal constraints and applies them to games: material constraints like interface and dialogue options restrict player choice in games and "cry out to make certain actions obvious" (2004: 25), thus channelling player agency on a systemic, simulational level; formal constraints like the necessities of the plot, causality and character development do the same on an authorial, narrative level. Whereas material constraints are mostly but not always openly visible, players create an understanding of the formal constraints in effect in a given interactive experience through a process of inference: "the understanding of the formal causation from the level of plot to

character additionally helps the player to have an understanding of what to do, that is, why they should take action within the story world at all" (2004: 25).

So agency does not only rely on the meaningful nature of the interaction with the secondary reality on a content level, it also requires a formal condition to be met: "*A player will experience agency when there is a balance between the material and formal constraints*" (2004: 25; original italics). What the author means here is that only if the player can successfully project his intentions formed on the basis of and motivated by their understanding of dramatic probability into the secondary reality through the use of the interface provided, will there be maximum agency. If there is a high degree of formal constraints but only a very low degree of material ones, players might experience 'too much' agency and feel lost what to do in order to fulfil the authorial intentions (=high formal constraints) of the designers, since they can do almost everything in the secondary reality. In the other extreme, the narrative freedom of a game low in formal constraints (a so-called 'sand-box game') but high in material ones, with an interface and a dialogue system that only permits a very restricted style of interaction, will make the player painfully experience the harsh restrictions on their agency. Using Zimmerman's idea of play as the free space of movement within a given system, the first case would allow too much movement, the second one too little. In both cases, the collapse of a sense of agency, frustration and very likely abandonment of the game is the result. In order to prevent this from happening, the design of a game needs to carefully balance the material constraints with the intended degree of formal constraints. I would also like to add that too much or too little of either constraints can in itself already endanger the success of a gaming experience: What is the point in being railroaded through someone else's story (maximum formal constraint), or having no idea whatsoever what to do in a secondary reality (minimum formal constraints)? And would I really want to waste my time playing a game where I can affect no changes in the secondary reality at all (maximum material constraints), or spend hours trying to second-guess how a game might want to be played only to then find out that it is not my kind of game (minimum material constraints)? This negotiation between desired player freedom and necessary limitations of this freedom clearly emerges as the pivotal element in Game Studies, starting from the very basic definitions of the objects of study (play,

game), to the attempt at a formal differentiation of games from narrative, or even the elements of the experience necessary to understand games as media in their own right (immersion and agency).

Mateas finishes off his (or actually Janet Murray's) triad of aesthetic categories for interactive experiences with transformation, adding immediately that it is the most problematic of the three, because it is very diffuse in meaning. Transformation, according to Murray (and thus Mateas) happens on at least three levels during a game: (1) "Transformation as masquerade", where the player becomes someone else for the duration of the experience; (2) "Transformation as variety", where the player can explore the numerous variations provided of the central theme that defines the gaming experience; and (3) "Personal transformation", as the emotional and intellectual impact of the gaming experience changes the player's personality in primary reality (2004: 21 – 22). Taking this definition as guideline, transformation appears closely connected to immersion (level 1) and agency (level 2), and in direct proportional relation to the maximal realisation of both of these concepts to successfully transfer the meanings produced from the secondary into primary reality (level 3). I will therefore subsume transformation in my further deliberations under agency and immersion and focus exclusively on these two aspects when I analyse RPGs.

Since, unlike agency, immersion does not take a central role in Mateas's theoretical approach, I would like to bring in another perspective that will also allow me to make a connection I have briefly touched upon already: namely how immersion and flow are related. With their article "The Pleasures of Immersion and Interaction", J. Yellowlees Douglas and Andrew Hargadon rather than arguing on a purely rational level "explore the affective dimension of interactive narratives" and how it interrelates with the phenomenon of immersion (2004: 193).

"The pleasure of immersion in interactives", they write, "stems from our ability to take guided action and see the outcomes from our choice of one or more scripts within a single schema" (2004: 201). And they expand upon that idea, also bringing in the competence and textual repertoire of the player as a component in the intensity of engagement created through interaction with the system provided: Not only do those with more media experience enjoy navigating the interactive experience more,

they are even more likely to pick up the activity in the first place, as they generally have a more positive and accepting attitude towards "confronting situations for which they lack scripts, as those provide opportunities for learning, as opposed to merely performing one of a series of scripts within a general framework" (ibid.). So the motivation to engage in and enjoyment of interactive experiences is directly connected to previous experience, not only with other interactive or playable media, but media in general. This means that the apparent feedback loop between playing games and the willingness to pick up more games leads to an exponential growth of the return rate to gaming, or put in the language of the detractors of the activity: games are addictive because they are immersive, and the activity of gaming in turn reinforces the immersion.

This (and I am not using this term in a negative sense here) addictive nature of gaming – on a level beyond, or beneath the cultural - is also remarked upon by Steven Johnson in *Everything Bad is Good for You* (2005) where, similar to Douglas and Hargadon, he looks at the neuroscience of desire and how it drives the interaction with playable secondary realities: "Why does a seven-year-old soak up the intricacies of industrial economics in game form, when the same subject would send him screaming for the exits in a classroom?", he asks (2006: 32), and his answer is simple: because games "tap into the brain's reward circuitry" (2006: 34). By activating and stimulating the dopamine system – "a kind of accountant: keeping track of expected rewards" (ibid.) – games trigger our human instinct to seek ever new rewards by navigating our environment, the 'natural' curiosity that has led our species to not only the dominant position on this planet, but also the destruction of uncountable ecosystems and cultures unlucky enough to be on the receiving end of our urge to explore. Game worlds, according to Johnson, are teeming with reward, and, what is more, "[g]ame rewards are fractal; each scale contains its own reward network" (2006: 36), no matter whether you learn how to handle the interface during your first steps, or manage to resolve the climax of the interactive experience near the end of it. So games, irrespective of the narratives they provide or produce (the content), create desire on a formal, a systemic level: "If you create a system where rewards are both clearly defined and achieved by exploring an environment, you'll find human brains drawn to those systems", Johnson argues (2006: 38).

And even though I have to agree with him here, I am not saying that this is necessarily a bad thing, or a good thing either for that matter. Value judgments do not enter the discussion, as it remains on a purely structural and formal level. The immersive and thus addictive nature of interactive, or playable secondary realities is a systemic feature that *per se* is beyond ethics or morality: It does not create serial-killers or empty husks of failed existences, nor does it create geniuses or enlightened philosophers. It only creates desire, and that desire can and will be used by game designers who in turn *will* be responsible for the ethical and moral ramifications of their design choices in gaming. Games are an immensely powerful medium exactly *because of* the power of desire they mobilise in immersion, and, as Johnson claims: "[n]o other form of entertainment offers that cocktail of reward and exploration" that exerts such a basic and almost primal hold over human imagination (2006: 38). But even if we disregard the content of games, they teach us important things: "It's not *what* you're thinking about when you play a game, it's the way you're thinking that matters", Johnson explains (2006: 40), and goes on to define instances of what he calls *collateral learning*, a concept I would like to adopt for my own analysis (ibid.): By their very formal nature, games teach us how to make good decisions, a skill vital to life in primary reality, through experience in *probing* - understanding systems by exploring, forming hypotheses about their rules, testing those hypotheses and adapting them if necessary, aka the scientific method (2006: 45) – and *telescoping* – the ability to prioritise simultaneous necessities and goals in a logical and effective manner to create order and balance between short-term and long-term aims (2006: 54). "There is something profoundly *lifelike* in the art of probing and telescoping", Johnson concludes (2006: 56), and he reinforces this intimate connection between gaming and primary reality when he ends his chapter on (video) games as follows:

> To non-players, games bear a superficial resemblance to music videos [...]. But what you actually *do* in playing a game – the way your mind has to work – is radically different. It's not about tolerating or aestheticizing chaos; it's about finding order and meaning in the world, and making decisions that help create that order.
>
> (Johnson, 2006: 62)

It is this active stance towards affecting change in primary reality and how games can convey the skills and motivation to do so that forms the core of my analysis of the cultural function of games and gaming (using the example of RPGs) in a Postmodern society. Order and meaning are no longer out there and can be encountered, they are seen as something that must be created by active cultural participation, and games are immersive experiences built upon the desire to participate, to interact, to create that seems to be hard-wired into our neuro-psychological make-up as human beings.

Douglas and Hargadon define an "'immersive' affective experience" as a state where a "reader's perceptions, reactions, and interactions all take place within the text's frame, which itself usually suggests a single schema and a few definite scripts for highly directed interaction", and in opposition to it the "'engaged' affective experience" where "contradictory schemas or elements that defy conventional schemas tend to disrupt readers' immersion in the text, obliging them to assume an extratextual perspective on the text" (all quotes 2004: 196). Following these definitions, immersion and engagement would be mutually exclusive, as games would be designed to either serve the one purpose or the other. Even though there is merit to the differentiation between these two rather different states of gaming experience – looking at the secondary reality from 'within' or 'without' in a way that bears similarities to Linda Hutcheon's description of Postmodernism's ambiguous relationship with society and culture (c.f. Chapters 3.2.4 and 3.3.4), Henry Jenkins's reply printed with the article must be seen as an essential addition in that "it makes more sense to think of game players as fluctuating between states of immersion and engagement" (Douglas and Hargadon, 2004: 197). The difference is, as so often in the analysis of cultural artefacts, one of perspective: While Douglas and Hargadon prefer a producer-oriented approach, describing games as *designed* to be more immersive (drawing the player in) or engaging (pushing the player to a critical distance) in nature, Jenkins opts for a more recipient-oriented approach where the player in a given context in time and space and through his personal style of interacting with the secondary reality of the game oscillates continually between immersion and engagement. This is also more akin to my own twenty years of experience with RPGs, and will come up later when I define the medium and the experiences it makes possible.

However, the two authors do acknowledge that contemporary developments in technology and game design might actually take players beyond immersion or engagement and into Csikszentmihalyi's 'flow', a state that "hovers on the continuum between immersion and engagement, drawing on the characteristics of both simultaneously" (Douglas and Hargadon, 2004: 204):

> Where immersion involves identification [i.e. the 'making' of identity] with characters and narrative elements – the local details that keep us involved even when we know the plot's trappings intimately – engagement involves deciphering the author's or game designers' intention. During a flow state [...], [test subjects] both identified utterly with the objects they were manipulating [...] just as they also were deeply involved in determining the constraints built into the game.
> (Douglas and Hargadon, 2004: 204)

Csikszentmihalyi's concept of the flow is thus used by the authors to propose the possibility of synthesis between immersion and engagement in the gaming experience, similar to, but not quite the same as Jenkins's idea of a fluctuation (or oscillation in my terminology). The seemingly small but essential difference is that by positing a coming together of immersion and engagement in a synthetic experience of flow, differences between the two aspects are elided, eclipsed, even though it is highly unlikely that at any given point in time during a player's experience of a game and the secondary reality it creates both the immersive and the engaging aspect of this experience will be in total balance. Usually, depending on both internal factors such as personal preferences and temporary mood, and external, contextual ones such as location, company present or situation, a player will tend more towards one or the other. And while the third aspect in the behaviour of test gamers named by the authors as evidence for the existence of flow in gaming, the "relentless ... demand that all other time stop ... and that players take full responsibility for every act" (Turkle in Douglas and Hargadon, 2004: 204), is something that I can – again from personal experience – attest exists, it is a rare thing indeed, since it takes perfect conditions and ample time to reach it.

Csikszentmihalyi himself gives a very comprehensive definition of 'flow activities', activities perfectly suited to produce instances of what he terms "optimal experience" (aka 'flow'):

> What makes these experiences conducive to flow is that they were *designed* to make optimal experience easier to achieve. They have rules that require the learning of skills, they set up goals, they provide feedback, they make control possible. They facilitate concentration and involvement by making the activity as distinct as possible from the so-called 'paramount reality' of everyday existence. [...] Such *flow activities* have as their primary function the provision of enjoyable experiences. Play, art, pageantry, ritual, and sports are some examples. Because of the way they are constructed, they help participants and spectators achieve an ordered state of mind that is highly enjoyable.
> (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008: 72)

Even though he does not mention games as such (only play), I think it is safe to say that they by definition still fulfil all of the criteria to the last jot: (a) they have rules (explicit and implicit ones), (b) they require the learning of skills (how to play the game), (c) they set up goals (winning, achieving a high score, or just to keep the experience going), (d) they provide feedback (you are rewarded for doing well), (e) they give the players control over the system and secondary reality they provide (in stark contrast to the lack of control in primary reality), and (f) they are clearly differentiated from primary reality by circumscribing their secondary reality by rules and/or narrative content. Games, no matter whether they are board- or card games, video or role-playing games, are thus flow activities, and through immersion and engagement, they give participants the opportunity to achieve enjoyable and ordered states of mind, or flow.

But Douglas and Hargadon also point out the 'dark side of the force', as flow "is, however, elusive, fleeting, and intensely problematic" (2004: 204). Not only will some gamers, or rather all gamers sometimes experience flow "due to their desires to achieve mastery over something, however brief and fictive", feeding destructive power fantasies, flow also annihilates the possibility of radical critical distance as such, since the player is trapped in a middle position between the inside and outside perspective, immersion and engagement (ibid.). This is the price of synthesis, which is

what the authors claim flow to be, and it is important to my understanding of games in general, but also specifically RPGs as both critical media *and* entertainment.

2 – *Of Dice and (Wo)Men: What Are Role-playing Games?*

Now that a conceptual and terminological basis for the study of play, games, and playable media is established, it is time to fill the framework with the concrete object of this analysis: Role-playing Games (RPGs). The first step in this process is necessarily the definition of RPGs as a medium and a classification of possible subtypes, before the narrative process – what actually makes them tick - and previous efforts in various disciplines to make meaning of this very special kind of story-game can be addressed.

2.1 – Dissecting the Medium: Definitions and Classifications

Role-playing games are games where players take on (or play) fictitious roles. Looking it up in the OED, the first striking realisation is that the definition is not even graced with an independent entry, since it only appears as compound C2 under the main entry "role-playing". This half-hearted inclusion in the self-proclaimed "definitive record of the English language" (OED online) should be surprising for a medium that has been around for almost 40 years now, but sadly, it is not. It is just one tiny façette of a general and pervading stance of indifference demonstrated by the vast majority of the official and institutionalised cultural authorities in the Anglosphere and most other Western societies and cultures. But indifference is still better than the hostility that flared up during the early eighties in the US and almost killed the then fledgling medium before it had had any chance to unfold and develop into the complex and fascinating medium interested and open-minded researchers will encounter today.

Taking a closer look then at the definition of the term "role-playing game" provided by the OED, it confirms not only my first, and naturally utterly superficial approach to its meaning, but also my first impression of indifference: "**role-playing game** *n*. a game in which participants act out roles; (now usually) *spec*. a game in

which players take on the roles of imaginary characters who engage in adventures, typically in a particular fantasy setting overseen by a referee; (also in later use) a computer game of this kind" (OED online). There is hardly anything there at all, as far as substantial insight or even reliable information is concerned: So, players act out roles (that much is obvious), these characters engage in adventures (out-dated terminology and conception), and these typically happen in a fantasy setting (that largely depends on your definition of 'typically' *and* 'fantasy'). There is a referee overseeing the setting (is this a dictatorship?), and "later" (what is the point of reference?) we also find computer RPGs (so what is then the 'earlier' platform if the 'later' one is computers? are there any others?). From my, admittedly sarcastic, deconstruction of the OED 'definition', one question arises more than ever: What is a role-playing game?

In order to approach a satisfactory definition, I will start from the aspect of what I call platform: What is the physical (concrete) medium used to play the game (the abstract, conceptual medium)? Depending on the platform used I would thus argue that three basic kinds of RPGs can be distinguished, and given in the order of their historical appearance these would be:

1) *Pen&paper RPGs (P&P RPGs):*

   This is the oldest form of RPGs, the one that was used for the game that is now considered to be the first fully-fledged RPG: *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974). Pen&paper RPGs are communal and cooperative oral storytelling activities of at least two participants with no or only a limited degree of physical acting. These discursive activities are asymmetrical in nature, as one of the participants is consensually invested with more discursive power than the others and acts as an organising and structuring instance on both levels, simulation (adjudicating rules) and narrative (driving the plot). Basic information about the characters played and the secondary reality they interact with is recorded and organised in written form, and the discursive creations of the group are founded on the pre-textual basis of setting (secondary reality) and rules information (primary reality) taken and often adapted from published rule- and sourcebooks. With a few exceptions,

randomisers such as dice and cards simulate the effects of chance and dependent on the traits and abilities of the characters played determine their probability of success. The published pre-texts, the written information selected and adapted from them, and the effect of the randomisers all serve as the basis for the verbal improvisation and exchanges between participants that create an *ad hoc* and ephemeral narrative.

Pen&paper RPGs are thus collective efforts of structured, formal play (games) that negotiate and create a communal narrative experience from actions in secondary reality through verbal interaction in primary reality.

2) *Live Action Role-playing (LARP):*

LARPs are a sister-medium to pen&paper RPGs, dispensing with much of its printed/published pre-textual basis and the use of randomisers, and replacing the strictly verbal interaction (or storytelling) with physical performances. They integrate the impromptu acting of informal play or improvisational theatre and the highly structured narratives of drama with the social organisation and use of props and costumes of historical re-enactment to form group performances in public spaces or reserved areas. The groups that come together for LARPs are usually larger than those for pen&paper RPGs, and together with an increase in the spatial (up to entire cities) and temporal dimensions (up to several days) of the experience this also frequently necessitates the installation of more than one coordinating instance.

LARPS are collective efforts of structured, formal play (games) that negotiate and create a large and collective dramatic experience from physical interaction and live performance in primary reality.

3) *Computer RPGs (CRPGs):*

This category is based on the use of computers and electronic equipment as means of representation of a secondary reality and/or communication between and organisation of the participants. It thus includes both off-line and on-line, both single and multiplayer computer and video games played on personal computers, consoles, as well as portable devices such as telephones

or tablets. In comparison to pen&paper RPGs, only the systemic aspects of character management and development, as well as the use of rules and randomisers remain intact in single-player experiences. Multi-player RPGs also preserve the communal and collective aspect of both pen&paper and LARP. Unlike the other two types, CRPGs in most cases provide an audio-visual simulation and aesthetic representation of the secondary world and the rules system the players interact with. Consequently, the amount of imagination required to fill in gaps in the representation decreases from pen&paper to LARP to CRPG, and the tyranny of the image increases as less space for individual imagination remains. Since this classification relies only on the platform used for gaming (verbal interaction for pen&paper, physical performance for LARP, and electronic equipment for CRPGs), this category also includes attempts to use the internet for pen&paper style of play, such as play-by-mail, play-by-post in online forums, or virtual gaming tables such as *Fantasy Grounds* (available on http://www.fantasygrounds.com/). This is a very heterogeneous category, unlike the other two, and it would have to be separated into subgroups in case of a study focused on examples taken from it.

Taking all of the caveats mentioned above into consideration, CRPGs are collective and/or individual efforts of structured, formal play (games) that negotiate and create an individual and/or communal audio-visual and/or narrative experience from actions in a simulated secondary reality through interactions with electronic media.

My interest for the purpose of this present inquiry is only in pen&paper RPGs, because:

(a) role-playing games as a medium started on the pen&paper platform,

(b) the characteristic negotiation between player freedom and structural restrictions, between individual and community, are best observed in the framework of the smaller and closely knit pen&paper groups, and

(c) the platform for pen&paper RPGs is only language and verbal interaction, and together with the complex web of textualities surrounding them they

thus exemplify the Postmodern concept of 'language games' and their cultural significance that I will try and argue formed the basis for the creation of the medium in the first place.

For ease of reference I will hitherto only use 'RPG' when I speak of pen&paper RPGs, unless I mean other kinds, or in cases where I want to stress the fact that I refer to the pen&paper kind.

2.2 – Power Games: The Key Role of the Hub-player

Unlike other storytelling media, the game aspect of RPGs invites *all* participants in the experience to co-create, as their "unique status as explicitly interactive narrative systems of formal play" allows these games to signify in completely new ways (Zimmermann, 2004: 162). The previously mentioned inherent tensions between narrative (fixed, linear sequence of events) and game (meaningful interactivity) are at the heart of RPGs and represented by two different kinds of narrative agents structuring the communication situation and narrative production.

As previously mentioned in the categorisation of RPGs above, one of the participants in pen&paper RPGs (or more than one in LARPs) is different from the others. Most CRPGs do not have such a differentiation in participants, as the computer and the software take over the administrative, organisational and narrative coordination. In the case of pen&paper RPGs, the one player who takes over this role is given more discursive power and authority than all the others. If this additional power over the process is the prime motivation for a participant to volunteer, the group would do wisely to pick someone else, or it runs the risk of unbalancing and ultimately endangering the narrative process. This special hub-player goes by many names: 'Dungeonmaster' (DM), 'Gamemaster' (GM), 'Storyteller' (ST), or simply 'Referee' are the most frequently encountered terms, usually linked to a specific system or game. The choice of designation alone is very significant for the ideological and mostly implicit assumptions in a game about how the power dynamics between this one individual and the rest of the group are supposed to work and thus shape the gaming experience and ultimately the narrative created.

Dungeons & Dragons (*D&D*), as the origin of the new medium, calls this special participant Dungeonmaster (or DM). Not only does this designation signal that gameplay is still very much restricted to the secondary reality of 'dungeons' (closed-off, mostly underground complexes filled with monsters to slay and treasure to plunder), it also shows a very strong auteurist approach ('master'), not only towards gamemastering, but beyond that game design itself, a fact that undoubtedly has to do with the personality of Gary Gygax, one of the two creators of the game. In the *Players Handbook* for *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (originally published in 1978), Gygax actually blurbs and celebrates *himself*, signing: "Gary Gygax – creator of the AD&D game phenomenon and author of this book" (Gygax, 1980: outside back cover). In his preface, he very humbly claims the position as final and singular authority in the medium he helped create:

> Authoring these works means that, in a way, I have set myself up as final arbiter of fantasy role playing in the minds of the majority of **D&D** adventurers. Well, so be it, I rationalized. Who better than the individual responsible for it all [...]; and as the first proponent of fantasy gaming and a principal in TSR, the company one thinks of when fantasy games are mentioned, the credit and blame rests ultimately here. Some last authority must be established for a very good reason.
> (Gygax, 1980: 5; original emphasis)

Authorship and authority go hand in hand in Gygax's understanding of the medium, and he assumes, *takes* discursive power and claims ultimate textual authority: he alone defines what 'true' *AD&D* is. And he sets up the DM as his viceroy in the individual groups:

> Within the broad parameters given in the **ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS VOLUMES**, you [i.e. the DM] are the creator and final arbiter by ordering things as they should be, the game as a whole first, your campaign next, and your participants thereafter, you will be playing **ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS** as it was meant to be.
> (Gygax, 1979b: 230; original emphases)

Following this argument, there is a 'right' and a 'wrong' way to play *AD&D* on all levels: the game on the metalevel as a specific cultural practice, the game as a series

of interactive narratives conceived by the DM, and finally the game as a social and narrative group activity. On the first level, Gygax sees himself as the (final) authority, on the other two he 'installs' the DM to truly 'master' narrative and participants. It is thus not surprising at all, that the DM - as defined by Gygax - is still very close to the traditional author of a fixed narrative and his almost unlimited discursive power:

> Know the game systems, and you will know how and when to take upon yourself the ultimate power. To become the final arbiter, rather than the interpreter of rules, can be a difficult and demanding task, and it cannot be undertaken lightly, for your players expect to play *this* game, not one made up on the spot. By the same token, they are playing the game the way *you*, their DM, imagines and creates it. [...] As the DM, you have to prove in every game that you are still the best.
> (Gygax, 1979b: 9; original emphasis)

Mastery of the system, of the rules, of the players (!) is the function of the DM as conceived of by *AD&D* (and thus Gygax): Know the system and apply it pragmatically to secure "ultimate power" on the gaming table, "to prove in every game that you are still the best" (ibid.). The confrontational, conflictual, competitive nature of *AD&D* still bears the marks of its origin in wargaming. There is no place for interpretation, but as the DM you are supposed to become an extension of Gygax's will in *his* game, throwing hordes of monsters against your players to clobber them into submission, or at least make their triumph as hard to win as possible. Luckily for the medium, the control-freak and auteur Gygax suffered the fate of the sorcerer's apprentice: Appropriating the concept of RPGs and adapting it to their preferred style of playing, other players and DMs soon came up with variations of what the game, and the role of the DM could be like.

The most common, game-neutral term to refer to the narrative and organisational hub-player in an RPG experience is Gamemaster (GM).[5] As a term it is a curious hybrid between the master of Gygax's invention and a rejection of the whole dungeon-aspect of *(A)D&D*, and since words carry meaning, this is also what most of the games using it are: hybrids, compromises, in-between solutions, adopting basic concepts of

[5] Sometimes also found as gamemaster, Game Master, or gamesmaster.

D&D, while at the same time adapting them to their needs and ideas. The persons credited with the 'invention' of the term GM in reaction to the US-American Gygax are the Canadian Edward Simbalist and the Austro-Canadian Wilf Backhaus, co-creators of *Chivalry and Sorcery* or *C&S* (1977). In an exchange of letters with the editors of the *Places to Go, People to Be* online magazine for role-playing, Backhaus tells the anecdotal story of the creation of their own RPG as follows:

> It was our intent and our hope to sell our material to TSR [the publisher of D&D] as a sort of 'Advanced' D&D. We travelled to GENCON [an annual gaming convention created by Gygax in 1968] for that purpose in August '76. We never did show it to TSR because we took an instant dislike to Gygax and so sought out another publisher. It required us about 4 months to completely de-D&D our manuscript - it was during part of that process that we decided on the term 'Game Master'.
> (Backhaus, 2000)

C&S is frequently seen as one of the first instances of a conscious development of the medium away from the formula set up by Gygax and *D&D*, even though it still owes a lot to the parent system. In line with that origin story, the role of the (now) GM also shifts away from the controlling, dominating, fundamentally adversarial DM:

> In the final analysis, everything that happens in a fantasy role playing campaign is under the management of the GameMaster, and he more than any other person bears the responsibility for any successes or failures that are encountered during the course of play.
> (Simbalist and Backhaus, 1983: 5)

Even though the authors still place the GM at the centre of the narrative procedure, there is an evolutionary development to be seen: The DM was supposed to be the ultimate authority, only beneath Gygax himself, and in competition with their players; the GM, however, is now more of a manager only bearing more responsibility than the others. The impossibility of achieving truth stands at the conceptual centre of this understanding: "There is never One True Answer", Simbalist and Backhaus write, "only better and worse ways of handling a situation. Only experience with role playing will teach the participants the difference" (1983: 4). The

DM was always right, the GM never *can* be. Playing or gamemastering an RPG is not about winning, it is about handling situations, reaching compromise, negotiating outcomes in order to satisfy all participants as far as possible. The GM thus no longer attempts to 'master' the participants of the experience - metaphorically expressed by the concept of the dungeon - but is now called to first and foremost 'master' the game system in order to provide everyone with a fair and enjoyable experience. The additional measure of narrative control and discursive power the GM enjoys is no longer the justification for a power fantasy come true, but instead counterbalanced with increased obligations and duties.[6]

Simbalist and Backhaus's comprehensive definition of the different 'hats' a GM has to wear in an RPG and how they interrelate exemplifies the complexity of the function in the narrative process typical of the medium. It will therefore serve as a structural and argumentative basis for the discussion of what it means for the role of the GM in RPGs (c.f. Table 5).

A Gamemaster has to be …	***What does it mean?***
…a master of the rules (a)	Know and fairly apply the rules
… a creator of worlds (b)	Use material to create effective world
… a teacher and advisor (c)	Assist players with rules and world
… a storyteller (d)	Respond to player input and create story
… a role-player (e)	Create real personalities for characters
… a bookkeeper (f)	Keep track of narrative process

Table 5: *The 'Hats' of the Gamemaster (c.f. Simbalist and Backhaus, 1983: 4)*

[6] I added the nationalities of both Gygax and Simbalist/Backhaus when I introduced C&S, because I think that a good argument could be made about diverging national ideologies in the US and in Canada, and how they influence conceptions of the medium RPG in general and of the role of the DM/GM specifically. But a discussion of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny on the one and the Métis nation as introduced in John Ralston Saul's *A Fair Country* (2008) on the other, and how they interact with questions of (discursive) power would lead too far away from the structural implications of the conceptualisation of the role of the GM.

Mastery of the rules, and, resulting from it, fairness and impartiality are key to the redefinition of the GM, and in extension the whole process of how RPGs can be played (Table 5, a):

> First of all, the GameMaster must be a **master of the rules** [...]. He has the task of acting as Referee. He must **impartially** and **fairly** apply the rules. When a dispute over the interpretation of any rule arises, he alone has the final decision as to what the rule means or how it will be applied.
> (Simbalist and Backhaus, 1983: 4; original emphases)

The conflictual and confrontational battle between DM and players is now replaced with interpretation, a procedure explicitly rejected by Gygax (c.f. Gygax, 1979b: 9). Simbalist and Backhaus argue that not only the narrative content produced by the players is subject to negotiation, the rules themselves, or the bits and pieces of the meaning-making machine to use Aarseth's ideas, are now open to interpretation. Negotiation and interpretation, not conflict and truth set the GM clearly apart from the DM. But the two authors are not socio-cultural idealists either, they know that sometimes a situation requires a quick and (at least provisionally) final decision in order to prevent a process from grinding to a halt, so their GM is still also invested with the power to make final decisions. There is a deep sense of pragmatism implied in their definition of the role of the GM: a negotiation driven by common sense and the acceptance of compromise between the wish for freedom on the one side and the need for structure on the other that could be seen as a meta-discussion of the medium and its unique narrative process. Gygax might have invented the medium of RPGs, but it is through the contributions of people such as Simbalist and Backhaus that it was able to reach conceptional and structural maturity later.

> Secondly, the GameMaster must be a **creator of worlds**. He must use the rules and a series of [materials] which he has either designed himself and/or purchased to go with the game, so that he can create a fantasy world fit for effective role play.
> (Simbalist and Backhaus, 1983: 4)

This aspect of the GM's contribution to the process (Table 5, b) is an expression of *C&S*'s more simulationist approach in contrast to *(A)D&D*'s gamist one: a distinction that will become clearer later in the RPG Theory chapter. In the *Players Handbook* of 1978, Gygax made it very clear: "It is important to keep in mind that, after all is said and done, **ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS** is a game. Because it is a game, certain things which seem 'unrealistic' or simply unnecessary are integral to the system" (Gygax, 1980: 6). This goes against the design credo Simbalist and Backhaus include in *their* introduction to *C&S*:

> We believe that it is necessary to provide a coherent world if fantasy role playing is to be a coherent activity. […] The feudal system was **working** culture, and thus it can be used to very good effect as a **model** on which to base a fantasy role playing culture that will also **work**, often to the finest detail. […] A role-playing world is as good or as bad as the conceptions of the way things are that underlie its fantasy reality. We begin with a solid foundation.
> (Simbalist and Backhaus, 1983: 2; original emphases)

As they invest serious effort - and dozens of pages of their rulebook - in their attempt to provide the players and the GM with that solid foundation, the authors create a comprehensive and fully functional simulation of a European-style medieval secondary reality (adding magic), and this world building filters through to the rules themselves: realism in conception, adjudication and implementation is the guiding principle, and there is even a whole subchapter dedicated only to a classification of different sorts of rules and how they apply to different frames of reference and contexts in the gaming experience: Enabling Rules, Environmental Rules, Social Rules, Rules for Things, Rules for Personalities, and the Rule of Common Sense (Simbalist and Backhaus, 1983: 3 – 4). Gygax himself was clearly aware of how he and *(A)D&D* could not, and did not want to be proponents of what he called "the *realism-simulation* school", as they were firmly rooted in the "*game* school" (1979b: 9):

> Those who desire to create and populate imaginary worlds with larger-than-life heroes and villains, who seek relaxation with a fascinating game, and who generally believe games should be fun, not work, will hopefully find this system [i.e. AD&D] to their taste.
> (Gygax, 1979b: 9)

The DM and the players of Gygax's game engage in a fun competition, a playful confrontation that ends with winners (the player characters, or heroes) and losers (the DM's characters, or villains) 'as it should be'. This is entertainment, distraction, escapism, and fun, and not supposed to be anything else. It is a game, *not* a simulation. With *C&S*, Simbalist and Backhaus charge the GM with the task of administering and managing a fully functional secondary reality on an intradiegetic (society, culture, laws of nature) and extradiegetic level (rules, group dynamics). The GM becomes a creator of worlds, using content (setting material) and form (rules) of the RPG to run a world, not only a game. And this aspect of the duties of the GM is important enough to rank second in their list of six, with the group aspect following close behind on three.

> Third, the GameMaster must be a **teacher** and **advisor**. His task is to instruct Players about his view of role playing so that they know how to conduct themselves. He must explain the broad outlines of the world in which the Player Characters 'live' [...]. He must [...] clarify any rule changes or new rules he has made, and assist players whenever they have a difficulty in working with a specific rule.
> (Simbalist and Backhaus, 1983: 4; original emphases)

Here again, the divergence between the DM and the GM could hardly be any clearer. *C&S* invests the GM with more discursive power and authority than the other players, implicit in the use of the 'teacher' as metaphor (Table 5, c), but unlike Gygax the authors expect the GM not to confront, but to use this power to advise and assist the players. As the narrative and organisational hub of the group and the experience, the GM needs to communicate their individual reading or understanding of the setting material and the rules to the others so that they can make an informed choice whether they want to participate under these circumstances or not. And what is more, this assisting role is a continuous one, since the material is also subject to change, so in order to keep the process going and everyone involved, it is first of all the responsibility of the GM to mediate, inform and help. If the process collapses, the GM is more to blame than anyone else, even though the authors clearly state the common and shared nature of responsibility in RPGs:

> Gamers should understand that fantasy role playing is an activity that continuously evolves with the playing. New rules will be introduced, old ones modified, and the campaign will take on an atmosphere which the participants themselves establish. In the end, not all the rules in the world, whether written down or just understood to apply, will do any good if someone insist on 'ego-tripping' and ignores the right of others in the game to fair and honest play.
> (Simbalist and Backhaus, 1983: 3 - 4)

No-one, not any player, not the GM, can go 'ego-tripping', or they will destroy the experience for everyone involved. In stark contrast to Gygax's concept, there is no right or wrong way to play, not the way any author would want their game to be played, nor the way the GM interprets the material provided. And there is even an allowance for the natural diachronic change of what 'feels right' for a given group. The GM, unlike the DM, does not define a static system alone, a dictator in discursive power and sole textual authority, he merely manages dynamic change and evolution that results from group dynamics and interaction. And from cooperative storytelling:

> Fourth, the GameMaster must be a **storyteller**. A fantasy role playing game is a kind of enactment of a heroic tale, and the GameMaster is the narrator who tells the story and keeps everything tied together. [...] It is the GameMaster's job to **respond** to the actions of the Players through their Characters, changing and modifying his general story line to match the effects the Players are having on the course of the action. In short, the GameMaster must be prepared to accept the fact that the Players are also 'storytellers' who can influence his own plans and ideas.
> (Simbalist and Backhaus, 1983: 4; original emphases)

Just like the social level, the handling of the narrative level of the RPG experience also differs decidedly between the DM and the GM (Table 5, d). *C&S* is not only a simulation, it also is supposed to be an "enactment of a heroic tale", a communal story. Whereas the DM walks his players through the dungeon he has designed, the GM *responds* to the players' interactions with the secondary world, adapting his or her preconceived structure and narrative outline to *their* interventions. While it is the GM's duty to guarantee narrative coherence (keeping everything 'tied together'), the players are just as much storytellers as the GM, or even more so, because the fact that the GM 'responds' to player input implicitly attributes the players with the

primary driving momentum in the narrative flow. The GM is not the players' opponent, he or she is a collaborator. The GM does not provide a linear set of challenges for the players to overcome, the GM him- or herself faces the constant challenge of integrating player interaction with the secondary world and still guarantee its narrative and experiential coherence. Even though a GM enjoys greater discursive power than a player, he or she is expected to use it only to keep the narrative intact, not to punish or destroy player characters, as well as to populate the shared secondary reality with interesting characters and events that provide ample motivation for player interaction:

> Fifth, the GameMaster must be a **role player**. He must take the part of Everyone Else in the game besides the Player Characters. […] He must quickly breathe **personalities** into his NPCs [non-player characters] so that they acquire an identity all of their own. Role playing demands personal interactions between the personalities in the fantasy world.
> (Simbalist and Backhaus, 1983: 4; original emphases)

So, beyond the organisation of the system and the group, the simulation of a believable world and the management of the narrative process, the GM is also responsible for the representation of the secondary reality the players immerse themselves in (Table 5, e). Role-playing not 'roll-playing', in-character performative and narrative interaction between GM and players, or players and players, more so than the rolling of dice and out-of-character interaction or meta-talk, this is what the authors require of an RPG experience in order to achieve maximum impact. Taking a look at the back-cover of the *AD&D Dungeon Masters Guide* (1979), the image is a drastically different one:

> You now have a complete compilation of the most valuable material for your refereeing, the **Dungeon Masters Guide**. Herein you will find: combat matrices, encounter tables, monster attacks alphabetically listed, treasure and magic tables and descriptions, gem values by type, random wilderness terrain generation, random dungeon generation, suggestions on gamemastering"
> (Gygax, 1979b: outside back-cover)

What is "most valuable" for Gygax in the experience of DMing, and thus in extension of role-playing, are combat, monsters, treasure, and dungeons, as well as matrices, tables, attacks, and values. This is all *roll*-playing, and no word about *role*-playing. The DM – taking Gygax's description of his or her function – acts like an organic computer, administering the system and probabilities, the damage- and hit-points. "After all, ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS is first and foremost a game, a pastime for fun and enjoyment" (Gygax, 1979b: 112; original capitals). Simbalist and Backhaus emphasise the GM as "role player" and his duty to create believable "personalities" for the characters in the secondary reality so that the players can immerse themselves in, interact with, and affect it through "personal interactions between the personalities in the fantasy world" (1983: 4). Immersion is not an issue for the DM, however, as that would diminish the 'fun' aspect of *(A)D&D*. The DM uses the system of the game to challenge his or her players in primary reality, the GM uses the immersive quality of the narrative process to challenge his or her players in secondary reality.

Quintessentially, it is thus the quantity, location and application of the discursive power invested in the hub-participant that differentiates between the DM concept we find in Gygax's *(A)D&D* and later evolutions like Simbalist and Backhaus's GM and their successors. The DM assumes "ultimate power" by "know[ing] the game system" in primary reality, applying it so that the players are aware that "they are playing the game the way *you*, their DM, imagines and creates it" and that the DM is in a constant competition with them to "prove in every game that you are still the best" (all quotes Gygax, 1979b: 9). The GM is not 'king of the hill', he is more of a *primus inter pares*: he is supposed to act as advisor and storyteller, using his more in discursive power to stabilise the group and the narrative, aware that there is "never One True Answer" (Simbalist and Backhaus, 1983: 4). While mastery of the rules is essential, this is in order to create a fully functional and internally logical secondary reality that is also the main location for the GM to exert his discursive power to motivate the players through and to continuing interaction with the narrative process. The result of this different application of the GM's additional discursive power is that he is more of a manager or administrator than a ruler:

> Finally, the GameMaster must be a **bookkeeper** and **clean-up man**. […] The GameMaster has to keep track of all the important details so that everyone else knows what is going on, moment by moment.
> (Simbalist and Backhaus, 1983: 4; original emphases)

The image of the GM as the bookkeeper and the clean-up man (Table 5, f) is a strong one to understand the essential and fundamental difference between Gygax's competitive, auteurist, and autocratic conception of the role of the DM and the cooperative, process-oriented, and democratic GM Simbalist and Backhaus propose as an answer. In Gygax's conception of the RPG, all authority *ultimately* derives from him as a person, as the creator of the medium RPG himself, "the individual responsible for it all" (Gygax, 1980: 5), a claim that unjustifiably eclipses the essential contributions of many others, first among them Dave Arneson, as I will explain in my overview of the historical development of the medium later. The DM is the representative of *Gygax* at the gaming table, guaranteeing that the author's 'creative vision' of the game as such is kept intact, and - by the power invested in him or her by the 'creator' Gygax and the application of the rules - that the players in turn respect the DM's individual sub-creation, the campaign or adventure.

In contrast to this conceptualisation, the GM is the representative of the *group* he or she organises and administers and the *narrative* they cooperatively create. The authority of the GM therefore ultimately derives from a group consensus that he or she is doing a good job preserving the integrity and functionality of the group and the shared secondary reality. If one had a tendency towards oppositional metaphors to quickly grasp the conceptional and the ideological differences, one could argue that the DM is in a position similar to an emperor, a monarch invested with ultimate power and authority within a given system by reference to a metaphysical truth-claim (God/Gygax), whereas the GM is more like the President in a representative democracy whose power and authority is invested in him by the people and the narrative (national ideology/secondary reality) he represents. I favour a less oppositional metaphor: If the DM can be seen as an absolute monarch (think Louis XIV), the GM is more of a constitutional monarch (think Elizabeth II) – the difference is the Magna Carta, the sense of responsibility and where you locate ultimate

authority and accountability: outside of the social contract, or inside of it. This question is essential for my discussion of how RPGs interact with Postmodern questions about textual authority and discursive power, and one could make a good argument that it was the shift from DM to GM that was the beginning of the end of Modernist auteurism in RPG narratives, a process that finally found its end with the introduction of the Storyteller as the third dominant term for the hub-player in RPGs.

Mark Rein•Hagen designed *Vampire: The Masquerade* in 1991 together with Graeme Davis and several other members of White Wolf Publishing, and with their choice to abandon both DM and GM for 'Storyteller' (sometimes abbreviated ST) they signalled a fundamental paradigmatic shift in the medium that finally made it possible to claim the status as a fully developed form of serious and valid cultural expression or art, not only fun entertainment.

Already in the subtitle, Rein•Hagen establishes the basic premise of how *Vampire* would contribute to the evolution of RPGs as "A Storytelling Game of Personal Horror" (Rein•Hagen et al., 1991: back-cover), and he also puts his design premise at the most prominent position of the text, the very first sentence of his introduction: "This is a game of make-believe, of pretend, of storytelling. Though a game, it is more about storytelling than it is about winning" (1991: 19). While the GM would still be perceived as the 'master of a game', the Storyteller is now primarily visible as a narrative, not a simulational instance. RPGs in Rein•Hagen's understanding are interactive narratives: "The Storyteller's primary duty is to make sure the other players have a good time. The way to do that is to tell a good story" (1991: 20 - 21). So from the competitive DM and the administrating GM, we now have a move towards a Storyteller: from game to simulation to narrative – a triad that I will encounter again later in RPG theory. In *Vampire*, a whole chapter is now dedicated not to treasure and monsters to slay, not to tables that simulate the wearing of plate armour or the intricacies of a feudal society, but to storytelling and the role of the Storyteller (1991: 227 ff.).

Owing a lot to earlier innovations and the concept of the GM, Rein•Hagen also defines the duties and powers of the ST on three basic levels - role-playing (the performative level), story progression and coherence (the narrative level), and the application of rules to resolve conflicts fairly (the systemic level) (1991: 227 – 228). The

new element, or rather the intensification of a movement that started as early as *Chivalry and Sorcery* (1977), is the absolute primacy of the story over the rules:

> When a Storyteller directs the players through the story, she is said to be 'running the game'. The storyteller is in charge, and must take the lead in order to keep the story moving briskly in the desired direction, or at least stop it from breaking down totally if the players and their characters head off in the completely wrong direction. The Storyteller must make sure the game element doesn't slow down or interfere with the story element.
> (Rein•Hagen et al., 1991: 228)

The authority invested in the ST by the players is here no longer primarily intended to master and apply the rules, but to keep the narrative coherent and dynamic. If the game aspect of the Storytelling Game gets in the way of the story aspect, players are expected to change or even ignore the rules. The story-game RPG has become a game-story. In later editions of *Vampire* and its sister-games, this fundamental rule is even formulated as The Golden Rule and sometimes set apart from the rest of the text by design and placement on the page to highlight its power to override everything else:

> **The Golden Rule**
> Remember that in the end there is only one real rule in **Vampire**: there are no rules. You should fashion this game into whatever you need it to be – if the rules get in your way, then ignore or change them. In the end, the true complexity and beauty of the real world cannot be captured by rules; it takes storytelling and imagination to do that. Indeed, these rules are not so much rules as they are guidelines, and you are free to use, abuse, ignore and change them as you wish.
> (Rein•Hagen et al., 1992: 79; original emphases)

The difference to Gygax's autocratic claim of ultimate authority over rules and the 'right' way to play 'his' game could not be any clearer. I will dedicate more space to the merit of Rein•Hagen's essential contribution to the medium in the historical overview later, but the paradigmatic shift he initiated has *Vampire* and its sister games twice removed from *(A)D&D* on a conceptual level: While the role of the DM is an expression of Gygax's deeply ingrained competitive ideology, this switched to a

more cooperative relationship between GM and players with the evolutionary step taken by Simbalist and Backhaus in C&S. And while the GM in turn still has a more system-oriented role ('mastering the game') based on the largely simulationist approach to gaming the authors take, Rein•Hagen's ST is mostly a narrative instance ('telling the story'): the coherence and immersive qualities of the procedural, cooperative narrative are paramount, and the only rule (or systemic framework) that possesses ultimate validity is simply: "there are no rules". As primary reality is too complex to be adequately represented in the simulational system of an RPG, Rein•Hagen shifts the emphasis of the medium away from the Game, and clearly towards the Role-Playing. By this redefinition of the function of the hub-player, RPGs have become a narrative, playable medium, going beyond mere entertainment value and aspiring towards the status of an art.

But this change is not apodictic, nor is it absolute. Rein•Hagen is clever enough to allow for leeway in the reality of STing:

> As a Storyteller, you will quickly come to develop your own personal style. Part of this will arise from your own personality and inclinations, and part of it will reflect the tastes of your players. The range of different styles is best illustrated by reference to two archetypes, representing the opposite ends of the scale. Both are exaggerated, and you will probably end up somewhere in between.
> (Rein•Hagen et al., 1991: 229)

Once again, the author here shows an understanding of the intricacies of the narrative process of role-playing that Gygax never reached. First of all, the cooperative moment even influences the 'personal style' of the ST. He or she is *not* an auteur but part of a group effort, so their own inclinations will be refracted and channelled by the participation of everyone else. The collective of players must and will impact the narrative and organisational style of the ST. Secondly, even though Rein•Hagen sets up the ST as a mostly narrative instance, and thus *Vampire* as a storytelling game, he acknowledges that this is not an either/or choice, but in reality will fall more into the category of both/and: even though he uses two archetypes to explain STing styles, he notes that these are not mutually exclusive classifications, but

only the framework of a continuum, with the individual ST falling somewhere along the scale.

The first of these two archetypes is the Rules Lawyer: "This type of Storyteller insists on dice rolls for everything, and applies the letter of the rules to the fullest extent" (Rein•Hagen et al., 1991: 229). This is the echo of the GM still reverberating in the experience, the hub-player as the organising principle on a systemic, a game level. This is structure. "At the other end of the scale is the Freeformer", the author continues, "[and t]o this type of storyteller, the story is everything. Dice are rolled only occasionally, and then only for the nice sound they make" (ibid.). Here we have the ST in its purest form, the hub-player as the dynamic principle on a narrative level, the story level. If the Rules Lawyer is structure, then the Freeformer is player freedom and anti-structure. For Rein•Hagen, ironically, game equals constraint (rules), while narrative equals freedom (creativity):

> **Vampire** as a game tends to be more freeform than rules-oriented. The rules are there to help, not to govern, but the players should have the maximum freedom of action, and *never* feel that their decisions and actions do not make a difference.
> (Rein•Hagen et al., 1991: 229; original emphasis)

The relationship between the ST and the players is here defined by the constant oscillation between the necessary restriction of player freedom through rules to guarantee the fairness and continuity of the process and the desired creative freedom to take decisions and affect the secondary reality in a meaningful manner. This has lived on through the years, also after Rein•Hagen's departure from White Wolf in the late 1990s, until the most recent incarnation of the Storytelling Games rulebook, *The World of Darkness* (2004), where the reactive role of the ST is again emphasised: "The Storyteller's job isn't to defend his story from any attempts to change it but to help create the story as events unfold, reacting to the players' choices and weaving them into a greater whole" (Achilli et al., 2004: 22).

Even though I personally appreciate Rein•Hagen's contribution to RPGs as an essential breakthrough in the development of the medium since he helped them 'grow up', if so to say, to become a fully-fledged means of cultural expression, I also

find it curious that his approach is quite the opposite of most critics' in Game Studies who, as I explained earlier, associate the narrative aspect of for example video games with structure and constraint, while they see the game aspect as the liberating one, offering players the freedom to participate. An inkling of this conception shines through near the end of his explanation of the Freeformer archetype, when Rein•Hagen unfortunately leaves the following sentence and its apparent contradiction with his earlier classification without a proper appreciation of its critical implications: "Character actions may direct the story, but it is the Storyteller who decides the results of the actions" (1991: 229). Here the authorial and discursive power of the ST shines through, but the author does not comment on the effect this would have on the narrative process.

What he does, however, is add a list of 'Dos and Don'ts' for the Storyteller which I would like to discuss, because it will help understand the role of the ST in the process and the medium – and thus in extension the medium itself - according to Rein•Hagen's conception.

The first of the Dos he lists is "Keep all the characters in mind" (Rein•Hagen, 1991: 230). Here he talks about the ST as the organising force on a social level, in primary reality, and how it impacts the secondary reality created. It is essential to bring every player into the process of storytelling, to give them all an equal and fair share of the narration, and balance the personalities of the players and the focus given to their characters, so that stronger personalities do not hog the spotlight and quieter players also get *their* 15 minutes of fame. The primary role of the ST for Rein•Hagen is thus as a mediator and group leader, an equaliser, to guarantee that different social competence in primary reality does not affect the narrative created in secondary reality *and* the relationships between players in primary reality. The narrative is seen as a social, a negotiated thing. The ST does not get to dominate it, he or she is mostly busy administering the cooperative production.

Second on the list comes the aforementioned primacy of the creative over the simulationist, systemic aspect of RPGs: "Go beyond the rules", Rein•Hagen encourages the STs of *Vampire* (1991: 230). Again he associates the rules with restrictive qualities, even implying autocratic and controlling reflexes in STs leaning more towards the rules side of the medium, as "rules are for keeping characters in

line" (ibid.). So, rules serve the purpose of safeguarding the ST's narrative vision and bringing unruly characters and thus players 'to heel'. The author's suggestion, restating the Golden Rule, is clear: imagination before rules, creativity and storytelling before structure and simulation.

Picking up ideas about the cooperative nature of narrative production in RPGs I mentioned earlier, Rein•Hagen's third recommendation drives the medium beyond the seemingly inherent design flaw of relying overly much on the hub-player in the process of narration, decentring the cooperative effort: "Encourage the players to roleplay among themselves" (1991: 230). Certainly with Gygax's conceptualisation of the DM, but also still to a lesser degree in the more pluralistic and cooperative shift towards a GM with Simbalist and Backhaus, many players of RPGs and critics alike seem to (mis-)understand the narrative process of the medium as a set of dialogues between the hub-player (DM, GM, or ST) and the other players. The 'master' is given maximum discursive power and the guardianship of textual authority, so 'naturally' all players gravitate around them and look towards the DM/GM for narrative approval of their contributions. Rein•Hagen clearly opposes this view, arguing that "[i]f they [i.e. the players] don't roleplay unless they're talking to you [i.e. the ST], you know something is wrong" (ibid.). The measure of a fully functioning RPG experience is that play around the table continues when the ST gets up and goes to get some coffee. The narrative process of RPGs is not only communal and cooperative, ideally – in Rein•Hagen's understanding – it also becomes a self-organising and self-motivating process, detached from the ST's narrative and social control.

This is also why he concludes his list of Storyteller 'Dos' with the simple entry: "Encourage Player Input" (1991: 230). RPGs are not about the ST and their artistic vision, and this is a lesson every newbie ST will learn painfully early on when the players gleefully walk all over their carefully prepared and well-crafted plots. The game, or the narrative process to be more precise, belongs to no-one and everyone around that table at the same time and to equal measures: "Don't run the game without being aware of what your players like and don't like", the author cautions (ibid.). And then there is also a second instance that needs to be respected: "Balance the desire of the players to achieve the objectives of their characters with their desire to roleplay – let them accomplish their goals without breaking character" (ibid.). Not

only the players, but also their characters need to have 'their' interests guaranteed and safeguarded by the ST. The narrative must be respected for its developing and constantly changing internal logic and coherence. So on both levels, the primary as well as the secondary reality, it is *not* the ST or their characters that dominate the game, it is the collective of players and the narrative cooperatively produced that, according to Rein•Hagen, has ultimate authority.

This crucial insight also determines the 'Don'ts' the author then goes on to put together. The central item of all successful game design takes the place of topmost priority: "Don't take away the character's free will. […] They want real choices, and the freedom to choose their character's actions" (Rein•Hagen, 1991: 230). If there is no choice in gaming, there is no play (harking back to Zimmerman's definition), and ultimately no gaming. If the Storyteller assumes ultimate narrative and structural authority, he or she becomes a storyteller. Nothing wrong with that *per se*, as everyone enjoys a good story, but the medium is no longer an RPG, it becomes oral storytelling.

The next two 'Don'ts' remind the ST to uphold a careful balance between structure and anti-structure in the narrative process. There is on the one hand "Don't force the characters into a pre-determined plot" (1991: 230), and the author even claims a special position for his game in that respect, as "[i]n **Vampire**, more so than in other games, the characters need to be self-motivated" for conceptual and thematic reasons (ibid.). The characters (and their players) not only need to take centre-stage in the narrative created – which does *not* necessarily also mean that they need to be heroic at all and in the case of *Vampire* is hardly ever the case, they also determine the direction, atmosphere and pacing of the game. Even experienced STs cannot always correctly predict their group's actions and needs, so Rein•Hagen adds: "Often this means you must create the story as you go […]. It is difficult, but fulfilling" (ibid.). The procedural and *ad hoc* nature of the narrative created in RPGs is a necessary and inevitable result of the distribution of discursive power and textual authority in the group of participants. And even though it does and will create problems with upholding narrative, systemic, and sometimes even social cohesion, the emotional and social rewards for players and ST alike when (not if) these

difficulties are negotiated and eventually 'mastered' in a non-autocratic and competent way easily outweigh the bumps in the road.

The ideological (or philosophical) meta-message the medium RPG sends through this process on both a narrative and a formal level is that rules are necessary for collective decisions to work. This is why Rein•Hagen openly warns: "Don't let luck rule the plot. Characters should get to win on the basis of their own skill and ingenuity, not on unrelated dice rolls" (1991: 230). There can only be meaning if there is causality and a frame of reference that everyone agreed upon at least to a basic degree. Players need to know that the rules are fair and will be applied meaningfully, that the narrative is coherent and follows the basic premise of providing all participants with an enjoyable and meaningful experience, and that thinking, debating and then acting as a group will result in an acceptable outcome and not be rendered meaningless by a single unlucky roll of the dice. If pure luck rules the narrative and thus the process of producing it, the rules of simulation, narrative and social interaction themselves are rendered meaningless, and what remains is only chaos and disintegration. Allowing for the creative production of new meanings and not stifling them with too much structure, while at the same time preventing all interaction and meaning-making from collapsing by too much freedom or anti-structure is the everyday challenge we all face when we participate in social and/or cultural institutions. Meaning needs negotiation and at least a provisional consensus, and negotiation and consensus both need a shared framework of reference. RPGs, according to Rein•Hagen, showcase these processes of meaning-making, their necessities and dangers.

And being the attentive critic of systems that he appears to be in his text, the author also immediately highlights the need to constantly appropriate and adapt the structures used for meaning-making: "Don't cater to stereotypes. Though you will use stereotypes regularly, you should always try to twist or change them", he writes (Rein•Hagen, 1991: 230). Stereotypes, as narrative 'short-hand' for habitual concepts and situations, provide structure for a story and the players collaborating on its creation. They make for a quick and easy way to introduce elements, but they also always run the risk of violating the specificity and individuality of the element they are used to describe. Rein•Hagen's solution to this dilemma is simple: use and abuse

stereotypes. Turn the players' preconceptions against them, to get them to question and denaturalise their own unreflected frames of reference:

> Put a stereotype into a story, play it like a stereotype for most of the story (outraging the players in the process), and then, near the conclusion, suddenly flip everything upside down by breaking apart the stereotype. […] It can be very effective and pleasantly educational.
> (Rein•Hagen et al., 1991: 230)

The educational aspect of this strategy might smack a bit of authorial power, of 'teaching the players a lesson', but the ST is sure to have the tables turned on him or her as well more than once during the narration. This is the beauty of the collaborative storytelling experience RPGs can provide once the group accepts and embraces the distribution of discursive power and the procedural, cooperative creation of narrative that was first fully realised and put into practice in RPGs by Mark Rein•Hagen.

In the meantime, and the death of Gary Gygax before its publication in 2008 might have had some influence there, even the fourth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* has moved clearly away from the purely game-oriented, conflictual and adversarial role of the DM, even though it has kept the name for historical reasons. The four functions of the DM given are (in that order): Adventure Builder, Narrator, Monster Controller, and Referee (Heinsoo et al., 2008: 8). So the narrative aspect comes first and the game aspect second. The authors elaborate on the non-adversarial role of the 'new' DM :

> The Dungeon Master controls the monsters and villains in the adventure, but he isn't your adversary. The DM's job is to provide a framework for the whole group to enjoy an exciting adventure. That means challenging the player characters with interesting encounters and tests, keeping the game moving, and applying the rules fairly.
> (Heinsoo et al., 2008: 8)

It is Mark Rein•Hagen's conception of the Storyteller that echoes in this passage and the subsequent fundamental change of paradigm in RPGs as a new medium bringing together story and game that will serve as the basis for my analysis as to

how the medium itself interacts with Postmodern theories of literature, textuality and meaning-making on a formal and a content level. I will therefore adopt his terminology of Storyteller (ST) for the hub-player in the RPG experience for the rest of the following argument.

2.3 – Talk to Me: The Narrative Process in RPGs and the Question of Art

Taking a closer look at the concrete procedure of creating narrative in RPGs, the Storyteller is closely associated with the story side of the medium as the structuring force reacting and responding to the players' interactions. He or she is both the final arbiter of rules, and at the same time striving to construct a meaningful plot. While other players only take over the roles of the main characters in the story, can "focus their imaginative powers on one unique individual, and spend all the effort bringing that character alive", the Storyteller has a more universal role: "You are everything the players are not – you are the rest of the universe" (both Rein•Hagen, 1992: 59). The setting, characters and the dynamics of the events due to the player-characters' interaction with the secondary reality are all the responsibility of the Storyteller. The Storyteller creates his or her own interpretation of rules and background information, populates the setting with supporting characters (NPCs or 'Non-Player Characters') and comes up with an idea for a story. The players create and play the main characters in that story (the PCs or 'Player Characters'), developing the plot through their interactions with setting and NPCs.

The narrative of an RPG session is thus produced from a constant and ever-changing oscillation between the narrative and simulational structure created by the Storyteller and the anti-structure or ludic freedom enjoyed by the players. In stark contrast to the monological power of the author of traditional narrative media, the Storyteller, however, has to engage in constant plurilogical negotiation with their players. He or she "must be willing to work with them" (Rein•Hagen, 1992: 60) and to abandon all expectations of a pre-defined and designed plot development:

> The events and flow of the story are as much the responsibility of the players as the Storyteller. The primary duty of the Storyteller is to lead the story and to keep it moving

> briskly in the desired direction – or at least stop it from breaking down completely. Telling a story is more a matter of keeping up with the players, commenting and elaborating upon what their characters do and say, than it is of relating a narrative.
> (Rein•Hagen, 1992: 60)

It is thus the players who 'lead' in the process, as the actions and interactions of their characters provide the forward (and sometimes sideward or backward) momentum of the narration. The Storyteller takes up the narrative elements contributed by the players and integrates them with the secondary reality, judging how they would impact the setting and its conflicts, describing the resulting developments and opening the secondary reality up to player intervention again.

This constant feedback loop drives the RPG narrative. If the feedback collapses, because the players refuse to participate e.g., so does the narrative. In his article "Role-Playing Games: An Overview", Andrew Rilstone, one of the leading thinkers of RPG theory during the early 1990s, wittily summarised this basic concept as follows:

> It would not be too much of an imagination to say that the entire role-playing hobby is a series of subtle and complex elaborations of the formula:
> **Referee:** 'What do you do now?'
> **Player:** 'I do such and such.'
> (Rilstone, 1994)

So this is where the strong heart of the medium beats, the process of constant circulation of narrative information, of question and answer that itself feeds into the next question again, perpetuating the cycle. "From this chaos", Rilstone goes on to explain, "a more or less well realized story emerges. This story (or the vicarious experience of an imaginary world, which comes to much the same thing) is the purpose of role-playing games" (1994). The emergent narrative - a term I would like to borrow from Henry Jenkins (c.f. 2004: 128) – is what RPGs are about, and the procedural production that brings it forth necessitates an instance that successfully mediates between the players' individual freedom of choice and the meta-structure of the self-same narrative. This is the essential role the Storyteller plays, and "role-

playing games require human referees because no one has yet developed a computer or rules system which can allow complete freedom of choice" (Rilstone, 1994).

The primacy of story, however, puts Rilstone on Rein•Hagen's side of the argument about the nature of RPGs, and he even openly accuses Gygax as being "markedly hostile to modern developments in interactive narrative" (1994). The article is a true child of its times, since 1991 saw the arrival of two game-changers in the medium (no pun intended) with Mark Rein•Hagen's *Vampire: The Masquerade* and Erick Wujcik's *Amber Diceless Roleplaying Game*, both of which are not only highly creative and inspirational games, but also meditations on the medium RPG itself and its potential to reflect and comment upon social and cultural issues. Like Rein•Hagen and Wujcik, Rilstone comes to a simple but momentous conclusion about what makes RPGs so powerful as a medium of cultural expression:

> Role-playing games, like other forms of interactive narrative, represent a fundamental blurring of the distinction between creator and consumer, between story-teller and listener. Unlike other forms of interactive narrative, they can, in theory, be played with no tools and virtually no financial outlay: all that is necessary is that there be interaction between a player and a referee. As such, they have the possibility to become a truly popular artform with individuals and small groups creating virtual worlds for their own enjoyment.
> (Rilstone, 1994)

The blurring between producer and recipient, the activation of the consumer into co-creating meaning is a general feature of all interactive, playable media to a certain extent, but no other medium shows such a pervasive and total application of the principle. Video games and hyperfiction are both pre-designed and only allow the reader/player the freedom of configuration of the elements they offer. In pen&paper RPGs, however, the process of narration lets the players contribute totally new elements that become validated by collective assent. This deeply democratic approach to meaning-making also dominates the material aspect of RPGs, as Rilstone observes. All it takes to be able to play is a group of at least two people, some bits of paper and a couple of pencils for taking notes. No hardware, or software, or any other infrastructure is necessary. Even the books normally associated with RPGs – the rulebooks explaining the rules of a given system and the sourcebooks providing

information on the specific settings or secondary worlds – are, ultimately, not required. Many individuals and groups also develop their own game systems (rules) and backgrounds (settings) and spend years playing them, continually adding to them and their complexity. Some of them never buy any commercially available RPG books at all. On a conceptual and a material level, RPGs are therefore the most democratic narrative medium I am aware of in Western societies.

And more than that: Rilstone and others, people like Rein•Hagen and Wujcik, at the beginning of the 1990s started to hypothesise, sometimes even to demand that it was time for the medium to take on responsibility and aspire to the status of an artform. A truly *democratic* artform of critical, cultural expression 'by the people for the people' that would help to establish a critical mind-set in current and future generations. Robin D. Laws, Canadian game designer and critic well known for his *Feng Shui: Action Movie Roleplaying* (1996) and *The Dying Earth Roleplaying Game* (2001), wrote a highly perceptive article, "The Hidden Art: Slouching Towards a Critical Framework for RPGs" (1995), on the problems RPGs face as far as establishing a critical framework is concerned, one of the basic ingredients (on the reception side of the creative process) of defining a new medium as art. At the time of writing, Laws identified one argument as dominating the community of RPGers: Whether their medium could be considered art at all. And even though "writing a game product or moderating a session clearly involve the same sorts of decisions about plot, characterization, pacing, atmosphere, imagery and so on that creators in other narrative art forms use in their work" (Laws, 1995), the strongest resistance against an 'artification' of RPGs was seen as coming from within the community itself. One of the reasons Laws suggests for this is that a large number of RPGers have an educational and professional background in mathematics, science and engineering who "have traditionally been suspicious of pretensions associated with the humanities, and aren't comfortable thinking of themselves as artists" (ibid.). However, the author compares the necessary process to critically describe and define RPGs to what happened to film with the advent of the auteur theory, as it clearly established that entertainment and art need not be mutually exclusive and that "works in a genre mould can have legitimacy as important works" (Laws, 1995). Since most RPGs are deeply rooted in popular genres (sci-fi, fantasy, horror, super-heroes,

spoof), they would profit from auteurist modes of criticism, Laws claims, as "[t]hese new modes reduced their emphasis on evaluation […] and searched instead for social or political insight reflected in pop construction" (ibid.). Interestingly enough, and seemingly in contradiction with the narrative process of RPGs, this idea of an auteurist approach towards gaming in order to establish it as an accepted art form will come up again later in this chapter, so over almost two decades there is agreement between critics and theoreticians about this issue.

But Laws also brings up a second central and conceptual problem with (academic) RPG criticism and the resulting insecure state of the medium as an artform: "Criticism of the actual RPG experience is the Schrödinger's Cat of art criticism. Lift the lid to look at the cat, and you may well destroy it" (1995). As I have already established when I discussed the nature of the process of narration in RPGs and the essential role of the Storyteller in it, the narrative production happens in a cooperative, plurilogical, immersive, dynamic, and open-ended but closed-group set-up. The narrative that is created is, by definition, ephemeral, since RPGs are an oral storytelling medium. An external and objective critical appraisal of the narrative, or even the process of its creation, is thus impossible. I have addressed this conundrum in my introduction, since, as a trained academic, I am well aware of the violation of good scientific practice this present analysis constitutes. I am a gamer myself, using my first-hand experiences as one of the bases for my critical investigations. By definition I cannot be external *or* objective. But Laws explains quite convincingly why this is not possible in the first place: "the gaming experience itself is not set up to be observed by outsiders" (1995). As the medium "does not draw a line between artist and audience" (ibid.), this completely upsets the traditional process of cultural production and reception and, subsequently, the academic model of critical distance and objectivity:

> In a gaming session, all participants are creators. They are not passively watching a predetermined work of art unfold before them. They are collaborating together to create a work that exists only for a moment, without the eyes of non-participants upon them. […] RPGs are not set up so that other people may watch. […] If critics do take the unusual step of arranging to watch a session, they will change its very nature.
> (Laws, 1995)

Since it is therefore impossible to critically assess the procedural narration, interested academics have resorted to means to try and circumvent the problem. They use protocols or write-ups of sessions, or rulebooks and supplements as a basis for their analyses. Laws cleverly uses an analogy to film criticism to point out the methodological problems here: "Write-ups are about as representative of the original gaming experience as the press kit for a film is of the film itself" (Laws, 1995), and "studying a game book to evaluate the RPG experience as art is rather like using a technical manual of cinematography to write about *Rashomon* instead of actually watching *Rashomon* itself" (ibid.). Using published adventures and stories for RPGs gets closer to the experience, but will not help either: "The analogy would be to reading the screenplay of *Rashomon* instead of watching *Rashomon*" (ibid.). This then is the main conceptual stumbling block for Laws in the endeavour of establishing an academic critical framework for RPGs, and resulting from this impossibility of studying the medium, its questionable status as an artform. He himself, however, clearly advocates an understanding of RPGs as fully functional art from the very first sentence of his text: "Role-playing games have existed for many years as an art form without a body of criticism" (Laws, 1995). Closing the frame at the end of his short but essential article he therefore concludes:

> So perhaps this entire survey of possible critical approaches is premature. The interactive art of RPGs is an elusive one, hidden from the observing eye of the critic. Perhaps before we figure out which criteria to apply to it, we should attempt to figure out how to observe it at all. (Laws, 1995)

Almost two decades later, video games, also a fairly new medium, have now reached exactly the same point in their development RPGs were at during the 1990s, and in *How to Do Things with Video Games* (2011) Ian Bogost talks about how they can and should follow the aspiration to venture into the sphere of artistic expression. Based on his analysis of three well-known 'art games', Jonathan Blow's BRAID (2008), Jason Rohrer's PASSAGE (2007), and Rod Humble's THE MARRIAGE (2007), he defines five descriptors on the production side of the creative process that they share on the levels of desired effect, method of creation, and form (c.f. Table 6).

Art games are …	*What does it mean?*
… proceduralist (a)	They expose systems and structures
… introspective (b)	They promote reflection not action
… abstract (c)	They favour processes over debate
… subjective (d)	They are poetic rather than concrete
… auteurist (e)	They exhibit strong authorship

Table 6: *The Descriptors of Art Games (c.f. Bogost, 2011: 13 - 16)*

The first of these is procedural rhetoric (Table 6, a), and this is where RPGs excel, easily outshining their video game cousins. "[P]roceduralist games are process intensive […]", Bogost writes, "In these games, expression arises primarily from the player's interaction with the game's mechanics and dynamics, and less so […] in their visual, aural, and textual aspects. These games lay bare the form, allowing meaning to emanate from a model" (Bogost, 2011: 13). As I have shown earlier, the narrative process of RPGs is only carried by the players' interaction with the mechanics and dynamics of the game. If there is no interaction, there is no RPG. And there is also a second quality Bogost highlights in procedural games which sets them clearly apart from most other forms of art: "[A] procedural rhetoric does not argue a position but rather characterizes an idea. These games say something about how an experience of the world works, how it feels to experience or to be subjected to some sort of situation" (2011: 14). So *per se*, these games do *not* argue for or against anything, and this moral and ethical nullity is one of the major points of criticism held against games as art: How can games be art, when they do not take a stand? What critics do not understand is that instead of taking a stand, games invite the player to walk in someone else's shoes for a while and make up their mind about the situation they find themselves in. Instead of convincing the players of the author's point of view, games ask them to think for themselves.

Art games therefore are introspective in nature, and this is Bogost's second descriptor (Table 6, b). Unlike other games or mainstream media, they eschew both immediate gratification (cheap thrills) and external action, as "[t]he goal of the proceduralist designer is to cause the player to reflect on one or more themes during

or after play" (Bogost, 2011: 14). External conflicts and questions are internalised and answers looked for not on the outside (winning, fighting, possessing), but on the inside (reflecting, arguing, understanding). The negotiating aspect of RPGs could be seen as a communal internalisation of the processes of deliberating and understanding the issues and themes that come up in play. Like the different instances of the human psyche identified by Freud and Jung, or the various identities that we all possess and that necessitate different approaches to problems and questions encountered, the players and the Storyteller work through the narrative and come to a consensual solution. This is why the main protagonists in art games need to be abstract enough to give the players a sense of freedom, but at the same time human enough so that they can successfully project their own experiences onto them in order for this strategy of internalisation to work.

Abstraction is therefore the third aspect of art games in Bogost's tentative typology (Table 6, c): "Their focus on meaning in mechanics notwithstanding, proceduralist games do not reject graphics, sound, text, or even story entirely. But when they do include such things, these games tend to reject verisimilitude in favour of abstraction" (Bogost, 2011: 14 – 15). The abstraction not only strengthens what Scott McCloud called the "masking effect" in cartoons on an aesthetic level, that is the ability to project oneself more easily into a representation the higher the degree of abstraction (McCloud, 1994: 43), Bogost also argues that it foregrounds the experience of the processes at work and favours metaphor and vignette over explicit debates and long-forms (2001: 15). RPGs offer this sense of abstraction on a very basic, formal level: Since they are 'only' language games, there is no audio-visual representation, no aesthetic input other than voice and language. This is a narrative medium in the literal sense, as actions and reactions, the setting and character development are exclusively related through language. On a content level, 'artsy' RPGs frequently offer metaphorical and/or alienating roles for the players to adopt: non-glittering, brutal and predatory urban vampires (*Vampire: The Masquerade*, 1991), inspiration incarnate fighting with the power of imagination against manipulative and exploitative forces (*Agone* by Sébastien Célerin, Mathieu Gaborit et al., 1999), or the now-sentient detritus of a human civilisation long since fallen (*Low Life: The Rise of the Lowly* by Andy Hopp, 2005) are just a few examples.

The fourth aspect of art games according to Bogost is subjective representation (Table 6, d), "a more poetic and less direct way to express the ideas or scenarios their processes represent" (2011: 16). No definitive solutions are presented, "the subjective interpretation of emotion" is seen as the core of human experience (ibid.). A poetic atmosphere, sometimes dark (*Wraith: The Oblivion*, 1994), sometimes whimsy and colourful (*Changeling: The Dreaming*, 1995) pervades all *World of Darkness* games, a series of RPGs released during the first half of the 1990s and based on Mark Rein•Hagen's *Vampire,* the first game in the series. Some games take the introspective and subjective implosion of meaning to the extreme, such as the fascinating but deeply disturbing *Patient 13* (2009) by Anthony Combrexelle where the players take over the roles of characters who one day are torn out of their ordinary lives only to wake up in a lunatic asylum they cannot leave and where they are subjected to all sorts of nonsensical mental and physical abuses by staff and fellow inmates.

The fifth and last feature of art games – strong authorship (Table 6, e) - seems to be in direct opposition to the very concept of RPGs. Bogost's reasoning why this is an indispensable ingredient is convincing:

> When we ponder the subjective themes of human experience, it's hard to do so in relation to the nameless anonymity of corporate creation. Thus the strong presence of a human author is prevalent in these games whether an individual or individually identified members of a small group.
> (Bogost, 2011: 16)

RPGs show this "strong presence of a human author" on two different textual levels: the printed or otherwise published pre-texts, and the concrete process of cooperative narrative creation.

Many of the more famous RPGs have the names of their creators attached to them: Gary Gygax's *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), Mark Rein•Hagen's Storytelling games (1991), Steve Jackson's *GURPS* (1986), to name the big three in contemporary RPG subsociety in order of traditionally attributed market shares based on anecdotal evidence, as there are no industry-wide figures available. And yet, with the possible

exception of control-freak Gygax, the creators would not, or could not impose an auteurist quality on their games. Jackson's *Generic Universal Role-Playing System* (GURPS) is built around the premise of being 'generic' and thus able to interface with other games and systems:

> To be honest, we hope ***GURPS*** will become the 'standard' roleplaying system. But we won't expect to do that by driving everyone else out of the market, or even by forcing them to conform to us. Instead, *we* are conforming to *them* – by producing a system that will work with *any* clearly-written adventure.
> (Jackson, 1987a: 4)

Rein•Hagen openly admits to being inspired by other pre-texts and invites his readers to change his games to whatever extent it pleases the individual groups so that they resound with meaning for them:

> The efforts and creativity of many created this game, as no one person could ever create anything of this depth and scale. Each of us takes the ideas of others, and then passes them along, transformed perhaps, but the chain is always unbroken. We may evolve the idea, concept, or seed, but we can never claim sole ownership.
> What we call creativity is actually evolution. Creativity is hiding your sources. However, if you are creative enough in hiding your sources, you can reveal them openly, for they will no longer be recognized. That is the real achievement, the actual creativity.
> I urge you to take the seeds of what has been described in the book, and evolve from it your own reality, stories, and passion plays. Become part of an unbroken chain, traced back to Caine and beyond.
> (Rein•Hagen, 1991: 258)

Here the anti-auteurist stance goes much deeper, beyond the economical and into a philosophical and cultural sphere. The auteur Rein•Hagen describes his text, and all literary or artistic creation, as an exercise in intertextuality, an unbroken chain of cultural evolution. As a link in this chain, 'his' text ceases to be *his* as soon as it enters the public sphere, and he even expressly asks the players to interact with it, appropriate it and develop their own narratives from it. And this then is the second level of auteurism that I see in RPGs: the "individually identified members of a small

group" Bogost mentions in his definition (2011: 16) seems to me a fitting description of a role-playing group. Beyond the pre-textual level, the concrete realisation of the narrative process in RPGs is carried by a small group of people who use their own personal contexts and narrative abilities and inclinations to negotiate a common and shared narrative experience. It does not get any more human than that: the everyday experience of negotiating between my subjective perspective and needs and the perspective and needs of the group.

Even though Bogost originally developed his defining features of art games for video games, procedural rhetoric, introspection, abstraction, subjective representation, and strong authorship can also, or even more so than in video games, be identified in RPGs. Together with Robin Laws's demands for a theoretical and critical framework that are slowly fulfilled, RPGs do thus have the potential to finally be considered art games on both the production and reception sides of the cultural and creative sphere.

2.4 – WYSIWYG: The Development of Theoretical Approaches to RPGs

The largely untapped artistic and critical potential is most certainly one of the central reasons why since the inception of RPGs as a new medium continuous critical and theoretical attention has been paid to its very peculiar narrative situation.

Early on, academic interest was mainly sociological. Gary Alan Fine's landmark study *Shared Fantasies – Role-playing Games as Social Worlds* (1983) is based on three intersecting goals: to analyse and describe gamers as "a contemporary urban leisure subculture", to understand the microcultural system of RPGs and how it relates to the gaming community, and lastly "to understand the processes by which people generate meanings and identities in social worlds" (Fine, 1983: 1).

Two concepts are central to Fine's deliberations: the creation and workings of cultural systems on the one hand, and the phenomena of engrossment and identification on the other. "Fantasy gamers", Fine argues, "create cultural systems as their avocation – worlds of imagination formed by the participants, given the constraints of their own knowledge and the structure provided by the rules" (1983:

2). The sociologist is interested in how players and Storytellers jointly create these systems, and what mechanisms constrain and regulate all parties involved during the process, as "each fantasy world is a fairly tight transformation by the players of their mundane, shared realities" (1983: 3). So on an abstract, conceptual, as well as on a concrete level, the 'shared fantasies' of Fine's title are not escapist and meaningless pastimes. RPGs seen through this lens become secondary creations that like mythologies tell us a lot about the workings of the societies and subsocieties in primary reality that produce them. As cultural artefacts and means of cultural expression, they always reflect the context of their creation, no matter whether it be the social, historical, or personal context. And, Fine concludes, RPGs are especially fertile grounds for these processes, as they take up a formal middle ground:

> Gaming fantasy combines the expressive freedom of fantasy with the structure characteristic of games. It is neither as rule-governed as games, because of its fantasy component, nor as free-floating as fantasy, because of its organisation, which derives from the gaming model. (Fine, 1983: 3)

The conceptual nature of the medium literally being a 'medium', something in the middle, in between, and its procedural, formal nature as a moderated collective mediation, both make it especially open to projections of the personal circumstances and personalities of participants and thus an attractive narrative and social space of sociological (and psychological) interest.

The binding force that promotes emotional, as well as personal attachment to and identification with the process and product of RPGs – the collaborative narration and narrative, is also a focus of Fine's study: "Fantasy gaming comprises three interrelated systems of meaning: commonsense reality, the gaming rules, and the content of the gaming fantasy itself. Participants enact different persona [sic] on each of these three levels" (Fine, 1983: 3). Following this analysis of the different components of the narrative process, it is the game aspect of RPGs that is used to negotiate between the primary (or "commonsense") reality shared by the players – the social level - and the secondary reality (or "fantasy") shared by their characters – the narrative level. Fine the sociologist thus defines RPGs as narrative social games,

using a non-genre-specific but conceptual and psychological understanding of 'fantasy'.

Essential for this process to work properly is what the author terms 'engrossment' and what in Game Studies is widely known as immersion:

> For the game to work as an aesthetic experience players [...] must lose themselves to the game. [...] The acceptance of the fantasy world as a (temporarily) real world gives meaning to the game, and the creation of fantasy scenario and culture must take into account those things that players find engrossing.
> (Fine, 1983: 4)

This passage is essential in many ways to understand Fine's conception of RPGs. First and most important of all, he concedes that they possess the *capability* to produce aesthetic experiences. This differentiation is a clever way to circumvent unending discussions of the nature of RPGs as serious art *or* playful escapism. Fine here uses a functional approach: RPGs *can* work as aesthetic experiences, but they do not *have to* do so. Experienced RPGers will know that sometimes it is just enough to not immerse oneself in the secondary reality, but pass a fun evening in its primary counterpart with your friends killing monsters and looting treasure. This is when the game aspect of the RPG takes centre-stage: dice, stats, challenge, experience points. Some RPGs also openly promote this style of play (like *Dungeons & Dragons*), as the creators of these games see the entertainment and fun function of RPGs as primal. But in order for the medium to show what it can contribute to an artistic reflection of its social and cultural context, in order for it to make meaning, as Fine put it, there must be not only agency, which is perfectly intact in the sheer visceral pleasure of blazing through hordes of monsters gamist style, but also immersion. Engrossment - to use Fine's terminology - is the source of the unrivalled power playable media, and especially RPGs can exert over their participants. And while video games provide almost perfect audio-visual simulations of secondary realities, it is the tyranny of the pre-designed virtual land- and soundscape that also poses a problem for this medium in reaching everyone equally: If I do not like the images and sounds/music I am presented with, or if they do not match my imagination of the narrative architecture I

should be interacting with, the result is a feeling of alienation that reduces immersion and thus emotional and intellectual impact. In a pen&paper RPG, the only narrative medium is the voice and language, so each of the participants will have their very own imagination of the look and feel of the secondary reality. It becomes a highly selective and interpretative *personal* variation of the *shared* narrative architecture produced through configuration of the provided narrative elements, bringing together the social and the psychological aspect I mentioned earlier to maximise immersion and thus identification.

Fine also extends the competences conveyed by RPGs beyond the purely social and narrative framework of the medium. As each of the three levels or frames of the experience - group, game, narrative (c.f. Fine, 1983: 4) - provides the participants or their representative entities (character) with different sets of knowledge, they learn to constantly switch between the frames concerned and use the information available in a given context. "The awareness context of each framed self", Fine argues, "the ease of moving to other frames of meaning, and the ambiguities inherent in situations with several levels of meaning permit an examination of relationships among experiences on each level in the game" (ibid.). Why this is relevant for a sociological perspective becomes immediately clear when the author begins his next paragraph: "Related to this are questions of identity and identification" (ibid.). As a sociologist, Fine sees a close connection between the constant frame-switching in RPGs (Do I act as a player, gamer, or character at a given moment?), and the frame-switching we, as social beings, constantly engage in when we go through our everyday lives. The multiple and intersecting layers of our individual, social, and cultural identities resemble the complex set-up of interacting with the narrative process of an RPG. In a way, the medium and the strategies of decision- and meaning-making it necessitates are thus very life-like. And it is the power of the close identification between player and character that drives it, sometimes also to the detriment of the process, as when a player cannot or does not want to differentiate between the player and the character anymore. On a sociological perspective one could thus argue that RPGs train the ability to distinguish and switch between the different roles and identities one assumes in everyday life, contributing to the mental health and successful social behaviour of its players.

Using his sociological point-of-view, Fine also logically attempts to define the medium focussing mainly on its social aspects:

> In FRP ['Fantasy Role-playing'] gaming rules and outcomes do not have the inevitability that they possess in most formal games; rather, both features are negotiated, and rules are adjusted by the referee and his group. As a result fantasy role-playing games are in some ways more like life, and less like games.
> (Fine, 1983: 8)

The closeness of RPGs to the requirements of 'real life' becomes their central identifying feature. Rules *and* narrative are subject to negotiation between all participants, just like societies negotiate their rules (social structure, laws) and the meaning they consider to be 'true' (norms and values, cultural expression). Even though play takes place in a space separated from every-day (primary) reality, the negotiated co-creation of a Secondary World - to use Tolkien's term (1964: 49) - develops insights, and social as well as intellectual skills relevant to life in the Primary World. RPGs are therefore similar to psychodrama and other forms of therapy, Fine argues, "in which participants act out reactions to psychiatrically significant events" (1983: 206). The Storyteller as the hub-player is in a special situation as far as identification is concerned. Since they do not have an individual character to identify with – and through them with the secondary reality created – there are five possible choices: "[The ST] can identify with the player-characters in the game, the enemies of the player-characters, or attempt to balance the two; he can suppress all identification and be neutral; or he can attempt to create the most aesthetically pleasing story line possible" (Fine, 1983: 224).

Basically, Fine argues that no matter what the Storyteller chooses as his approach, eventually they identify with the game itself on a meta-level: "His orientation to the game may be implicit, explicitly emotional (in that he admits his personal desires), or may be fundamentally aesthetic" (1983: 228), but unlike the players who identify with an individual narrative instance, the Storyteller necessarily identifies with the process as such. This curious situation is just one of the reasons why Fine then looks beyond

his initial statement that RPGs are more like life and less like games, identifying a set of perceived differences:

> First, role flexibility is expected and allowed. Second, the consequences of stepping out of role are relatively light (and sometimes it is in the player's interest to do this). Finally, participants regularly treat others as two simultaneous coacting personae – character and person/gamer.
> (Fine, 1983: 228)

While his first point might have been invalidated by changes in work and private life since the 1980s, as 'flexibility' has become one of the core elements of Neo-Conservative ideologies and their attempts to restructure our societies, the second one is definitely a crucial feature to distinguish RPGs from life in primary reality. If my character fails and is punished, I as a player do not suffer any consequences. If my character dies, I am still very much alive. This is exactly one of the reasons why RPGs are so attractive, because with the ability to provide maximum player freedom of choice, they also provide maximum security from the more unpleasant effects such choices might have. The worst thing that can happen is that I will have to create a new character. RPGs thus provide safe spaces to experiment with behaviour that would be unthinkable or difficult in 'real life' for fear of possible repercussions. The third point, treating others as 'multiple' personalities (not in a pathological sense), is actually something I see as a very positive and informative experience: Since we are all "simultaneous coacting personae" in primary reality – like I would be researcher, teacher, son, partner, friend, Storyteller, gamer and many other things at the same time when we meet (c.f. Goffman, 1973) – the peculiar narrative and social situation of RPGs train their participants to consider many identities at the same time when they engage in social contact. So while in Fine's first point life has overtaken the game through socio-economic changes, and his second one is one of the fundamental differences between RPGs and life, I would *hope* for his third point to seep from game into life. But the author is still very much the pragmatic, US-American researcher in 1983, ending his chapter on "Role-Playing and Self-Playing" with the sense of closure we would expect and the assurance that the separation of the

spheres is still very much intact: "These features remind us that games are not work, and are fantasy, not reality" (Fine, 1983: 228). If this way of thinking is what it takes to uphold traditional, modern (or Modern) systems of classification, then I am afraid many critics will miss the profound changes that are taking place in Western societies at the moment.

At the end of the 1980s and during the early 1990s a paradigmatic change towards a more serious use of RPGs beyond mere entertainment and pleasure occurred, and subsequently attempts were made to provide a theoretical framework for these hybrid artefacts from within the community supporting and developing them.[7] Attempts to define RPGs in RPG Theory have ranged from the comedic to the pedantic. "On the Vocabulary of Role-Playing: Notes Towards Critical Consistency?" (1995), for example, is a commendable and very helpful collection of RPG terminology assembled by Phil Masters. Not only restricting his task to the mere copy/pasting of definitions, Masters also critically reflects upon the usability of the terms he mentions. So the entry for "Role-Player" reads as follows:

> Generally, anyone participating in role-playing games; more narrowly, any player whose primary interest is the depiction of PC [i.e. player character] personality.
> Although the narrow use of the term is at least as old as the concept of the Four-Way Split [i.e. Glenn Blacow's classification in the late 1970s of RPG styles into Roleplaying, Storytelling, Powergaming, and Wargaming (Masters, 1995)], the potential for confusion with the broad meaning, and the value-judgement implicit in the suggestion that only a narrow-definition Role-Player truly merits the term, makes its acceptance undesirable. On the other hand, a better word for the behaviour pattern may be needed.
> (Masters, 1995)

Masters here provides a differentiated definition (general/specific), and even points out the problematic value judgment inherent in this double use of the term. Other proponents of RPG Theory have later followed his suggestion and tried to find

[7] I have already mentioned two proponents of RPG Theory, Robin D. Laws and Andrew Rilstone. Two of the leading online platforms for theoretical articles and exchanges between gamers are *The Oracle* (www.rpg.net/oracle), active until May 23, 2000 (c.f. The Oracle, 2000), and *The Forge* (http://www.indie-rpgs.com/forge), supported by Ron Edwards until June 1, 2012 (c.f. Edwards, 2012).

a more fitting and less confusable term for the more specific sense. But Masters's article is also a very good example of how RPG Theory is not an academic discipline in the strict sense and thus not bound by the principles of objectivity and the use of serious language or argumentation. In his introduction, Masters himself points out the academic insufficiencies of his article:

> It would be pleasant to say that this article is designed to remedy [the lack of a commonly accepted RPG terminology]. However, the author is slightly too much of a democrat, and far too flippant, to try any such thing. […]
> As the alert reader will already have guessed, this means that this article is partly descriptive (describing terms in widespread use), a little prescriptive (suggesting some definitions that the author thinks deserve more popularity), and frequently combative (suggesting where existing terms, or the thoughts they embody, are misleading or misguided). This is not, perhaps, the most academically respectable way to do things, but the author enjoys it, and he has attempted to make clear distinctions between the different modes of discourse.
> (Masters, 1995)

The deep sense of self-awareness, the playfulness and textual mastery demonstrated here very much befits the attempt to critically describe a playable narrative medium based on very democratic principles. One could argue that form here follows content, taking the text beyond the sphere of mere criticism and into the sphere of art itself in a borderline textuality that again echoes the one present in RPGs. And to reinforce this first impression, Masters also provides a definition of "RPG" in very much the same vein:

> The accepted abbreviation for "role-playing game", little-known outside the hobby, nearly universal within.
> The author of this article spent several years of his life as a computer programmer specialising in a language called RPG ("Report Program Generator"), and military technology (a subject which some role-players study obsessively) give us Rocket-Propelled Grenades - but confusion is not usually a problem.
> (Masters, 1995)

Andrew Rilstone is also one of the creators of RPG Theory, and in his article "Role-Playing Games: An Overview" (1994) he, a gamer himself, gives his more serious attempt of a definition of RPGs:

> A role-playing game is a formalized verbal interaction between a referee and a player or players, with the intention of producing a narrative. This interaction is such that the fictional character (controlled by the player) has complete or nearly complete freedom of choice within the fictional world (controlled by the referee). What is essential in this definition is the freedom of choice allowed to a player's character, compared with the very limited range of choices available in most computer or boardgames.
> (Rilstone, 1994)

If the social aspect – the negotiation - dominates Fine's (sociological) definition, here the game aspect of RPGs – the interaction and player agency, the ability to interact meaningfully with the secondary reality - is the dominant aspect of the medium, situating this perspective closer to Game Studies. Rilstone expressly emphasises the high degree of freedom of choice granted to the participants of an RPG, *even* in comparison to other playable media, such as video- or boardgames. All of the fundamental building blocks of RPGs are there – the presence of rules ("formalized"), language as the platform ("verbal"), the social aspect ("interaction" between players and referee), and the procedural narration – but it is the unrivalled amount of agency that Rilstone as a gamer makes the key concept in his definition of the medium and his essential contribution to RPG Theory.

During the 1990s, games in general took on momentum as forms of cultural expression in Western societies, hand in hand with the rise to discursive dominance of Postmodern theories in the humanities, and quickly the first key texts of what later would be called Game Studies appeared, such as Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext* (1997), or Janet Murrey's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997). An interesting connection to make here is that the RPG community (and RPG Theory) has known this very same conflict ever since the beginnings of the medium (Simbalist and Backhaus vs. Gygax for example), and it was kicked into a higher gear when during the early 1990s self-proclaimed 'narrative' RPGs such as Mark Rein•Hagen's *Vampire* (1991) or Erick Wujcik's *Amber Diceless Roleplaying* (1991) appeared and basically created two camps

among RPGers: those that would play for fun - the game (or ludologist) faction symbolised and represented by *(A)D&D*, and those that would play for story - the narrative (or narrativist) faction using *Vampire* as their flagship. In "Simulation or Story?", the first part in his four-part series of articles "The Interactive Toolkit" (1995), Christopher Kubasik, who has contributed to RPG classics such as *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game* (1987), *Shadowrun* (1989), *Earthdawn* (1993), and even *(A)D&D*, calls this the "'roleplaying' vs. 'roll-playing' debate" (Kubasik, 1995a), alluding to how one camp prefers playing in-character with a focus on the secondary reality to create a sophisticated narrative (*role*playing), while the other one is content with mostly out-of-character interaction between players in primary reality and more interested in the dice (*roll*-playing) and the rules (Kubasik, 1995a). For historical reasons, Kubasik argues, RPGs traditionally have a lot of "baggage left over from wargames" (ibid.), and it was only the enormous success of narrative games such as *Vampire* that made it possible for newbies to avoid the heretofore unavoidable initiation into the medium through *(A)D&D* in the Anglosphere and its epigones such as the German *Das Schwarze Auge (DSA)*, developed in 1984 by Ulrich Kiesow, Werner Fuchs and Hans Joachim Alpers.

Kubasik enters the debate clearly on the side of the narrativists. He even goes so far as to change the term used for the medium in part two, "Why Do Modules Suck?", replacing Role-playing Game by "Story Entertainment" (Kubasik, 1995b). The 'story' bit is to assure that "[t]he evening's gathering is now focused on story, rather than the partaking of roles", and "by removing the term 'game' and replacing it with 'entertainment', we remove concerns about winning" (ibid.). Needless to say that this attempted rebranding of RPGs has not garnered enough support in the community since and thus has not been able to replace the omnipresent 'RPG'. Even if his urge to get rid of 'game' and the attached issue of winning/losing is understandable following his logic, his utter rejection of 'role-playing' in favour of 'story' appears to be extreme. Although 'role-playing' does more likely evoke drama than story, the way the players impersonate their characters also resembles impro-drama (*sans* the physical acting), or better even impro radio-drama (*sans* the radio), more so than classical storytelling. Still, Kubasik's narrativist stance is admirable when he states: "The goal is to improvise an entertaining story; to get together and have a

good time or, if a powerful sentiment is carefully introduced, be moved" (1995b). At the end of his article, Kubasik gives a definition of Story Entertainments in a nutshell:

> The adventure doesn't depend on the right answer. There is no right answer. There's only the story, as created by everyone gathered that night. In a Story Entertainment, no one knows how the thing's going to end or even what the story is. The plot is unknown. What is known are the characters' goals, the fact that the Fifth Business [i.e. The Storyteller] is going to provide opportunities for those wants to be met, and the fact that the Fifth Business is going to impose obstacles for the characters. It's also known that at some time those goals are going to be pursued to a win, loss or draw in terms of their fufillment.
> (Kubasik, 1995b)

Even though Kubasik here obviously contradicts his own concept – reintroducing a "win, loss or draw" condition he declared he wanted to get rid of together with the 'game' aspect – the procedural, cooperative, open-ended narration through interaction is still at the core of RPGs (or rather SEs). He also is a typical representative of the post-*Vampire* Storyteller conception as far as the role of the hub-player is concerned, even though he calls it the 'Fifth Business', a term adopted (via Robertson Davies's eponymous novel) from opera:

> You cannot make a plot work without another man, and he's usually a baritone, and he is called in the profession Fifth Business. [...] The prima donna and the tenor, the contralto and the basso, get all the best music and do all the spectacular things, but you cannot manage the plot without the Fifth Business!
> (Davies in Kubasik, 1995b)

In part four of his series, "Running Story Entertainments", Kubasik defines the amount of discursive power and textual authority the Fifth Business enjoys in opposition the Gamemaster (GM):

> Unlike a gamemaster, you are not the master of the game. You are on equal footing with the Leads [i.e. players]. Everyone is there to make a story that night, and you're just one of the gang.
> Also unlike a gamemaster, you does not [sic] come up with 'adventures'. You don't arrive with a scenario to 'run' because the Leads have created goals for their characters. What you do is

> provide opportunities for the Lead characters to achieve those Goals and obstacles to prevent the attainment of those goals. Of course, as discussed last issue, the other members of the group will help you in creating opportunities and obstacles.
> (Kubasik, 1995d)

The Storyteller is *not* in control of the narrative process in Kubasik's definition of RPGs. He or she does not even provide the assembled players with a story in the first place, as the narration is reduced to its functional elements and processes: characters, goals (or motivation), and opportunities/obstacles. All of the members of the group, Leads (players) and Fifth Business (hub-player) alike, share and exchange discursive power. Such radical divergence from the traditional story-game hybrid is very rare in contemporary RPGs and can be seen as a more extreme form of the search for a self-definition of the medium from within the community in RPG Theory. Indie RPGs now carry this torch, the small and independently or self-published RPGs that have been at the forefront of formal innovation in the medium since the turn of the millennium because of a major shift in the institutionalisation of RPGs.

Interestingly enough, both Aarseth and Murray also talk about RPGs in their seminal Game Studies texts, and following a pattern that emerges quite clearly, their respective definitions or conceptions of the medium are very much coloured by their approach. In stark contrast to the proponents of RPG Theory, they also both seem to have an outside perspective, as one can surmise from their very limited understanding of RPGs and how they work. Aarseth, for instance, sees *Dungeons & Dragons* as a direct pre-text to William Crowther and Don Woods's text adventure ADVENTURE (1977), and his description of the RPG concerned is very much in tune with his ludologist bias:

> In Gygax's strategy board game and its many descendants, a group of adventurers explore a two-dimensional fantasy world controlled, improvised and sometimes created by a dungeon master (DM). The players choose among the options laid out by the DM and roll dice to settle the outcome of battles between opponents and DM-controlled monsters. The *Dungeons & Dragons* genre might be regarded as an oral cybertext, the oral predecessor to computerized, written, adventure games.
> (Aarseth, 1997: 98)

Calling *D&D* a "board game" is a bit much even for critics of the game, and reducing the secondary world created through the procedural narration to the "two-dimensional fantasy world" of the battle maps and maps in general just shows that the author has no conception whatsoever of what happens around a gaming table. As a ludologist, Aarseth only sees the simulational, the systemic level of the process in primary reality and is completely blind on the narrative eye that should peek into secondary reality. I generally find his approach insufficient and lacking, but calling *Dungeons & Dragons* a "genre" and not a representative of a medium is an inexcusable terminological blunder. The *genre* of *D&D* would be heroic fantasy, the *medium* RPG.

As is to be expected, Janet Murray is just as blind, but on the other eye. Her concept of RPGs is only based on LARPs, Live-Action Role-playing Games, because, as the title of her *Hamlet on the Holodeck* already suggests, her background is in narrative and drama. Not a single sentence on the pen&paper kind of RPG, which *is* after all the historical origin of the medium, but instead a celebration of the creative possibilities of the LARP:

> The most active form of audience engagement comes in roleplaying clubs. Fans of fantasy literature from Tolkien to space operas have joined together for live-action role-playing (LARP) games in which they assume the roles of characters in the original stories to make up new characters within the same fictional universe. [...] In all of them, the players share a sense of exploring a common fictional landscape and inventing their stories as they go along. Role-playing games are theatrical in a non-traditional but thrilling way. Players are both actors and audience for one another, and the events they portray often have the immediacy of personal experience.
> (Murray, 1997: 42)

Murray – in contrast to Aarseth - at least seems to know LARPs from first-hand experience, judging from her correct and functional description.[8] She also talks about the social and cooperative level of the process and how the distinction between artist and audience is suspended. She even mentions immersion, so both agency and immersion are present in her definition. Unfortunately, as the figurehead of the

[8] Even though space opera is definitely not a subgenre of fantasy but more likely of science-fiction.

narrativist camp, she mostly ignores the game aspects of RPGs, which is to be expected just like Aarseth's complementary incomprehension of narrative aspects. For Murray, RPGs are a theatrical medium, and this is also why she focuses exclusively on LARP: Whereas in p&p RPGs the platform is oral storytelling only, LARPs add the physical acting of drama to the equation. Also, while Aarseth only perceives the elements of RPGs that are contained in primary reality, Murray's concept is very much based on the secondary reality created. However, she later also adds a brief discussion of the function of the GM in LARPs, which she calls "the most successful model for combining player agency with narrative coherence" (1997: 151). Again, she stresses the cooperative, egalitarian and procedural nature of RPGs:

> Live-action role-playing games are guided by a clear aesthetics that divides plot responsibility between the game master (GM) and the players. [...] In a successful game the players have a great deal of constructive freedom in improvising the story and multiple ways of accomplishing their goals. [...] The rule of successful game mastering is to set the world in motion, wind up the clock, and then step back and let the plot unfold at the will of the players. (Murray, 1997: 151)

Shared responsibility, the emphasis on player freedom and the advice to the GM to set the stage and then let the narrative flow show that Murray fundamentally understands the medium in its specificity, unlike Aarseth. It is only her narrativist approach, obviously founded in drama and performance studies, that obscures the game aspects and the essential contributions they make to the workings of RPGs.

From Aarseth and Murray, the development of the theoretical discussion of RPGs branched off into different directions: One branch moved into Performance Studies, such as Daniel Mackay's *The Fantasy Role-playing Game – A New Performing Art* (2001), the other into Game Studies, as is exemplified by several contributions to Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin's essential collections *Second Person* and *Third Person*.

Mackay's 2001 study draws heavily on two sources for his conceptualisation and definition of RPGs: Gary Alan Fine's classification of the frames of reference that coexist in the narrative process of the medium, and the author's own background in theatre and performance studies. When these two come together, Mackay

constructs a reading of RPGs that clearly favours the story, and especially the performance aspect. Already from the very start (his introduction) the author explains his interest in bringing out the aesthetics in gaming: "Where there have previously only been critical evaluations of the game design, it is time to introduce an appreciation for the performance aesthetics of the game" (Mackay, 2001: 1). As he establishes in the subtitle of his book, *A New Performing Art*, RPGs for him *are* an art form and they are *performative* art. But he also adds the dimension of the "product art of popular culture" (ibid.) to the mix, a side of RPGs that has so far not had enough attention: These artefacts, or 'proto-artefacts' if one considers the published pre-textual material – rule- and sourcebooks - for the actual narrative process later, are almost always designed for a market (be it mainstream or niche). They are commercial items *also*, no matter their entertainment value *or* their artistic merit.

Mackay's definition of the medium is not very concise and it takes up half a page. This already shows the difficulties of coming to terms with the complexity of RPGs. Here is the core of Mackay's argument:

> I define the role-playing game as an *episodic* and *participatory* story-creation *system* that includes a set of quantified *rules* that assist a group of *players* and a *gamemaster* in determining how their fictional *characters'* spontaneous interactions are resolved. These performed interactions between the players' and the gamemaster's characters take place during individual *sessions* that, together, form *episodes* or adventures in the lives of the fictional characters.
>
> [...]
>
> [T]he episodes become part of a single grand story that I call the role-playing game *narrative*.
>
> (Mackay, 2001: 4 – 5; original emphases)

It is interesting to note that even though he sets out to aestheticise RPGs and establish them as a 'new performing art', the very first core information the reader gets is that they are *systems*. That might seem odd, but Mackay here cleverly straddles the tiresome narrativist/ludologist debate, taking his perspective to an abstract meta-level: RPGs are not *games*, but they include rules; they are not *narratives*, but they produce stories. The system of the medium brings both ludic and narrative mechanisms together to create narratives. How are these created? In an

episodic and participatory manner. While the second half of this definition is commonplace in investigations of RPGs (the cooperative and interactive nature of RPGs *is* one of the central features of the medium), Mackay also adds another aspect sorely underrepresented in other definitions: RPG narratives are episodic, cumulative narratives. This sets up an intriguing connection to a whole lot of more traditional media that have influenced humanity's appreciation of stories over millennia – the oral traditions of campfire tales, heroic epics and bedtime stories; the serialised novel; the comic book series; and their audio-visual cousin, the TV-series. In recent years, even video gaming hast started to experiment intensively with serialised publication, from SAM & MAX SAVE THE WORLD (2006 – 2007), to AMERICAN MCGEE'S GRIMM (2008 – 2009), and most recently THE WALKING DEAD (2012), a serialised video game based on a TV-Series and a series of graphic novels. The serialised narrative seems to hold a special fascination for the human mind, as it coincides with our experience of time and life as continuous, cumulative and evolutionary. RPGs, and all of these other serialised media, tap into that experience, and they also use secondary effects to bind their audience: habituation and curiosity. Meeting once every week at an appointed time with the same group of people, often also at the same location, makes RPGs a constant and regular part of people's lives. The medium spills from the sphere of art and/or entertainment into the sphere of private life, most of the time even literally 'invading' it as the creation of the narrative takes place in the participants' living rooms. In time and space, RPGs accompany their practitioners in their everyday lives. This is not a play you go to see at a theatre, or a movie that you catch with a couple of friends, nor is it a gallery or a museum that you visit: RPGs are not singular events, but continuous processes, and they are not separate from your 'normal' life, but happen in your home. To adapt Fine's conclusion, RPGs are thus more like life and less like Art, and much of that has to do with their serialised narratives so acutely identified by Mackay as an essential component of the medium.

What is most surprising about the author's definition, is that there is one element that appears to be essential for his own interpretation of RPGs, but he obviously does not think so. A list of the emphasised concepts covers all of the basic elements of RPGs, plus Mackay's essential addition of the serialised, cumulative narration very

well: episodic, participatory, system, rules, players, gamemaster, characters, sessions, episodes, narrative. It is all there. *But* there is one element of his definition that should have been highlighted based on his claim that RPGs are 'a new performing art', yet it is not: the "performed interactions" (2001: 5). This was supposed to be his central contribution to the definition. However, it seems as if it was not important enough to Mackay to warrant the emphasis. Be that as it may, it is interesting to see that the author extends the concept of performance from LARP (where it is obvious) into pen&paper RPGs that are generally seen as more narrative than performative in nature.

Again, like in Mackay's use of 'system', this is to do with his very specific and conceptual use of the term, going beyond the more general common understanding of it. Referring to J.L. Austin, the author distinguishes between the constative and the performative use of language: constative language describes and indicates, whereas performative language enacts and performs (Mackay, 2001: 55). In RPGs, he argues, both of these uses alternate. The performative frame is used when "a player's first-person, in character utterance, coincides with the enunciation" (ibid.), that is: when the character is acted out, or when what is said constitutes what is done. The constative frame is "descriptive and is usually the province of the gamemaster" (ibid.), it is used when the setting and situation are established, when the stage is set (to use a theatrical metaphor) for character interaction. Mackay also includes players describing their character's actions or passing notes at the table in this constative frame. In addition to these two frames, Mackay suggests the existence of a third one within the game-world, the raconteur frame that is entered "when players and the gamemaster assume a storyteller, or raconteur, relationship by narrating their characters' actions in the third person" (2001: 55 – 56). Bringing these three frames of reference together with Fine's simpler, tripartite structure of the frames navigated by the participants in the RPG experience as he sees it – the social frame inhabited by the person, the game frame of the player, and the gaming-world of the characters (Mackay, 2001: 54), Mackay comes up with his own list of five frames:

1) the social frame inhabited by the *person*;
2) the game frame inhabited by the *player*;
3) the narrative frame inhabited by the *raconteur*;
4) the constative frame inhabited by the *addresser*;
5) the performative frame inhabited by the *character.*

(Mackay, 2001: 56)

While the first two of these frames are extradiegetic (i.e. they happen in primary reality), the other three are diegetic instances, affecting the narration and the narrative. Making a connection to performance theories by Brecht, Schechner, and the Wooster Group (2001: 58), Mackay then goes on to point out how the deletion of the differentiation between producer and receiver, between performance and audience parallels a trend in Late-Modern and Postmodern drama (and beyond):

> This trend, in fact, extends well beyond performance forms and extends into literary reception theory, cognitive psychology, any cybernetics, where work emphasizing the reader or receiver's control of the message indicates a movement in thought meant to confound the lucid, rational distinctions and divisions of labor that separate sender and receiver. Now [...] artists, theorists, and researchers are attempting to reconfigure our inherited social, artistic, and cultural roles [...] in a knowing return to premodern structures, where those roles are blurred (e.g. role-player = performer-audience).
>
> (Mackay, 2001: 58)

This "return to premodern structures" is an intriguing concept and just one of the links between what I identify as Postmodernism and the medium of RPGs. However, Mackay's definition of RPGs as a performing art is finalised when he uses the five frames that participants constantly switch between and Richard Schechner's performance analysis to come up with a "taxonomy of the role-playing game performance" (2001: 60) in a nested ensemble of 'boxes' that is very helpful to understand the intricate complexity of the seemingly simple process of narrative creation in RPGs: [***Performance*** [***Theatre*** [***Script*** [***Drama***]]]] (ibid.).

At the core of the RPG performance according to Mackay thus stands the *Drama*: "Game (gamer) frame; Game system and setting; *AD&D* 2nd edition set in *The Forgotten Realms*" (2001: 60). So this is the rulebook (*AD&D*) and the background

material as presented in the sourcebooks (*The Forgotten Realms*), the published (printed or electronic) system and setting of the RPG played. This is what is fixed and general, the same for all groups playing the same game.

The next step up is the Script: "Narrative (raconteur) frame; Gamemaster's plot preparations, ambitions, intentions, parameters of player's role; Gamemaster's outlines, players' intentions for characters" (2001: 60). In adopting, appropriating and adapting the published material, this is the first step of interpretation that removes the RPG experience from its pre-textual material. The GM (this is Mackay's preferred term) reads and digests the rules and the background material and comes up with their own version of system and setting. They develop a script from the play, to use a metaphor from the world of theatre. Focusing on a certain part of the secondary world, the GM defines the narrative framework in (fictional) space and time and the central parties and conflicts driving the meta-plot. When these are communicated to the players, they will in turn create their own, individual interpretations of the GM's interpretation of the published material and come up with character ideas they want to realise in the provided narrative frame.

Mackay calls the next higher frame the *Theatre* of RPGs: "Performative (character) and Constative (addresser) frames; Set of imaginary events experienced by characters; The life and time of Ixhil, Minya, Kurgo, Gendolin, and Thai" (2001: 60). The *Theatre* now includes the diegesis, the concrete (and ephemeral) narrative produced from *Drama* and *Script*. This is situated solely in the secondary reality. The characters mentioned in Mackay's example are his own gaming group's.

The topmost frame that contains all the others is the *Performance*: "Idiocultural (player) frame; Set of all events witnessed by players and gamemaster during sessions; Everything available to gamesmaster [sic] and four players" (2001: 60). If the *Theatre* is situated on an intradiegetic level (in the secondary reality created), the *Performance* is wholly situated on an extradiegetic level (in primary reality). It includes (remember the nested structure) the diegesis (*Theatre*), the filtered interpretation of the source material (*Script*) and the published source material itself (*Drama*), but it adds the process of production of the narrative (narration) and the systemic aspect of task resolutions, character administration and development. Also happening on this level of the RPG experience we find interventions of 'real life' in

the gaming experience: the group dynamics around the table, the primary task of finding and coordinating players, even players coming late, falling ill, or the question of whether to order pizza or Chinese. All of these are part of the *Performance* of RPGs.

Mackay's taxonomy is helpful, because it brings in all of the elements that determine the procedural narrative and situates them in relation to each other and the essential differentiation between primary and secondary reality. So *Drama* and *Script* are *not* one and the same: one is general, the other specific; one published the other mostly unpublished, although that is changing through the internet. The same holds true for *Theatre* and *Performance*: one is intra- the other extradiegetic; one is the narrative, the other the narration. These basic distinctions are frequently blurred in RPG criticism, and it is a central merit of Mackay's to make them available in a distinctive and defined manner. That, together with his conceptual, theoretical link between RPGs and Postmodernism – echoing also into the realms of sociology and psychology if one considers performative conceptions of identity such as Judith Butler's (c.f. 2008: 185 - 193) – make Mackay a central pre-text to my own investigation into the relationship between the Postmodern and the advent of RPGs as a new medium on the cultural stage.

What emerges from this very brief and superficial account of theoretical approaches to RPGs is that they represent a hybrid medium combining aspects of literary and other narrative forms as their cultural and aesthetic precursors on the one hand, such as the need for structure, coherence and plot, while on the other hand they also extensively use the player agency and interactive potential available in games to break the monological discursive power of the author and to mutualise textual authority in a coordinated group effort, including the audience in the process of co-creating a Secondary World. The immersive power of games gives RPGs an emotional impact unparalleled among narrative media, as they bind, touch and move their participants. Besides these narrative (performative) and ludic aspects expressed in theoretical perspectives like Mackay's or Rilstone's, there is also an essential social component in the constant need for re-negotiation of meanings and discursive power as described by Fine. It is this set of sometimes radically different approaches - Sociology, RPG Theory, Performance Theory, and Game Studies - that has influenced

not only public understanding, but also the development of the medium itself since its inception in the 1970s.

As collectively performed story-games, RPGs bring together all four of Caillois's categories of play (and games) in one, powerful medium. *Agôn* is present when the players amicably compete with each other in resolving situations with more efficiency or style than the other, or when they, as a group, go up against the challenges the Storyteller puts in their way on their way to fulfil their characters' goals (agency and narrative). *Alea* enters the equation when it is time to roll the dice and to see whether a carefully hatched plan bears fruit (game). *Mimicry* is the joy of taking on another role, of becoming and being someone else and making decisions knowing that there are no repercussions on life in primary reality (role-playing and performance). And *ilinx*, or 'vertigo', is the pure rush of narrative transport, of entering a secondary world and experiencing strange and foreign impressions, but also the feeling of being carried away by the common and shared experience and the every special momentum it develops (immersion and group dynamics). This is what RPGs can do, and this is why it is essential that they are studied as the serious and at the same time entertaining medium, the *artform* they can be.

3 – Generations: The Origins and Historical Development of RPGs

There have been several attempts so far to put together a history of RPGs, and many of those have their own merits. For my own overview I will use two main sources. There is on the one hand Greg Porter's scheme of generations, introduced in his article "Where We've Been, Where We're Going" (1995). It will provide a general framework and a functional structure, taking the development of the medium beyond a purely linear and sequential, diachronic chronology and including the possibility of the synchronic coexistence of several generations. Due to its date of publication, Porter's classification will have to be expanded to include developments since 1995, but it is still an apt tool to organise the history of RPGs. The second essential text for this chapter is Shannon Appelcline's *Designers & Dragons: A History of the Roleplaying Game Industry* (2011), a large-format tome of 441 pages containing

the most comprehensive chronological collection of the major RPG publishing houses and their games in two columns of text in miniscule font size. Unlike Porter, Appelcline takes a production-oriented approach, chronicling the rise (and fall) of the people who make RPGs and their companies. Used in synthesis, Porter's conceptual structure and Appelcline's comprehensive content should provide a satisfactory insight into the development of RPGs as a medium.

Porter defines six generations of RPGs, and even if the first examples of these appeared in a chronological sequence, thus creating something like an evolution of RPGs in form and content, already in his introduction he clearly warns against the temptation to read this as a purely historical classification: "Also note that 'generation' is independent of publishing date in this case. An earlier game can be of advanced generation, while a later game can be an evolutionary throwback" (1995). He generally uses two sets of features to differentiate between generations: Game Mechanics (or Rules) and Background. The Game Mechanics deal with "[t]he 'realism' quotient, both in an absolute sense ('can you be decapitated by a single blow from a two-handed axe?'), and in a subjective context, i.e. do the rules encourage play that is true to the genre" (1995). This is the systemic aspect, the formal game aspect of RPGs. Porter assumes that higher generation RPGs provide more consistency and flexibility in their rules, thus doing a better job at simulating a secondary reality and minimalizing the disruption of play and immersion. The second aspect looked at is the Background, and this addresses questions such as: "Does the world have a consistent rationale behind it? Do the societal, technological and paranormal [...] underpinnings of the game world stand up to close scrutiny, or are they cardboard cutouts that only work if you are too busy killing things to notice their flimsiness?" (Porter, 1995). As with the Rules, it is suggested that higher generations also show more consistency and sophistication in their world-building, making it increasingly easier for the Storyteller and the players to create an immersive and functional secondary reality. I will generally follow Porter's classification and add Appelcline's less clearly defined 'waves' of RPG production, discussing similarities and differences where appropriate.

3.1 – Are We There Yet?: Generation 0 of RPGs

The first essential difference between the two authors already appears at the very beginning of the list and it is due to their chosen approaches. Porter begins his evolution of RPGs with a strangely named *Generation 0* that is totally absent from Appelcline's account. The reason for both, the name and its absence, becomes apparent when one has a look at the definition Porter provides for this origin of RPGs:

> Free-form, rule-less roleplaying. There are no formalized systems, no good way to arbitrate disputes. It also includes any incidental role-playing that is used for strategic or entertainment value in other games [...]. It can also include structured events like historical re-enactment groups, or semi-structured events like tournaments, feasts and fairs held by the Society for Creative Anachronism.
> (Porter, 1995)

In *Generation 0* there are no Game Mechanics and there is also no common degree of detail or sophistication to the Background used. It is questionable whether all *Generation 0* games do actually even fulfil the necessary minimum criteria to be 'games' according to Zimmerman in the first place. The list of examples Porter provides shows how inhomogeneous this Generation is, as it reaches from children's games or historical re-enactments to "Social Democrats vs. Tories" (Porter, 1995). Some of these I would see more as play than as games, and the political reference – although appreciated for its ironic qualities – can only be considered playful behaviour in itself.

3.2 – *Dungeons & Dragons*, What Else?: Generation 1 of RPGs

The actual birth of a new medium is *Generation 1*, and this is where Appelcline and Porter are in perfect agreement. *Generation 1* is synonymous with *Dungeons and Dragons* (or *D&D*), Porter writes: "First formalized rule set, i.e. *D&D* (or the fantasy supplement to *Chainmail*). The concept of fixed characters, specific attributes and the

use of dice to cover the aspect of random chance when attempting to perform a difficult action are introduced" (Porter, 1995).

In his analysis of *Generation 1*, Porter describes its Game Mechanics (i.e. the rules of *D&D*) based on their rigidity: character classes and personality alignments are narrowly defined, character development uses a level system – collect a steadily accumulating number of experience points to advance through the levels and increase your character's game statistics. Another typical feature of *Generation 1* is that the "[o]bjective realism factor is negligible, genre-based realism is drawn from a very limited fictional subset and is often lacking as well" (Porter, 1995). This means that *D&D* does not do a very good job in simulating (a) a secondary world realistically and (b) a realistic secondary world. As I have already shown in the discussion of the DM-concept underlying *D&D*, Gary Gygax was aware of this aspect of his game and also claimed that it was never intended to be able to do so. Another major problem with *D&D* is the organisation of its rules. Porter's verdict is not very friendly: "Rules are entirely on a special case basis, with no intuitive or extrapolatable functions" (1995). While later Generations at least try to create rules that are essentially simple permutations of one or two procedures, *D&D* fills whole books with special cases and lists. This specificity that is at least addressed (if not successfully) in the fourth edition of the game published in 2008, is most definitely due to its complex and convoluted genesis.

The 'game' basis for *D&D* and thus all subsequent RPGs ultimately goes back to classic abstract wargames such as Chess or *Weiqi* (*Go*). They simulate conflicts as zero-sum-games: one winner, one loser. This is a very black-and-white conception, which is ironically also mirrored in the colours most often chosen for the two sets of figures/tokens. From its abstract and philosophical origins, wargaming turned into something more concrete and practical with military training simulations developed in Germany during the late 18th and early 19th century. In 1780, Christian Ludwig Hellwig, Master of Pages to the Duke of Brunswick, created the first rule-set, later on picked up, adapted and finally turned into the famous Prussian *Kriegsspiel* by Georg Leopold and his son Georg Heinrich von Reißwitz (1824). This game and its successors use dice, modelled terrain and miniatures to simulate military engagements, and they were used up until the early 1980s for the training of officers in most western armies

(c.f. Pias, 2004: 163). It is these wargames that represent the actual (not only spiritual) predecessors of *D&D*, through the intermediary of a series of strategy boardgames for hobbyists, like H.G. Wells' *Little Wars* (1913) or Avalon Hill's *Diplomacy* (1959), that were released during the early to mid-20th century. Taken out of its military and professional context, wargaming became a mainstream hobby for civilians in the US with Charles Roberts's *Tactics* (1953), played for fun, not education (Appelcline, 2011: 5). A whole wave of historical table-top wargaming followed in the early 1960s with players controlling military units and simulating conflicts, very much like the original *Kriegsspiel*.

As Gary Alan Fine notes in his brief history of the medium, the next decisive step towards individual, character oriented interaction – and thus pen&paper RPGs - was taken by Dave Wesley in 1968 (Fine, 1983: 13). Wesley ran a wargame called 'Braunstein' set in the Napoleonic wars, but unlike in traditional wargaming, he for the first time gave each player a single character and not an entire unit to control, and he also added a personal quest for every character thus fostering role-playing. During the early 1960s, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954 – 55) became a huge success in the US, and fantasy was everywhere. It was Gary Gygax who first introduced fantasy into the rules of wargaming with the fantasy supplement for his *Chainmail* rule-set (1971), but Dave Arneson, one of Wesley's players who took over the Braunstein group when Wesley was drafted, created the first recorded fantasy-RPG-setting, his *Blackmoor* campaign, in the same year using Gygax's rules. This makes *Blackmoor* not only the oldest RPG setting in existence, it was also continuously played until the author's death in April 2009 (Fine, 1983: 14). When it was republished by Zeitgeist Games in 2006, Arneson wrote in his preface:

> There was no master plan at the start, and portions of the campaign have had to be updated over the years. At least once a year many of the old players get together and journey again through the land of Blackmoor. I continue to run the Blackmoor campaign in the games I judge at conventions and in my classroom. Over the years some 5,000+ people have adventured in Blackmoor in excess of 1,500 game sessions. The roads are well traveled but the adventures never end.
> (Arneson, 2006a: 8)

When Gygax and Arneson met in 1971 and played *Blackmoor* together, Appelcline explains, they "decided to jointly design a game that incorporated their ideas of fantasy realms and individual player characters. They called it … 'The Fantasy Game'" (2011: 7). It was not until 1972 when the first 50-page copies were sent out by the authors to potential publishers that the new game was actually called *Dungeons & Dragons*.[9] After several refusals, *D&D* was ultimately self-published in 1000 copies of the now famous box of three booklets by Gygax's company TSR Hobbies Inc. in 1974, and by the end of the year, 2000 more copies followed. This was only the beginning of an unparalleled success that established a new hobby, and ultimately a new form of cultural expression:

> Creating unique, individual characters and playing them over the course of an extended campaign was largely unheard of in 1974. For wargamers, *D&D* offered a whole new set of more personal tactics, while for people who had enjoyed *The Lord of the Rings*, *D&D* offered an opportunity to interact with fantastic realms in a more intimate manner. *D&D* was the first of a whole new wave – or rather, a whole new medium – of gaming and there was nowhere to go but up.
> (Appelcline, 2011: 7)

While Gygax eclipsed Arneson and his essential contribution to the medium for a long time with his well-developed ego and showmanship, already quietly starting to write him out of the first edition of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (1977 – 79), he was himself pushed out of TSR during the 1980s. Gygax died on March 4, 2008, and a little bit more than a year later, Arneson followed on April 7, 2009. In the years before his death, Arneson successfully re-established public recognition of his status as a co-creator of the medium.

This very first commercially available RPG makes up Porter's *Generation 1* in its own right. *Dungeons & Dragons* is still *the* dominant text of the medium almost 40 years later, and in spite of all of its perceived insufficiencies it has been the motor for many

[9] According to Appelcline the catchy title was the result of Gygax's daughter picking one each from two arbitrary columns of evocative words provided by her dad: "The Fantasy Game could have been called 'Swords & Spells' or 'Men & Magic' or 'Treasures & Trolls'" just as well (2011: 7). This anecdote should serve well to deconstruct any attempt at a hagiographical approach to the creation of *D&D*.

later developments. All of the basic building blocks of RPGs as story-games are already there: the fixed characters with quantified attributes and/or skills, the polyhedral dice to bring in randomness and probability when characters attempt actions, the shared narrative production.

An interesting counter-voice to Appelcline's mythopoeic stance towards *D&D*, its origins and its role for the medium - that also happens to be the predominant mode in the RPG community - is Ron Edwards's "A Hard Look at Dungeons and Dragons" (2003):

> Texts do not equal play, and the origins of role-playing and the origins of D&D are two separate things. No one seems to be able to discuss the history in modulated tones, but I know what *I* think - that Dave Arneson and a variety of other wargame hobbyists around the country had found that people liked playing characters in the wargaming-worlds, and they even enjoyed the development of those characters through adventures. Chainmail [...] was not a role-playing game. In my view, Arneson (and as I say, he was not unique in the activity) found a system to conduct this new imaginative activity, and Chainmail just happened to be it. (Edwards, 2003a)

This is Edwards's premise, and it contains several key ideas: First of all, that *D&D* was or is *not* the origin of the medium. The argument here is simple and two-fold: (a) on a textual level, a printed set of rules does not make an RPG, and (b) on a sociological level, the emergence of the new medium *cannot* be attributed to one (or two) individuals in any case, as it was the result of a pervasive trend in hobbyist subsociety. Both of these arguments seem valid and pertinent to me, even though I also understand the need in the community to provide itself with a 'founding myth' and a set of 'founding fathers' (no 'founding mothers' in sight). The second controversial idea is that Gary Gygax, the self-proclaimed originator of *D&D* (and thus RPGs in his opinion) is not part of the equation but Dave Arneson is, the oft-forgotten side of the 'dynamic duo' of early *D&D*. Gygax's contribution (*Chainmail*) is clearly not seen as an RPG, or even a direct RPG precursor by Edwards. So, RPGs did not begin with *D&D* in the first place, and even *if*, the author argues, this would be Arneson's and not Gygax's merit.

Evidence gathered to support Edwards's ideas is plausible. The first point he makes is that in the beginning, *D&D* was not perceived to be what we today understand as an RPG, not even by the community supporting it:

> One unifying or at least visible factor was tournament play; this new (or new-ish) activity was called 'fantasy wargaming', after all, and had first been released and understood as a modification of wargaming. So tournaments were held, and people ran characters in squads against referee-directed dangers.
> (Edwards, 2003a)

This echoes the shifts in narrative perspective I tried to argue earlier using the DM, GM, and ST conceptions for the hub-player organising the procedural authorship of RPGs. Whereas the DM is still an adversary to the players and the competitive angle is essential, already the GM becomes more of a *primus inter pares*, administering the secondary reality and the group dynamics of play in order to guarantee the functionality and entertainment-value of the process. But it was not until the latest shift away from the systemic role of the GM towards the narrative role of the ST that RPGs became a fully-fledged playable *and* narrative medium.

Following Edwards, one would have to come to the conclusion that *D&D* was indeed *not* the first RPG, but it was definitely the first decisive step in the new medium's split from pre-existing social and cultural constructs and the formulation of a new kind of textuality. A long and drawn-out process that, in my opinion, was finally accomplished with the publication of *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) and similar RPGs at the time. Bearing in mind Edwards's first two caveats, Mark Rein•Hagen was certainly not the *inventor* of this more narrative style of play either, as narrative-oriented approaches will also have existed in earlier groups, even those playing *D&D*. I am also aware that you can still play *Vampire* as a killing-and-looting kind of game, totally ignoring the printed text asking you explicitly *not* to do it. And I also even see and acknowledge the vestigial remnants of the medium's roots in wargaming in *Vampire*, a surprising fact that is so poignantly exposed by Chris Kubasik:

> Flip open your rulebook. Any rulebook. See that big chapter on combat? And the equally large chapters on technology and magic, both of which are used primarily for combat? Stories don't need all that stuff.
>
> White Wolf's *Vampire: The Masquerade* is a game about the brooding affairs of immortal vampires and their clan disputes. It's moody. It's horror. It's about personality and character. For some bizarro reason, there's space in the rules devoted to distinguishing between the damage done by shotguns and that of Uzis.
>
> (Kubasik, 1995a)

It is neigh impossible to put the inherent dissonance between rule design and narrative premise into words any more clearly - or more entertainingly for that matter. The intricate combat rules are not necessary for the storytelling *Vampire* sets out to promote. So why are they there? Because, to quote Edwards again, "[t]exts do not equal play" (2003), and there is a large segment of RPGers who are still more interested in bashing NPCs' heads in than in talking to them. And yet, the conceptual change from GM to ST and what it means on a narrative level, the philosophical/cultural objective explicitly and implicitly expressed in the book, and the innovative choice of setting all come together in *Vampire* not to herald a change in how considerable parts of the community would see the medium afterwards, but as a symptom of that change that had already taken root earlier, only to bubble to the surface then and there, visible to all in a comprehensive and concise manner, with this book. *Vampire: The Masquerade* thus marks the watershed moment between 'fantasy wargaming', or 'fantasy simulation' and RPGs as a playable, narrative medium.

Again, Edwards supports my claims that this development did not start with *D&D* by classifying it very clearly in terms borrowed from the GNS-theory that will be explained in the following chapter on RPG Theory:

> Gary Gygax's own version of the Dungeons & Dragons *book* was under way, now referred to as "Advanced." About the sources for this writing, I can (but will not) speculate, but its eventual content clearly deviates from Arneson's play as observed from his later-published The First Fantasy Campaign. Not to put too fine a point on it, Gygax's Simulationist priorities did not blend well with Arneson's goals, which to my possibly biased eyes smack of Narrativism, or with the parallel development of a lively, even fierce competitive Gamist

> culture. [...] Dave Arneson, in the first of very many complex and not-especially pleasant ownership conflicts with the property, was significantly absent from the new version's authorship.
> (Edwards, 2003)

Even if we have Gygax's own words in *AD&D* first edition claiming the absence of a Simulationist impetus as quoted in my discussion of the DM, and if *(A)D&D* is generally held to be a paragon of Gamist play, i.e. play to overcome challenges, it is safe to say that in any case, the Narrativist approach Edwards identifies in Arneson's contribution to *D&D* clashed with Gygax's more wargaming-oriented one. By writing Arneson out of *AD&D*, the game finally lost all narrative (or Narrativist) pretensions. Through a long and ugly series of ownership conflicts, the IP is also clearly marked as more of an economical than a cultural artefact.

Edwards's conclusion about the nature of *D&D* as an RPG is thus a rather sobering one, deconstructing the mythological subtexts we find in accounts like Appelcline's:

> [T]he concept that Dungeons & Dragons "invented role-playing" is patently false. Rather, D&D was the first publishing epiphenomenon of role-playing as a hobby, intertwined with its development but providing, itself, only raw material, not procedure. It provided the first official role-playing texts, but those texts themselves invented very little; rather they provided patchy stuff that had to be shaped into role-playing at the local level.
> (Edwards, 2003)

And as far as the role of these publications for the subculture of RPG gaming is concerned, there is also a fundamental conceptual problem that has not been addressed in critical literature: "*Prior to AD&D2* [i.e. 1989]*, the available texts were reflective, not prescriptive, of actual play*" (Edwards, 2003; original emphasis). What this means is that even as far as the textual authority of *D&D* is concerned, there is not one regulative and authoritative text (or voice), but the diverse playing styles of the contributors and co-authors come together in a hodgepodge of texts and textual fragments reflecting individual ways of playing. Also, due to the uncoordinated publication of numerous editions and updates, individual groups would sometimes use widely diverging corpora of rulebooks and supplements as pre-textual basis for

concrete play and thus the actual process of narrative creation. RPGs happened locally, without any central textual authority: "we are talking about **Cargo Cults**", Edwards states (2003).

So, unlike the vast majority of critics, reviewers and commentators, Ron Edwards, at the end of his intriguing deconstruction of the myth of *D&D* as the first 'proper' RPG lists three points as the quintessence of his argumentation:

> No one role-playing technique may be cited as 'the original' way.
> No single combination of rules and presentation formats may be considered archetypal.
> 'D&D' as a term cannot be taken to indicate any particular form of play, especially in reference to the origins of the hobby.
> (Edwards, 2003)

Even though this argument is very convincing, the need within any community to identify with a 'founding mythology' must also be recognised. Loving *D&D* or hating it, or arguing your way in between these two extremes, in any case this game provides a common point of reference for the vast majority of the RPG community, as fictitious as that latter one might be to begin with. *(A)D&D* is still the most played RPG on the market (note the economic terminology here), followed by *Vampire* in a respectable distance, and it is still the usual way for the majority of newbies to enter the subsociety of RPGers in the English-speaking world. So, even though I found it necessary to include and discuss this contrary point-of-view about the contribution of *D&D* to the evolution of the medium in detail for reasons of objectivity, I also cannot deny the game's special status in the historical development of RPGs.

One of the indications of this is that in the history of the medium there is also a set of RPGs very closely related to *D&D*, an intermediate *Generation 1a*, that Porter basically defines as follows: "*D&D* clones, any game which uses the same basic concepts with little or no modification. Genre may vary, but the game system itself draws very heavily from Generation 1 concepts" (Porter, 1995).

In these *Generation 1a* games, some of the perceived flaws of the Game Mechanics of *D&D* will be repaired, but generally they are adopted as is. The Background, that

was very hazy at best in the early years of *D&D*, also frequently shows much more detail and consistency.

As a prime example for such a game Porter uses M.A.R. Barker's *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975) that is based on *Tékumel*, an immensely detailed Secondary World Barker had created and that is rivalled only by Tolkien's *Middle-Earth* as far as the amount of material is concerned. While the Background easily outshines many other games of even much later Generations, EPT was originally published by TSR and therefore used rules very similar to *D&D* with several adaptations and simplifications. In his foreword, Gary Gygax - overly enthusiastic - proclaims:

> I simply state that this is the most beautifully done fantasy game ever created. it is difficult for me to envision the possibility of any rival being created in the future. Comparisons are often misleading, but carefully drawn ones can be helpful and informative. Therefore, I must ask the reader to view the world of Tékumel in comparison with J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth.
> (Gygax, 1975: 4)

However, due to an overpriced boxed set - "almost 100$ in today's money and […] two to five times as expensive as anything else on the market" (Appelcline, 2011: 8) – and lack of product support from TSR, Barker moved his IP from the publisher and it never made it to mainstream recognition. Another problem is brought up in Dave Arneson's introduction to the 1987 re-edition by Different Worlds:

> In the first days of role-playing games, *Petal Throne* was regarded as being too esoteric and complicated. I mean it literally has its own written and spoken languages developed by a certified linguist! […] Well, in today's crowded market where there are dozens of game rules running to multiple volumes, *Petal Throne* is now nowhere as complicated looking.
> (Arneson, 1987: 3)

In 1975, the medium itself was still very young, and while *D&D* did not have a proper setting to speak of, and "[e]ven Gygax's world of Greyhawk and Arneson's world of Blackmoor were dungeons and little more" (Appelcline, 2011: 8), Barker's Tékumel had more than 60,000 years of history, several fully functional languages, societies and religions that were not based on the Celto-Germanic Middle Ages (like

Tolkien's) but on Central American and Far Eastern cultures. The alien nature and sheer amount of material was too much for the average RPGer who, only one year earlier, had most likely still been a wargamer.

3.3 – I Beg to Differ: Generation 2 of RPGs

The paradigm change that justifies a new Generation in Porter's scheme comes when elements of the community for the first time strongly react to *D&D*, looking for ways to do things differently. *Generation 2* is therefore defined as follows:

> Mutation of Generation 1 games. Other people have played enough that they have modified the Generation 1 game extensively, and incorporated these new ideas and concepts into their systems as a result of this experience. Generation 1 influence is still strong, either in what is included, or what is excluded from the rules.
> (Porter, 1995)

In Game Mechanics, many of these games actually increase both the absolute *and* subjective realism of their systems: They simulate processes and their results in accordance with experience from primary reality more successfully, and they also encourage play closer to the requirements of the chosen genre. On the level of Background, *Generation 2* games provide the first complex and fully detailed settings. Both innovations in this Generation still use *D&D* as an implicit or explicit point of reference. For example, the new fondness of detailed backgrounds is a direct reaction to the very limited setting used in *Generation 1*, the so-called 'dungeon crawl' where, as an echo of the medium's roots in wargaming, characters explore a system of hallways and rooms, killing all opposition to achieve a set quest goal. Games like *Chivalry and Sorcery* (1977) by Edward E. Simbalist and Wilf K. Backhaus, or *RuneQuest* (1978) by Steve Perrin display a clear shift towards plot-based adventures on both levels, Game Mechanics and Background, and include options for non-hostile behaviour that are also rewarded by the character development and experience mechanism of these games. Others, like Mark Miller's *Traveller* (1977) open the

medium up to new genres, moving away from heroic fantasy, in this case towards hard sci-fi.

I have already mentioned the decisive contribution made by Simbalist and Backhaus in detail when I discussed the paradigm shift from DM to GM earlier, as well as their motivation to create *C&S* out of a deep dislike of the person Gary Gygax and his approach to gaming and RPGs. This is then a perfect example for *Generation 2*, as there is both an intrinsic and an extrinsic motivation to push for change away from *D&D*: On an intrinsic level, *C&S* was an attempt to address perceived shortcomings in its absolute and subjective realism, simulating the effect a sword has on the human body as well as the social structure of a medieval culture in a way more similar to primary reality. On an extrinsic level, *C&S* was also the result of a disagreement with Gygax and 'his' game as to what RPGs are and how they should do what they do, a personal, as well as a philosophical and conceptual disagreement. *C&S* is both a more focussed approach on the systemic level and at the same time a widening of the scope on the setting level as the authors explain:

> Many GameMasters make the mistake of concentrating on adventure scenarios or on developing involved dungeon complexes, forgetting that there is an entire world somewhere out there. That world goes on from day to day, often oblivious of the existence of the Player Characters except when their actions intrude upon the daily routine. [...] [A]s your campaign grows in scope, and your conception of the fantasy world becomes more clear and detailed, the broader events and movements in the world's history will assume a life and purpose of their own. [...] This is why C&S concentrates upon the simulation of an actual, documented segment of history and fantasy fiction - - the feudal ages. [...] By having a coherent social order to build on, a believable fantasy gaming world that really works can be created.
> (Simbalist and Backhaus, 1983: 9)

The Secondary World does not only exits through and because of the PCs, it has a logic, dynamics, and a life of its own, it is supposed to be "a world that really works" (ibid.). The easiest way to guarantee a functional world, according to the approach Simbalist and Backhaus present in *C&S*, to imitate history. Theirs is an attempt to simulate elements of primary reality in the secondary one created by playing their RPG, developed in *reaction* to the perceived inability of *D&D* to do so. This is also why

Porter includes their game as the first example on his list of typical *Generation 2* games (1995).

The two other RPGs I named earlier as members of *Generation 2*, *Traveller* and *RuneQuest*, are actually representative of another transitional category, named *Generation 2a* by Porter. Following the author's definition, these games are merely refinements of concepts introduced in *Generation 2*, moving beyond the logic of the dungeon crawl and adapting the rules to reflect this more realistic set-up, and often they also partially anticipate features of the following *Generation 3*. This by no means also necessarily implies a split from the inherent ideological framework of *D&D* that I would like to call 'Cash & Conquest', a deeply rooted orientation towards profit- and conflict-oriented decision-making, as I will show shortly.

RuneQuest (or *RQ* for short; gamers love abbreviations) by Steve Perrin, Steve Henderson and Greg Stafford is one of the *Generation 2a* games listed by Porter, and together with *C&S* it is considered to be the first wave of (then) new games that could seriously threaten *D&D*'s dominance in the community. Following indications in Ron Edwards "Hard Look", it also seems as if there was a sociological differentiation between players of *D&D* and *RQ* at the time: "I also knew of several college groups during this time, up through the early 1980s, mainly playing RuneQuest. I burned with jealousy and desperately wanted to be in college and to play with folks like that" (Edwards, 2003). While the author was still in his mid-to-early teens, more 'grown-up' and educated gamers seemed to have preferred *RQ*. Not only that, it also appears as if there was a difference in prestige between the game(r)s: *D&D* was associated with teens and lower prestige, while *RQ* was clearly an element of college life and therefore enjoyed higher prestige.

On a systemic level, *RQ* and/or *Traveller* are frequently named as *the*, or at least the first highly successful and widely distributed games moving away from a characteristic-driven towards a skill-based play. While *(A)D&D* was perfectly happy to describe all possible sorts of characters with six very basic characteristics (called *Abilities*) – Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma - and only made skills a non-optional component of the game with its third edition (first published in 2000), *RQ* used its seven basic characteristics *and* a collection of more than thirty skills, inviting the players to create more if necessary, for the same

purpose. You would no longer fast talk, orate and sing with your CH(arisma), instead you would use your Fast Talk, Orate and Sing skills that in turn would be modified according to your scores in INTelligence, POWer (i.e. Charisma), and APPearance. And while you could be pretty good at Orate, you could at the same time be utterly hopeless in Sing. This increase in absolute realism pervades the combat system as well, and the magic system pushed the subjective realism to new heights. What is more, all of this cranking up the realism gauge was now intrinsically liked to the cultural and social background of your character: primitive cultures, nomads, barbarians, and civilized societies all provided different opportunities (the ideological framework behind this classification is another matter entirely). On the "Roleplayer's Worklist" supposed to guide the player towards a well-rounded character during the creation process, one finds the following items (and I give the full list here just to show the level of detail):

> **Describe Your Adventurer:** How does he usually behave? What are his important drives and motivations? What important possessions does he cherish? What was his education? What are his basic attitudes?
> **Your Adventurer's Family:** What are their important values and principles? What are his personal ties to them? Does he like them, emulate them, worship them, hate them, miss them, seek them, etc.?
> **Your Adventurer's Religion:** Does he belong to an established cult or religion? Is he pious and sincere? How important to him are the codes and teachings of his religion? (Remember that magic is certain to be a part of his life.)
> **Your Adventurer's Attitude Towards the State, the Folk, the Tribe:** What are its important values and traditions? Is he proud, ashamed, or indifferent of his culture? Does he consciously or unconsciously reflect his culture's prejudices and principles?
> **Influential People:** Who are his heroes and enemies? Who are his role models? What grudges, debts, and obligations does he recognize? Who are his most valued friends?
> (Perrin et al., 1984a: 1)

RQ's understanding of a character as a psychologically fully functional - or dysfunctional if that is what you want to play - individual in a complex social and cultural context and not only a collection of statistics and weapons provides a fertile ground for a rich narrative and alone justifies the generational break Porter sees here.

But there is much more, like for example abandoning the experience-points-and-level-based abstract character development in favour of a more concrete one based on the actual use of skills. On a functional and conception level, the authors early on stress the essential importance of cooperation over competition in *RQ*:

> Cooperation is essential to enjoyable roleplaying games, for the participants work together for a common goal [...]. [...] There also needs to be cooperation between players and gamemaster. Though the gamemaster creates the world and manipulates its details, it's also true that the game remains a game for him as well, and that he likes to have fun playing too. Players should pit their ingenuity against the game world, not the gamemaster. [...] Simple communication builds enjoyable and understandable worlds for adventuring. The rewards of cooperation are great, while hostility and resentment are fatal to play. Remember, the object of all this is to have fun.
> (Perrin et al., 1984b: 6)

Here again, one can find a crucial difference in comparison to *D&D*, as cooperation does not only include the other players, but needs to extend to the GM as well. Communication and cooperation guarantee both "enjoyable and understandable worlds" (ibid.), entertainment and simulation in RPGs depend on working together, according to the RQ authors.

Traveller by Marc Miller was first published in 1977, shortly before *RQ* was published and shortly after Steve Perrin had started working on it (c.f. Perrin, no date). Originally it was conceived as a generic science-fiction system, "filling the then-yet unfilled need for a science-fiction (and more sophisticated) equivalent to the fantasy-oriented *Dungeons & Dragons*" (Smith, 1996: 5). While *RQ* provided a more realistic and gritty fantasy setting, *Traveller* was carried by a wave of enthusiasm from sci-fi fans who had missed a decent genre offering among RPGs. *Starfaring* and *Metamorphosis Alpha* were both published in 1976 and strictly speaking were thus the very first Sci-Fi RPGs, but they failed to gather support. However, nine more editions of *Traveller* would follow until 2009, and '*Fantasy* Role-playing' had just lost the 'Fantasy' bit, opening up to all sorts of genres, settings and narratives. Even though its merits on a systemic and genre level cannot be denied, unlike *RQ* (or *C&S* for that

matter), *Traveller* must also be seen in direct continuation of *D&D* on an ideological level, as I mentioned earlier.

The conceptual and philosophical underpinnings of the game are concisely and explicitly described by Lester Smith in its fourth edition, aka *Mark Miller's Traveller*, that was supposed to take the IP back to its roots and was greenlighted by Miller himself:

> Fundamental to the Traveller science-fiction game system are answers to a myriad of questions about life, society, civilization in the universe. [...] Traveller is firmly grounded in technological and social science, each lends realism to the game's background while enhancing its adventure potential. The universe itself encompasses a vast future wherein mankind has already reached the stars and conquered thousands of worlds, but still faces the never-ending struggle to control more worlds and uncover more secrets of the universe.
> (Smith, 1996: 7)

Beyond any ideological implications of this approach, and I will go into more detail about this in the chapter on Postmodernism, the idea to provide answers in an RPG is already questionable from a structural/formal point of view: How can a simulation make value judgments and definite statements? There is also the push towards greater realism, one of the defining features of Porter's *Generation 2/2a*, but here it is supposed to be based on "technological and social science" (Smith, 1996:7) and not first-hand experience, like for example the combat system of *RQ* (c.f. Perrin et al., 1984b: 45). But what kind of science is Smith talking about here? The technological science used as a basis "from which all extrapolations and story ideas can spring" (Smith, 1996:7), is above all based on the idea that technological advancement is not evenly distributed between worlds, and so "cultures are classified by their current technology level, ranging from 0 (equivalent to the Stone Age) [...] to 20 (which to some is practically magic)" (ibid.). While *RQ*'s classification is problematic for the terminology it uses but beneath it there is no inherent gradation in value between cultures (they are just different), Smith divides the cultures of the *Traveller* setting into the tech-haves and the tech-have-nots. And while a culture that "rises to the minimum required Tech Level" (ibid.; note the spatial/hierarchical metaphor) enjoys the relative freedom of jumping across the vast distances of space in a relatively

manageable amount of time, the transmission of information is restricted by the physical limitation of the speed of light. This leads to very special situation reminiscent of a specific historical and geographical situation:

> A message to the end of the empire needs to be carried there. [...] Consequently, folks governing 'out there' have a lot of independence. A war can be over before the news of it reaches the Capital, or for orders to return, so [...] commanders of ships (exploring or warring) have to act on their own. The characters have to think on their own.
> (Smith, 1996: 7)

The far-flung Empire, the limitation of communication by transportation, and the resulting independence of the colonists and military personal 'out of necessity', acting and thinking 'on their own': *Traveller* is the Frontier all again: "Space, the final Frontier", as Star Trek has taught us. And then there is also the infamous Manifest Destiny in the introduction mentioned above, as "mankind has already reached the stars and conquered thousands of worlds, but still faces the never-ending struggle to control more worlds" (Smith, 1996: 7). And this is only the technological side of the argument.

The second pillar of *Traveller*'s brand of realism, the social science, only serves to confirm my thesis. Smith praises the setting as "a diverse, heterogeneous universe composed of many different groups, concepts, races, communities, and individuals" (ibid.), his conclusion, however, is not very accepting or appreciative of this diversity: "So naturally, there is conflict, antagonism, friction, and strife between various factions, but the universe itself allows any with talent to rise to the top" (ibid.). This is exactly the confrontational and openly competitive ideology that drives *D&D*. But in space. And it continues in this vein: "Through a combination of fortuitous accident and strong willed effort, humanity has reached a position of dominance in the universe" (ibid.), and this success is largely based on a militaristic society:

> Those who are loyal and faithfully serve their duty are the ones to shoulder important responsibilities, and a natural nobility arises from those innovative leaders of society who unwaveringly and honorably follow the orders of their superiors.
> (Smith, 1996: 7)

Please excuse my unprofessional, un-academic and highly subjective reaction at this point, esteemed reader, but there is only so much a critical mind can take: This must be a fascist's wet dream. Back on a more objective level of observation, Smith also quickly dispenses with the Prime Directive that was arguably Gene Roddenberry's greatest gift to Star Trek:

> Interstellar governments have never felt it their duty to impede development, especially economic development. As a result, no government has ever promulgated the 'Prime Directive' [...]. Instead, economic forces have driven the development of those worlds rich in natural or exploitable resources, while retarding the development of infertile worlds.
> (Smith 1996: 7)

I am sure the population of "those worlds rich in natural or exploitable resources" (ibid.) will appreciate and enjoy being 'developed'. And as if it was not already clear enough, Smith explicitly spells out the ideological core of *Traveller*:

> **Everything Is Driven By Economics:** Regardless of the pronouncements of political, moral, or cultural leaders, every incident in this universe takes place with the specific intention to gain economic advantage. Economic advantage generally means rewards in a monetary sense, but it can also translate to political or social power. Simply put, the foundation of all actions is economics.
> (Smith, 1996: 7)

I appreciate the irony of the name of the author and am sure the 'other' Smith would be most satisfied with this analysis, but the intensity of the explicitly ideological nature of the text is almost too much for a critical reader. To come full circle to the US-American context I hinted at earlier, Smith ends his introduction to *Traveller* extolling the virtues of the individual:

> Above all, this universe is filled with adventure. Individuals can own starships and travel on their own to distant worlds. Individuals can undertake literally world-shattering missions whose results depend on their personal courage and resources. Individuals are the key to discovery, progress, and the turning points in history.
> (Smith, 1996: 8)

Gone is the cooperative and community-oriented approach of Simbalist and Backhaus, or the structural(ist) and sociological approach of Steve Perrin. And unfortunately, this is not just in the setting (as one could argue). Taking a look at the Referee section (this is Traveller's term for the GM), the ideological make-up is also very visible there. "To a certain extent", Smith writes, "Traveller adventures are a contest between the referee and the players, as the referee represents all the nasty things that the universe can throw at people" (1996: 153). And among a list of "Signs of a Good Referee" this is what one can find in the very prominent last position:

> For a **Traveller** referee, the secret of life is confidence. If you don't have it, fake it. Remember, when it comes to how the rules work and how everyone else in the universe responds to the actions of the PCs, *you are in charge!* As long as you are a benevolent dictator, everyone will have a good time.
> (Smith, 1996: 154)

Unlike *C&S* or *RQ*, *Traveller* does not have a GM, it has a *Referee*, a befitting terminology for a game that understands an RPG as a "contest between the referee and the players" (Smith, 1996: 153), and the group dynamics around the table as well as the procedural narrative creation as a "benevolent dictator[ship]" (1996: 154).

The games grouped by Porter under the category of *Generation 2/2a* can therefore really be seen to be directly dependent on *D&D* for their self-definitions in one way or another. *Chivalry & Sorcery* (1977) is born from a personal animosity of its creators against Gygax and his idea of RPGing, starting a trend towards Simulationism and cooperation in the medium, framed rather wittily by Hindmarch and Tidball more than thirty years later as: "A cooperative game isn't a solo game (with bonus assistants!) for the table's most active egotist" (2008: 49). *RuneQuest* (1978) keeps the genre (Fantasy) intact, but pushes the aspect of absolute and subjective realism on *both* levels Background and Game Mechanics, bringing a framework based on sociology and cultural theory into the medium. *Traveller* (1977) switches the genre (to Sci-Fi), thus opening the medium up for new settings, and joins *RQ* and *C&S* in a general move towards realism, but keeps the ideological basis of *D&D* intact (what I

called the 'Cash & Conquest' mentality) and also contextualises its setting in the clearly identifiable national cultural logic of the US.

As different as these games are, their relation to *D&D* directly defines them, or as Appelcline writes about what she calls "The First Wave" of RPGs after *D&D*: "It was immediately obvious that TSR was onto something with *Dungeons & Dragons* and thus the RPG book began within a year, as publishers rushed into the newly created field to try to make their fortune" (2011: 33). This would change with the diversification of tastes and subsequently also the market (initiated by Generation 2a), and a new generation of RPGs appeared that no longer looked towards *D&D* for self-definition but to the abstract interrelation between system and setting.

3.4 – MAKING Worlds and Making WORLDS: Generation 3 of RPGs

Generation 3 started to experiment on a basic level with rules and background and how they do or do not connect to and feed into each other. This experimentation becomes the generation's defining aspect. Most RPGs provide both, the rules to create and play characters, and information about the Secondary World they inhabit. Conceptually, they are situated on absolutely separate levels:

> ***Theme* and *gameplay* are two different things.**
> Even when they are deeply interrelated, they should not be confused. Even if you want your player to experience the game without consciously separating theme from gameplay, you the designer must not confuse them.
> Theme is what the game is apparently about […]. This is how the game is dressed.
> Gameplay is what the game is actually about […]. This is what the game is made of.
> (Hindmarch and Tidball, 2008: 65; original emphases)

Hindmarch and Tidball's argument is a ludologist one, there can be no doubt about that ("Gameplay is what the game is actually about"), but they *do* have a point. Setting an RPG in a world where vampires have secretly run civilisation for the last several thousand years and are locked in an unending war between each other, sometimes spilling over into mortal society as the rise or collapse of an Empire here, or a World War there is theme, it is "how the game is dressed". It could be (and it also

is/was) treated in other media, such as novels, TV-Series, comics, board-, online or offline electronic games. Playing the RPG that is *Vampire*, "what the *game* is made of" (my emphasis), is administering your in-game resources, like Blood Pool, Health, and Willpower Pool, rolling a number of ten-sided dice depending on the attributes and skills of your character whenever he or she attempts to impact the secondary reality, and evaluating their success (or failure) according to the previously-agreed-upon interpretation of the rules provided in turn by the book/pdf called *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991), or *Vampire: The Requiem* as of late (2004). And, as Noah Wardrip-Fruin explains:

> **All games are designed systems – but this doesn't mean the same thing for tabletop** [boardgames and pen&paper RPGs e.g.] **and computer game design.**
> Tabletop designers create systems for players to understand – they must be understood to be played – while computer game designers mostly hide system operations.
> (Noah Wardrip-Fruin in Hindmarch and Tidball, 2008: 119)

RPGs and other tabletop games are therefore more openly systemic and engaging than video games: While it is the setting information and atmosphere of the secondary reality created that drives the plot (motivation) and sets the mood, the rule-set must be understood and used in order to successfully engage in the process of playing the game and of narrative production in the case of p&p RPGs. Ideally, however, in a well-designed game, there is supposed to be a close connection between the theme of a game and its rule-set. Sometimes there is a strange disconnect, as in the case observed by Chris Kubasik about the combat rules in *Vampire* that I brought up earlier (c.f. Kubasik, 1995a), a situation remedied in *all* of the *Vampire*-groups I am familiar with by basically disregarding most of the specifics of these rules and reducing them to a bare minimum (focussing more on social interaction and role-play). Seen from a game designer's and economical point of view (RPGs as products), Kenneth Hite points out the dangers of such a disconnect quite succinctly:

> If you as a game designer claim that your game is 'about' something [i.e. theme], and it contains no rules or mechanics for doing, or simulating, or modeling, or telling stories *specifically* involving, that thing, then you, sir, are a liar.
>
> **Do not lie to your customers.**
>
> (Kenneth Hite in Hindmarch and Tidball, 2008: 124; original emphasis)

Whereas in *Generation 1* the setting is only vaguely defined and *Generation 2* sees the first fully fledged Secondary Worlds, Porter identifies two diametrically opposed movements in *Generation 3* RPGs as far as the relation setting/theme and rules/gameplay is concerned:

> Introduction of 'meta-rules', a rule system that is designed to be used with more than one genre, and which has a solid, expandable base. Another Generation 3 idea is the game whose genre reality is an overriding concept. Such a game cannot be a meta-system, but can work much better for a narrowly defined genre than any meta-system can.
>
> (Porter, 1995)

Many of the games of this generation are thus quite radical in rethinking this relation: Some completely separate rules from background, creating meta-rules that can be applied to any setting, others fall into the other extreme, simulating a Secondary World in such detail that it infuses every aspect of the gaming experience.

The most well-known, prominent and economically successful example for the multi-genre approach is *GURPS* (1986), the '*Generic Universal RolePlaying System*' by Steve Jackson that has already come up briefly in my discussion of the auteurist model of RPG design. *GURPS* provides a compact and balanced set of rules that can easily be adapted to and adapt any published or home-made setting or story. Jackson explains the strange name, originally a joke that stuck - "We never found a better name. *GURPS* may sound strange, but it really fits." (Jackson, 1987a: 3) - and his design philosophy in the introduction:

> 'Generic'. […] *GURPS* starts with simple rules, and […] builds up to as much *optional* detail as you like. But it's still the same game. You may all use it differently, but your campaigns will all be compatible.

> 'Universal'. The basic rules system emphasizes realism. [...] *GURPS* is *one* set of rules that's comprehensive enough to let you use *any* background. [...]
> 'RolePlaying'. This is not just a hack-and-slash game. The rules are written to make true roleplaying possible – and, in fact, to encourage it. [...]
> 'System'. It really is. Most other RPGs are *not* 'systems' – they started out as a simple set of rules, and then were patched and modified, ad infinitum. That makes them hard to play. GURPS is a unified whole. [...]
> (Jackson, 1987a: 3)

So a certain basic uniformity on the systemic level (the 'Generic' aspect) makes it possible for players to be mobile between groups, just like the claimed universality of the rules makes groups themselves 'mobile' on a generic level. While you are supposed to be able to play in any setting your group could possibly think of, the preferred gameplay conveyed and encouraged by the system itself is 'role-playing', not 'roll-playing'. And to top the whole package off, there is a systemic, coherent organisation to the game, or, as Jackson concludes: "GURPS will let you create any character you can imagine, and do anything you can think of … and it all make sense" (Jackson, 1987a: 3). Obviously, there has to be a downside to this extreme form of a *Generation 3* RPG, otherwise it would by now have replaced all other systems out there and rule supreme over the medium. Thinking of Hite's caveat the problematic aspect is obvious: If you can be *everyone* and do *everything* with GURPS, at the end of the day (or the gaming session in this case) you actually will not really be *anyone* or do *anything*. Put otherwise (less cleverly, more understandably): The generic and universal nature of the rule-set will allow you to approximate every possible theme or setting, but it can never – on a systemic level – express additional levels of meaning befitting the *specific* narrative and the atmosphere you want to create. If you play a game of blood-sucking undead, you will need a game mechanic that addresses the need for blood and the urgency to get more if you run out of it. If you want to do some "[r]oleplaying in the mind of the Great Bard" (Lawrence, 2010), it makes perfect sense to name the stats of your character Comedy, Tragedy, History, and Romance. (I highly recommend Jaime Lawrence's brilliant *Shakespearead* to all teachers desperately trying to get their students to understand the intricacies of the Bard first hand.) And if you want to engage in simple and ruthlessly violent no-brainer

fun, like some *Carnage Among the Stars* (c.f. Hutton, 2008), surely all you need is a Fighting Ability and a Non-Fighting Ability and nothing more. This is what *GURPS*, and similar systems that aspire to be generic and/or universal, cannot do. And this is also what Porter means when he talks about the Game Mechanics of this type of *Generation 3* games:

> May not be perfectly objectively realistic, but is usually internally consistent, and with guidelines on how to expand the rules set to cover situations not explicitly mentioned. Subjective realism is often good, but is limited by the multi-genre nature of the meta-system. (Porter, 1995)

If you try to be everything at once, like games using 'meta-rules', your options are necessarily very limited and non-specific.

While *Call of Cthulhu* (1981), designed by Sandy Petersen for Chaosium, successfully adapted the Cthulhu Mythos horror stories by H.P. Lovecraft to the Basic Role-Playing System that originated with RuneQuest (adding a highly atmospheric Sanity mechanism), the most typical and among many players infamous example for the other extreme of *Generation 3*, games where the Secondary World determines every little aspect of the system, is late N. Robin Crossby's *Hârnmaster* (1986). Unlike in 'meta-rules' RPGs, the entire game, all of its rules and concepts are geared towards only one genre: in this case 'historical fantasy' would be the closest descriptor. *Hârn* takes the concept to the utmost extreme as the aim is the most perfect simulation of life on a fictitious island (that uncannily resembles Great Britain) in a quasi-medieval setting possible. *Hârnmaster* is seen as the most complete and detailed simulation of a fully functional Secondary World in the medium. The setting material, published as *HârnWorld* for the first time in 1983, that formed the basis for the later development of the game system itself, is unsurpassed in its complexity and the high standard of realism necessary to attempt a truthful simulation of medieval life and combat. This is why *HârnWorld* provides such things as detailed treatises on feudalism, manorialism, medieval city life, the workings of guilds, medieval economy, income and coinage, taxes and tolls, trade, religions, and 20,000 years of history; detailed maps, such as an "Interrupted Epizenithal Projection" of the planet Kethira by the author that shows

how the regional maps are supposed to fit together (Crossby et al., 1990: Kethira 1[10]), charts of the solar system, including orbital and rotation periods, as well as axis tilts and masses of all of the five planets in it, and charts of the northern and southern night sky depicting and naming all of the 23 constellations and twelve zodiac signs visible, maps of vegetational zones, detailed wind and ocean currents on a planetary scale, plate tectonics and volcanic activities, cultural and economic zones, a world map of the distribution of language families and dialects followed by a family tree of the same, as well as a twelve-page index to all of the places named on the world map of Kethira. And all of this constitutes only *one* 70-page booklet of two in only *one* supplement. Crossby explains his creative strategy in his introduction to *HârnWorld*:

> A good environmental framework is a painstaking endeavor that takes many, many years of blood and sweat to create. Something like *thirty* man-years has gone into *HârnWorld* products.
>
> All works of fantasy should be woven of familiar threads. Because it is impossible to entirely describe an alien world, readers must be able to fill in the gaps with their own knowledge and experience. […] [T]he reader can take comfort from knowing that this world operates under the same physical laws and social dynamics as medieval Terra.
>
> […]
>
> *HârnWorld* is, I believe, an epic product, with all the fantasy you want, and all the realism you need.
>
> (Crossby et al., 1990: Introduction)

The same attention to detail and realism that defines Crossby's world-building is also consequently applied to the rule-set and system. A character is thus described using thirteen Attributes ranging from the ubiquitous entries like Strength or Dexterity, to rarer ones, such as Eyesight, Hearing, and Smell/Taste, and even obscure ones such as Voice. During the creation process, the complete social environment of the character is determined, together with a history of mental and/or physical illnesses, birthdate and zodiac sign. Based on age, zodiac, relevant Attributes and

[10] *Hârnmaster* sourcebooks are compiled of several articles and do not have continuous paging, as they are meant to be taken apart and put into a three-hole folder. Pages are numbered within a given article identified by title, like "Kethira 1".

chosen profession, sixteen automatic skills, and up to a dozen special ones, are calculated. Once this is taken care of, equipment such as weapons and armour are chosen and their statistics entered on the Character Profile. Armour is differentiated into sixteen strike locations on the body, eight different materials that all protect differently against four different kinds of damage (blunt, edge, point, fire). Every single dram of equipment must be registered as it affects weight penalties to physical actions. And in combat, four different tables are used for melee and three for missile attacks, depending on what counter-strategy the defender uses. Characters die quickly, and if combat itself does not kill you, infection most certainly will. One of my *Hârnmaster* groups died of exposure trying to cross a mountain in winter, another one - all of them nobles - was lynched and nearly wiped out by an ambush of angry peasants with pitchforks. Life on *Hârn* is dirty, dangerous, smelly, mostly unpleasant and often painful - unless you die young. Still, it is a fascinating experience only RPGs can deliver, if you bring a certain amount of masochism and historical enthusiasm to the table. There is also a supplement called *Lionheart: Living in History – England 1190 AD* (1987) by Edwin King that sheds the fantastic elements altogether and actually wants to be a historical simulation:

> Lionheart is an experience not easily forgotten. It allows the reader to enter the England of Richard Coeur-de-Lion as a spectator in history. Events of the time are seen as current events, and personalities are alive. Instead of a pallid and distant view from the present, Lionheart is a living history that grows with each reading.
> (King, 1987: outside back cover)

Here the medium of RPGs almost leaves the entertainment aspect behind, engaging in simulation in the most literal sense, and in an active re-writing of history. *HârnMaster* is thus an extreme case of a tendency Porter identifies in many *Generation 3* games: "A Generation 3 background usually covers almost every aspect of a genre that characters will need to interact with. Currency, language, legal systems, travel, history, important personages and behind-the-scenes intrigue are necessary elements for this generation" (Porter, 1995).

And while this focus on the Background divides this generation into two diverging movements, there are also unifying aspects. Most of the *Generation 3* RPGs abandon randomised character creation by rolling for attributes and other features of a character, up until this Generation the main way to do things. Instead, they – at least optionally – introduce point-based character generation, "a somewhat variable pool of points with which to purchase character abilities, or some other non-random means to let the player choose exactly what they want" (Porter, 1995). Besides this orientation along the players' wishes, this method also guarantees that all characters will start the game equally capable. This helps to prevent frustration and negative effects on group dynamics if some characters are better than others. Now everyone is the same, but different.

Based on this deeper investigation of the connection genre/system (and the recognition that the system itself *does* carry meaning, or at least shapes the meaning created by play), more and more games started to question even the very fundamental assumptions about the medium, on both levels system- and world-design. The intermediate generation that is still attached to the 'traditional' way of playing RPGs while also looking towards new concepts, is defined as *Generation 3a* by Porter, and the most important example he gives is *Ars Magica* (1987) by Jonathan Tweet and Mark Rein•Hagen. Rein•Hagen would later go on to design *Vampire*, but *Ars Magica* is already the beginning of what I will argue was the biggest paradigmatic shift in the history of the medium and the reason for this paper, and this shift is already clearly visible in both the dedication and disclaimer at the very beginning of the rulebook:

> *Dedicated to*
> C.G. Jung and Joseph Campbell,
> who remind us of the importance of myth.
> The magic we detail in this game is not real, but we hope you can use it as a metaphor to help you explore the very real mystery of the human experience.
> (Tweet and Rein•Hagen, 1989: 2)

Hârnmaster/HârnWorld might well be the most complete simulation of a fictional world ever to appear in a non-electronic medium, but it was still focussed on the

systemic aspect of that simulation. Sure, it included philosophical and ethical subtexts in its setting, not least of all the disenchantment with and deconstruction of the *über*-clean and sanitised image of the Middle Ages that we have inherited from the Romantics, but at the end of the day it was about the simulation itself. Other 'intelligent' games, like *Rune Quest*, *Chivalry & Sorcery*, or even *Empire of the Petal Throne* – games that pointed beyond the mere fun aspect of RPGs to 'something more' that could be done with the medium – also essentially never quite stepped beyond the 'game' concept. With *Ars Magica*, a game that on the surface is about playing mages in thirteen century Europe, Tweet and Rein•Hagen even explicitly spell it out that this RPG is primarily not about fun, *or* the perfect simulation, even though both aspects, entertainment and simulation, do contribute to a satisfying RPG experience, but what they aim at is an exploration of "the very real mystery of the human experience" (1989: 2). The *conditio humana*, human nature and existence, here becomes the focus, the subject of an RPG. Obviously, I cannot claim that *Ars Magica* was the very first RPG to do so, as I cannot possibly be familiar with all texts of the medium, published *and* unpublished – and I am sure that rare gems of RPGs that never saw the light of day have slumbered and are still slumbering in some gamer's drawer, but of all the widely distributed RPGs out there this is where the incipient reorientation of a large segment of the community with *Generation 3a* is visible most clearly. By referring to both Jung and Campbell, Tweet and Rein•Hagen talk about both the psychological and the cultural, the individual and the collective mechanisms of meaning-making in RPGs and about how they can contribute to and express the human condition. This is the beginning of a new conception of the medium:

> For those of us who take it seriously, role-playing gives us access to great moments: [...] a sense that our choices and efforts really make a difference. Though we seem to escape to another world, we are re-enacting stories that are lodged deep within us, stories about our own lives and who we are. This potential makes role-playing more than just a hobby – it is what makes it *ars*. We hope that, with this game, you have one more tool to help you tell the stories you most need to hear.
>
> Enjoy gaming, savor the adventure, and become a storyteller in your own right. You have the creative potential; use it. Role-play your heart out. PAX!
>
> (Tweet and Rein•Hagen, 1989: 156)

These "Last Words" to the second edition of Ars Magica almost read like a mini-manifesto. The sense of agency and immersion are there, the ritual aspect already brought up earlier during my discussion of Mackay's analysis of the medium, the issue of discursive power and active engagement in the processes of meaning-making on all levels of human existence: it is all there.

And the pivotal sentence is: "This potential makes role-playing more than just a hobby – it is what makes it *ars*" (1989: 156). Here Tweet and Rein•Hagen clearly and in full awareness of the creative, aesthetic potential and the potential for self-aware meaning-making the medium holds, declare it to be *ars* – art. Under that aspect, the title *Ars Magica* attains a double meaning, a double coding, reflecting not only the intradiegetic magical arts used by the characters the participants play, but also the extradiegetic 'magical' art of cooperative and procedural narrative creation, the most human of all activities. It is through these processes that we give meaning to our individual identities, our group identities, and the extratextual world around us in everyday life through "stories about our own lives and who we are" (ibid.). It is here that the understanding and conceptualisation of RPGs that forms the basis of my deliberations about the medium's connection to the Postmodern finally takes shape.

This essential change also filters down into the Game Mechanics of *Ars Magica*, and so the authors see the need to warn seasoned RPGers early on in their book about the fundamental differences not only in *why* you play, but also *how* you play: "If you've played other fantasy role-playing games" they point out, "**Ars Magica** may seem closely related to them in theme [i.e. the existence of magic and the medieval framework], but it does have some fundamental differences" (Tweet and Rein•Hagen, 1989: 6; original emphasis). On an individual level, player characters - in tone with the sorcerers of legend - break with the established conventions by being considerably more powerful from the very beginning of play and not the green teenagers of the typical 'level 1'-kind. Another change affecting the narrative pacing on both the intra- and extradiegetic level is the 'slowness' of the game:

> A typical saga (campaign) lasts for many game years because it is based on the lives of magi, who increase their power mostly through long hours of study and extend their lives with magic potions. Unlike faster-moving games in which characters adventure full-time, **Ars**

> **Magica** assumes that adventures are the exciting but infrequent events that punctuate long months of quieter pursuits.
> (Tweet and Rein•Hagen, 1989: 6)

Thus player characters are not *only* the vehicle for adventuring, they also have a life and pursuits other than killing monsters and amassing treasures, and this directly affects the mapping of game time (c.f. Juul, 2004: 131 - 142). Between game sessions, years of intradiegetic time (event time) might pass, while extradiegetic time (play time) is minimised to a few short sentences by the ST and the players at the beginning of the next session before play resumes. "Remember", the authors caution, "that none of the characters make their livings by adventuring; adventures are the exceptional activities that, thankfully, happen only once in a long while" (Tweet and Rein•Hagen, 1989: 151). RPGs are thus – "thankfully" (!) – no longer about adventuring.

Additionally, players create and switch between several various thematically and mechanically different kinds of characters, magi, companions and grogs, i.e. guards who protect the magi, and the authors make it quite clear that "**Ars Magica** rejects the assumption that all player-character types should roughly balance out in power" (ibid.). The collective organisational principle of play based on this concept is thus not the usual collection of strong individual characters associated exclusively with individual players, and this new way of playing an RPG even extends to the extradiegetic organisation:

> These rules are based on the concept of a 'troupe', a group of friends who work together and share responsibility in order to have a good time telling a good story. Though it is not vital to the way the rules work, different people can take the job of storyguide [i.e. Storyteller] for different stories (perhaps with one person loosely in charge overall).
> (Tweet and Rein•Hagen, 1989: 6)

To make this cooperative telling of a 'good' story and the switch between STs easier, *Ars Magica* also starts a trend in the medium that Rein•Hagen's later Storyteller games, beginning with *Vampire*, would elevate to the level of a central design premise: "The basic rules system is simple and practical, yet versatile enough

to adjudicate nearly any situation. The same system is used throughout the game so you don't have to learn a whole new set of rules for every chapter" (Tweet and Rein•Hagen, 1989: 6). As these RPGs are about the stories and the social dynamics created and what they tell us about the human condition, the game aspect takes a step back and becomes not the purpose, but the facilitator of play. Rules need to be simple, practical and universally applicable throughout the gameplay, so that the ST and players do not have to break the mood or the narrative flow in order to look up an obscure regulation during the process. All of the possibilities to interact with the secondary reality ideally need to be covered by simple permutations of one central mechanic.

This set of rather daring departures from (at the time) almost two decades of conventions is ample justification to include *Ars Magica* in Porter's *Generation 3a*, RPGs that still "cling to the core of Generation 3 ideas, but often have some element that begins to question fundamental game and game-world design tenets" (Porter, 1995).

On the industry side of things, Appelcline separates the 1980s, the period that in a historical perspective mostly coincides with Porter's first *Generation 2a, 3* and *3a* games, into what she calls The Second Wave (1980 – 1984), and The Third Wave (1984 – 1992) of RPG publishing, divided into a 'before' and an 'after' by the advent of Desktop Publishing (DTP) in the form of *MacPublisher* in 1985 (2011: 200). This raises interesting questions about authorship and democratisation in publishing that mirror the changes in the medium of RPGs, but unfortunately these are beyond the scope of this paper. Generally speaking, Appelcline argues that the 1980s saw an increase in the quality of both the printing and content of RPGs, so that the RPG industry finally grew into "a professional gaming genre" (2011: 97). For the first time in the history of the medium, we thus find professionally produced material artefacts that appeal to a continually growing market and demand amongst gamers.

Carried by this economical impetus, some of the wargaming companies, Appelcline calls them the Holdouts (ibid.), switched partially or totally to the new medium, like Avalon Hill (*RuneQuest*), Columbia Games (*Hârnmaster*), Steve Jackson Games (*GURPS*), or West End Games (*Star Wars RPG*) to name just a few. But there was also a new crop of gaming companies that were specifically created for the production of

RPGs, hoping to profit from the continuing growth of the medium. These Newcomers in Appelcline's diction (ibid.) encompass both those who still produced supplements for, or their own RPGs that were very much like, *D&D*, such as Iron Crown Enterprises (*Rolemaster*, 1980, or *Middle-Earth Roleplaying*, 1984) and Palladium Books (*The Palladium RPG*, 1983), but there were also companies like FASA (*The Star Trek RPG*, 1982, or *Shadowrun*, 1989) and others focussing on non-fantasy RPGs or those that put their very own spin on the genre.

With DTP, even smaller companies could afford to produce high-quality RPGs: "What followed was an almost unprecedented wave of creativity. New people thinking about new games in new ways were able to make their mark on the industry" (Appelcline, 2011: 200). This Third Wave of RPG companies carried *Generation 3* and *3a* ashore, providing the fertile ground that would bring forth Generation 4 and the realisation of the full potential of the medium. Appelcline among others names SkyRealms Publishing with their very unique science-fantasy world of Jorune (*Skyrealms of Jorune*, 1984), and "Lion Rampant introduced the 'storytelling' branch of roleplaying" with *Ars Magica* (2011: 200), just as "Phage Press invented diceless roleplaying" (ibid.) with their *Amber Diceless RPG* (1991), taking the medium directly into Porter's *Generation 4*.

3.5 – And So It Begins: Generation 4 of RPGs

As *Generation 3* rethinks the relationship between rules and setting (or genre), *Generation 4* questions the fundamental concepts of RPGs. After developing beyond *D&D*'s formula in *Generation 2* and beyond the need to be a 'game' in the traditional sense in *Generation 3*, *Generation 4* finally asks the essential question defining the new medium on its own terms: What is an RPG in the first place?

Porter's answers to this question, or at least the attempts to describe the various possibilities inherent in looking for answers through the medium itself, are complex:

> Introduction of some entirely new game mechanic that alters the normal [i.e. D&D-related] flow of play in an rpg [sic]. Examples include overt plot change in the middle of play, dice reduced or diceless resolution systems, abandonment of traditional attribute or skill systems,

> or overt emphasis on story and plot rather than tactics and combat resolution. While generations 1-3a are linear descendants of each other, Generation 4 games are like branches off the trunk of the same tree, spreading in different directions.
> (Porter, 1995)

Two aspects of this definition are interesting. First of all, *Generation 4* redefines the 'normal' way to play RPGs. It is thus a breaking free from the normative power of the textual and interpretative authority of *D&D* and Gygax as to how RPGs are 'supposed' to be played. On a conceptual level, the medium itself thus gets closer to realising its full potential, deconstructing the authoritative voice of the 'founding text' and the 'father of RPG', and replacing this monological and normative discourse with a plurilogical and explorational one, as is expressed in the second part of Porter's description. RPGs no longer copy or develop 'away' from *D&D* in a linear fashion, the medium explodes into a web or a rhizome of equally authoritative texts like "branches off the trunk of the same tree, spreading in different directions" (Porter, 1995).

On the level of Game Mechanics, this results in a maximum of objective and subjective realism if possible, and if not – also leaving the purely simulational impetus of earlier generations behind – "subjective realism usually is better" (Porter, 1995). The mechanics themselves now take on meaning or at least the function to produce narrative and/or player behaviour that expresses a certain desired kind of meaning according to the RPG played. They are optimised to "create a 'feel' for the game setting, inherently rewarding or punishing certain types of character behavior" (Porter, 1995). On the level of the Background, *Generation 4* RPGs provide the same level of detail that already dominated *Generation 3*, "but may have a twist, such as allowing buyers of the game input on the direction of future events published for the game world" (Porter, 1995). Other examples for twists in the Background of *Generation 4* games are the possibility to play godlike beings like Roger Zelazny's Amberites that automatically triumph over any mortal and are only graded in competence and power within their own family safeguarding the continued existence of *existence per se* (*Amber Diceless RPG*), or the complete re-interpretation of

canonical and apocryphal biblical texts and even history itself as the setting for *Vampire: The Masquerade*.

Players disturbed by the influence of dice on the game and narrative process completely eliminate randomisers, creating dice-less systems. Erick Wujcik's *Amber Diceless Roleplaying Game* (1991) is credited to be the first published RPG to rely solely on the direct comparison of traits to determine the result of player interaction with the Secondary World. Wujcik starts his introduction to the terms used for the Amber RPG with the following humorous entry:

> **Diceless:** Doing without dice, and any type of chance or random number generator. Diceless also means going without coins (2-sided dice), chard shuffling (52-sided dice), spinning wheels (flat dice), Electronic Number Crunchers (infinite dice), Yarrow Sticks (multi-dimensional dice), or anything else other than character interaction.
> (Wujcik, 1991: 9)

So it is the interaction with and within the secondary reality, not a random figure generated in primary reality that determines the results of character actions. This complete absence of randomness and the pervading theme of the Amber setting – the incessant conflicts within a family of super-human beings - is also carried through to the character generation process itself in a manner unique in the medium. The system-relevant aspects of the characters are not rolled or even bought with points, they are auctioned off:

> **Auction Time**. Otherwise known as the 'Bidding War'. All the players get together and participate in four consecutive Attribute Auctions. In each auction the ranking of the Attributes will be determined. […] The first auction if for Psyche, the next for Strength, then Endurance, and finally the bidding on Warfare.
> (Wujcik, 1991: 13)

Wujcik's explanation shows how primary and secondary reality come together to express the atmosphere and emotional framework of the game the participants are about to play. Also, the simplicity of the game system becomes apparent: With only four attributes, ranked by the auction within the specific generation of Amberites the

players create, the resolution of conflicts is as simple as can be. An example from the rules for combat in illustration of *how* simple things are in *Amber*:

> Most Combat is resolved quite simply, using the following two steps.
> **Step 1.** Compare the Attribute Ranks of the participants in any Combat.
> [...]
> **Step 2.** The character with the larger Attribute rank wins.
> That's it. Everything else is just a matter of adding details, figuring things out when it's a close call, and making things seem realistic.
> (Wujcik, 1991: 80)

No dice to roll, no modifiers, no tables, no calculations. Just a basic comparison of attributes amongst competing Amberites and then the narrative description of the result of that comparison: the higher the difference, the quicker or with more style the winner will triumph. *Amber* is about telling a fascinating and moving story, it is *not* meant to be a simulation or a game about killing monsters and looting treasure. This is why Amber usually prefers the 'yes, and'-approach of improvisational theatre ("Yes, you can do it, and this is what adds to the drama of the situation.") to the probability-approach of simulation ("You have a probability of x% to succeed."), or as Wujcik puts it:

> The number one question put to any Game Master is, 'does it work?'
> [...]
> In *Amber* the answer is almost always yes. Characters, player characters or otherwise, almost always succeed at everything they try.
> [...]
> There are exactly three exceptions, three cases where characters can fail. They are when a character has Bad Stuff [i.e. a kind of 'Bad Karma' accumulated through player decisions], lacks the ability, and/or is opposed by some other character.
> (Wujcik, 1991: 104)

So, all of the possibilities for characters not to succeed in their activities in secondary reality are based on player decisions: Bad Stuff and lacking an ability are in the responsibility of the acting character's player, opposing a character's action is in

the responsibility of either the other participating players as the Amberites are not big on brotherly or sisterly love and constantly seek to undercut each other's plans for reality or the GM. And the narrative and discursive power of the players is hardly restricted:

> There are no limits in *Amber*. Player characters can, if they're ambitious enough, or careless enough, destroy the whole campaign. It's just a habit with me. I've always liked the idea of player characters being given sufficient power to blow themselves to kingdom come.
> So the characters here have no particular limits.
> (Wujcik, 1991: 107)

This is the ultimate realisation of the procedural and cooperative narrative potential of RPGs. What Wujcik suggests here is to give players ultimate discursive power in the process of creating the RPG narrative, even so far as to give them the power to destabilise or collapse the process itself if that is what they want to do or if they do not understand the possible effects of their decisions. This means that *Amber* explicitly includes the option for the narrative process to disintegrate, and unlike more 'traditional' RPGs (from *D&D* to *Hârnmaster* and even *Ars Magica*) this is not seen as failure, but as one of several possible outcomes.

Ironically, in this case this narrative and procedural freedom is the pivotal element of an RPG based directly on a literary pre-text. Roger Zelazny's *Chronicles of Amber*, a series of ten novels published between 1970 and 1991 and some other related materials, forms the framework of the game. And yet, Wujcik includes a chapter in his rulebook called "*Amber* Under Construction" where he explains:

> Here's where each Game Master gets to design their own unique version of the *Amber* universe.
> Why?
> Why not just use Zelazny's version of *Amber*? […]
> There are three reasons.
> **Surprise!** […] *Amber* stays fresh and new, delighting even jaded long-time players, when each Game Master builds their own version.

> **Zelazny Doesn't Say.** One of the main problems with using Zelazny's version is that we don't know enough about it. […] To properly run a campaign in Zelazny's version of *Amber*, you'd need to know his secrets. And he's not telling.
>
> **The Players Shape the Universe.** Each Game Master starts with a different cast of player characters. […] Player characters in *Amber* are not minor figures. They have the power of universal creation and destruction. […] Even their minor actions can have major consequences.
>
> (Wujcik, 1991: 121)

What Wujcik collects here are very good reasons to argue that Amber actually is a meta-fictional RPG, an RPG that tells us about how we construct stories and make meaning. He asks his players to *appropriate* Zelazny's Amber and to construct their *own* Amber from it. And the reasons he gives are interesting: (a) the constant contextual re-construction of Amber in every new group keeps the original text relevant to them; (b) Amber players can never know the original author's intention, this information is unavailable to them (if, indeed, there ever was such thing); and (c) the game itself is about characters that engage in the creation of reality on a day to day basis, so the narrative has to reflect this on both levels, form and content. Amber is thus a game about meaning-making in its most essential form, recognising the impossibility of accessing the 'true' meaning of a text and thus opting for the continuous contextual deconstruction and reconstruction of its pre-text through cooperative procedural narrative. *Amber Diceless RPG* is therefore the prototypical RPG for the essential systemic shift of *Generation 4* (just like *Vampire* represents the shift on the level of narrative), and it is one of the central texts for my argument of a connection between RPGs and Postmodernism. Wujcik himself must have recognised the radical potential of his creation to change the medium, since his last chapter basically deals with how to deconstruct the *Amber RPG itself* to achieve what he calls "Ultimate Amber Role-Playing":

> Ultimately, I hope you can toss this book.
>
> The best kind of role-playing is pure role-playing. No rules, no points, and no mechanics.
>
> If there is such a thing as an 'improved' version of *Amber*, it's something that goes straight for the storytelling.
>
> Don't like something here? Toss it out!

> Find a way something works better? Use it!
> (Wujcik, 1991: 234)

Step by step he then goes on to delineate what to get rid of: dumping the character creation process, the points, the magic system, the rules, and even the GM (ibid.). The result of this deconstruction of the formal fixtures of the RPG would be a form of decentred and radically democratic narrative process that abandons all ludic aspects. Actually, the medium RPG would thus deconstruct itself and vanish. Based on his own experiences, Wujcik argues that the impulse to eliminate the hub-player and their asymmetrical amount of discursive power came from GMs themselves, as "they were often the instigators and innovators of these player-to-player role-playing experiments" (Wujcik, 1991: 234). This supports my expectation and hope that most of the people taking on the many responsibilities and duties of ST (or GM, and even DM) would do so not because of the added discursive and (sub-)social power and authority, but in spite of it, or even because they are aware of the risk this position can represent for the group if filled with abusive persons. This might be naïve and idealistic, but it is also rooted in more than twenty years of experience with the medium and the people who regularly engage with it.

Resonating Wujcik's move away from the game aspect of RPGs, Mark Rein•Hagen's *Vampire – The Masquerade* (1991) accomplishes the paradigmatic change by postulating the pre-eminence of story over system, urging players to ignore and abandon the rules should they be in conflict with the necessities of plot or even so much as slow the narrative down. The so-called Storyteller games and the *World of Darkness* created as a meta-setting for them on the one hand reduce the complexity of the rules, and on the other hand develop a degree of narrative and philosophical complexity hitherto unknown in the medium. It is this change, I would argue, that finally marks the coming of age of RPGs as a new art form and a medium for serious cultural expression, heralded by *Ars Magica* years before, productively incorporating but no longer dominated by the entertainment aspect of its distant origins in wargaming.

Continuing the tradition started with *Ars Magica*, Rein•Hagen puts interesting bits of text at the beginning of the self-proclaimed "Storytelling Game of Personal

Horror" he and his colleagues at White Wolf Publishing have created (1991: outside back cover). It all begins with a peculiar dedication for an RPG**:** "This game is dedicated to Vaclav Havel, Poet, Playwright, & Statesman – who was its inspiration" (Rein•Hagen et al., 1991: 2). As if to explain this claim, what follows is a quote from Havel's speech at the joint session of the US Congress, February 21, 1990:

> We are still under the sway of the destructive and vain belief that man is the pinnacle of creation, and not just a part of it, and that, therefore, everything is permitted… We are incapable of understanding that the only genuine backbone of our actions – if they are to be moral – is responsibility – responsibility to something higher than my family, my country, my firm, my success. Responsibility to the order of Being, where all our actions are indelibly recorded and where, and only where, they will be properly judged.
> (Havel in Rein•Hagen et al., 1991: 2)

Following this reference, the reader immediately understands that *Vampire* will not be about overcoming adversaries, hoarding treasure or the realistic simulation of the effect a blade has on a human body. Words such as 'belief', 'understanding', 'moral' and 'responsibility' signal that this RPG is going to be about a philosophical and ethical exploration of the human condition, and to be on the safe side, the author spells it out in the following disclaimer (that is very much reminiscent of the one found in *Ars Magica*):

> Though our purpose is not to offend, our use of the Vampire as a metaphor and as a channel for storytelling may be misconstrued. To be clear, Vampires are not real. The extent to which they may be said to exist is revealed only in what they can teach us of the human condition and of the fragility of the splendor which we call life.
> (Rein•Hagen et al., 1991: 2)

The vampire thus becomes a metaphor for "the destructive and vain belief that man is the pinnacle of creation" mentioned by Havel (ibid.), for the self-image of our species and especially Western societies as alpha-predators, top of the food-chain, and the important question this raises about responsibility and morality. If we claim ultimate authority, what is there to constrain our behaviour and to help us discern between what is 'right' and what is 'wrong', what is 'moral' and what is not.

The stroke of genius about the approach taken by Rein•Hagen is the recognition that this is exactly what the pen&paper RPG as a medium is all about on a formal, systemic level even: making decisions and taking responsibility for the results. But unlike decisions taken in primary reality, those in the secondary reality created by RPGs do not affect our 'real' life, so people are able to experiment without fear. For some this might be seen as *carte blanche* to misbehave, and even *Vampire* can be played by people who do not care about the results of their actions, butchering dozens of people, undead or alive equally. *Vampire* is an RPG, and as such its authors cannot constrain player behaviour once the rulebook is published and its content appropriated by players. But they can include mechanisms that guide interaction with secondary reality, and this is what White Wolf have done with *Vampire* when they made Humanity a trait whose constant dwindling threatens the player with expulsion from the group, as a character is eliminated from the game when their Humanity reaches zero, and when they defined a framework for desired player behaviour by introducing virtues such as Conscience, Self-Control, and Courage (notice the 'positive' terms). And then there is also the Storyteller (ST) whose responsibility it is to make the procedural narrative creation meaningful and enjoyable for everyone involved. If one of the players goes on a killing spree, face the group with the consequences of his or her actions. Even a destructive player who does not care might thus act as an example for others who do. In most cases, however, the agency and immersion of gaming conspire to implicate the individual in the secondary world they co-create and affect with their actions.

This is why *Vampire* is a game of *personal* horror and why Rein•Hagen chose the metaphor of the vampire, anchoring it in biblical mythology by making Cain, the first murderer, the originator of all vampires. And again White Wolf appropriated and re-wrote their pre-texts cleverly, by putting together and even publishing a 'vampire bible', *The Book of Nod* (1993), where the events around Abel's death are represented from Cain's point of view, drawing a completely different picture than the one we are familiar with from biblical texts: When, asking why God would not accept his offer, Cain is told by his brother to sacrifice "the first part of your joy" he remedies the situation by sacrificing that which he loves most, Abel (Chupp and Greenberg, 1003: 22 – 23). The reality that is narratively created here is in contradiction to scripture, and

it thus highlights the fact that it is the narrator's voice that through language and narrative determines what we think of as 'truth'. But the distancing from and deconstruction of the transcendental 'truth' of the bible is refracted twice by the primary reality authors, as the reader is told in the beginning of the book that it is actually a secondary reality collection put together by the vampire Aristotle de Laurent (1993: 1). So the reader only has Aristotle's 'word' that the texts presented here are not his own, but 'really' the literally antediluvian fragments he managed to collect. And to make matters and the question of textual authority or 'truth' even more delicate, the fictitious author admits to lacunae in the 'originals' and to arranging the available fragments according to his own discretion:

> I have attempted to compile these textual fragments into some kind of coherent story, at least within the contexts of the various Chronicles. Where you see an ellipsis, know that there are more words on that particular scrap, but that it has somehow been lost, erased or hidden from me.
> (Chupp and Greenberg, 1993: 10)

The Book of Nod therefore becomes an intra- and extradiegetic comment on the process of cultural transmission and the making of history as well as the central body of text of an RPG that wants to be and quite successfully *can* be a meditation on the darker aspects of human nature.

Vampire is a powerful tool for the latter, since the results of characters' actions are 'out there' in secondary reality, but they are also 'inside', as the character's personality begins to shift in a never-ending inner struggle:

> The horror of **Vampire** is the curse of what it is like to be half-beast and half-angel, trapped in a world of no absolutes, where morality is chosen, not ordained. The horror of **Vampire** is the stirrings of the Beast within and the cravings for warm blood. Perhaps the greatest risk of playing **Vampire** is seeing yourself in the mirror. To play this game, you must bear witness to the madness within you, that which you strive to master and overcome, that which you cannot bear to face.
> Unless you are willing to face the reflection of your *own* imperfections, then this game is not for you.
> (Rein•Hagen et al., 1991: 19)

Like the psychological method of psychodrama, *Vampire* confronts its players with their inner selves, the hidden, unwanted or just unreflected motivations of their actions. To use a psychological comparison, the narrative that is created is like the conflict between Freud's Id and Super-Ego, or between Jung's Shadow and Animus/Anima. Additionally, vampires are 'invisible' monsters, they look just like any living human being, like you and me: The players negotiate between their darker instincts and their higher aspirations just like Freud's Ego does, and they keep up the appearance of a uniform and whole individual, an outer façade or mask of respectability and normalcy (Jung's Persona, literally means 'mask' in Latin). It is thus that *Vampire* in its aspirations and narrative conception is justifiably one of two central texts in Porter's *Generation 4*. It might not have *Amber*'s daring deconstruction of RPG mechanics, as its rules still rely on dice and numbers to structure play which makes it a more 'gamey' RPG than *Amber*, but it does explicitly shift the medium towards a primacy of narrative over games, and its totally new paradigm as far as the *function* of the narrative process is concerned clearly marks it as *art*. The imitation of psychological processes through the negotiation of a procedural narrative and the cultural implications this raises carry the cultural expression in *Vampire*. It becomes a participatory cautionary tale: "The Gothic-Punk world is a metaphor for our own world, a warning of what we might become and a reflection of what we really might be" (Rein•Hagen et al., 1991: 167). As *Vampire* critically engages the question of the *conditio humana*, it leaves the last traces of wargaming and escapist entertainment behind, and the medium joins other art forms on an equal footing in its urge to reflect upon and contribute productively to contemporary culture.

In his "Last Words" (1991: 257), Rein•Hagen explains his (undeniably auteurist) vision for, the *raison d'être* and thematic focus of the RPG. Even though *Vampire*'s setting is described earlier as 'Gothic-Punk' (1991: 167), it clearly goes beyond both the hollow romanticised, and ultimately conformist and quietistic (neo-)Gothic imagery of the vampire-as-doomed-and-dangerous-but-fascinating-lover pushed more recently to its sickening extreme in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series of novels and films (2005 – 2008 and 2008 – 2012 respectively) and the equally hollow pseudo-revolutionary, and ultimately infantile deconstructive violence of Punk vampires as seen in artefacts

such as David S. Goyer and Stephen Norrington's BLADE (1998) and its sequels, loosely based on the Marvel Comics character of the same name (1973 – 2009).

> Vampire was written in order to help discover the true nature of Evil. I have never been interested in the conventional, Old Testament concept of Good vs. Evil. Though I believe that there is such a thing as Evil, I do not believe it is anything so cut and dried. It certainly doesn't exist in simple dichotomy with good. I believe Evil is natural to the world, is intrinsic to the human condition, and that the recognition of Evil is, in fact, crucial to the attainment of happiness.
> (Rein•Hagen et al., 1991: 167)

By choosing the medium RPG to make his point about Evil, Rein•Hagen reinforces his thematic context (vampire mythology in general) and setting material (his re-interpretation of vampire mythology, biblical texts and world history) by the problematic nature of discursive power and textual authority in the medium. As all meaning and narrative must be negotiated in the group between ST and players, there is no "simple dichotomy" to begin with. By not denying the baser impulses in human nature, but by working through them in a collective and productive way, acknowledging, accepting and appropriating the creative power of the Shadow, aware of the possible destructive aspects that need to be channelled by rules and mutuality, *Vampire* as an RPG reaches maximum synergy between theme, content, and form:

> We must learn not to expel the dark side, but to harness it instead. We must somehow come to terms with the Evil, accept it and understand it, and then, finally, overcome it. Fortunately we still have our ancient stories and legends and fears and all the fiction based upon them, and so we may search for our Beast and know its name.
> You cannot reason with the dark side, it does not understand our world of logic and reason. It must be attacked in a different way. We must *become*, in order to *overcome*. Evil must be found, and lived, before it can be exorcised. Yet one cannot truly become Evil and remain moral.
> (Rein•Hagen et al., 1991: 167)

This conception again echoes the ritualistic aspects of RPGs that I will bring up later, and it also is reminiscent of psychological practices from psychodrama to family constellations with its central idea that "[w]e must *become*, in order to *overcome*" (1991: 167). It also raises the question of the psychological and social dangers the players expose themselves to, but I will not be able to address this complicated issue, as it is not relevant to my research interest. To express both the psychological and the archetypal power of *Vampire* and the medium in general, I would like to adopt and adapt the title of one of Ursula LeGuin's articles about the interrelation of the Jungian Shadow and the genre of Fantasy for my purposes: "*Vampire*, like Fantasy literature, Speaks the Language of the Night" (c.f. LeGuin, 1976).

And again, Rein•Hagen takes his RPG full circle, making the essential connection between the individual and the collective, between the psychological and the cultural processes of meaning-making via Campbell's *Hero With A Thousand Faces* (1949):

> It is the quest of the hero to lead the fight in the eternal war against the Beast and the Evil it represents. Yet, archetypically, the hero must always discover the Evil within, before conquering it. One must first find one's internal weakness, moral rectitude ignorance, and mortal frailty.
> There will never be an end to our inner war, no matter what we achieve or attain. This is both our agony and our hope. Each of us possesses our personal demons, and exists in a most private hell. We must forever confront this reality in our journey towards redemption.
> It is my desire that this game will assist you in doing just that.
> It is the power behind the obsession.
> (Rein•Hagen et al., 1991: 258)

It is thus certainly not a coincidence that the eternal struggle between vampires that has secretly driven our history in the secondary reality is called the Jyhad (normally transliterated as *jihad*, Arabic for 'struggle'). Since September 11, 2001, this term is seen as synonymous with Holy War in the West, but this is not the case. In Muslim tradition, there is a Lesser Jihad, 'such as participation in a war, or self-defence in case of an attack', and a Greater Jihad, 'that happens inside the individual

to triumph over negative tendencies and egotism' (both Mandel, 2002: 140).[11] This second meaning strongly shines through in Rein•Hagen's use of an Arabic term in an RPG that otherwise is based on Judeo-Christian mythologies, and the eternal external war between predators becomes a metaphor for the author's conception of the eternal internal 'war' every human being faces.

These complex questions about human nature and the aesthetic as well as narrative approach to produce experiences through role-playing that might result in provisional answers or moments of truth for the participants in the RPG in my opinion make *Vampire* art. For some the conceptual difference between RPGs and narrative art is still unbridgeable, that is why critics such as Will Hindmarch prefer to introduce an additional distinction in the medium, when he writes:

> [S]torytelling games are rightly filed on the store shelf with RPGs, but storytelling games don't refine the core ideas of RPG gameplay – they expand on them. A storytelling game is a collaborative narrative built around an RPG.
> (Hindmarch, 2007: 48)

Basically, Hindmarch here distinguishes between what he calls the RPG element (or 'game' aspect) and the collaborative narrative element (the 'story' aspect of the medium). RPGs are *only games*, and *storytelling* games add the production of a narrative to the purely ludic core. His analysis of *Vampire* is consequently as follows:

> *Vampire*, for example, is an RPG plus a storytelling game. It can be (and is often) played solely as an RPG, in which the advancement of the character's supernatural powers is the player's only goal, but that is not the goal stressed by the game itself. [...] The RPG element of the game is present because it's entertaining, but also because it's functional [to make unbiased rulings].
> (Hindmarch, 2007: 49)

Externalising the procedural meaning-making and the production of meaningful narrative thus from the medium RPG seems highly problematic to me. As I

[11] Since the book was published in German, the quotes are my translations and therefore marked with single quotation marks ('...').

established earlier, even the functional structure of a game (the rule-set and organisation of the group) can and will convey meaning, be it on an explicit level (as is the case with *Vampire*) or an implicit one (such as *D&D*). The openly stated primacy of story in the game up until its latest incarnation, *Vampire: The Requiem* (2004) – a fact that is directly referred to by Hindmarch (2007: 49) – in my opinion does not make *Vampire* a different medium, it just shifts the emphasis more towards the narrative end of the spectrum in a hybrid medium whose very roots are to be found in the attempt to bring game and story together, and –this is the *decisive* step in the development of the medium – *Vampire* fully self-identifies as an attempt to create interactive art.

Porter's *Generation 4* includes several other notable games besides *Amber* and *Vampire*, such as *Torg* (1990), a cinematic RPG that uses a so-called drama deck of cards that influence both the task resolution (system) as well as the plot development (narrative), or *FUDGE* (1992), the public domain *Freeform Universal Donated* (or *Do-it-yourself*) *Gaming Engine*, a toolkit for generic free-form role-playing that allows every group to create their own game system according to their individual needs. However, the two games I introduced in detail here seem to me to best incarnate the spirit of change within the community and the medium on both levels, content and form, and to exemplify the essential paradigm shift *Generation 4* brought: From the early 1990s on, a conceptual divide separated the community into players who would look for nothing else but entertainment in the medium and those that would support its artistic aspirations. And obviously, RPGs would be published to cater to the interests of one group or other, and rarely those that would attempt to bridge that gap.

Another aspect in the development of the medium at that time is brought up by Appelcline, when she calls the period from 1992 – 2000 "The CCG [i.e. Collectible Card Game] Years" (2011: 275). Setting up shop in 1990, *Wizards of the Coast* in 1993 started the publication of their card game *Magic: The Gathering*, developed by Richard Garfield, who would later also design the card game for *Vampire - Vampire: The Eternal Struggle* (1994). Many RPG companies tried to jump on the band wagon (White Wolf included), some of them went under as a result of the CCG bust around

1995, such notables like FASA, ICE, and West End Games among them. The droves of dying RPG publishers made it possible for new companies to rise:

> The ***spinoffs*** might best represent the era. Companies like Green Knight Publishing, Hogshead Publishing, Imperium Games and Issaries Inc. came into business to publish the product of someone else that no longer could. […] Similarly Margaret Weis Productions […] represented RPG designers who wanted to get back into business.
> (Appelcline, 2011: 275)

This creates the intriguing situation that after a short but momentous buzz of creative innovation during the early 1990s, the medium RPG entered a deep crisis triggered by the advent of a new medium, or rather the revamping and elaboration of a very old idea, the CCG. Many of the more game-oriented players would leave RPGs behind for the 'quick-fix' and the structural complexity of CCGs. Many of the RPG companies would kill themselves over their failed attempts to profit from that shift in the market and community. So on both sides of the medium, publishing and play, RPGs entered a difficult phase.

3.6 – Neuromancer Publishing: Generation 5 of RPGs

After *Generation 4*, Porter adds a – at the time of writing of the article – hypothetical *Generation 5* that would be "taken in some direction not possible for strictly pencil & paper roleplaying" (Porter, 1995). Information technology is at the core of this expected Generation, and since 1995 computers and the internet have truly changed our everyday lives, as well as our relation to information and to one another.

On a first level, closest to 'traditional' pen&paper RPGs, Porter expects the computerisation of the administrative and systemic side of the medium and the use of PDAs (aka tablets) at the playing table for reference and communication. From personal experience in several groups playing all sorts of different RPGs, the use of laptop, tablet, smartphone, and other electronic devices is by now standard

procedure for ease of reference as well as the multi-media capabilities of these devices (music, sound, video, presentations).

A second level concerns the transferal of the RPG experience itself to the computer as a platform that would basically result in multiplayer CRPGs, building on earlier, purely-game-oriented attempts that have been around in the form of MUDs (Multi-User-Dungeons) since the late 1970s, such as Jim Schweiger's OUBLIETTE (1977). CRPGs are played by hundreds of millions of people each day all around the world, the cooperative creation of a secondary reality has, however, been more or less replaced by the consumption of content prefabricated by professional game designers. Porter's ideas go a bit further than simple monster-bashing though: "The game would tread the thin line between interactive movie, role-playing, and video game, with elements of each" (Porter, 1995). If anything, MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer On-line RPGs) of the latest generation have the potential to fulfil Porter's expectations. The design manifesto of GUILD WARS 2 (2012) for example includes the following premise:

> In *GW* you experience the story of the world, but the story in *GW2* is the personal story of your character as well. You fill out a biography at character creation time that defines your background and your place within the world, and that starts you on your path. Then the choices you make will take the story in different directions. Each time you play through the game, you can experience a different storyline.
> [...]
> *GW2* tells story by allowing the player to befriend and adventure with key characters, by presenting him with moral dilemmas that will impact the lives of the people around him, and by having him live through world-changing events and all the key moments of the storyline.
> (O'Brien, 2010)

Such a strong narrative approach, together with the game structure inherent to on-line multiplayer experiences could well realise Porter's expectations, but a manifesto and its concrete and successful implementation are two different things, so only time will tell whether GUILD WARS 2 can live up to the hype it has generated.

The third level of the expected shift in RPGs due to computerisation is the effect of the web on social organisation and narrative process:

> If the information networks become more sophisticated, live role-playing by Net might become more common. Already, role-playing by e-mail or bulletin board system is common. Using a common network and a central computer, video conferenced games could take place between widely separate groups.
> (Porter, 1995)

While play-by-mail and play-by-post were already widely practiced during the 1990s due to the low technical requirements, in the meantime video and/or audio conferencing software has made it possible to also play as a virtual group over vast physical distances. Virtual gaming tables such as SmiteWorks' *Fantasy Grounds* (2004), where all the paraphernalia of pen&paper RPGs are simulated, exist to take over the RPG aspect of these digital encounters, as rules can be imported and tools are provided for the Storyteller to allow for a realistic experience of playing without the need to come together physically. In typical 1990s' techno-euphoria, Porter already sees possibilities of "virtual reality role-playing":

> [M]any groups could conceivably play a game in the same universe at the same time. Imagine playing a superhero in virtual reality city where anyone you meet could be another player, where several professional GM's [sic] manage the background details, but the plot moves itself through the actions of the players, rather than being driven by a pre-arranged plot.
> (Porter, 1995)

Even from today's perspective this electronic implementation of the LARP concept is still far off beyond the technological horizon, and the only approximation of such a process can be found in MMORPGs: EVE ONLINE (2003), for example, is driven purely by player interaction, and the emergent narratives are then retroactively 'authorised' by CCP, the company behind the game that will come up again a bit later.

Of course, it has to be said that following my own categorisation of RPGs according to the platform used at the beginning of these deliberations, a central question remains: When pen&paper RPGs and computers interact, when exactly do they stop being *pen&paper* RPGs and start being CRPGs?

Another area of impact of the rise of the computer and the web in *Generation 5*, already pre-figured earlier with the advent of DTP, is the simple fact that RPG

publishing has also changed. And it all began with a major shift in the landscape of RPG companies. Harvesting the fruits of its success with *Magic*, Wizards of the Coast (WotC) acquired TSR in 1997, and this was especially important because, as Appelcline points out, "[a]lthough not the first hobbyist company, TSR was the first roleplaying company" (2011: 3). In the almost 25 years of their existence, TSR always managed to dominate the RPG market with *D&D* and even build a considerable book division (ibid.). But eventually two factors are identified by Appelcline that led to their downfall: (a) other companies eclipsed TSR in their innovative fervour, introducing new media or pushing pre-existing ones to new heights of prominence, such as WotC with the CCG *Magic* or Games Workshop with their *Warhammer* universe of tabletop-wargaming (1983) and fantasy role-playing (1986); and (b) unstable and conflictive management within TSR that made the company an easy target for competitors (2011: 31). Ironically, the wheels of the gaming market turned quite quickly, so when WotC made "more money on *Pokémon* [CCG licensed by Nintendo] in five years than they had on *Magic* in 10" (Appelcline, 2011: 286), they drew the attention of Hasbro, the "megacorp that was slowly taking over the gaming world" (ibid.). In 1999 and $325mio later WotC was incorporated into the Hasbro 'portfolio'. Big business was now in control of RPG's biggest success story, and the most momentous decision for the development of the medium since *Generation 4* was taken purely for business reasons:

> The downside here is that I believe that one of the reasons that the RPG as a category has declined so much from the early 90s relates to the proliferation of systems. Every one of those different game systems creates a 'bubble' of market inefficiency; the cumulative effect of all those bubbles has proven to be a massive downsizing of the marketplace. I have to note, highlight, and reiterate: The problem is not competitive product, the problem is competitive systems. I am very much for competition and for a lot of interesting and cool products.
> (Dancey in Appelcline, 2011: 287)

Ryan Dancey was TSR's brand manager and his perspective on RPGs was less as an artistic medium but more as an industry. Within WotC, his conviction that *D&D*'s real strength lay in its community of gamers and not in the game system itself, and that too many systems on the market would weaken the industry, fused with a theory

created by one of his co-workers, Skaff Elias, that the market leader would always profit from the work of other companies in their shared field (Appelcline, 2011: 287). The result of these deliberations was the *Open Gaming License*, presented in 2000 in the interview quoted above, and the d20 Trademark License. Appelcline explains how they work:

> The Open Gaming License (OGL) made the D&D third-edition mechanics […] forever open and available for use as a set of 'system reference documents'. The d20 Trademark License built on this by letting publishers use the Wizard's official 'd20' mark to show that their products were compatible – but unlike the OGL, it could be cancelled at some point in the future.
> (Appelcline, 2011: 287)

So everyone could now use the third-edition rules of *D&D* to create their own sourcebooks or even their own RPGs, and they could brand them as 'd20'systems, referring to the twenty-sided die (abbreviated 'd20' in gaming jargon) used in *D&D* task resolution. A huge wave of products introduced what Appelcline calls "The d20 Years" from 2000 to 2005 (2011: 364), as small companies entered the market producing supplements for *D&D*, and established companies tried to push their own products into new market segments by offering adaptations to d20. Even WotC's greatest competitor, White Wolf, entered the d20 arena, using the *Sword&Sorcery* brand to (re-)publish *D&D* campaign settings like *Ravenloft* (2002, 2003), as well as 'new' RPGs based on computer games such as *EverQuest Role-Playing Game* (2002) or *Warcraft: The Role-Playing Game* (2003). As system unification and content diversification progressed, the OGL and the d20 license also affected the distribution channels of the medium: In a move echoing Porter's predictions for *Generation 5*, the internet took over a considerable slice of the metaphorical cake with electronic publication in pdf-format on such platforms as RPGnow, "the first large-scale electronic shopping mall of RPG PDFs" (Appelcline, 2011: 288).

Within WotC, however, the HASBRO corporate spirit slowly encroached upon the creative and organisational work done: Profit-sharing with employees - a central concept of Wizards' alternative business ethos - was killed off in 2000, followed by ordained cuts in staff to maximise profits, the forced shut-down of a *D&D* MMORPG developed in-house (that led to the loss of the founder of WotC by resignation), and

the introduction of a policy of continuously selling off less profitable IPs. With HASBRO/WotC shedding more and more staff, they would more often than not move on to found or join competitors. Even Dancey himself fell victim to his ideology of 'market efficiency' and what it had done to the medium in 2002. A d20 crunch followed in 2003 as publishers lost faith in the brand due to WotC's erratic and autocratic behaviour, "and by the next year", Appelcline observes, "the industry would be in a severe freefall that would endanger every publisher, whether they were publishing d20 or not" (2011: 293).

The publication of *D&D* fourth edition in 2008 that led to massive unrest among gamers claiming "that 4e feels to much like an MMORPG" (2011: 299), did nothing stop this negative trend, and when WotC decided to redefine their OGL for this new edition into a Game System License (or GSL) it included severe restrictions in genre and content, as well as the open prohibition to create original RPGs (2011: 295). The fourth edition was also intended to be part of a business strategy of media convergence (2011: 300), meaning that WotC (or HASBRO) was aiming to control the digital aspects of 'their' game as well, and *Dungeons & Dragons Insider* (or *DDI*) was supposed to be their tool of choice. As a first step, they axed all sales of *D&D* pdfs in 2009. All of the content they would provide in future, the online magazines, the Character Builder, the Compendium of rules and the virtual gaming table, would remain within the absolute control of WotC/HASBRO, and players would have to continually pay monthly fees to be able to access and use them online. The overt and unashamed money-and-power-grab, together with the sacking of several of the core designers of *D&D* in the years since 2008, including Jonathan Tweet of *Ars Magica* fame and even the fourth edition lead designer Rob Heinsoo, created an upsurge of player discontent, and while "there is no question that the fourth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* did *well*" (Appelcline, 2011: 301; original emphases), insecurities and cancellations in the publishing schedule do not bode well for *D&D* and the medium it dominates as such.

Independent online communities have multiplied in response to the perceived danger of multinational control of gaming subculture. It is thus that the web has become the location of both, movements by dominant companies such as WotC/HASBRO towards curtailing player freedom and creativity in order to foster

dependence and to maximise profit (see DDI), and also movements towards creative, sometimes even collective experimentation with the medium by independent individuals and groups. RPG Theory was created mainly through discussion on forums and sites like *The Forge* (http://www.indie-rpgs.com) and RPG.net (http://www.rpg.net/). Creative developers that would stand no chance of being published by a profit-oriented corporation now use online communities for feed-back during the design stage and online publishing as pdf or print-on-demand as cheap alternatives (like www.lulu.com). New funding strategies were made possible. One of them is Greg Stolze's 'ransom method' where the author defines a minimum amount of money to produce a certain work briefly introduced online, interested people donate what the deem appropriate, and as soon as the 'ransom' is reached, the game is released for free online (c.f. Stolze, 2006). A similar but much larger platform is Kickstarter (www.kickstarter.com) where people pledge sums of money towards the funding of creative and other projects.

The resulting indie-RPGs diverge considerably in system design and content from the mainstream releases of the industry, and arguably it is *here* – in the indie sector – that innovation in the medium now happens, as all of the bigger companies have grown complacent or lack the impetus to change successful IPs. When the bottom-line becomes the sole driving force in a 'creative industry', a very ambiguous hybrid environment, the delicate balance between the 'creative' and the 'industry' aspect is destroyed and stagnation the result. Obviously, a de-balancing in the other direction will not get all of your wonderfully creative ideas published. The internet and electronic media allow for low risk, cheap access to publishing, motivating more daring design concepts.

Appelcline, however, is still dubious about the merits and success of the indie-RPG community. The most recent era in the history of RPG production is therefore given a question mark at the end of the title: "The Indie Revolution? (2006 –Present)" (2011: 420). Her argument about the rise of the storytelling game and its central merit for the medium closely follows my own:

> Storytelling games rose in the '80s with publications like *Ars Magica* [...], then transformed into the small-press 'indie' movement of the late '90s and early '00s. Now, in the late '00s,

> indie ideas are making it to the roleplaying mainstream, thanks to companies like Evil Hat and Cubicle 7.
> (Appelcline, 2011: 420)

There it is again, *Ars Magica*, the game "to explore the very real mystery of the human experience" (Tweet and Rein•Hagen, 1989: 2). And in my bibliographical reference the creator of *Vampire* and the lead designer of *D&D* third-edition stand side by side, the perfect metaphor for the aporia of the RPG as a medium constantly caught between narrative and game, between entertainment and art.

Porter's *Generation 5* has come (and gone?), and the uncontrollable and democratic nature of the web has breathed creative life into a faltering medium strangled by corporate interests through reconnecting with its past: "On the one hand we look toward the future and on the other toward the past. Perhaps that is how it has always been in the roleplaying industry" (Appelcline, 2011: 420). Even the chronicler and (oftentimes) critic of the historical development of the RPG herself, Shannon Appelcline, invites the readers of her *Designers & Dragons* to follow her online: "There are still more stories to be told about the companies, magazines and settings of the RPG industry, while the future continues to unfold every day. For a new series of articles meant to complement this book, visit: http://designers-and-dragons.rpg.net" (Appelcline, 2011: 439). The most recent one of these articles is dated July 14, 2012. So the future *does* continue to unfold.

The structurally experimental and decidedly narrative streak of much of *Generation 4* reverberates strongly and unmistakingly in more recent indie-games such as Epidiah Ravachol's *Dread* (2005), Fred Hick's *Don't Rest your Head* (2006), or Greg Stolze's *Reign* (2007), while big publishers such as Wizards of the Coast/Hasbro streamline their games and try to cash in on the MMORPG-craze by implementing formal features such as character powers, cool-down and tactical roles in throw-backs to *Generation 2* or even *1*. For a while it seemed that a new creative impulse for the medium from the MMORPG side *was* possible, when CCP, the company behind the highly successful EVE ONLINE MMORPG took over White Wolf Publishing in 2006. Plans were announced to start a transmedial, dispersed cross-distribution of the two

IPs, using the experience each of the two companies would bring to the table in their respective field:

> The merged company will enable CCP to integrate White Wolf's leading expertise in offline gaming development to enhance and create physical products for its MMOG, EVE Online. Products to be introduced in 2007 will include strategy guides, enhanced collectable card games, role-playing systems, and novels all based on EVE Online. White Wolf will leverage CCP's industry-leading technologies to bring its offline role-playing titles online. Conceptualization and early development has begun to bring White Wolf's World of Darkness, one of the world's strongest gaming properties, into the online world.
> (Bergsson, 2006)

Sadly, none of these projects have happened so far. As was the case with the WotC take-over, the new bosses would soon start interfering with the organisation and IPs of their acquisition: Rumours started that the entire print line of publications would be cancelled, but there were also online initiatives to revive White Wolf's earlier tradition of original fiction, as well as a twentieth anniversary edition of Vampire numbering a strapping 518 pages. "Generally", Appelcline however has to conclude, "the future of White Wolf's original creative production remains very much up in the air" (2011: 230). Fortunately, in early 2012 CCP announced that the *World of Darkness* MMORPG was still alive and kicking, announcing a tentative release date in 2013 and their intentions to revolutionise both media with their game (Bedford, 2012). It remains to be seen whether (a) the release schedule holds, and (b) the reality of the game can then live up to the expectations created beforehand, but judging from the quality work CCP have done on EVE ONLINE so far, there is still hope.

The crises in the RPG creative industry during recent years, exemplified by the uncertainty around the two behemoths of the medium, WotC and White Wolf, might just be a sign of another massive change in the medium, a change that on a metaphorical level is symbolised and on a concrete level promoted by the web. Instead of a central core of two companies, representing the split in the RPG community - inherited from the impact of *Generation 4* on the medium - between those emphasising the entertainment and game aspect of the medium and those that see RPGs as artefacts of narrative, artistic expression, there is now a web of smaller

indie-publishers. As the big two crumble, numerous others take over the many gamers fluctuating in their tastes or allegiances. The 'old order' of either/or no longer serves and a new order slowly rises instead. Increasingly, people are taking back their voices, designers and players alike, from faceless and monolithic companies. Questions of textual authority, discursive power and the commodification of culture, the central questions of our – Postmodern - age, come together in this new generation of RPGs, after the form and the content of the medium now attaining and transforming the very modes of its production and distribution. This, if nothing else, would justify the step into a new generation, a *Generation 6* of RPGs where the procedural and democratic negotiation of meaning and authority leaves the sheltered game space and enters primary reality itself: And maybe these then are *truly* joyful games of meaning-making?

4 – Constructing Understanding: RPG Theory

By the early to mid-1990s RPGs were well established, especially in North America and Europe, and a trend was beginning to form to create a theoretical framework to underline their status as a serious new medium. In 1994 *Inter*Action* magazine was created by Andrew Rilstone, serving as a platform for critical and theoretical articles from members of the community. Parallel to the magazine, discussions on the rec.games.frp.advocacy newsgroup enriched the theoretical understanding of the medium well into the 2000s, and at the turn of the millennium, a strong critical voice emerged in Finland that would assume a perspective utterly different from all of these earlier attempts. I will take a closer look at three selected dominant critical discourses, the Threefold Model (or GDS Theory) by Mary Kuhner and John Kim, the GNS Theory and its later descendant, The Big Model, by Ron Edwards, and the Process Model by Eetu Mäkelä and others, to develop a deeper understanding of the complex textualities that cultural critics need to address when they engage with the medium RPG.

4.1 – Of Ham Actors, Munchkins, and Rules-lawyers: The Threefold Model

The Threefold Model originally emerged from posts by Mary Kuhner in the rec.games.frp.advocacy newsgroup (or RGFA) from May to August 1997. Kuhner first suggested the name in a post in July when she defined the basic framework, and the theory as such was later formalised, summarised and FAQ-ed by John Kim in 1998 (Kim, 2003a). The original idea was to establish the Threefold Model in order to overcome the (dualistic) dichotomy between storytelling-oriented players and war gamers:

> The model arose as an attempted compromise to heated debates over the proper style of role-playing. Earlier conceptual models of RPGs tended to separate into a single axis: between storytelling and role-playing on the one hand, and wargaming on the other. The Threefold tries to express three fully valid and functional goals or paradigms of play, which may at times conflict. These were termed 'Drama' (or Story), 'Simulation' (or World), and 'Game' (or Challenge).
> (Kim, 2003a)

What is especially interesting to note about the origin and evolution of the Threefold Model (aka 'GDS Theory', based on its tree axes – Game, Drama, and Simulation) is that it was the result of a long process of discussing different approaches to and practices in playing RPGs. Gamers themselves started reflecting on their medium, formed theoretical concepts and classifications and then debated those with other likeminded (or dissenting) gamers on-line. The initial spark for these sometimes rather heated discussions was when David Berkman, co-author of the diceless *Theatrix* RPG (1993), joined the newsgroup and a more general debate on the merits and flaws of RPGs available at the time, aggressively advocating his own game, playing style, and diceless task resolution in general, resulting in a year-long thread (Kim, 2003c). During 1994 and 1995, participants in the newsgroup slowly established a consensual critical framework, switching from a prescriptive to a descriptive approach in order to make productive discussions of different games and systems possible. In his own account of the path leading up to GDS Theory, Kim remembers this key decision:

> Over the course of 1995, participants began to agree to form a typology of games which described the differences expressed. That is, we wanted to define a set of terms (or types) for different styles of game design and game-play. The idea was that rather arguing over what was the best approach, we would first establish the type of game, and then discuss what was best for that type.
> (Kim, 2003c)

While the need for a typology was commonly agreed upon, and soon "[t]he idea of multiple axes arose through many participants, suggesting modeling the variety of games as a multi-dimensional space" (Kim, 2003c), the definition of these dimensions, their conceptualisation and the terminology used in naming them was very controversial. Starting from an understanding of RPGs that was largely rooted in drama, the group managed to agree widely (but not totally) on a definition of a second axis, simulation, in 1996 (ibid.). A 'Twofold Model' was established, but there was still dissatisfaction with the catch-all nature of 'simulation' as a style of playing and the oppositional nature of the theory, so during 1997 the third axis slowly emerged from simulation: game. One of the reasons for the difficult birth of the Threefold Model's third pillar that is mentioned by Kim in his account is the absence of a vocal group of advocates in the newsgroup for gamist play-styles, unlike the dominance of dramatist and simulationist gamers (2003c). So, in July 1997 the first attempt to critically and theoretically describe RPGs that was also widely accepted among gamers was formulated, and true to the nature of the process up until that time, it was not decreed authoritatively by Mary Kuhner's article "Threefold Model", but immediately augmented by community input: Whereas Kuhner conceptualised the typology as based on a split between the three styles or sets of values - gamist, dramatist, simulationist (hence 'GDS'), "Irina Rempt illustrated this as a triangle with 'World', 'Story', and 'Challenge' as its vertices, placing a person's usual gaming style as a dot on that triangle" (Kim, 2003c). The Threefold Model was born, although not everyone was happy. But such is the nature of compromise.

The self-proclaimed subject of the GDS Theory are the "group contracts" that are explicitly and/or implicitly established, or that emerge dynamically when gamers gather to play an RPG. The definition of what constitutes such a group contract is therefore rather comprehensive: "Full group contract includes every facet of how the

game is played: not just the mechanical rules, but also how scenarios are constructed, what sort of behavior is expected of PCs, how actions not covered by the rules are resolved, allowance of outside distractions, and so forth" (Kim, 2003b). Thus, all four of Mackay's frames are concerned: Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance are all specifically addressed by the definition above. The GDS Theory aims at a holistic appreciation and analysis of the procedural narration in RPGs.

While it does differentiate between three categories of motivation for players engaging with this process (game, drama, simulation), it is essential that there are no value judgments attached to any of these labels. All of the three approaches are equally valid. This is a result of the conflictual genesis of the theory and part of its ideological programme to bridge the gap between role-players and roll-players, and to show both sides the benefits of the other style: "The Threefold model", Kim explains, "is intended to promote looking at different styles as just other ways of play" (2003b). This egalitarian approach and the democratic process that led to it is especially interesting in connection with the fact that it is used to analyse one of the most democratic media in existence.

Using the GDS model, all decisions in gaming are motivated by one (or more likely more than one) of the following agendas: a Gamist, a Dramatist, or a Simulationist one. Kim's FAQ (2003) provides quick definitions for each of these.

> '**gamist**': is the style which values setting up a fair challenge for the players (as opposed to the PCs). The challenges may be tactical combat, intellectual mysteries, politics, or anything else. The players will try to solve the problems they are presented with, and in turn the GM will make these challenges solvable if they act intelligently within the contract.
> (Kim, 2003b)

This first aspect, Gamism, emotionally and/or intellectually anchors the experience in primary reality: The challenges that form the core of this style are challenged to the players (as Kim expressly mentions), not the character. The ST creates and presents challenges to overcome, carefully balancing the difficulty level in order to (a) do their players justice, but also (b) not frighten them off or demotivate them. Frustration due to excessive difficulty on both ends of the spectrum (too easy / too difficult) will

destroy immersion and the sense of agency required to guarantee a satisfying gaming experience. Even if 'winning' is not conceptually part of the medium, the gamist aspect is closest to this more 'traditional' idea of playing a game.

> "**dramatist**": is the style which values how well the in-game action creates a satisfying storyline. Different kinds of stories may be viewed as satisfying, depending on individual tastes, varying from fanciful pulp action to believable character drama. It is the end result of the story which is important.
> (Kim, 2003b)

The second style, Dramatism, is mostly focussed on the secondary reality or diegesis that is created through playing. The aim of a dramatist player is to be part of and to co-create a cohesive and powerful story. In opposition to Gamists, Dramatists can handle or even appreciate failure, *if* there is meaning or a special aesthetic quality to this failure that feeds into the procedural narrative. Sometimes, even total, seemingly meaningless disaster can lead to a satisfying dramatist experience, if the resulting sense of hopelessness and abnegation of meaning *is* the meaning the narrative ironically was meant to produce. There is also no inherent difference in quality between different genres or narrative styles: As long as all of the participants are content at the end of a narrative or a session, it can be considered a successful experience. It lies in the nature of the medium and its fluctuating distribution of discursive power that STs need to be able to adapt their plot ideas if this is what the plot-dynamics created by the players' in-game actions demand.

In one of my own MERP (Middle-Earth Role-Playing) groups for example, my players ended up kidnapping the Umbarian hostage they were supposed to just escort as a starting adventure from Edoras to Minas Tirith right after the War of the Rings, because they were so fascinated by that NPC. When they smuggled her back home to Umbar, that was the start of a long, complex and intriguing chronicle looking at Aragorn and his newly reunited empire from the outside in a critical re-writing of Tolkienian crypto-fascist tendencies. The story my players created from my more basic elements was so much more interesting and satisfying than the standard

fare I had planned, that I switched stories on the fly. Here my decision as part of the group contract was clearly motivated by dramatist desires.

Besides these two styles that give primacy to one reality, but closely connect it to the other at the same time, the simulationist agenda is almost exclusively oriented towards the Secondary World created:

> '**simulationist**': is the style which values resolving in-game events based solely on game-world considerations, without allowing any meta-game concerns to affect the decision. Thus, a fully simulationist GM will not fudge results to save PCs or to save her plot, or even change facts unknown to the players. Such a GM may use meta-game considerations to decide meta-game issues like who is playing which character, whether to play out a conversation word for word, and so forth, but she will resolve actual in-game events based on what would 'really' happen. (Kim, 2003b)

In a simulationist set-up, the secondary reality created at the gaming table is solely determined and structured by its own, intradiegetic logic. Considerations of story or game do not even enter the equation. The two levels of reality are kept strictly separated and organised according to their own, self-contained necessities. The example Kim brings about fudging results or changing facts in the secondary reality are – from personal experience as a long-term ST - two of the most frequent cases of interference of primary reality concerns in the structure and development of the events in secondary reality. An instance of a gamist interference in the simulationist integrity of the Secondary World would be to ignore the rolled result for an NPC, because they pose too little or too great a challenge for the players. If the ST 'unofficially' lowers or raises the difficulty like that, the motivation is external to the secondary reality. Another tactic frequently used, and I already referred to it with my MERP anecdote earlier, is the retroactive adaptation of the plot in reaction to player input to make for a more interesting story. The core value for a Simulationist style, however, is to be as 'real' as possible within the framework of the secondary reality: If an arrow to the head most likely kills you in primary reality, it will do so in secondary reality as well, as long as this secondary reality copies primary reality as far as the lethality of head-shots is concerned. Simulationist agendas go beyond realistic combat, affecting issues such as social structures, patterns of speech and behaviour,

or the unpleasant details of life such as illness and suffering and their place in the experience. Here satisfaction is drawn neither from overcoming challenge nor from telling an interesting story, but it is the creation of and immersion in a fully functional Secondary World that often motivates the players.

These three dimensions are, however, not mutually exclusive:

> On the short term, a given conflict might happen to be both a fair challenge and realistically resolved. However, every game will have problems, including undramatic bits, unrealistic bits, and unbalanced bits. The Threefold asks about how much comparative effort you put into solving these.
> (Kim, 2003b)

The participants in an RPG experience are therefore never *either* one *or* the other, every player and every situation can and will show attributes of all three of these dimensions. It is mostly only a matter of degrees. This is why Rempt's contribution goes far beyond a mere visualisation of the Threefold Model when it is imagined as an equilateral triangle with each of the three axes taking up one tip of this triangle: Going towards one of them will distance you from the other two, but you do not have to go all the way and you almost never completely inhabit one of three positions.

There are also some additional points to be made about the GDS Theory. First of all, as Kim warns: "Even if the stereotypes have some truth to them, the Threefold is not about just the lowest common denominator. There are good and bad examples of each type of game" (2003b). This is in reaction to a comically exaggerated question that tries to sum up the dominant stereotypical images of gamers of the three 'types': "So dramatism is ham actors playing through arty nonsense, gamism is munchkins who want to beat the GM, and simulationism is rules-lawyers who argue over ballistics?" (Kim, 2003b). In a clear and conscious movement of dissociation from these simplistic concepts, the three categories of agendas or guiding motivations in decision making are not meant to be reductionist or essentialist, they are rather complementary aspects that come together to varying degrees to describe one special instance of gaming or one concrete gaming decision taken. Secondly, "any of the three [agendas] can vary from 'Light' to 'Serious' (Kim, 2003b). A largely

Dramatist stance does not necessarily mean that the dominant mood around the table is sombre or even serious. *Changeling: The Dreaming* (1995) for example allows for quick narrative modulation between starkly different emotional states and atmospheres ranging from nonsensical comedy to hopeless despair. Also, not everyone agreed that the unilateral triangle was complete as it is:

> The Threefold is not intended as a be-all and end-all of gaming, nor is it neccessarily [sic] complete. Several people suggested a fourth group of styles, which was 'Social'. However, discussion died down as there was no consensus about what that meant in contrast to the other styles, or even whether one could even discuss it on the same level.
> (Kim, 2003b)

Upping the dimension count to four would not only make the triangle a diamond, it would also make the whole theory much messier, as Kim rightfully points out: How do you define Social? Where do you situate a Social agenda on the complex layers of interaction and process? And would the agenda then be called Social-ist? Yet again, speaking from my own experience, there is a subset of players who could not care less about game, drama, or simulation, and who only show up once a week to spend four hours with friends, in addition to at least thirty minutes of gossip and geek-talk before play commences. Why should they be excluded from the model? And is it not a very special motivation to help someone in-game, because you do not want to see them suffer in primary reality through the immersive feed-back when their character suffers? It is certainly not challenge-, story-, or 'realism'-oriented behaviour, but rather people-oriented one.

In an Addendum (dated January 12, 2007), Kim summarises the results of a longish discussion of the Threefold Model on the RPG.net forum in 2006. Essentially, these are clarifications of concepts established earlier. The central issue of the discussion obviously was the nature of the "group contract" Kuhner and Kim defined as the basis of not only the GDS Theory, but also the RPG experience in general:

> One of the central points of rgfa discussion was coining the term 'group contract' for both formal and informal agreements among the group. As we used the term, all agreements of play were part of group contract -- including the mechanics as well as agreements like 'Don't

> feed the cat' or 'Call in advance if you're late'. I've noticed in later usage people tend to used [sic] the term "Social Contract" to mean only non-mechanical issues -- which implies that the system and mechanics are not social agreements, when of course they are.
>
> One thing which bugs me is the idea that there is a natural distinction between "social contract", "system", and "content" of a game -- or worse that the natural way of that is the one true way. A game can have printed rules which cover virtually anything which is in the social contract.
>
> (Kim, 2007)

The basic assumption of GDS therefore is that content, form, *and* social context of an RPG experience are determined by the three agendas. What is more, they are all three essential elements of the process and thus all three are also subjected to negotiation. To denaturalize the 'natural' distinction between these three elements and thus to re-open them to adaptation and re-appropriation is one of the basic principles of the Threefold Model. Role-playing Games are deeply social events and processes ordered by agreed-upon rules if seen through the GDS lens.

On a conceptual level, this theoretical approach is interested in decision-making not results, it is therefore procedural and not teleological (Kim, 2007). To use a phrase coined by R. Scott Bakker as the title to his 2004 novel of the same name , it is 'the darkness that comes before' that GDS tries to classify, the motivation influencing the moment of decision, not the real or intended outcome of the situation. This concentration on the present, the moment of decision, and the procedural nature of narration in the theory mirrors its object, the medium RPG on both a conceptual and philosophical level. RPGs are story-game hybrids that are based on a procedural and ephemeral concept of textual production. The Threefold Model takes this into consideration and structures its analyses accordingly.

And lastly, Kim makes it quite clear that the GDS Theory is *not* the representation of Truth (capital t) about RPGs, it is just *one* possible way to approach the medium, and its categorization can be applied to the medium on several levels:

> The Threefold Model is a taxonomy rather than a strictly defined model. Thus, wherever the definitions make sense, they can be applied. It is possible for players to make decisions on the basis of either in-game cause, story effect, or meeting challenge. Thus, the model can apply to players. The definitions can also be applied to many cases of preparation. For example, you

> can generate the details of a town based on either needs of the story you are telling there, or extrapolation based on it's [sic] geographic location, local history, and so forth. Now, broad early choices about the world cannot be extrapolated. For example, the choice of whether to play fantasy or science fiction, for example, isn't classifiable under the Threefold. The same is true of other classifications, though.
>
> Now, the Threefold Model was developed to apply to actual play -- not to rules on their own or to campaign preparation on its own. However, the principle is to look at of what sort of actual play the rules and/or preparation support.
>
> (Kim, 2007)

The GDS taxonomy is open and flexible enough to accommodate many instances of decision making in the gaming experience on the side of the players as well as the ST. However, it always tries to make meaning of instances of play, not printed or otherwise fixed textualities. It is a theory of flux and dynamics, and in this respect it is again a clear child of the medium it is applied to. The first theory created from gamers in order to better understand their medium has become a conceptual mirror image of the aspects that fascinate the inquisitive mind about an RPG.

Even though it was originally created to describe player decisions taken during gaming, the Threefold Model or GDS-Theory has had considerable impact on how RPGs have been played, analysed and developed during the late 1990s and ever since. On a conceptual level, it forms the basis of most of the RPG theories that circulate today:

> The rough idea of the Threefold Model has taken root in several places, but the ideas have also changed, in some cases drastically. It has not evolved into a single canonical form, but rather (like real evolution) has influenced several branches which are now quite distinct from each other.
>
> (Kim, 2005)

The other two major bodies of theory I will be addressing next - Ron Edwards's Big Model and the Finnish Process Model that in turn developed from the Meilahti school - count among those, and Kim additionally mentions Scarlet Jester's GENder model (2001), the LARP-based Three Way Model by Petter Bøckman (2002; c.f. Bøckman 2003), and the 3D Model by Mike Holmes and John Kim himself (2004) as direct

descendants (Kim, 2005). Most of these take up the general ideas of the Threefold and tinker with the terminology and/or add additional layers of classification. A prime example of both of these processes is Ron Edwards's Big Model.

4.2 - Size Does Matter!: The Big Model

The motor for change and the eventual emergence of other RPG-theoretical systems was what Kim calls "The Dilemma of the Threefold":

> The later models which were influenced by the Threefold tend to interpret [the three dimensions] more as goals -- i.e. as values for what the players get out of gaming, rather than just patterns of what is put in. So, for example, Dramatism is sometimes interpreted as "art for art's sake" while Simulationism is sometimes interpreted as realism for its own sake.
>
> Another issue with the Threefold Model was that there were many open questions about the scope of the model. Does it apply to both GM decisions and player decisions? Does it apply to decisions made during campaign design, or only to decisions made during dynamic play? The original model had no defined scope -- i.e. the terms could in principle be applied to any area, though how useful they would be varied. This was an issue because it meant that there was not a canonical meaning of a "Dramatist game".
>
> (Kim, 2005)

Ironically, the subsequent developments would thus react to exactly that non-teleological way of thinking that I argued earlier was the central aspect of GDS Theory and where it directly reflects the medium it was created to reflect upon: form and function coming together in a simple but convincing whole.

Leading among the (productive) critics of Kuhner and Kim's Threefold Model was Ron Edwards who between 1999 and 2005 took up basic ideas of GDS, refined them further into his own GNS-Theory, and added new dimensions to describe the complex narrative production of RPGs in discussions on his website *The Forge* (www.indie-rpgs.com). In his article "GNS and Other Matters of Role-playing Theory" (Edwards, 2001a) he expands the catalogue of concepts to be considered, the range of terminology, and the applicability of RPG theory. Chapter 1, subtitled "Exploration", is his attempt to put a metaphorical finger on "what the role-playing experience is

'about'", or as he also puts it "the things which must be imagined by the real people" (Edwards, 2001b). He gives a list of five of these concepts:

> Character: a fictional person or entity.
> System: a means by which in-game events are determined to occur.
> Setting: where the character is, in the broadest sense (including history as well as location).
> Situation: a problem or circumstance faced by the character.
> Color: any details or illustrations or nuances that provide atmosphere.
> (Edwards, 2001b)

These "imagined elements" form the basic building blocks for play, or "imagination in action", which Edwards characterizes as Exploration and goes on to trace across the frames of reference of Theatre and Performance (both ibid.): "Initially, it is an individual concern, although it will move into the social, communicative realm, and the commitment to imagine the listed elements becomes an issue of its own" (Edwards, 2001b). Motivated originally by individual reasons, the participants of an RPG experience thus enter the collective and cooperative narrative process, thereby subjecting themselves to the communally negotiated rules and the commitment to keep the process going. Edwards calls the reason for attraction to a given game the Premise of the player: "Premise is whatever a participant finds among the [five previously defined] elements to sustain a continued interest in what might happen in a role-playing session. Premise, once established, instils the desire to keep that imaginative commitment going" (Edwards, 2001b). It is situated in the extradiegetic realm of primary reality and thus part of the Performance, but not the Theatre of RPG. Additionally, Edwards argues that as the Exploration turns from an individual motivation into a collective commitment, Premise follows suit: "The real Premise exists as a clear, focused question or concern shared among all members of the group" (2001b). This goes to show how Edwards turns The GDS Theory from a decision-based model into a motivation-based, more teleological model: his GNS Theory (notice the emphasis).

Like Kuhner and Kim, Edwards defines three dimensions in his model, but the essential difference is that "[t]hese terms, or modes, describe three distinct types of people's decisions *and* goals during play" (2001c; my emphasis). Another change, as

he explains at the end of Chapter Two in a long catalogue of perceived "Misunderstandings of GNS" is "Ascribing any sort of geometric shape or variable-space to these terms. Such ideas are often interesting but they are not formally part of the definitions. (For instance, there is no such thing as a 'GNS Triangle.')" (2001c). Gone is the idea of the conceptual and quasi-spatial interconnectedness of Game, Drama, and Simulation in the Threefold Model, implying that by moving towards one of the dimensions you would distance yourself from the other two. Theoretically speaking, Edwards's model would allow a player a motivation that is a melange of and coloured to a maximum by two or even three of his modes. Nevertheless, the conceptualisation and naming of the three dimensions clearly shows the theory's relation to its precursor, as GDS becomes GNS.

The first of the three modes (the 'G') again stands for Gamism, but Edwards's definition is slightly different from Kuhner and Kim's:

> **Gamism** is expressed by competition among participants (the real people); it includes victory and loss conditions for characters, both short-term and long-term, that reflect on the people's actual play strategies. The listed elements [of Exploration] provide an arena for the competition.
> (Edwards, 2001c; original emphasis)

The essential shift or perspective here is away from the notion of challenge (in the *D&D*-sense of DM vs. players), and towards competition. The spirit of *agôn* (to use Caillois's classification) rules Gamism, and just like the Greeks did not stop competing amongst each other when they laid siege to Troy, the players – even if they perceive to be in a competitive situation between them as a group and the ST (DM) – will also always compete amongst each other. Some clever indie-RPG designs, such as John Harper's fittingly names *Agon* (2006) or Robin D. Laws's *Rune* (2001), even formalise this tendency.

The second mode, and this is where the 'N' comes from that replaces the earlier 'D', is Narrativism:

> **Narrativism** is expressed by the creation, via role-playing, of a story with a recognizable theme. The characters are formal protagonists in the classic Lit 101 sense, and the players are

> often considered co-authors. The listed elements provide the material for narrative conflict (again, in the specialized sense of literary analysis).
> (Edwards, 2001c; original emphasis)

The renaming and the definition both show that Edwards is changing his medial point of reference for the story-aspect of the RPG experience, taking it out of the realm of theatre and drama (RPGs as 'improvisational theatre') and into the wide fields of literature and literary criticism (RPG as 'story-telling'). The players as co-authors and the procedural creation that I use as central elements for my own approach are all concepts that are formalised here by Edwards for the first time in RPG Theory.

The third mode, Simulationism, is also redefined by the author and put in relation to the elements of Exploration:

> **Simulationism** is expressed by enhancing one or more of the listed elements in Set 1 above [i.e. the elements of Exploration]; in other words, Simulationism heightens and focuses Exploration as the priority of play. The players may be greatly concerned with the internal logic and experiential consistency of that Exploration.
> (Edwards, 2001c; original emphasis)

Together, the three modes form the living core of GNS Theory, closely related to but clearly distinct from GDS in the ways outlined earlier. Similar to The Threefold Model, Edwards modified conceptualisation also does not - and cannot – make absolute claims, and the author is perfectly aware of this situation:

> Used properly, the terms apply only to decisions, not to whole persons nor to whole games. To be absolutely clear, to say that a person is (for example) Gamist, is only shorthand for saying, 'This person tends to make role-playing decisions in line with Gamist goals.' Similarly, to say that an RPG is (for example) Gamist, is only shorthand for saying, 'This RPG's content facilitates Gamist concerns and decision-making.' For better or for worse, both of these forms of shorthand are common. […]
> Over a greater period of time, across many instances of play, some people tend to cluster their decisions and interests around one of the three goals. Other people vary across the goals, but even they admit that they stay focused, or prioritize, for a given instance.
> (Edwards, 2001c)

Edwards here acknowledges the synchronic as well as diachronic co-existence or even evolution of modes within the preferred and/or exhibited style of one player, as well as the existence of structural and conventional aspects in the published RPG (pre-)texts that would favour one mode of play over others. I would add to that contextual constraints or factors that can and will impact play: If a Narrativist player joins a Gamist group for example, whatever their intradiegetic or extradiegetic reasons might be (ranging from an interesting story to the desire to be with a certain person), they are sure to adapt their own style so as to not disturb the group contract they enter and thus shift more towards the Gamist mode themselves. Edwards himself indirectly addresses this issue:

> Again, all three modes are social applications of the foundational act of role-playing, which is Exploration. Taking that into a social, role-playing circumstance, the people get more concrete about a shared Premise, and thus their decisions acquire a GNS focus of some kind. To play successfully, the members of the role-playing group must be, at the very least, willing to acknowledge and support the focused Premise as perceived by one another.
> (Edwards, 2001c)

The modes of playing are, ultimately, concrete social applications of the abstract concept of Exploration, to rephrase the quote above. The group dynamics of a specific ensemble of players will push the shared Premise towards one of the three modes of the GNS Theory, and what is perceived to be a successful experience is then determined by adherence to this group contract. RPGs are deeply social, dynamic and constantly re-negotiated forms of cultural expression in Edwards's terms, and I do not only fully support his ideas, I also think that this is essential to construct a connection to Postmodern textualities and notions of literature.

In addition to the three modes (GNS), Edwards also talks about three different Stances a player can take, "defined as how a person arrives at decisions for an imaginary character's imaginary actions" (2001d). Unlike modes, Stances are highly volatile aspects of play, and participants shift quickly between them without making conscious decisions or even giving this too much thought. Again, there is a list of three, beginning with the Actor stance: "In **Actor** stance, a person determines a character's decisions and actions using only knowledge and perceptions that the

character would have" (Edwards, 2001d). If a player decides as an Actor, their point of view is extremely close to the character's they are playing. They successfully ignore the additional information they have access to on the Performance frame (as a player), and act within the informational economy of the Theatre frame only, even if this is to the detriment of the character and/or the story.

The second stance, the Author or Pawn, takes a narrative step back: "In **Author** stance, a person determines a character's decisions and actions based on the real person's priorities, then retroactively "motivates" the character to perform them. (Without that second, retroactive step, this is fairly called **Pawn** stance.)" (Edwards, 2001d). If a player treats their character like an Author, they use all of the information that is provided to them by their position in the Performance frame. As soon as a character in secondary reality acts because of a motivation of his player in primary reality, this is an Author (or even Pawn) stance: Having your character do something (or not) because you do not want to endanger the progression of the story? Author. Holding back your character's sharp tongue in interaction with another character because you know their player cannot handle sarcasm? Author. Exposing the supposed villain prematurely and taking the chance of epic failure because your last bus is about to leave for this night? Author. And, as Edwards explains, if players do not even bother to come up with an intradiegetic motivation *post facto*, you treat your character like a Pawn.

While Actor and Author/Pawn are both attached to a character and how they behave and are thus frequently encountered in players' decision-making, the third stance, Director, transgresses the amount of discursive power normally available to players:

> In **Director** stance, a person determines aspects of the environment relative to the character in some fashion, entirely separately from the character's knowledge or ability to influence events. Therefore the player has not only determined the character's actions, but the context, timing, and spatial circumstances of those actions, or even features of the world separate from the characters.
> (Edwards, 2011d)

In ‘traditional’ RPGs or the ‘traditional’ style of playing RPGs, it is the hub-player (be it DM, GM or ST) who has almost exclusive discursive and authorial power to shape the Secondary World beyond the immediate sphere of action of the player characters. While the other players can only interact with the secondary reality through their characters, the ST can either use their NPCs (non-player characters) or even change and determine aspects of the Secondary World directly through narrative control. However, the ST will often allow players to take the Director stance for issues not directly affecting the development of the plot or pertaining only to the private or immediate sphere of their character, narrative decisions that thus have little to no potential to derail the narrative process.

Even though Edwards makes a point stating that Stances and modes do not correspond to each other directly, he also admits that there are particular tendencies for certain modes of play to prefer or promote certain Stances:

> Historically, Author stance seems the most common or at least decidedly present at certain points for Gamist and Narrativist play, and Director stance seems to be a rarer add-on in those modes. Actor stance seems the most common for Simulationist play, although a case could be made for Author and Director stance being present during character creation in this mode. These relative proportions of Stance positions during play do apparently correspond well with issues of Premise and GNS.
> (Edwards, 2001d)

Motivation and play thus stand in an intricate interrelationship with each other that goes to show how complex the narrative process of RPGs and its implementation of player agency on both sides of the diegetic border really is. The author is also well aware of the personal and emotional impact produced by immersion and how it might be related to the Stances. Again avoiding authoritative, prescriptive theories in favour of a more descriptive approach, Edwards positioning is helpful but cautious:

> **Immersion** is another difficult issue that often arises in Stance discussions. Like "realism" and "completeness" and several other terms, it has many different definitions in role-playing culture. The most substantive definition that I have seen is that immersion is the sense of

> being "possessed" by the character. This phenomenon is not a stance, but a feeling. What kind of role-playing goes with that feeling? The feeling is associated with decision-making that is incompatible with Director or Author stance. Therefore, I suggest that immersion (an internal sensation) is at least highly associated with Actor Stance. Whether some people get into Actor stance and then "immerse," or others "immerse" and thus willy-nilly are in Actor stance, I don't know.
> (Edwards, 2001d)

Using his pretty simple and straight-forward adaptation of the GDS Theory, Edwards sets up a much more comprehensive and complete theoretical framework, that encompasses individual and collective motivation, as well as playing style, and a well-rounded discussion of both agency and immersion. With chapters 4 and 5, "The Basics of Role-Playing Design" and "Role-playing Design and Coherence" respectively, he applies his analytical framework for play and its results to the design of RPGs, thus effectively closing the feedback loop typical of a critical relation to a medium: RPG theory and practice feed into each other, just like literary theory and practice have done for centuries (c.f. Edwards 2001e and 2001f). Besides several highly useful concepts for the design of new games, the attentive reader also finds a practical reason for the renaming of Drama into Narrative in these chapters: When Edwards discusses options for event resolution systems in RPGs, he devises a classification into three basic concepts of how actions in secondary reality and their results can be adjudicated – Drama (by narrative logic), Karma (by reference to quantitative character features like attributes without random element), and Fortune (by use of randomisers like dice in conjunction with quantified character features) (2001e). So it does make sense to be able to differentiate between a Narrativist mode/motivation and the use of a Drama-based task resolution system, since they do not necessarily go hand in hand as using Dramatist for the mode would suggest.

Chapter 6, "Actually Playing", addresses the social and organisational aspects of the RPG experience, and it starts off with an assertion that I hold to be essential for a critical understanding of RPGs and that clearly sets the medium apart from other, non-playable media:

> It all comes back to the social situation, eventually, because role-playing is a human activity and not a set of rules or text. Coherence is expressed as a social outcome; it must apply all the way into and through actual play. I suggest that preparing for and carrying out the role-playing experience in social terms, well above and beyond considerations of system mechanics, is most coherent from a GNS and Premise perspective.
>
> Role-playing is carried out through relying upon the real, interpersonal roles of living humans, yes, even of opponents. If people do not share any degree of either Premise focus [...] or an Exploration focus [...], then their different assumptions, different expectations, and different goals will come into conflict during play. When that happens, the uber-goal of 'Fun' is diminished. Perhaps the people continue to play together solely to interact socially, but the actual role-playing is, effectively, gone.
>
> (Edwards, 2001g)

For Edwards (and for me) it is the *social contract* that *makes* an RPG experience, and this echoes Fine's statement that they are "more like life and less like games" (1983: 8). Even if other playable media do have that social aspect, they tend to require less commitment (boardgames), or they give the participants less agency and authorial power (multiplayer video games), ultimately requiring less responsibility from players. It is this confluence of social structure and creative freedom that makes RPGs a unique medium, maximising player responsibility alongside immersion, and thus using the power the medium holds over its participants to create a social bond and 'teach' the players in a non-didactic way the skills required for successful social living.

That this process of constant, dynamic re-negotiation of social and narrative positions on both sides of the diegetic divide is without problems is an illusion Edwards, luckily, does not fall victim to, and so he closes his seminal article with a subchapter entitled "Dysfunction: when role-playing doesn't work out" (2001g). In it he treats cases such as people who habitually disrupt the RPG process, emotional tensions between players, and what he calls "GNS incompatibility", the collapse of groups where people come to the table with different or even conflicting goals (2001g). It is from these "GNS casualties" that Edwards draws his motivation to produce RPG Theory:

> [GNS casualties] have never perceived the range of role-playing goals and designs, and they frequently commit the fallacies of synecdoche about 'correct role-playing.' [...] They are the victims of incoherent game designs and groups that have not focused their intentions enough. They thought that 'show up with a character' was sufficient prep, or thought that this new game with its new setting was going to solve all their problems forever. They are simultaneously devoted to and miserable in their hobby.
>
> My goal in developing RPG theory and writing this document is to help people avoid this fate.
>
> (Edwards, 2001g)

Like all social activities, participation in RPGs can go horribly wrong if the participants are not really clear about what they are in for and what they want this process to be like. Motivation and expectation drive the process of Exploration that Edwards defines as *the* core of RPGs. So RPG Theory is not only theory for its own sake, some kind of eternally self-reproducing autistic discourse, but it is about applicability and real life decisions. It is about people, not process, even though it talks about how this specific process works and what potential problems might be due to its elements and their interaction. RPGs in Edwards's GNS Theory are a people-oriented medium, and this is essential not only to understanding the medium in its own right, but also for my argument in the second, and especially the last part of this paper, when I establish connections between Postmodernism and RPGs.

Edwards later collected and condensed his body of criticism into the so-called Big Model, eventually finalised in 2004. These ideas had first started to condense from The Threefold Model in his befittingly titled article "System Does Matter" (Edwards, 1999) where they showed a strong focus on game design and system:

> I suggest a good system is one which knows its outlook and doesn't waste any mechanics on the other two outlooks. Its resolution method(s) are appropriate for the outlook: they have search and handling time that works for that outlook, in terms of both what the players have to do and what happens to the characters.
>
> (Edwards, 1999)

This early Edwards is still very much the critic of RPGs as game systems, and not so much as group contracts producing narrative. He is also much less careful with the

use of qualifiers such as 'good' (and by extension 'bad') when he talks about games, a position he luckily avoids later on in the evolution of his theoretical framework.

By 2001, GNS Theory had taken shape and Edwards defined most of his theoretical concepts in "GNS and Other Matters of Role-Playing Theory". Widening his focus and differentiating his diction, Edwards aims to include not only play styles and systems, but also the social context of gaming, going so far as to claim the primacy of the social aspect, as I have shown above. A series of three articles published online on *The Forge* followed in 2003 and 2004 that together form the most complete version of The Big Model: "Simulationism: The Right to Dream", "Gamism: Step on Up" and "Narrativism: Story Now". In the first one Edwards struggles with the definitions of Role-playing Game and Simulationism, only to raise the essential question about the *raison d'être* of the medium in his conclusions:

> Role-playing is a hobby, leisure activity. The real question is, what for, in the long term? For Simulationist play, the answer 'This was fun, so let's do it again,' is sufficient. However, for how *long* is it sufficient? Which seems to me to vary greatly from person to person. Is the focus on Exploration to be kept as is, permanently, as characters and settings change through play? Some say 'sure' and wonder what the hell I'm talking about, or perhaps feel slightly insulted. Or, is Drift [i.e. switching between creative agendas] ultimately desirable?
> (Edwards, 2003b)

The author does not provide any answers here, only questions. By defining a purpose behind the RPG medium, Edwards would violate his own conceptualisation of it: that it is a process of continuous negotiation regulated by a social contract. So no purpose is given and the author 'concludes' his article with the simple statement: "I judge nothing with these questions. I think that they're important to consider and that answers are going to vary widely, that's all" (2003b).

In "Gamism: Step on Up" Edwards not only deals with the titular concept of Gamism and how it affects play experience and game design, he also for the first time uses a Venn diagram similar to Mackay's (c.f. 2001: 60) to bring all of the different layers and aspects of the RPG experience - Social Contracts, Exploration, GNS, Rules, Techniques and Stances - in relation to each other (2003c). But it is not until his last

(and longest) article in the series, "Narrativism: Story Now", that Edwards makes this his central theoretical tool, finalising his theoretical Big Model and also using the name for the first time: "Here's the big ol' model for role-playing that the previous two essays sort of fumbled at" (2004a). In his "Provisional Glossary", the author defines The Big Model as follows: "A description of role-playing procedures as embedded in the social interactions and creative priorities of the participants. Each internal 'box,' 'layer,' or 'skin' of the model is considered to be an expression of the box(es) containing it" (Edwards, 2004b).

What Edwards attempts here is to establish hierarchical relationships and dependencies between different levels of the gaming experience, with the Creative Agenda (aka 'GNS' or 'modes' in earlier versions) that a group of players favours shaping and 'holding together' the process. In the article itself the author uses a written structure: [Social Contract [Exploration [Creative Agenda → [Techniques [Ephemera]]]]] (Edwards, 2004a). Since this is not very transparent and easily lets one overlook the central (and conceptually different) position and function of the Creative Agenda, Edwards also provides a graphic representation that should help understand how all of these layers relate to each other (c.f. Figure 1).

The different layers briefly defined are:

1) Social Contract: The group of people getting together in primary reality to play, their relationships with each other and with the outside world (context).
2) Exploration: The motivating and defining aspect of RPGs, communicated "shared imaginings" (Edwards, 2004a) of the interdependent five elements of Exploration - characters, setting, situation, system and colour (or atmosphere).
3) Techniques: The methods and procedures of play, the concrete use of the abstract system which is part of Exploration.
4) Ephemera: Intradiegetic and extradiegetic interactions between characters, the game world and players and the cooperative creation of the procedural narrative.

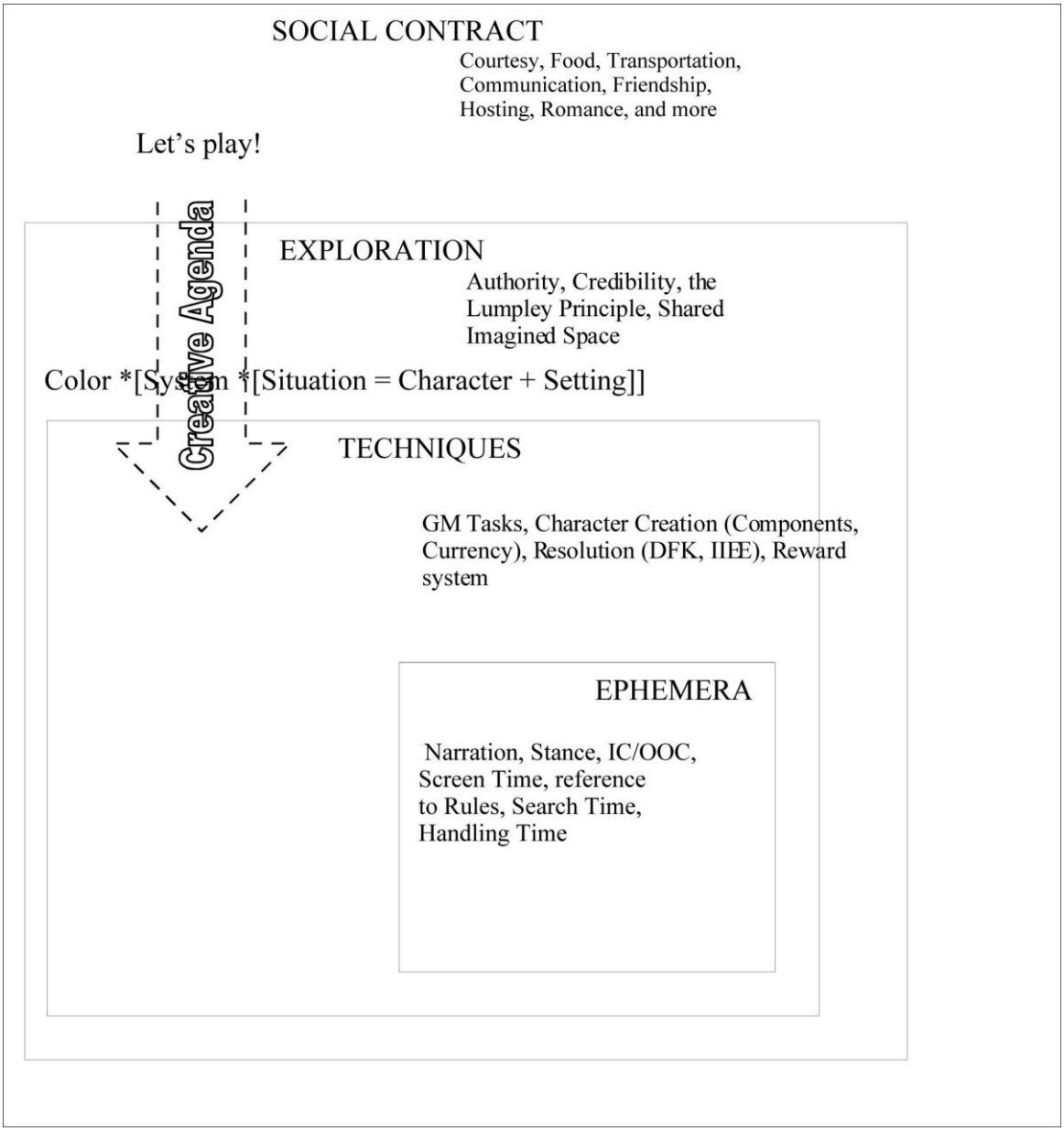

Figure 1: *Ron Edwards's Big Model (taken from Edwards, 2004b)*

Even though it is not uncontested in its ability to describe the medium in all its complexity, Ron Edwards' *Big Model* is a successful attempt born within the community of gamers to express the multi-layered and challenging procedural nature of RPGs as a medium and the gaming experiences they provide. Other equally valuable taxonomies exist, like the interaction-oriented Finnish Process Model (Mäkelä, 2005), or Daniel Mackay's performance analysis (Mackay, 2001: 60), Edwards's model, however, cleverly unites both the styles of play observed and experienced by the author himself with an extrapolated generalised description of

the structure of the medium. With its strong focus on the social and dynamic negotiation of narrative content in RPGs and the driving motivation of the Exploration of secondary realities, it connects not only to Postmodern literary theories, but also to Game Studies and their attempts to theoreticise the (virtual) spaces created by video games. Based on Kuhner and Kim's ground-breaking ideas on the one hand, Edwards's Big Model can thus be rightfully seen as their fruition on the other. But this is not the only direction RPG Theory has evolved into since.

4.3 – The Flow-Charts of Wrath: The Meilahti School and the Process Model

The Finnish Meilahti School of RPG Theory was started in 2002 by Jaakko Stenros and Henri Hakkarainen in the context of the annual Knutepunkt conference. The title of this series of conferences, started in 1997 in Oslo/Norway, translates as 'meeting point', and as events wander through Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland every year, the name itself is changed to the respective language as well (thus Knutepunkt, Knutpunkt, Knudepunkt, and Solmukohta). Originally a forum for LARP and the 'mother' of the Nordic LARP movement, in more recent years panels for pen&paper RPGs were introduced that have provided a fertile ground for the forming of new ideas on the medium.

In "The Meilahti School: Thoughts on Role-Playing", Stenros and Hakkarainen collect their earlier ideas developed since 2002 and give them a coherent, theoretical framework. Their basic premise is interesting, as they are looking to approach the medium totally on its own terms:

> Even though there has been some writing on RPGs, so far no other serious, descriptive models attempting to define what RPGs actually are and how they are created exist. We are not interested, at this stage, in using tools created for theatre studies, organisational communication, ludology, or any other discipline. Before we can successfully use a tool from another field of study we need to know what it is we are actually examining.
> (Stenros and Hakkarainen, 2003: 54)

Even though I have already disproven their first claim (the lack of existence of descriptive RPG theories at the time), their refusal to use the toolsets developed for the analysis and critical appraisal of other media (drama, games) and their aim to establish a terminology and discourse proper to RPG Theory pinpoints the central problem of the field: "Any discussion needs a language shared by the participants to be meaningful, and sadly such a common language often seems to be missing when attempts to discuss role-playing are made" (Stenros and Hakkarainen, 2003: 54). Their approach, however, is not only a descriptive (and non-normative), but also a very inclusive one, such as when they define the objects of their theory: "We want to cover all games from classic Dungeons & Dragons games to post-modern Turku-school live-action games, and from table top games to computer assisted gaming" (2003: 55). The problematic nature of this aim and the result it inevitably has on the theory based on it is that the descriptions produced can only be of a very general kind, lacking the detail to address specific issues of the RPG medium. The authors also very early on signal that neither the (sub-)cultural nor the social aspect of role-playing figures in their approach, but that this is going to be an abstract and systemic theory only (ibid.). Therefore, the definition of RPGs the Meilahti School suggests is: "A role-playing game is what is created in the interaction between players or between player(s) and gamemaster(s) within a specified diegetic framework" (Stenros and Hakkarainen, 2003: 56).

The very general (and problematic) nature of this approach becomes immediately apparent, and when they go on to define the constituent elements of the definition, its origin in the practice of LARP also emerges quite clearly.

> By 'gamemaster' and 'player' we are referring to roles assumed by participants. It is possible to switch from one role to another during one gaming session, and there can be a number of gamemasters and a number of players, but at least one of each is needed.
> (Stenros and Hakkarainen, 2003: 56)

This would not hold true for the vast majority of pen&paper RPGs where the position of the hub-player (the 'gamemaster') is fixed before the narrative process and then stays with the same participant for at least a session, or most habitually a

whole plot-line. Once this is resolved, GMing can switch or it just stays as is for as long as that player is willing or able to shoulder the additional workload. Also, a set-up with more than one GM is highly unusual in pen&paper RPGs, but most of the time necessary for LARPs, as the physical space covered and the number of people to be organised into meaningful interaction with the plot is just too big. What is highly interesting about that definition and relevant to my topic, however, is the notion of GM and player being a 'role':

> A role is any subject position within a set discourse, an artificial closure articulating the player within the diegetic frame of the game or in a real-life situation. There is no need to differentiate between the roles the player assumes within the diegetic frame and the roles assumed outside of it (in fact 'player' is a role as well). They are all equally aspects of the participant's fluid self; specific tools for interacting in certain situations according to a specific set of rules, and based on assumptions defined either explicitly or implicitly.
> (Stenros and Hakkarainen, 2003: 56)

The implications of such an understanding of the essential equality between extradiegetic and intradiegetic roles are massive: RPGs de facto create secondary realities and the interaction with those would then be just as 'real' or 'true' as the interaction with primary reality. As the "process of interaction is defined as role-playing" (ibid.), just living your everyday life could be considered as not so much different from playing RPGs, a problematic reading that would collapse the distinction between life and game and make this differentiation meaningless in the first place. Again, echoes of Fine's famous quote about life and RPGs are noticeable (c.f. Fine, 1983: 8). And not only do the proponents of the Meilahti School argue that role-playing mirrors the processes of social life in primary reality, they also make a connection that underlines their importance for my argument: They call the "post-modern thinking on identity and the self" their "basic framework for dealing with the concept of roles" (Stenros and Hakkarainen, 2003: 57). Both identity and the concept of the self are thus seen as roles, are not metaphysical and monolithic, but constantly de- and re-constructed and performed in interactions between the individual and other individuals, as well as the individual and the world. It is through interaction with the Other that we define ourselves, adopt elements that we identify with and adapt

them to our needs. According to the Meilahti School, this is basically also how RPGs work: they are about taking subject positions in discourses, fully aware of their nature as discourses.

Stenros and Hakkarainen also differentiate very diligently between the different readings of 'reality' that coexist and are exchanged during the process of playing an RPG, and about the asymmetrical distribution of discursive power around the gaming table:

> The player of course has her own interpretation of the diegesis [...], just as a reader constructs her own reading of a book or an audience member, or even an actor, of a play. However, once her interpretation is expressed and becomes relevant to the diegesis itself it is subject to the gamemaster's approval. Through this process the participants constantly adjust their readings of the game, and the gamemaster functions as the gatekeeper of the diegesis.
> (Stenros and Hakkarainen, 2003: 57)

So even if all of the participants (players and ST) have their own individual interpretations of the secondary reality that is created, as soon as they enter the process of communal negotiation and interact with the diegesis, the ST intervenes if their understanding diverges too much from the agreed upon consensus in order to guarantee narrative coherence and a fair treatment of all participants. The coordinating power of the ST does not, however, reach into every little corner of the secondary reality conjured up in the minds of players: For reasons of narrative efficiency (RPGs are still an oral storytelling medium and talking takes time), the ST will only focus his or her attention on the elements and events that are essential or at least meaningful to the development of the plot. The non-essential information lies within a semantic gap that can and will be filled by the players according to their own imagination.

The discursive power of the ST is also not absolute in the Meilahti concept, it is relational and relative. The restrictions already begin when one of the participants adopts the role of ST (or GM):

> This power is tied to the role of 'gamemaster', is arbitrary in nature, and stems from the conventions of the discourse. In practice underlying social dynamics often affect the power

> structure of the gaming situation, and a player can choose not to participate in a game if she dislikes the gamemaster's methods of controlling the events [...].
> (Stenros and Hakkarainen, 2003: 56)

All of the power the ST enjoys is first of all arbitrary, and secondly invested in him or her only by the tacit and/or open consent of the other participants. It is thus relational. If some of them do not agree with a certain person taking on that role and they are in the minority, they can always leave the group. If the majority of the participants does not want someone to be ST, group dynamics will force the person concerned to find another group. On a second level, the ST's power is also relative, so Stenros and Hakkarainen argue that even if this initial assent *is* given, STs cannot exert *ultimate*, tyrannical power over the diegesis:

> The gamemaster has total control over the situation created, but she has to surrender part of that power either implicitly or explicitly to the player in order for meaningful interaction to be possible. Surrendering part of the creative control is necessary in order to make a distinction between role- playing and telling a story.
> (Stenros and Hakkarainen, 2003: 56)

So according to the Meilahti School, this relational and relative power the GM is invested with is what constitutes the core of the role-playing process. The GM *has* to relinquish part of their creative control over the production of the diegesis to allow for "meaningful interaction" (ibid.). Power is thus constructed not as a one-way street but as an exchange if the social (and narrative) system is to remain stable and creative. RPGs are thus 'games of meaning-making', and they are also power games, in both the literal and metaphorical sense:

> The gamemaster also defines the limits of the power passed to the players. Often this takes the form of defining, implicitly or explicitly, the medium (e.g. role-playing, live action role-playing), the narrative form (e.g. integrating or dissipating, see Montola 2002), the genre (e.g. fantasy, cyberpunk, see Stenros 2002) and the style of play (e.g. soap, immersionist, ibid.).
> (Stenros and Hakkarainen, 2003: 58)

So by choosing between all of these frames of reference – medium, narrative form, genre, and style of play – the ST (or GM) establishes limits to the discursive power devolved to the other participant players. The medium itself becomes a meta-discussion of power: where it comes from, what it is limited/channelled by, how it fluctuates within a group. As an asymmetry of power is at the core of roleplaying according to the Meilahti School and as there is no 'natural' difference between 'role-playing' in primary and secondary reality, the process of negotiating the diegesis becomes an example for the negotiation of meaning and truth in the 'real' world.

The Meilahti approach is, however, not interested in describing the concrete or practical aspects of this process, it remains an ideal, even ideological theoretical framework:

> It is important to note, however, that this model is necessarily an abstraction, and as such addresses ideal role-playing rather than role-playing culture in general. We have not been interested in examining the social structures underlying various gaming situations or the real-life dynamics between a game's actual participants.
> (Stenros and Hakkarainen, 2003: 55)

This blind spot forms the basis for the development of the later Process Modell that integrates the procedural understanding of the medium and the interest in the distribution and flow of power with a strong social framework in addition to the purely diegetic deliberations of the Meilahti School.

There is also an inherent bias in the theory against pen&paper RPGs and for LARP that becomes overt in the brief discussion of the various forms of role-playing in the foundational article. Whereas what Stenros and Hakkarainen call "the tabletop game" (2003: 60) is described as "incorporating heavy game mechanics and dice as random number generators" (ibid.), and the critical focus on pen&paper is seen as "a narrow-minded approach severely limiting the potential for further progress with this form of expression" (ibid.), their passage on LARP is free of such negatively connoted expressions and even promotes a very vague and fluid distinction between the two concepts (ibid.). The authors' stance on CRPGs is just as judgmental (or even more so) than the one on p&p RPGs:

> In our opinion computer- aided gaming has potential, but at the moment the technical limitations are far too severe for it to be an especially interesting form of role-playing, even if the requirements for role-playing are met (and they usually aren't).
> (Stenros and Hakkarainen, 2003: 61)

Although if I have to agree with the point they make about the technical limitations of CRPGs and how they impact the role-playing, I do not think that this is the main problem with the computerisation of RPGs. First of all, technology evolves and the situation has changed a lot since 2003 and will change even more drastically in the future - as Stenros and Hakkarainen also acknowledge (2003, 61). Secondly, I see the far greater problem on the level of the codes used for the creation of the secondary world and the effect they have on the procedural, communally negotiated diegesis: By creating audio-visual representations of the Secondary Worlds, the semantic gap that contributes greatly to the player's sense of agency is diminished in favour of a heightening of the immersive qualities of graphics, sound and music. On a conceptual level, CRPGs necessarily restrict player freedom much more than pen&paper RPGs or LARPs, because you need to design all available resources beforehand, to structure the opportunities for interaction, and to design an interface that allows the player maximum agency.

Besides a clear LARP bias, Stenros and Hakkarainen also exhibit a somewhat 'incestuous' and selective predilection for 'Nordic' RPG theories – seven out of the eight references they use and that are related to the medium fall into that category (2003: 63 – 64), and the only other body of theory they refer to – *The Forge* – is flat out denied validity for the more systemic approach (2003: 61).

So while the Meilahti School contributes essential aspects to any discussion of the medium RPG that deserves this name – such as the analysis of the distribution of discursive power and the procedural nature of the creation of the diegesis, it also shows significant insufficiencies in its applicability in conceptualisation (intentional), scope (unintentional) and applicability (the result of the latter two). Building and expanding upon it, the Process Model of Role-playing later creates a more comprehensive and practical theoretical toolbox that also enables normative (and

not only descriptive) discussions of RPGs and playing styles very much like Edwards's Big Model.

In the FAQ to the Process Model its authors, Eetu Mäkelä, Sampo Koistinen, Mikko Siukola, and Sanni Turunen, cleverly anticipate critique of their approach and its conceptual similarities to The Big Model:

> We quite like the Big Model, actually. We just think its ruined by the fact that people anally focus only on the three stated Creative Agendas [i.e. GNS], ignoring the rest (and what we consider the real meat) of the model. So, one of the reasons for not basing the work on the Big Model was truly to avoid tangling ourselves in that mess.
> (Mäkelä et al., 2005c)

If this statement can be seen as any indication at all, it is not so much the Gamist, Narrativist, and Simulationist Creative Agendas (or modes) that connect the Big and the Process Models, but – to take Edwards's perspective here – the definition of the levels of interaction that define the process *per se*: the Social Contract, Exploration, Techniques, and Ephemera. It is therefore not the question how the *player*s interact with each other and the process that is of central interest in the Process Model, but more the question on what level of the *socio-narrative process* this interaction happens. The design goals of the model stated at the very beginning of the article are thus as follows:

> 1) to identify distinct elements and components inside the act of role-playing and create a vocabulary of such concepts, and
> 2) to describe how these components interact to make or break a game.
> (Mäkelä, 2005a: 1)

The focus is clearly on the process itself, or the medium, and not the (inter-)agents or players. A depersonalized description of the nature and functioning of the elements of the RPG experience should then, in a second step, make the Process Model usable to:

> 1) to describe and analyze singular or typical gaming sessions from the viewpoint of an individual or a whole group,
> 2) to plan and communicate visions of future sessions and campaigns,
> and
> 3) to describe play preferences of an individual or a whole group.
> (Mäkelä, 2005a: 1)

While the theoretical model itself stays within the abstract and ideal boundaries delineated by the Meilahti School, the proponents of the Process Model explicitly also want it to be applied to the analysis of actual play and playing styles, and to even go beyond the description of a given present to be able to extrapolate future developments. So while process is the central concept in the Big Model, the Meilahti School and the (transparently named) Process Model, both the Big Model and the Process Model add a concrete and social dimension as essential to their approach that is absent from the Meilahti theory. The Threefold Model cannot compare with any of these as far as its theoretical complexity or the scope of its analytical reach is concerned, but it must been seen as an essential stepping stone on the way to the functionality and intricacy of the Big Model.

After establishing the aims and intended applicability of their model, Mäkelä et al. provide a concise reasoning for the choice of their central theoretical concept:

> The core modeling concepts utilized are those of process and process interaction. These concepts were chosen because they provide a very natural methodology for modeling and abstracting such complex time-varied phenomena as role-playing. The concepts are also well defined and widely in use in a number of fields, including social, cognitive and computer sciences.
> (Mäkelä et al., 2005a: 1)

This, I would argue, not only convincingly establishes the necessity of relying on process interaction to describe a medium that is mainly defined by the communal negotiation of a secondary reality (i.e. the procedural interaction with the Secondary World and each other), it also embeds the medium and its theoretical analysis in a web of related disciplines (social, cognitive, and computer sciences) that could all be

tapped for additional insights into the nature of the medium RPG and its workings, as I will show in the following chapter.

The process-oriented definition of role-playing the authors provide is, again, kept very open and inclusive: "For the purpose of the model, role-playing is defined as any act in which an imaginary reality is concurrently created, added to and observed, in such a manner that these component acts feed each other" (Mäkelä et al., 2005a: 1). As short as this definition might be, there are several important aspects to it that are worth pointing out. First of all, role-playing is seen as an act, so it necessitates activity on the side of its participants. If there is no activity, there is no role-playing. Passively watching or otherwise consuming a narrative or other secondary reality is, by definition, never roleplaying. Secondly, the creation of the secondary reality must be concurrent, this excludes single-player video games that are frequently called RPGs such as SKYRIM (2011) or MASS EFFECT (2007 - 2012). Multi-player CRPGs and MMORPGs – for example WORLD OF WARCRAFT (2004 – 2012) - would both fulfil this second condition of concurrent creation, but fail the third one: that creation and observation need to feed into each other. This constant feedback loop – and the procedural narrative it results in - is what essentially defines RPGs of the pen&paper and LARP types, as participants enjoy creative freedom unparalleled in other comparable media, can react to shifts in the narrative and group dynamics, and have them affect the shared secondary reality.

Before the Process Modell can adequately describe the constituent elements of these processes, a space, or better two spaces differentiated by the diegetic divide have to be defined that separate them and their creations from primary reality: the Shared Space of Imagining (SSoI) and the Shared Imagined Space (SIS).

> The facts, expectations and hopes about the imagined reality being explored, as experienced by an individual, define a conceptual space referred to as the Imagined Space. When role-playing in a group, the Imagined Spaces of the individual participants overlap to create a Shared Imagined Space (SIS) with regards to which the majority of interaction pertaining to the game is enacted.
> (Mäkelä et al., 2005a: 1)

The facts and conjecture about a secondary reality, as well as its emotional subtext of meaning to an individual, all come together for form the individual Imagined Space (or IS) that person explores. In the standard set-up of a pen&paper RPG and even more so a LARP, that IS must also be negotiated with the ISs of all other participants, and the consensual overlap is then called Shared Imagined Space (or SIS), a term adopted from The Big Model where it is, logically, part of the level of Exploration (Mäkelä at al., 2005a: 1; c.f. Figure 1). The SIS is therefore the consensual secondary reality that is created through the processes framed by the medium RPG, it represents the (intradiegetic) space within which the characters act and that is defined by the (extradiegetic) interactions of the players with it.

The players themselves are situated on the other side of the diegetic divide and inhabit what is termed Shares Space of Imagining (or SSoI) in the Process Model:

> The environment in which this interaction is enacted is the Shared Space of Imagining (SSoI), a concept that includes the Shared Imagined Space, but also all the other facts, expectations and intentions concerning the act of role-playing, like unspoken or spoken social contracts pertaining to how the game is played.
> (Mäkelä et al., 2005a, 1)

So this is where the acts of role-playing happen that then determine the actions in secondary reality. The authors of the Process Model not only include an implicit nod to Edwards's Social Contract in the quote above ("unspoken or spoken social contracts"), they also explicitly reference the similarities to his earlier concept in the text explaining the concept of the SSoI (2005a: 1): Like the Social Contract that contains and determines all of the other levels of the Big Model, the SSoI also contains and determines the SIS and all of the other elements of the RPG experience. Mackay's terminology of the frames of reference in RPGs would call the SSoI the Performance and SIS the Theatre. It seems as if there is a broad consensus among most RPG Theories that these categories, their position on the two neighbouring and opposing sides of the diegetic 'fence', as well as the interactions across that fence are essential to the medium.

Within these two spaces, the Process Model identifies four different kinds of elements or components: Processes, Circumstances, Methods, and Results (Mäkelä et al., 2005a: 2). How they interact organisationally is best understood through a graphic display (c.f. Figure 2).

The processes (and sub-processes) drive the experience, they "are the means to the Results" and "describe what actually happens inside a role-playing session" (both 2005a: 2), which is why the whole model is named after them:

> The Process Model of Role-Playing sees roleplaying first and foremost as a process, something that happens and goes on in a time-frame. Inside this process, multiple concurrent but distinct subprocesses can be seen. Each of these subprocesses revolves around a certain element, creating and consuming it, be it player competition or the exploration of a theme.
> (Mäkelä et al., 2005a: 1)

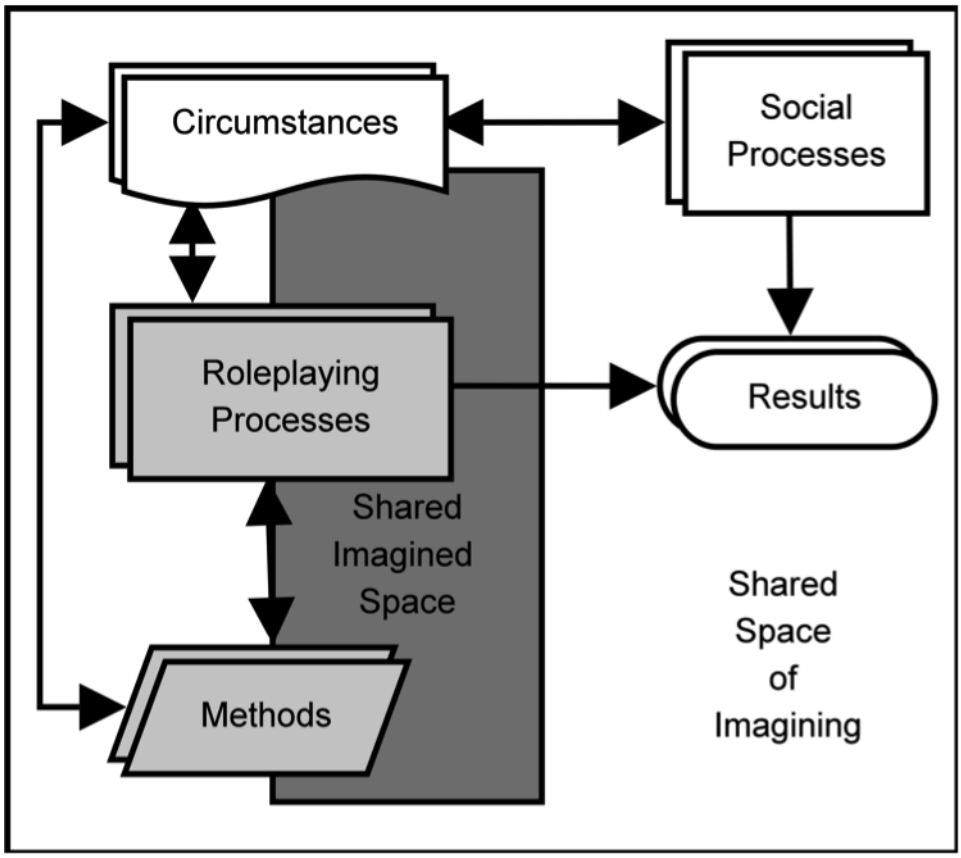

Figure 2: *The Process Model (taken from Mäkelä et al., 2005b)*

RPGs are hereby defined as a time-based medium, not a space-based one, since the constituent elements of the processes carrying the experience are organized and

sequential in time. Processes also show a fractal structure, as every one of them can be broken down in sub-processes (see examples above) that in turn are constituted by even smaller sub-processes.

The basic definition of a Process in the model rests on four cornerstones:

> - A Process produces some measurable quality in a role-playing session
> - The amount such a quality is present or is realized depends on how play is conducted [...].
> - The qualities produced can be mapped to the various Results.
> - The Processes are distinct entities in and of themselves.
>
> (Mäkelä et al., 2005a: 2)

So, depending on the general style of a group and the intradiegetic (characters) and/or extradiegetic behaviour (players) at a given point in play time, the processes that are initiated contribute a stronger or weaker, but necessarily noticeable quality to the experience that eventually produces a logical result in the SSoI and/or the SIS. Processes can be anything from organizing the venue for the group to engaging in an in-character discussion of secondary reality philosophy.

Processes also come in two different kinds. Social Processes are "general forms of social contact" (2005a: 2) situated only in the SSoI and encompass all "social interactions that could as easily coexist with other activities" (ibid.). When a player constantly complains that he or she has had a hard work day the resulting animosities in primary reality constitute the result of this Social Process. Roleplaying Processes "describe what qualities are being created or explored in the role-playing session and how" (2005a: 2) and happen on the intersection between SSoI and SIS. The most important of these are defined by the Model:

> **Competition** The pursuit of victory
>
> **Tension** Maintenance and enjoyment of tension
>
> **Challenge** The besting of challenge and the overcoming of adversity
>
> **Exploration of an Entity of the Shared Imagined Space**
>
> Exploring the many-fold interactions a single entity has
>
> with others.
>
> **Exploration of a Concept through the Shared Imagined Space**

> Exploring a concept through its expressions in the Shared Imagined Space, and bringing forth such expressions to be explored.
> **Immersion** Equating the self with an entity of the Shared Imagined Space, feeling and acting as that entity
> (Mäkelä et al., 2005a: 5)

In Ron Edwards's Big Model, all of these processes would be defined by different Creative Agendas from Gamist (Competition, Challenge), to Narrativist (Tension, Exploration of Entity or Concept), and Simulationist (Immersion), but this distinction is of no importance to the Process Model. Motivation or decision-making does not come in here at all, the only criterion is the situation of the process in relation to the two spaces.

All processes of the RPG experience are "constrained and guided" by both the given Circumstances and the chosen Methods (2005a: 2). "Circumstances", the authors explain, "are any states of affairs that affect how the role-playing group enacts the various processes" (ibid.). The emotional state of the players, the physical environment sessions take place in, or social relationships around the table all form the Circumstances. But they also affect the SIS in the form of the "gaming history", the pre-existing cumulative collective narrative and group dynamics. Unlike Circumstances, Methods are "agreed-upon means and rules by which the actions pertaining to the role-playing session are undertaken" (2005a: 2), or, to establish their relation to Processes: "While Processes tell us what happens in a role-playing session, Methods tell us how it happens" (ibid.). This category thus subsumes all of the explicit or implicit rules, techniques, and contracts that shape the RPG experience. The most important Methods in their effect on the procedural narration are by definition of the medium "the Methods used to distribute authority over the Shared Imagined Space" (2005a: 2), or the question of discursive power and its flow across the gaming table.

All of the Processes that inhabit the SSoI and the SIS eventually feed into the Results of the experience, "what the people engaging in role-playing get out of it" (2005a: 2). These results are according to the Model subdivided into two categories: "Wanted Results are called Benefits, while unwanted Results are termed Losses"

(ibid.). Benefits are a central factor in the motivation to engage in role-playing in the first place, and they assume a wide range of appearances from positive and profitable emotional to social and intellectual experiences. Examples for Benefits given in the Model are Entertainment, Learning, Meaning, Aesthetic Appreciation, Social Benefits, and Physical Benefits (2005a: 4). Losses are the product of failed sessions or processes within sessions. Some Losses can be harmless if annoying, others can be dangerous on a collective (social) or individual level (emotional) and include but are not limited to Boredom, False Knowledge, Unwanted Emotional Experience, Aesthetic Failure, Social Dysfunction, or Physical Hindrances (2005a: 4).

The authors of the Process Model define two central uses for their theory: There is on the one hand the analysis and planning of RPG sessions, and on the other attempts to state preferences and describe future sessions and campaigns (2005a: 3). Both are concrete and specific applications of the theoretical framework that clearly take The Process Model beyond the ideal and abstract context the Meilahti School designed their model for. The authors want to understand processes in primary reality (SSoI) and how they affect the experience of negotiating and creating the procedural RPG narrative (SIS or secondary reality). The Process Model therefore is even less theoretical (in spite of its overly complicated first appearance) than the Big Model, as it is situated at the pulse of the medium itself: the dynamic sharing of discursive power and the processes of secondary creation. "The main use of the process model", the authors claim, "is in analysing how the different components support or hinder each other" (2005a: 3). It is this dichotomy between supporting and hindering that defines the evaluative and normative framework of the theory: Does a certain Circumstance, Method, or Process make it easier or more difficult (or even impossible) for a Process to produce a certain Result? The preferred method of visualising these interconnected relations in a descriptive perspective (analysing past sessions e.g.) is the flow chart, hence the title of this chapter (c.f. Figure 3). If used for preferences in style or future sessions (i.e. a more prescriptive approach), the Process Model starts with the desired Benefits and then reverse-engineers the flow.

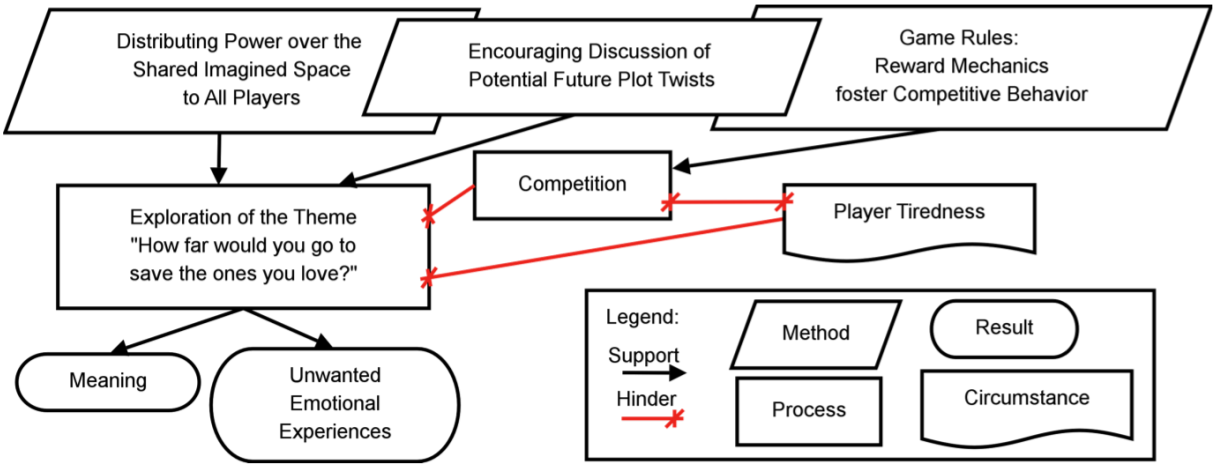

Figure 3: *Example for Game Analysis using The Process Model (taken from Mäkelä et al., 2005b)*

The Process Model is the most recent of the theoretical frameworks for RPGs that I consider and at least on the surface of things it is also the most complex of them all. It completely abandons the notion of a limited catalogue of possible styles of play (GDS, GNS) that one can find in Kuhner and Kim's Threefold Model or Edwards's Big Model respectively, and focuses exclusively on the wide range of possible qualities of the processes that make up the experience. While similarities emerge with the transition from GDS to GNS as the Exploration of a Premise through play becomes central to the understanding of the medium RPG (Mäkelä et al., 2005a: 9), it is not until the full realisation of The Big Model (2004) in all its multi-layered complexity that the procedural nature of RPGs takes centre stage, the aspect that provides the essential conceptual impetus for the creation of The Process Model (2005).

It thus seems that on both sides of the Atlantic, the theoretical development towards a procedural theory happened at very much the same time. Edwards's final move away from GDS and towards what would later become the Big Model happened with "GNS and Other Matters of Role-Playing Theory" (2001), and the three articles constituting the new theoretical framework appeared from 2003 to 2004. Stenros and Hakkarainen first presented their approach at Knutpunkt 2002 and published their article containing the basics of the so-called Meilahti School of RPG Theory early in 2003. Early in 2005, Eetu Mäkelä and the other authors of the Process Model followed. The close connections between The Process Model and The Big Model are openly acknowledged as I showed earlier, but the authors of the later theory also point out conceptual and productive differences:

> [I]n our opinion there are also significant valuable differences in basic structure. For example, we think the C[reative]A[genda]s mix 'how we attain enjoyment' with 'what form does the enjoyment take', which are better kept separate, as in our model Processes and Benefits are [...]. The concept of Process is also in our opinion nicely able to contain the temporal aspect of play without breaking play into actual temporal units (which again, in our opinion, should not be the first breakpoints in analysis).
> (Mäkelä et al., 2005c)

In spite of these differences, the consensus between contemporary theories seems to be that RPGs as a medium are necessarily procedural, interactive and social in nature, that they are based on a dynamic situation of asymmetrically distributed discursive power that affects the production and nature of the resulting negotiated narrative, and that enjoyment is the motivating emotional force that drives the process. Essentially, RPGs are thus the joyful games of meaning-making that I mention in the title of my thesis, and how this relates to the socio-cultural context of their development will emerge from the second chapter in detail. But before I turn to the context, I would also like to provide spotlights of alternative 'readings' of RPGs beyond RPG Theory that will then echo throughout the second chapter in various ways.

5 – Reframing: Alternative Theoretical Perspectives on RPGs

So far I have considered RPGs as a medium only through the lens of theories that specifically address them and their constituting aspects. I would, however, argue that there are also other theoretical perspectives out there – and I am making a conscious effort not to quote the X-FILES (1993 – 2002) here – that shed additional light on the medium, what it can and cannot do, and how it interacts with its socio-cultural contexts. From (Video) Game Studies to Cultural Anthropology, Postcolonial Studies, and Economics, I will briefly bring up these decidedly Other frames of reference and what they could contribute to RPG theories.

5.1 - RPGs as Spaces: Henry Jenkins's Narrative Architecture

In his seminal study *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006), Henry Jenkins focuses on three emerging concepts that are about to profoundly change the way we relate to cultural artefacts, technologies, and other people: "media convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence" (2008: 2). When he goes on to define these, the relevance for any serious study of RPGs becomes immediately apparent.

The central term, that also contributes the name to the book itself, is 'convergence':

> By convergence, I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want.
> (Jenkins, 2008: 2)

In other words, this is the trend towards the dissemination of cultural content across various different platforms (or media), towards dispersed narratives, where in a process of constant transmedial exchange content is adopted by and adapted to several forms of cultural expression: print, the web, TV, film, and gaming (of all kinds) come together to provide the avid audience with a seemingly never-ending flow of opportunities to engage with the secondary realities they prefer. There are two aspects to convergence that Jenkins mentions explicitly and that I would like to point out as important for my discussion of RPGs as artefacts of convergence culture: the issues of discursive power and the inherent commodification.

Jenkins puts it quite clearly: "Convergence is a word that manages to describe technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes depending on who's speaking and what they think they are talking about" (2008: 3). So convergence is about the Voice: Whose Voice does the audience hear? What do they say? And how does this affect changes outside of the semiosphere, in what is usually called 'the real world' (aka primary reality)? As one and the same cultural content travels between, say,

blockbuster film and indie comics, it must submit to the completely different conventions and expectations attributed to the two media respectively.[12]

Also, what content is chosen for dissemination by whom and why is something that needs consideration. Intended meaning, itself a very thorny issue under Postmodern cultural conditions as the second part of my argument will show in detail, will shift and change, will become multiple, ambiguous and even contradictory in dispersion. A mosaic of Voices is the result that must be considered as such: MASS EFFECT the video games (2007 - 2012) is not the same as *Mass Effect* the novels (2007 – 2012), or *Mass Effect* the comic books (2010 – 2012), or MASS EFFECT the film (2013?; c.f. Ottone, 2012), or MASS EFFECT the anime (2012), and definitely not MASS EFFECT: RED SAND, the fan film (2012). All of these artefacts come together across different platforms/media to co-create the same narrative universe (or rather 'multiverse' in a Moorcockian sense). They follow completely different conventions, suffer from different constraints and offer different possibilities to reach out to their audiences, which in turn will be different ones, and they are also mostly made by different people. The result is that the narrative multiverse of Mass Effect becomes a space for the creation of textual possibilities - and for matter of my argument, I take the term 'text' to signify on a very general and inclusive level.

Strictly speaking, all pen&paper RPGs *per se* establish such spaces of textual possibilities or potential: as the printed/published rule- and sourcebooks are read and interpreted by STs and players, they then go on to create their own, individual characters, plot ideas and preparations (mostly in written form), and eventually turn them into elements of the collective, negotiated, procedural creation of an oral narrative – print/e-publishing, written text and oral storytelling come together to create the RPG narrative in a process of media convergence. Beyond this core of the RPG experience, this convergence space can be expanded to include music, as most RPG groups create 'soundtracks' by choosing tracks they consider to be appropriate for their narratives and putting together special playlists or CDs, sound effects (wind, rain, thunder, etc.), Powerpoint/Keynote presentations (for maps or still images),

[12] For an especially revealing example of this I would recommend *30 Days of Night*, Steve Niles and Ben Templesmith's graphic novel of 2002 and its film adaptation of 2007.

video (to establish mood and/or a visual sense of space), paintings/drawings (portraits of important characters and places, maps), and even printed/e-published texts again when the sessions are summarised/written up afterwards. All of these media come together to form a highly creative convergence space for individual and collective Voices to emerge in order to produce meaning.

But, and this is an essential 'but', at least one half of the creative process does not do so for purely cultural and/or social reasons: they are in it for the money. While players and STs might be driven by cultural or social capital, most of the publishers of RPG rule- and sourcebooks are more interested in the harder currency of financial capital. I have already talked about the effect the Hasbro take-over of Wizards of the Coast has had on the medium, but this is just the most blatant and ugly example. At the end of the day, also smaller companies or indies must live. "In the world of media convergence", Jenkins realistically states, "every important story gets told, every brand gets sold, and every consumer gets courted across multiple media platforms" (2008: 3). Convergence culture in the contemporary sense is inherently a commodified consumer culture. The constant stream of supplements and sourcebooks for RPGs is not only provided by the publishers, it is also demanded by the majority of players, or they consider a game to be 'dead':

> [A] game that's not expanded on an ongoing basis is almost always deprecated in the eyes of the commercial channel. Fans and retailers assume an unsupported game is 'dead', which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as retailers stop stocking it.
> [...]
> A game that is no longer supported is called 'dead'. But that's business jargon. Don't let the state of a game line's release schedule determine whether or not you play it.
> [...]
> A game and a product are two different things.
> (Hindmarch and Tidball, 2008: 87, 88, and 89)

RPGs are products to begin with, and cultural activities second. The notable exception being 'hard-core' indie-RPGs that are available for free online such as Jaime Lawrence's *Shakespearead* (2010), or 'soft-core' indie-RPGs that can be bought

cheaply in digital form or via print-on-demand (like Gregor Hutton's *3:16 – Carnage Amongst the Stars*, 2008). Fred Hicks termed this the 'long tail' effect:

> The 'long tail' effect, made possible in large part by the Internet, is changing the landscape as far as dead games go. Online, 'dead' games live on, and still sell direct to customers, even long after the retail channel has given up on them.
> This is only really a problem when the publisher *wants* something to die, and it *just won't*.
> (Hick in Hindmarch and Tidball, 2008: 115)

The impact of the web on the commodification of RPGs generally is a rather ambiguous one, with WotC/Hasbro trying to make it into just one more media channel it can control and milk for money, while indie designers use it to distribute their highly creative approaches to the medium, promoting its change.

And then there are the other two pillars of Jenkins's definition: participatory culture and collective intelligence. I think my earlier deliberations on the medium RPG and its narrative and social spaces should make it rather clear in how far it fits into these categories. As far as participation is concerned, RPGs become micro-spaces that intensify and exemplify the general trend:

> The term participatory culture contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship. Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understand. Not all participants are created equal.
> (Jenkins, 2008: 3)

It is all there: the de-differentiation between producers and consumers of artefacts, the asymmetrical power distribution, the need to negotiate rules and contents. RPGs are epitomes of these cultural changes, and the following chapter on Postmodern culture will show that there is a cultural logic behind that drives the macro- and the micro-structures equally. RPGs are not only both artefacts of and spaces for the creation of convergence culture, the same is true for Postmodern culture. And the enormity of the task necessitates a collectivisation of efforts:

> Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives. Because there is more information on any given topic than anyone can store in their head, there is an added incentive for us to talk among ourselves about the media we consume. [...] None of us can know everything; each of us knows something; and we can put the pieces together is we pool our resources and combine our skills. Collective intelligence can be seen as an alternative source of media power.
> (Jenkins, 2008: 4)

The selection and assemblage of fragments of (personal and collective) meaning, meaning-making within the secondary realities of the semiosphere to make meaning of our lives in the primary realities of the biosphere, has replaced the pre-Modern and Modern concepts of ready-made meaning (or counter-meaning). Meaning is no longer found, it must now be made, effort and energy must be invested. The creation of meaning generates discursive as well as social power, a collectivization of these processes and the spaces they inhabit is thus a democratic move to problematize and re-distribute power. RPGs are *the* medium to create self-aware individuals who can engage consciously in the processes of meaning-making through their constant oscillation between narrative structure and player freedom. The micro-processes trained – re-/distributing power, decision-making, anticipating effects, mediating between individual and collective interests – can and will be carried over from the secondary space of the game into the primary space of social reality dominated by similar macro-processes (politics, economy, culture).

In his article "Game Design as Narrative Architecture" (2004), Jenkins suggests an understanding of (video) games as spaces to bridge the gap between ludologists and narrativists, and it seems to me that this not only formed one of the sources of his wider application in *Convergence Culture* (2006), but this approach can also help create a more holistic appreciation of the narrative and ludic processes that define the medium RPG, beyond the story/game dichotomy or even the GDS/GNS trinity. The position in between games as playable media and narrative Jenkins develops stands at the core of my reading of RPGs and also, indirectly, my understanding of RPGs as inherently Postmodern media. Like Jenkins, I refuse to fall into the lure of easy, one-sided answers (and thus one of the two - or in the case of RPGs three - 'camps'), and

prefer a both/and to an either/or approach, or as Jenkins formulates it: "I hope to offer a middle-ground position between the ludologists and the narratologists, one that respects the particularity of this emerging medium – examining games less as stories than as spaces ripe with narrative possibility" (Jenkins, 2004: 119). The spatial metaphor fits RPGs (and other games) perfectly, in my opinion, and I am much indebted to Jenkins for his concept. Play as "the free space of movement within a more rigid structure" provided by the rules and conventions (Zimmerman, 2004: 159) 'feels' like space to its participants, so why not follow the experience in theory? Even though Jenkins (and Zimmerman) originally developed the conceptualization for video games, it applies just as well to RPGs. The argument rests on a catalogue of assumptions that need to be brought up to establish the framework for a discussion later:

> 1. Not all games tell stories. [...]
> 2. Many games do have narrative aspirations. [...]
> 3. Narrative analysis need not be prescriptive [...]. [...]
> 4. The experience of playing games can never be simply reduced to the experience of a story. [...]
> 5. If some games tell stories, they are unlikely to tell them in the same way that other media tell stories.
> (Jenkins, 2004: 119 – 120)

So, even if not all games are attempts at storytelling (think Chess, or TETRIS, 1984), some of them are (think most RPGs, or HEAVY RAIN, 2011). The danger of both a narratologist's *and* a ludologist's approach to games is that it would damage the drive towards experimentation in playable media, but competences in *both* fields are also necessary to work in game design or criticism. And while even games that tell stories do so much more than just that on so many levels (content, form, context), they are also necessarily a hybrid medium and need to be theoreticised in their own hybrid terms.

Jenkins's attempt to do so is convincingly simple: "Game designers don't simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces" (2004: 121). Even if this interpretation of the process seems obvious, its intelligence lies beyond instinct (and

dogmatics for that matter). From boardgames to RPGs and video games, even theme parks, Jenkins follows the line of spatial design (c.f. 2004: 121 – 122), before he comes to his theoretical core statement:

> Environmental storytelling creates the preconditions for an immersive narrative experience in at least one of four ways: spatial stories can evoke pre-existing narrative associations; they can provide a staging ground where narrative events are enacted; they may embed narrative information within their mise-en-scene; or they provide resources for emergent narratives.
> (Jenkins 2004: 123)

This environmental storytelling, or what he also calls narrative architecture (2004: 121) - the sculpting of the aforementioned "spaces ripe with narrative possibility" (2004: 119) – is determined by the interrelations of ludic/simulational and narrative concepts and their situation in a secondary, conceptual space. The classification of the possible types of interaction between game space and narrative suggested by Jenkins – evoked, embedded, enacted, and emergent narrative (c.f. 2004: 124 – 129) – I would like to call the 4Es for obvious reasons and reasons of ease of reference.

Evoked narrative is what also might be called intertextual or intermedial reference, intersemiotic relationships between the present text (again in the widest possible sense as 'that which is woven') and absent texts. Evoked narrative provides familiarity with elements and conventions that are re-used, and can be used to alienate or destabilize superficial readings (also in the wide, metaphorical sense) through modification of the well-known. Talking about the example of AMERICAN MCGEE'S ALICE (2000), Jenkins explains:

> McGee can safely assume that players start the game with a pretty well-developed mental map of the spaces, characters, and situations associated with Carroll's fictional universe and that they will read his distorted and often monstrous images against the background of mental images formed from previous encounters with storybook illustrations and Disney movies. McGee rewrites Alice's story in large part by redesigning Alice's spaces.
> (Jenkins, 2004: 124)

The familiar and the unfamiliar, the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich* to use Freud's distinction (c.f. Freud, 1919), conspire to hold the reader/viewer/player in tension with the text, and the present text in tension with the absent texts it evokes. The effect any breaking of the familiar has is thus intensified, because the seeming safety is destroyed. The result can be fear and/or curiosity, depending on the textual repertoire of the receiver and the design choices of the producer of an experience.

Enacted narrative addresses the interactivity that stands at the heart of all spatial storytelling. Unlike linear media that develop their meanings in time, narrative architecture works by giving the interactor the ability to navigate the created space more or less freely. Going back to Zimmerman's categories of interactivity (c.f. Zimmerman, 2004), spatial storytelling does not only provide the cognitive, functional and meta-interactivity all cultural artefacts do, but it adds explicit interactivity or participation to the mix. This process of making choices within the designed environment is what constitutes the enacted narrative. This is also were all playable media – boardgames, RPGs, or video games – directly clash with the necessities of narrative: the linear sequence of described events and the variable sequence of interactive choices are inherently different concepts. Jenkins argues that they come together in the design of the navigable space: "The organization of the plot becomes a matter of designing the geography of imaginary worlds, so that obstacles thwart and affordances facilitate the protagonist's forward movement towards resolution" (2004: 124 – 125). On a micro-level, he identifies so-called "micronarratives", small pre-designed vignettes that respond to player interaction like NPC behaviour and that also shape a player's emotional experience of the game space. MASS EFFECT over the course of the video game trilogy has done an increasingly better job at filling the fascinating virtual spaces the designers created with believable micronarratives: Players quickly lost count of the hours they spent listening in on NPC discussions and dialogues in the hallways and places of the Citadel, the central space station; many of those enriched their understanding of the main plot, but many more just made the secondary reality seem to be peopled by real persons with problems and lives of their own. Providing a fully functional stage for a player's enacted narrative is the fundamental challenge of all game design: "trying to determine how much plot will create a compelling framework and how much

freedom players can enjoy at a local level without totally derailing the larger narrative trajectory" (Jenkins, 2004: 126). This negotiation between narrative structure and payer freedom can be felt in most contemporary AAA video games (MASS EFFECT vs. SKYRIM), and it forms the core of the procedural narrative of pen&paper RPGs.

Embedded narrative is the seeding of narrative information within the game space or secondary reality. It is a prime tool for designers in their attempt to structure a player's experience of the narrative architecture, as "a game designer can somewhat control the narrational process by distributing the information across the game space" (Jenkins, 2004: 126). This procedure eventually results in the co-existence of two basic narrative experiences: "one relatively unstructured and controlled by the player as they explore the game space and unlock its secrets; the other prestructured but embedded within the mise-en-scene awaiting discovery" (ibid.). In video game design, the prestructured narrative path that the player absolutely must take in order for the basic game narrative to be completed is called The Golden Path along The Spine of the Game (c.f. Bateman, 2007: 87), and one of the most popular design strategies that relies on player decision-making not restriction of player freedom for guidance is so-called 'bread-crumbing' (ibid.: 89), the seeding of interesting and/or essential narrative information along the Spine with less relevant information forming the side-alleys of the narrative architecture. Human curiosity and the urge for discovery motivate our experiences of such diverse game spaces as JOURNEY (2012) with its glowing mountain on the horizon, SKYRIM (2011) with its half-guessed structures slowly emerging out of the fog and snow, and *Vampire: The Requiem* (2004) where the presence of many contradicting legends but absence of established facts about the origin of vampires drives much of the meta-plot. So not only the content of narrative information but also how it is embedded in the game space, through NPCs, terrain features, items like books or other records, adds to the meaning players will create from their experience.

Eventually, evoked, embedded and enacted narratives will conspire to create a holistic experience of the secondary reality, an emergent narrative. "Emergent narratives" Jenkins explains, "are not prestructured or pre-programmed, taking shape through gameplay, yet they are not as unstructured, chaotic, and frustrating as life itself" (2004: 128). He also brings up Murray's concept of procedural authorship in

connection with emergent narratives (2004: 129), but argues that emergent narrative goes beyond, or rather "deeper than this, working not simply through the programming, but also through the design of the game space" (ibid.). What Jenkins means is that emergent narrative is not merely the player making a choice between pre-designed and pre-scripted option a) and predesigned, pre-scripted option b), but that the way the game space itself is set up will allow for additional creative and *ad hoc* options. This is a point brought up by James Portnow and Daniel Floyd as a feature of intelligent game design in their *Extra Credits* web-series of game criticism when they talk about how SPEC OPS: THE LINE (2012) responds and adapts to choices off the beaten narrative track the player wants to make (502: 7:20 – 8:35). Increasingly, the possibility to produce a functioning and personal emergent narrative becomes the hallmark of top-tier game design. Portnow and Floyd define this for video games as follows:

> First, it requires that you trust your player to think past the explicit choices you've given them and to instead try to create their own. And second, it requires that rather than having a set group of choices that you have declared from on high as a designer you instead go back and play through your choice moment and try to understand what else a person might want to do given the tools that are normally made available to them in the game. And then to embrace those choices and find a way to weave them into your narrative without having it spiral out beyond all control.
> (Portnow and Floyd, 2012: 8:05 – 8:25)

Whereas this is difficult to realize in video games, since all of the audio-visual resources needed to represent a player's choice and its effects on the secondary reality must be designed and programmed beforehand, this is where pen&paper RPGs shine: Whatever the participants can imagine, can be done – no preparation time, no costly CGI, no implicit or explicit censorship by a studio or publisher, just the collectively agreed upon social contract of the group concerned. Evoked and embedded narrative work very much the same for RPGs as they do for video games, enacted narrative already offers a player more choice in pen&paper than its electronic cousin, but the potential for emergent narrative in RPGs is unparalleled amongst playable media for the simple reason of the absence of audio-visual content

and necessary hardware other than the obvious pens and papers, some dice, and the odd rubber or two.

So all of Jenkins's conclusions about game design as narrative architecture and the essential role of the 4Es in video gaming are just as valid (or even more so) for RPGs:

> In each of these cases, choices about the design and organization of game spaces have narratological consequences. In the case of *evoked narrative*, spatial design can either enhance our sense of immersion with in familiar world or communicate a fresh perspective on that story through the altering of established details. In the case of *enacted narratives*, the story itself may be structured around the character's movement through space and the features of the environment may retard or accelerate that plot trajectory. In the case of *embedded narratives*, the game space becomes a memory palace whose contents must be deciphered as the player tries to reconstruct the plot. And in the case of *emergent narratives*, game spaces are designed to be rich with narrative potential, enabling the story-constructing activity of players.
> (Jenkins, 2004: 129; my emphases)

Formally speaking, playable media are thus not stories, but they are also not non-narrative. Design choices, and in the case of RPGs also the negotiated process of narrative production, create a Secondary World, a narrative architecture that is the stage for players navigating that space, interacting with it and making choices – all of them activities that in and of themselves create meaning in and from that space. It is thus that I would like to adopt Jenkins's concept as one possible, and in my opinion very productive way to speak about pen&paper (and other) RPGs on a theoretical level, beyond the old and tiresome role-playing vs. roll-playing debate or the narratologist vs. ludologist war.

In the meantime, other Game Studies critics have also identified the spatial approach as a promising one, such as Michael Nitsche in his *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Worlds* (2008). Not only does he explicitly refer to Jenkins and his influential articles (2008: 4), Nitsche also suggests a more differentiated classification of several spaces that intersect to form a specific ludic experience. Due to his own interest in video gaming, these are defined for electronic

playable media, but with a little adaptational work they could just as well be applied to pen&paper RPGs:

> 1. *rule-based space* as defined by the mathematical rules that set, for example, physics, sound, AI, and game-level architecture;
> 2. *mediated space* as defined by the presentation, which is the space of the image plane and the use of this image including the cinematic form of presentation;
> 3. *fictional space* that lives in the imagination, in other words, the space 'imagined' by players from their comprehension of the available images;
> 4. *play space*, meaning space of the play, which includes the player and the video game hardware; and
> 5. *social space* defined by interaction with others, meaning the game space of other players affected (e.g., in a multiplayer title).
> (Nitsche, 2008: 15 – 16)

These spaces are very much reminiscent of Mackay's frames of reference or the different layers of the RPG process in The Big Model or The Process Model. To use Mackay's classification as an example, the rule-based space bears similarities to Mackay's Drama, the mediated space is close to the Script, the fictional space is equivalent to the Theatre, while play space and social space necessarily come together in a communal experience such as a pen&paper RPG in the Performance frame. But generally speaking, Nitsche's model is much more detailed and precise in localizing the spaces in which certain processes happen than any of his predecessors', and it should be very interesting to apply it to non-electronic playable media.

Starting with Jenkins's threefold description of convergence culture and narrowing the focus to games as narrative architecture, a detailed discussion of the various sub-spaces of the RPG experience would take this discussion far away from its original purpose, to establish the strong spatial element in the medium and how it relates to its socio-cultural context. The role of space, and especially in-between spaces, will be the focus of the following two sub-chapters, before the last of these suggested alternative theoretical frameworks takes RPGs into more abstract realms of social and narrative organisation.

5.2 – RPGs as Rituals: *Dark Dungeons* and Victor Turner's Liminality

The second alternative perspective I would like to offer is a bit of a sticky issue: RPGs as rituals, or rather, ritual elements in RPGs. Why is this problematic? Because almost from the get-go the new medium was attacked by people who had no idea what it was about and for whom it smacked of a cult or was at least messing with young people's minds in a threatening way.

In his article "The Attacks on Role-Playing Games" (1994), Paul Cardwell Jr. quotes statistics from the early times of RPGs that support this claim of a strong anti-RPG bias in public opinion:

> The Associated Press and United Press International, between 1979 and 1992, carried 111 stories mentioning role-playing games. [...] Of the 111 stories, 80 were anti-game, 19 had no majority, 9 were neutral, and only 3 were pro-game. Those three pro-game stories were all from UPI, which is a considerably smaller wire service than AP.
> (Cardwell, 1994)

Press coverage of the emerging medium (this *is* the period from *AD&D* to *Vampire*) was thus 72% negative to hostile, a fact that often is seen in connection with two infamous cases: the disappearance (and later re-appearance) of Dallas Egbert III from Michigan State campus in 1979 and the suicide of Irving Pulling II in 1982. Egbert's case gained wide public attention through a book that was published by the private investigator hired by his parents – William Dear's *The Dungeon Master* (1984) – and by an earlier film, MAZES AND MONSTERS (1982) – starring Tom Hanks in his first leading role, that was itself based on Rona Jaffe's eponymous novelization of the events (1981). The chronological clustering of all of these cases, books and films is already a very good hint towards the hysterical nature of the phenomenon. Accounts of what really happened with Egbert are unreliable to say the least, and so Cardwell uses Dear's book as the main source of information, showing awareness of its problematic nature:

> I am not comfortable relying on Dear for all this information, but since the Egbert family will not help, I must assume that either they are not interested in correcting the record or that Dear is essentially correct in his statements.
> (Cardwell, 1994)

Egbert was a highly gifted but socially handicapped young man with a complicated medical history. He was 16 and in his second college year when one night he vanished and was found a month later in Louisiana claiming a false identity. Dears 'investigation' resulted in an eclectic (but sellable) mixture of urban myths, campus rumours, and a complete and utter misunderstanding of RPGs, and eventually in the hypothesis that Egbert got lost in a fantastic secondary reality while playing *D&D* in the steam tunnels under the campus. Cardwell easily picks this theory apart, stating that the steam tunnels concerned are not easily accessible, very small and highly dangerous spaces, that *D&D* is a pen&paper RPG and *not* a LARP (so no going into the tunnels with fake swords), and that tales of the Society of Creative Anachronism, a mock-medieval 're-enactment group founded in 1966, might have coloured Dear's story (Cardwell, 1994). Egbert did not even leave *D&D* materials behind (dice, books, or character sheets), and factual evidence hints at that his involvement with the game was not very deep or committed (Cardwell, 1994). But *D&D* was fairly new at the time and it fit the mould of cults quite nicely (snatching young people away, binding them in a tightly knit group, and filling their heads with illusory 'realities'), so it was an easy target. For full effect of the unbelievable naiveté, preachiness and RPG-hostility of the argument fabricated out of Egbert's case, the 1982 film is not to be missed, as it also adds a sob-story ending with the fictional Egbert remaining lost in the secondary reality of *Mazes & Monsters* forever, including a sunset and a larmoyant voice-over (1:36:00 – 1:39:25). The real Egbert seems to have committed an unsuccessful suicide attempt when he first disappeared, and as Paul La Farge claims in his article "Destroy All Monsters" (2006), he unfortunately succeeded later after his reappearance, maybe one of the reasons why his family is not very forthcoming with information regarding his fate (La Farge, 2006).

In Irving Pulling's case, however, his mother herself repeatedly (and unsuccessfully) tried to connect his suicide with the game through several law suits between his death in 1982 and her own death of cancer in 1997. Like Egbert, Pulling was highly gifted, but unlike Egbert, Pulling actually *was* a regular *D&D* player (Cardwell, 1994). He was also socially disconnected and fascinated by Adolf Hitler (ibid.). When he killed himself, his mother, who claimed "receiving ESP knowledge of the event upon reaching the gates of their house" (Cardwell, 1994), blamed a curse

that was supposedly laid on his *D&D* character during a play session, Cardwell explains: "She claims that this curse compelled him to kill and that he heroically sacrificed himself rather than carry out the curse" (ibid.). Ms. Pulling then went on to found B.A.D.D. ('Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons'), and even tried to campaign the Federal Trade Commission into attaching warning labels to RPG books "stating that they were hazardous and could cause suicide" (Cardwell, 1994). Her initiative never went through, but it continuously poisoned public opinion about RPGs. Shortly after Ms. Pulling's death in 1997, B.A.D.D. disbanded.

Cardwell follows the development of RPG hysteria through the decades and identifies several waves, starting in the early 1980s:

> In the early 1980s, much was made of gamers', particularly younger ones, 'casting hexes' on teachers and parents. Aside from assuming the magic in the games was not only real but translatable into real life, there was another assumption: that the game was teaching this real magic.
> (Cardwell, 1994)

So this earliest phase – following in the wake of the Egbert and Pulling cases, already shows two important features: Firstly, it is mostly the RPG-haters that cannot distinguish between primary and secondary realities. And secondly, there is this supernatural, magical, ritualistic reading of RPGs as spaces where players would gain initiation into mystical knowledge, not unlike the cult or even secret societies phenomenon (think Freemasons). Actually, the only arcane knowledge accessible to RPGers are rather profane mysteries such as how to handle the Encounter Table or the splitting of the dice pool for multiple actions. Nevertheless, accusations of Satanism were rampant for a long time, and Jack T. Chick's famously infamous comic *Dark Dungeons* (1984) is a good example for the misrepresentation of the medium and the hysterical fervour especially the religious right in the US showed at the time (c.f. Figure 4; Chick, 1984).

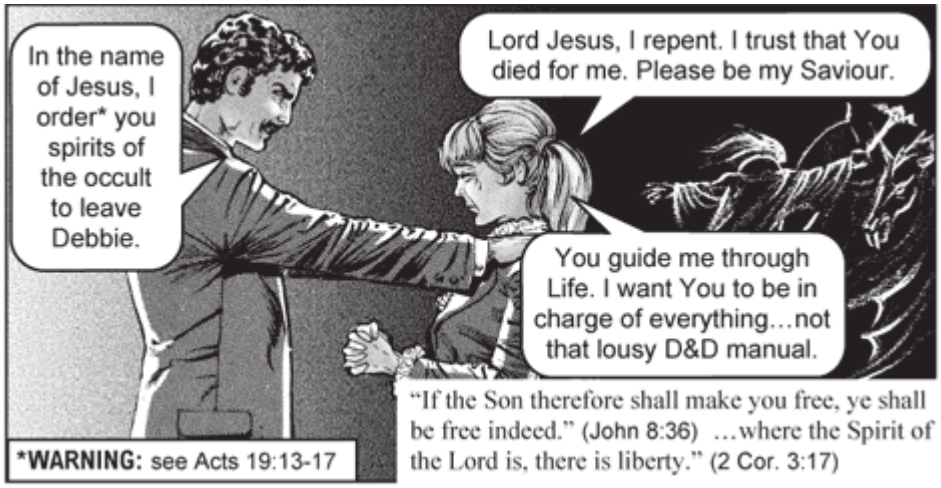

Figure 4: *Panel from* Dark Dungeons *(© Jack T. Chick, 1984)*

In the mid-1980 the mood changed, and Cardwell attributes this to the attention B.A.D.D.'s FTC petition attracted: "With the FTC petition, the emphasis changed from magic to suicide. After all, magic is rather hard to prove, while suicides are a matter of public record" (Cardwell, 1994). Unfortunately, for the RPG haters, the national statistics in the US do not support such a claim at all, and Cardwell even uses material to put it on its head:

> The statistics are actually arguing that gaming prevents suicides rather than causing them. Of course it does neither. Role-playing gaming requires imaginative solutions to complex problems. Therefore it attracts those who have some degree of skill in doing just that. These people can generally do the same in real life and thus avoid using 'a permanent solution to a temporary problem', which suicide usually is. Again, the game-bashers have their cause and effect reversed.
> (Cardwell, 1994)

From suicide the focus then gradually shifted towards murder in the late 1980s (again statistics were 'produced' to fit the intended stories), until good old ritualistic satanism reared its head again during the early 1990s, incidentally also the time when White Wolf first published *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991). As a brief reminder, this was the game that included a disclaimer on the very first page of printed text saying: "To be clear, Vampires are not real. The extent to which they may be said to exist is revealed only in what they can teach us of the human condition and of the fragility of

the splendor which we call life" (Rein•Hagen et al., 1991: 2). What *Vampire* and similar games published during the 1990s *definitely* taught us about the human condition as case studies in *primary reality* is that we are, it seems, a xenophobic and neophobic species, demonizing (in this case literally) what we do not know and/or understand:

> Building on the regular appearance on tabloid TV shows of multiple-personality syndrome cases in which persons claimed to have been the victims of ritual satanic cult abuse, the anti-game campaign came almost full circle. Critics now claimed that RPG was the same as Satan worship.
> (Cardwell, 1994)

With the crisis the medium entered during the late 1990s and due to internal problems amongst RPG haters, mediatised attacks on RPGs have largely subsided in the meantime. Also, video games, as the new emerging big thing, were much more interesting for the media outlets of the so-called 'hate industry' (c.f. the controversy about MASS EFFECT as a 'porn simulator' on Fox News; GamePolitics.com, 2008). Still, the constant resurfacing of the ritualistic slander against RPGs points towards a cultural and structural logic inherent to the medium that makes it easy for such accusations to stick. As Daniel Mackay brings up in his discussion of the frames of reference RPGers switch between constantly and in a self-aware way, RPGs are performances (Mackay, 2001: 53 - 60): pen&paper RPGs are verbal, LARPs even verbal and physical performances. Referencing Schechner (1998), he goes on to explain how performance has always been a "particular [sic] heated arena of ritual" (2001: 49), and how it has radiated out of performance into the "entire range of human action" (ibid.). If RPGs are performative narrative processes, they are therefore also ritualistic narrative spaces, as the experiences concerned are repeated, shared, follow certain pre-established patterns within a circumscribed situation, and the performed actions are given additional meaning. This is a connection that was made in detail by Christopher I. Lehrich in his article "Ritual Discourse in Role-Playing Games" (2004).

Already in his introduction, the author feels the need to include a caveat as far as his approach is concerned, in order to anticipate criticism:

> I intend to propose a ritual model for RPG play, based upon recent understandings of ritual within the academic discourses of anthropology, sociology, and history of religions. This model would appear to fall squarely into the common discourse of analogy as theory, of proposing that RPG's are 'like' something else in order to help emphasize a point otherwise unclear. Such analogical reasoning is founded upon an essential methodological principle: the analogy is not identity.
> (Lehrich, 2004)

Like Lehrich, I also do not intent to add to the 'RPGs are like…'-school of thought with my subchapters on different theoretical perspectives, but also like him, I am convinced that these more unconventional ways of looking at the medium and trying to understand it provide the interested observer with additional moments of insight that are valuable to appreciate it for what it is. To the detractors of his approach and RPGs in general, Lehrich "suggest[s] on the contrary that this grants to RPGs a legitimacy and 'specialness' attendant upon their roots in wider humanity and culture" (Lehrich, 2004).

As a theoretical basis, the author uses Ronald Grimes and Victor Turner whose performative approaches to ritual, "which ultimately amounts to a notion of total involvement in ritual activity", echo the Virtual Experience aspect of RPGs that John Kim identified in opposition to the Collaborative Storytelling one (Lehrich, 2004). On this second level, Lehrich identifies Lévi-Strauss's "structuralist interpretation of mythic and ritual thought as *bricolage*" and Pierre Bourdieu, Sherry Ortner, and Catherine Bell's "ritual as 'practice'" as possible vectors of intersection between ritual theory and RPG theory (Lehrich, 2004). Using these as points of reference, Lehrich concludes:

> RPG play enacts theory, in the sense that standing behind and prior to play is a series of theoretical constructs: system design, GM notes, pre-play agreements and social contract, genre expectations, and other theoretical tools. From this perspective, RPG play acts out this prior structure; this is equivalent to the old reading of ritual as acting out a liturgical text. At the same time, the prior structure is to a degree open to challenge within game play, and furthermore does not fully constrain particular game actions, determining a range and a set of priorities rather than laying out a script.
> (Lehrich, 2004)

The immersive nature of the secondary reality produced through play and the performative, procedural creation thereof using elements of appropriated pre-texts, as well as the negotiation of content and group dynamics clearly link ritual and RPG. The oscillation between structure and freedom (or anti-structure) happens in the space that Zimmerman calls 'play' (c.f. 2004: 159) and that Lehrich calls 'ritual' (Lehrich, 2004). In both cases, variations and rewritings happens because of and in spite of the structure containing them, or, as Lehrich puts it: "these two views are always in dynamic, creative tension: the available range of manipulations of ritual signs stands within a structural context only slightly accessible to interior challenge" (Lehrich, 2004). Structure and anti-structure are complementary to each other, they need each other to be able to exist, and without 'play' there is no 'game': "[N]o game structure", Lehrich observes, "can be so logically intensive as to dictate every action and speech by every participant at all times, because to do so (even were it possible) would annul the entire nature of the game *as* game" (Lehrich, 2004). It is this in-between-state, this oscillation in a "free space of movement" (Zimmerman, 2004: 159), that is reminiscent of Victor Turner's concept of liminality and its central function in ritual.

Going back to Arnold van Gennep and his theoretical analysis of rites of passage in his eponymous book of 1909, Turner differentiates the process of initiation into three stages or phases, as he calls them: "separation, margin (or limen, signifying 'threshold' in Latin), and aggregation" (Turner, 2008: 94). During separation old social and cultural functions and roles are left behind in adequate symbolic behaviour; once the initiates enter the in-between-state or liminal phase, they become ambiguous in their attributes and identities between past and present; in the third phase, status and identity in the new context are confirmed, norms and standards are again binding and the initiates are re-integrated in society. Broken down to simple terms, the three phases follow a script of catastrophe, ambiguity, and finally structure.

Lehrich appropriates this structure for RPG Theory quite successfully, and while his (and my) main interest is on the liminal, he cursorily also identifies the other two phases in the RPG experience. Separation is the first step of ritual, as it is in RPGs:

> Depending on a particular group's habitual practices and preferences, separation may begin at the front door of the host's house or apartment; this is particularly apparent in more LARP-oriented play, where entry into the broadly-defined play space is marked by a transformation of manner and affect, even of clothing. But the most limited table-top play generally marks a separation between game-play and out-of-game behavior. This is perhaps most obvious negatively, in objections to players who do not focus on the game and continually introduce 'irrelevant' topics (television shows, video games, current events, etc.) into play.
> (Lehrich, 2004)

In my own RPG group this separation has taken on a peculiar and highly ritualized form borrowed from the structural logic of TV-Series. After a brief recap of the last session that we half-jokingly and obviously aware of its origins in TV conventions have come to call "Previously on [enter name of the RPG here]", the ST plays the intro, a short piece of music of two or three minutes duration hand-picked by the ST to set up the mood and atmosphere of the current story. When the intro is over, the ST switches to the background music for the first scene and in-character play commences. In the past we have also experimented with more formal and overtly ritualistic separations, such as when we played Bill Bridges and Andrew Greenberg's *Fading Suns* (1999). The setting for this RPG is medieval science-fiction reminiscent of Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965) but with a more European feeling to it. An optional mode to play that is suggested in the rulebook is Passion Play Roleplaying:

> A Passion Play roleplaying drama or epic is meant to go over-the-top and play up the medieval stageplay elements to the hilt. The characters are thrust into a universe where their every action and decision has momentous consequences for good or ill. […] In short, the drama or epic becomes like a tale told by future generations, where the characters are mythologized as heroes, saints or villains and their deeds are teaching lessons or examples for all […].
> (Bridges and Greenberg, 1999: 278)

We implemented this Passion Play style both on the extradiegetic as well as the intradiegetic level as a device of ritualistic separation: After the "Previously on […]" section in primary reality, we switched immediately to a first level of diegesis (or secondary reality) where soldiers would lie in the trenches of a desperate war in the far future of the setting's timeframe (a conflict foreshadowed in the meta-plot of the

game itself) and tell stories of the heroes of the past. As soon as one of the players would bring up 'scripture' to reflect upon a situations the soldiers were currently in by introducing a plotline, for example with a story hook such as "Do you remember the hard decision blessed Caitlin had to make at the discovery of the Lost Jumpgate?", the ST would start playing the intro and at the end of it mark the switch to the tertiary reality where this decision and its context would be played out by the group by the phrase: "And thus it is written…". Such over-determined strategies of separation between play and non-play on several levels of reality are rarely used and largely dependent on the game played and the style preferred by the group, but even the most fun-oriented group of gamers needs to mark the switch somehow, even if it is only a "So, where were we?" from the ST/GM.

During play the separation of the secondary reality created and the primary reality of its creation is also constantly an issue. Lehrich mentions the age old debate about in-character (first person) and out-of-character (third person) speech during play, as well as the problem of keeping character and player knowledge apart during decision making, but also the general strategic decision that is part of the social contract of each group of how much rules they will use and how dominant the 'game' aspect of the RPG will be allowed to become (Lehrich, 2004). He concludes his discussion of separation in RPG by connecting it to its logical counterpart at the other end of the ritual process of role-playing:

> In any event, the problem of negotiating the bridge between in-character and out-of-character is founded upon the structural separation effected at the outset of ritual. The social aggregation at the close of play thus amounts to an undoing of this separation: players step back from the in-character world (to whatever extent they postulated themselves as in it) in order to receive rewards or accolades, rehash enjoyable events, and generally begin shifting from a relatively discontinuous and separated game-time to an ordinary social event, itself marked eventually by the dispersal of the participants to their everyday lives.
> (Lehrich, 2004)

Even though many critics of the medium would not believe it, the vast majority of role-players find back into their 'real' lives in primary reality at the end of a session. If anything, and here I echo Mackay and Fine, their constant awareness of and practice

in frame switching and delineating sub-spaces and sub-realities within the framework of primary, social and cultural reality make them only more apt to notice and successfully navigate thresholds of separation and aggregation. But, to misquote Shakespeare at once again in this thesis, "the play's the thing" (*Hamlet*: II, ii), so Lehrich and I are more interested in what happens between the two and how this relates to RPGs: play, or put differently, liminality.

> The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* ('threshold people') are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.
> (Turner, 2008: 95)

This is how Turner introduces his conceptualization of the liminal in *The Ritual Process* (1969) that stands at the centre of what Lehrich calls his "great achievements in the study of ritual", namely the "explication of the socio-political implications of ritual activity" in a simple and concise manner (Lehrich, 2004). Ambiguity rules the liminal, as old classifications and norms are left behind and new ones can be freely experimented with, only to be rejected as well as the individual moves on.

As far as authority is concerned, liminal spaces also present interesting features on both a structural/social as well as a cultural/meaning-oriented level:

> What is interesting about liminal phenomena for our present purposes is the blend they offer of lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship. We are presented, in such rites, with a 'moment in and out of time,' and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition[…] of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties.
> (Turner, 2008: 96)

Liminal processes are thus situated 'in between': between the sacred and the profane, the communal and the individual, between identity and the lack of it, between reality and game. They are deeply social processes, opening up a space for the renegotiation of social and cultural roles. This is a clear and strong connection to

how RPGs work as communally negotiated narrative processes. Lehrich, however, voices a problem about this optimistic understanding of the liminal that has been at the centre of my deliberations about RPGs as forms of cultural expression even since I have discovered *Vampire*:

> [W]ithin the liminal phase, neophytes -- and by extension, the society as a whole -- employ symbols and structures to challenge, test, and even undermine the structures and norms of authority; through the ritual process, however, particularly as the liminal phase moves towards conclusion in aggregation, all this 'testing' ends up serving the purposes of established authority. Thus the ritual gives the *illusion* of freedom and choice, but actually enforces conformity; ritual is thus read as a technique of mystification by which cultural authority can be produced and reproduced by deceiving participants in all walks of society into accepting these authority structures as natural, given, and ideal.
> (Lehrich, 2004)

The issue here is whether the negotiation and questioning of social and cultural conventions, since it happens in a space separate from social life in primary reality, can be considered an effective means of affecting evolutionary, or even revolutionary change at all, or whether it, on the contrary, only serves to stabilise the *status quo* as creative and dissenting energy is spent in a secondary reality. One good argument *for* a feedback between primary and secondary reality in the medium RPG is also addressed by Lehrich himself in the relationship between pressures from outside of play and reactions to it in play that then in turn can affect reality outside of play:

> Simply put, it is often the case that as authoritative discourse tries to increase control over what happens within ritual performance externally, resistant elements become increasing empowered within performance and have greater efficacy without. In an RPG context specifically, it seems not unlikely that increasingly emphatic assertions of hegemonic control of appropriate play and in-game discourse will tend to evoke increasing resistance within play, which is to say that players within the game will tend to challenge strong norms asserted by the game-master (or the game text, the received tradition of appropriate play, etc.) the more forcefully they are expressed. One classic example returns us to *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*: the more Gary Gygax asserted his authority and authenticity in laying down constraints about 'the right way to play,' the more particular groups and players were drawn

> either to revise the game, to play other games, or to challenge Gygax's principles from within play.
> (Lehrich, 2004)

When Gygax thus exerted his perceived authority from outside the ritual/ludic process, players pushed back with equal force, first only within the confined game space, later also taking their dissent into primary reality and actually changing the medium itself, like Simbalist and Backhaus did with *Chivalry and Sorcery* (1977) after a not so pleasant encounter with Gygax. Pressure to conform from the outside thus builds ever more pressure to resist from within, and when a certain threshold is crossed, this will spill over into primary reality and the socio-cultural context. So, the question is not as simple as 'Are RPGs subversive?', and even less than that will the answer be a simple 'Yes' or 'No':

> Quite apart from the fact that this entails RPG theorists' participation in the reproduction of authoritarian notions of ritual behavior, a complex logical circle inserts itself in this understanding, common it seems from the inception of RPG's [sic] as a discrete ritual form.
> (Lehrich, 2004)

Turner also remarked upon the ambiguity of the situation of liminality itself, as "two major 'models' for human interrelatedness" are juxtaposed and alternate:

> The first is of society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of 'more' or 'less'. The second, which emerges regognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders.
> (Turner, 2008: 96)

Structure and anti-structure, hierarchy and *communitas*, differentiation and de-differentiation thus coexist in moments of liminality. RPGs as liminal processes would thus be both conformist *and* dissenting, both confirming *and* questioning, constructing *and* deconstructing authority. The asymmetrical distribution of

discursive power that drives the medium's narrative process is a prime example of how RPGs do not fall into easy either/or categories ("They are only entertainment!"/"The are only critical!"), but rather breathe the spirit of the Postmodern both/and refusal of categories in the first place ("They are fun and engrossing, critical reflections of socio-cultural processes."). I am in open disagreement with Lehrich here, who uses the example of female players to make a point about how RPGs recreate and reinforce stereotypes and dominant discourses and do not deconstruct them:

> Indeed, female players often find themselves read as 'not serious,' 'just the GM's girlfriend,' and so forth. [...] To take an extreme example, if a female player reacts (in-character or out, in-game or out) negatively to a rape scene perpetrated upon her (or any) character, some groups will interpret this as a failure by the player to recognize the lines separating gameplay from ordinary discourse; more insidiously, perhaps, the player may feel that she *should* not overtly respond negatively, precisely because she accepts that other players grant this absolute division of discursive spaces, de-legitimizing her own emotional response as confirmation that she is not a 'serious' player.
> (Lehrich, 2004)

To my mind, Lehrich's position here is untenable, and based on my own experiences over more than twenty years, his argument is lacking. The described amount of emotional 'fall-out' over such extreme scenes could only be observed from highly immersed and equally serious players of all genders and sexes. Furthermore, such a response would not be de-legitimised as a failure to uphold the separation between primary and secondary reality, but on the contrary would be appreciate as a valid reaction. Groups would step out of secondary reality immediately and discuss the situation in primary reality. My experiences might not, however, be representative of the majority of gaming groups in existence, since most of the groups I participated in took the medium very seriously. Lehrich seems to have had different experiences, and he lays the onus on the side of game designers, not players:

> To shift the modalities of play from reproductive to transformational may be desirable, but it is unclear how this might be effected. While RPG ritual liminality permits exploration, its structured and constrained nature acts to defend stereotype reproduction as 'freedom' while blocking challenges thereto as failures of player technique or understanding. Logically, practical game-construction cannot merely strive to forestall deployment of stereotypes, but must work actively to undermine their function within gameplay; it is here that critical formation of counter-hegemonic moves (e.g. feminist game design) must focus effort, at the same time recognizing that simply formulating a game that pre-determines the boundaries of appropriate and inappropriate structure challenges cannot achieve anything.
> (Lehrich, 2004)

Maybe I am too much of a Postmodernist to share Lehrich's (qualified) hope that prescriptive game design of the feminist or any other kind can replace the conformist aspect of RPGs with revolutionary spirit. And maybe I am also too much group- and dialogue-oriented I my approach to wait for a solution from outside of the process of concrete narrative creation itself. In any case, Lehrich's argument seems to me to be in contradiction with his earlier explanation of how pressure from outside play will only lead to the opposite effect intended. The social and symbolic rather than the authorial and textual element of RPGs is where I can see the potential for change, going back to Turner's understanding of how cultural symbols work in *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (1974):

> Symbols instigate social action. [...] In my view they condense many references, uniting them in a single cognitive and affective field. [...] In this sense ritual symbols are 'multivocal', susceptible of many meanings, but their referents tend to polarize between physiological phenomena [...] and normative values of moral facts [...]. [...] The drama of ritual action [...] causes an exchange between these poles in which the biological referents are ennobled and the normative referents are charged with emotional significance. [...] There is set up, in [the participants'] minds, a symbiotic interpenetration of individual and society.
> (Turner, 1975: 55 – 56)

Through symbolic, ritual action in RPG narratives, the individual is connected to the other members of the group in *communitas*, but he or she also draws meaning from the symbols produced that is then carried away outside of the shared secondary

reality into the primary one. Both, *communitas* and return into structured society through aggregation are necessary for a coherent society:

> There is a dialectic here, for the immediacy of communitas gives way to the mediacy of structure, while, in *rites de passage*, men are released from structure into communitas only to return to structure revitalized by their experience of communitas. What is certain is that no society can function adequately without this dialectic. [...] The history of any great society provides evidence at the political level for this oscillation.
> (Turner, 2008: 129)

This revitalization of the individual will in turn lead to a revitalization of the society it reintegrates with. Unlike the more confrontational ideology present in Lehrich's reading of RPGs as ritual spaces, I do not perceive the aggregation of the individual as only a conformist act of surrender. It can also have a more subversive quality, when the multivocal cultural symbols produced and exchanged in the secondary space of play are reintegrated with their carrier into primary reality. The immersive power of RPGs and the sense of agency they allow their participants will invest the experiences made with emotional significance and meaning, just like the effect ritual has on the human mind. This is where I see the full potential of the medium of RPGs, in this power to affect, to move individuals. To give them an impulse towards change that they can then carry away into their everyday lives. Especially in secularized societies such as Western Europe's RPGs can thus, ironically – considering the accusations of paganism and Satanism, develop almost quasi-religious power in a kind of renaissance of the religious, but without the belief, the dogma, and the institutions. RPGs can truly be joyful games of meaning-making, experimental, liminal spaces of *communitas* where new meanings are negotiated and invested with emotional power.

Yet Turner also points out that freedom cannot exist for long without restrictions (just as play cannot exist without the structure constraining it):

> But the spontaneity and immediacy of communitas – as opposed to the jural-political character of structure – can seldom be maintained for very long. Communitas itself soon

> develops a structure, in which free relationships between individuals become converted into norm-governed relationships between social personae.
> (Turner, 2008: 132)

Again, this is reminiscent of the process of collaborative narrative production in RPGs: When the group distributes discursive power and roles, it re-enacts the social and cultural processes in primary reality within the confinement of the secondary one. The Social Contract (or Shared Space of Imagining) is a microstructure representative of the macrostructures surrounding it. Through its creation and interaction with it, players consciously and/or subconsciously train strategies of behaviour and observation they can then apply to similar structures. And so Turner eventually sets up a system of classification for different kinds of *communitas*:

> (1) *existential* or *spontaneous* communitas – approximately what hippies today would call a 'happening' [...];
> (2) *normative* communitas, where, under the influence of time, the need to mobilize and organize resources, and the necessity for social control among the members of the group in pursuance of these goals, the existential communitas is organized into a perduring social system; and
> (3) *ideological* communitas, which is a label one can apply to a variety of utopian models of societies based on existential communitas.
> (Turner, 2008: 132)

So while instances of existential or spontaneous *communitas* are fleeting, any lasting social order requires the move towards normative *communitas* through rules and conventions. By negotiating those actively around the gaming table, players acquire an awareness of and familiarity with these processes of standardization and can apply those critically on an individual level, as well as a cultural one when they encounter examples of ideological *communitas*. Based on this argument, I would like to claim that *potentially*, role-players can be more aware of mechanisms and strategies of social control, which in turn *can* predispose them to be more critical and responsible in social, political and cultural processes in primary reality.

In order for the medium to unfold its full critical and transformational potential imparted to it by its ritual logic, however, it will take theoretical approaches that manage to unlock it, and here I agree with Lehrich again:

> Classification must recognize that the object does not exist outside of the construction of taxa; 'religion' or 'ritual' do not exist, but are means by which historically situated and motivated people classify certain behaviors. Similarly, 'RPG' is not a thing, a singular object, unique and discrete from others, and Narrativist orientations do not differ from Simulationist or Gamist ones except insofar as we construct them so. Classification is the basis of *comparison*, not of truth or certainty. Until RPG theory takes on board serious recognition of its comparative nature, it will remain an ideology and not a science.
> (Lehrich, 2004)

RPGs thus reveal the constructed nature of all meaning and must be contextualized in their respective socio-cultural environments, which is exactly what I am trying to do with this present thesis. They must be seen in all of their ambiguous and contradictory complexity as a fully functional form of valid and valuable cultural expression just like more established media such as books, film, or TV. They provide both entertainment *and* food for thought, oscillating in their emotionally and semantically charged ritual space between complicity with and critique of the ideological systems they are embedded in. This idea will resonate clearly with several ideas of Postmodern critics in the second part of my argument.

5.3 – RPGs as Discourse: Homi Bhabha's Third Space

If RPGs are like rituals (or *rites de passage*), they are also like a Third Space, the discursive in-between space of the Postcolonial situation. Margaret Atwood, the accomplished Canadian author *and* Postcolonial subject (in more than one sense), identifies this space as follows:

> But who are *we* now, apart from the question *Who are we now?* We all share that question. Who are we, now, inside the *we* corral, the *we* palisade, the *we* fortress, and who are they? […] It's a constant worry, this *we*, this *them*.

> And there you have it, in one word, or possibly two: post-colonial.
> (Atwood, 2007: 99 – 100)

As a Canadian, Atwood finds herself in one of the most complex and interesting 'post-colonial' situations, in a nation that has seen a constant cycle of victimisation and colonisation for more than a thousand years on a military, social, cultural and - most recently – an economic level. In her short text "Post-Colonial" published in the collection *The Tent* (2006) , she formulates the emotional and conceptual fall-out of this seemingly endless line of defeats, surrenders, and/or occupations, the constant change of those with authority and power to rule, define, and interpret collective and individual social and cultural identities in a constant state of flux: "But who are *we* now, apart from the question *Who are we now?*". It is thus that she introduces her final paragraph and conclusions of the text (2007: 99), and this is also the central question of Postcolonial Studies, a 'meta-question', a question about questions, providing no answers. And this is where I see the connection to RPGs.

Another in-between space of negotiation, of meaning-making opens up, this time of meaning in the sense of "What does it mean to be 'a Canadian', 'an Indian', 'a South-African', 'a [continue a seemingly endless line of 'subjects' here]'?", of identification in the literal sense, 'the – active - making of identity', not just the 'putting on' of a ready-made, historically justified and institutionally provided identity as German, British, French, etc. The former mother-countries live in the illusion of self-knowledge, the former colonies (still colonies?) do not have this comfortable option. They need to talk about, discuss, argue, negotiate this 'self-knowledge'. This is a burden, but it is also a great opportunity: Where nothing is fixed, everything is still possible. The potential for play and performance is maximized, discourse is vibrant and creative. Similar to what happens on a very small and personal level around a table of RPGers, this creates a large-scale socio-cultural transformative experience.

Again, the parallels to Turner's model of rites of passage, which seems oddly fitting – 'growing up', having one's voice heard and respected in a larger community, are the connection I see and want to thematise. To make a point about the negotiation of identity as a process, a performance, not something that is acquired, established. In a post-colonial situation – and this is not necessarily a military,

political, historical colonization, as similar processes could or can be seen in the more discursive (de-) colonization of the working class, women, or the LGBTQ community – the liminal space of ritual opens up on a social and cultural macro-level: the Post-Colonial can be seen as a negotiation of identity between structure and anti-structure, the refusal and recognition of the necessity of the former coloniser for self-identification. Following the tripartite process model of ritual, separation could be seen as the moment of 'independence' (itself a fiction) and the establishment of one's own voice, liminality determines the post-colonial Third Space of identity negotiation, and aggregation would correspond to the acceptance of a new identity and the joining of other similar groups (nations/classes/genders/sexual identities) in equality.

The fragmentary nature of this short introduction to the present chapter already shows that it is discourse itself that is the issue here: words count, contexts count. Questions and relativisations necessarily riddle a text that deals with the issue of post-colonial situations (or post-'colonial situations'), as discursive power and textual authority are not only the *object* of analysis, they also directly affect the *means* of this analysis, discourse. In a way, this writing about discourse is like playing an RPG: a procedural narrative about the production of narrative, a performance of roles about performing identities.

The process of symbolic communication itself, Homi Bhabha reminds us, is necessarily a problematic and ambiguous one:

> The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot 'in itself' be conscious. What this unconscious relation introduces is an ambivalence in the act of interpretation.
> (Bhabha, 2010: 53)

Meaning-making through language is subjected not only to the conventions and norms of that language, but also to the performative and institutional constraints of the context. The negotiation of a consensus in communication is a performative act,

embedded in and determined by its context and vectored through language. RPGs, like ritual, are therefore both instances of collective, performative meaning-making, and they consequently both happen in an ambivalent space.

What is interesting about this connection, is that it allows me to apply Bhabha's concept of the Third Space to RPGs and how they as a medium make meaning: "The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as integrated, open, expanding, code" (Bhabha, 2010: 54). RPGs could thus be constructed as an institutionalised, formalised expression of the "Third Space of enunciation", they are the act of enunciation made Performance, a meta-medium questioning and denaturalising the "mirror of representation" by their very existence: As the processes of meaning-*making* are themselves made overt, the seemingly transparent medium of language (and narrative) becomes opaque, visible. The players themselves produce narrative in awareness of the social, narrative and ludic rules regulating their behaviour and the given context influencing it. The result of this process, the consensual narrative, is therefore perceived as a product of the entire system. It is recognised as not natural, it is experienced as something that is made, created. It is de-naturalised. The precarious and dynamic distribution of discursive power in the narrative process of RPGs highlights the ambivalent qualities of meaning-making and the meanings made. And this can have direct consequences for player behaviour in primary reality:

> It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures are untenable […].
> (Bhabha, 2010: 55)

Following this logic and my argument about how RPGs as medium make the space of enunciation, the Third Space, visible and let the players experience awareness of its mechanisms, RPGs become an inherently subversive and dissenting medium. They are a meta-medium, a medium that showcases how media (or rather the people using them) produce meaning. Additionally, the deconstruction of hierarchies, as well as

claims of originality and truth have far reaching effects on social, cultural and ideological systems. If hierarchies are arbitrary constructs, why do certain people rule and others have to follow? If there is no such thing as originality, how can artistic genius or intellectual property exist? If there is no truth (or 'purity'), how can one group of people claim to be any better than another?

Awareness of the Third Space collapses certainties and replaces them with questions, facts (*factum*, 'that which is made') with processes (*processus*, 'course of an action'). There is a strong potential for the push towards theory-building in the ensuing dynamics, but they also raise the very same questions about meaning-making on the level of identity. Once the Third Space is made opaque, it "enables us to see not only the necessity of theory, but also the restrictive notions of cultural identity with which we burden our visions of political change" (Bhabha, 2010: 55). Analysing Frantz Fanon's concepts of revolutionary change, Bhabha comes to the conclusion that living in the Third Space "the liberatory people who initiate the productive instability of revolutionary cultural change are themselves the bearers of a hybrid identity. They are caught in the discontinuous time of translation and negotiation [...]" (ibid.). Once cultural identity is thus de-naturalised through recognition of hybridity, change becomes conceivable and possible in a moment of "productive instability": Processes of translation and negotiation kick in to appropriate pre-existing elements of identity, adapt them to the context of meaning-making, and try to come to a new consensus or at least a stable state in the social systems concerned.

Here again, I see the similarities to RPGs, even though by definition the processes of translation and negotiation in the medium take place in a Shared Space of Imagining separated from everyday primary reality. Whereas political and social renegotiations in Third Space *directly* impact the social and cultural make-up of the society affected, the negotiations of a secondary reality in RPGs can only *indirectly* filter into primary reality as such. RPGs are not *per se* revolutionary tools, but games can and will affect evolutionary change in a society, as Gonzalo Frasca successfully establishes in his article "Videogames of the Oppressed: Critical Thinking, Education, Tolerance, and Other Trivial Matters" (c.f. Frasca, 2004). Not all role-players will change their society, but the medium through its logic and processes favours critical thinking and awareness, also of one's own identity and self. The similarities to the

models of negotiation between different instances of the human mind that Freud and Jung suggest and to the negotiation of meaning in the process of creating a shared narrative in RPGs are intriguing and have serious consequences for our understanding of what identity is and how it works in the first place.

The moment of recognition and awareness is like the moment colonial subjects become aware that their condition (and all authority) is not natural or God-given, but man-made: "They are now free to negotiate and translate their cultural identities in a discontinuous intertextual temporality of cultural difference. [...] The people are now the very principle of 'dialectical reorganization' and they construct their culture from the national text [...] (Bhabha, 2010: 55). This process of dialectical reorganisation happens in the Third Space between the Self and the Other, in a space/time separate from the concerns everyday life, "the precondition for the articulation of cultural difference" (Bhabha, 2010: 56).

By looking at RPGs, a fairly young medium still somewhat stuck in its beginnings in wargaming and mostly engaged in by a white, male, educated demographic (Who holds power over discourse?), I am not trying to belittle the massive risks people in the former colonies have taken (and still take) to liberate themselves, or the merit they deserve for the massive social and cultural changes they have wrought, but I am convinced that on a structural as well as a procedural level there is a similarity between the liminal space opened up by RPGs and the Third Space of the post-colonial situation. Following Bhabha's argument, I would also like to argue that there is a rich potential in acknowledging this connection to use the new medium of communal storytelling to affect subtle change in the 'real' world:

> It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory [...] may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an *inter*national culture, based [...] on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*. To that end we should remember that it is the 'inter' – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *inbetween* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. [...] And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves.
>
> (Bhabha, 2010: 56)

So the Third Space becomes the location of culture for Bhabha, the *axis mundi* that is none, the space that is none. It is not central or a space, but the creation and re-creation of all culture happens in this space in between spaces, through the twin processes of translation and negotiation: understanding the Other, adopting what seems valuable or helpful, adapting it so that it suits the given circumstances and the socio-cultural context of the Self. It is Bhabha's hope that by making the Third Space visible and thus opening it up to conscious exploration, polar dichotomies and either/or classifications will cease to be meaningful, as everything co-exists equally in the possibility-space that is the Third Space, and that through active and aware creation of their identities, their meanings, their cultures, people will be able to respect other people's creations just as much. Since we all draw from the same pool of meaning and all shape the elements we find there according to the same basic rules, who is to say that anyone's result is inherently more or less valuable? The conflictual and potentially dangerous distinction between the Self and the Other is not erased, but transcended. What this theory does for the macro-level of whole societies, RPGs and RPG Theory can do for the micro-level of personal life. In both cases, the Third Space becomes the meeting-place, the liminal space of encountering the Other, and thus ultimately the Self.

Even though at first glance this spatialisation of culture might resemble Fredric Jameson's understanding of Postmodernism (c.f. Jameson, 1999: 154 - 181), Bhabha specifically addresses the fundamental conceptual differences. Whereas open and hybrid Third Space in its *communitas* "makes available to marginalized or minority identities a mode of performative agency" – note the conceptual similarity with RPGs as game performances - (Bhabha, 2010: 314), Jameson's space is defined by separation, differentiation, distance:

> Through the metaphor of spatial distance, Jameson steadfastly maintains the 'frame', if not the face, of the subject-centred perceptual apparatus [...]. [...] And the pivot of this regulatory, spatial dialectic – the eye of the storm – is none other than the 'class-subject' itself. If Jameson makes the teleological dimension of the class category retreat in the face of the multiple axes of transnational globality, then the linear, developmental dimension returns in the shape of spatial typology.
>
> (Bhabha, 2010: 314)

As a Marxist cultural and literary critic, Jameson cannot accept a space so utterly unstructured as the one Bhabha describes. Going back to the Marxist division of society into the economic base and the cultural superstructure and the essentially Hegelian dialectic that drives class conflict, Jameson's space – arena of the new struggle between classes - is also separated in an inside and an outside, up and down. Hierarchy and the idea of linear progress still differentiate, whereas Bhabha's Third Space is situated exactly at the intersection of differences. And whereas the latter is a multiple, shared, creative space, Jameson's space is an individual, divided, sterile one. The effects this conception of a 'Postmodern space' has on Jameson's conceptions of the Postmodern itself will be treated in more detail in the second part of this thesis.

Bhabha also outright dismisses Jameson's attempts to maybe take a step beyond his dialectic frame of reference by introducing as prime social actor "the non-centred subject that is part of an organic group or collective" (Jameson in Bhabha, 2010: 317). Even though Jameson here talks the talk ('non-centred', 'organic', 'collective'), he is accused by his critic of not walking the walk as well:

> We have, by now, learnt that this appeal to a 'thirdness' in the structure of dialectical thought is both an acknowledgment of the disjunctive cultural 'signs' of these (postmodern) times, and a symptom of Jameson's inability to move beyond the binary dialectic of inside and outside, base and suprastructure.
> (Bhabha, 2010: 317)

So, incapable of conceiving a (literally) post-structural theoretical and analytical approach, the third instance is introduced NOT as the location of cultural creativity and production, but to be able to *integrate* the inherently disjunctive nature of Postmodern cultural production with the binary dialectic of Marxist social criticism. The Third Space thus does not represent the hot-spot of active and procedural meaning-making found in Bhabha and other Postcolonial theories, it becomes a container that (literally) *contains* and *neutralises* aspects of the societies observed otherwise incompatible with Jameson's theories. From the empowerment of the Third Space, Jameson falls into the disenfranchisement of a black hole: the collapse of space/time into itself. As class is the only valid and productive category of social

difference for the author, others, like gender, ethnicity, or race, are emptied of their "interpellative, affective power":

> In Jameson's argument, these forms of social difference are fundamentally reactive and group oriented, lacking the material objectivity of the class relation. It is only when political movements of race or gender are mediated by the primary analytic category of class, that these communal identities are transformed into agencies [...].
> (Bhabha, 2010: 318)

Jameson's concept of a space for meaning-making can only be one that is determined by clear and singular stratification: the multiple and chaotic entanglement of the rhizomatic interrelations of ethnicity, gender, sexual identity and the like is inconceivable to his (Modernist) mind-set. They, and the Third Space they inhabit, are therefore seen as incapable of affecting social change - the ultimate goal of Marxist philosophy - and subsequently must be categorised as reactive and implosive: the revolutionary energy mobilised by social injustice and the lack of a voice in society is drained away in a myriad little group agendas and not collected and applied to change society as a whole.

Following Jameson's theories, the analogy between the liminal space of RPGs and Bhabha's Third Space is reinforced, since all of the problems he has with the 'third way' suggested by Bhabha would also apply to RPGs as a (Postmodern) medium and be even 'worse': While the negotiations in Third Space still happen in primary reality, RPGs are removed to a private secondary or even tertiary reality, so – according to Jameson's logic – all of the revolutionary energy would be lost. Even though , as I have already mentioned earlier in this chapter, I understand this argument, I still see great potential in the medium to have a noticeable impact on social and cultural realities nonetheless, exactly *because* its procedural narrative and meaning-making is seemingly (!) transposed from primary into secondary reality. Topics and themes that would seem taboo or at the very least problematic to bring up in 'real life' are easier to handle with the safety-net of make-believe: Mark Rein•Hagen's harsh critique of the predatory nature of Western societies during the late 1980s and early 1990s is hidden behind the metaphor of the vampire, the radical politics and realities of

sexuality and sexual identity Storm Constantine brings up in her Wraeththu Mythos become more approachable in the RPG *Wraeththu: From Enchantment to Fulfilment* (2005), and the unsettling quality of madness and even more unsettling treatment of mental patients in institutions can be experienced first-hand in the deeply troubling borderline mixture of Simon Says, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988) that is Anthony Combrexelle's *Patient 13* (2009). RPGs can become a forum to confront important questions about society, culture, and the self, and through their inherent procedural and self-aware approach, they not only provide opportunities on the content level, but also train skills essential for successful social living on a formal one.

The reactive and group oriented social differences that Jameson sees as unconducive to affect social change – like ethnicity, gender, sexual identity – take centre-stage in many RPGs to varying degrees and in different forms, according to the game design and the play style of the group. But in any case, the performative agency they provide within the sheltered and safe space delineated and regulated by the social contract can be essential to the development of the identity construction of the participants, irrespective of their class. RPGs are a deeply democratic medium, bringing together members of all classes on an equal footing, as material wealth, social status or immaterial influence are all irrelevant for the ability to participate. In primary reality, a single book amounting to between 30 and 40 Euros is enough for the entire group to play, and in secondary reality, the distribution of discursive and social power is determined by the conventions and rules of the game itself. This is why Hindmarch and Tidball have called RPGs "the most efficient entertainment you can buy" (2008: 30). Often, RPGs bring people of low social status in contact with people of high status families, and through the shared experiences and idiocultures they quickly become friends. In a way, RPGs can level the playing field, as social, narrative and language competence are the only skills that matter for successful and satisfying play, irrespective of the class-affiliation of the participants. And, as is always the case with shared activities, RPGs might even breed a deeper understanding of and respect for each other's situation in life.

In this sense, Jameson is perfectly right: The Third Space is reactive or even reactionary, as it does not separate, instigate conflict, or foment revolution, it

connects, mediates, produces understanding through shared meanings. *Communitas* through communication, evolution through *communitas* – aware of all the problems of the processes of translation and negotiation involved. RPGs, as manifestations of the liminal Third Space, make these tools available to everyone in everyday life, motivating through the experiences of agency and immersion so rare in contemporary primary reality and the resulting entertainment value they provide to come back and keep trying. They are part of a grass-roots movement independent from academics, cultural critics, politicians, religious or ideological leaders who normally act as self-declared interpretational authorities to take back discursive power and give everyone a voice to contribute to cultural creation.

The cultural logic behind is one of pluralisation and mutual activation, away from totalitarianism of any kind and a "narcissism" like Jameson's that only can "articulate 'other' subjects of difference and forms of cultural alterity as either mimetically secondary [...] or temporarily anterior or untimely – archaic, anthropomorphic, compensatory realities rather than contemporary social communities" (Bhabha, 2010: 319). The Other can no longer be seen or experienced in terms of the Self, it must be encountered in the space between the You and the I, the Third Space, on its own terms and on equal footing. Bhabha takes Jameson's incapacity to abandon class as the only meaningful social and cultural category and the revolutionary teleology of his Marxist ideology as the basis for his own hope of a different future:

> As the autotelic specularity of the class category witnesses the historic loss of its own ontological priority, there emerges the possibility of a politics of social difference that makes no autotelic claims [...] but is genuinely articulatory in its understanding that to be discursively represented and socially representative – *to assume an effective political identity or image* – the limits and conditions of specularity have to be exceeded and erased by the inscription of otherness.
> (Bhabha, 2010: 319)

This new politics of social difference are therefore focused on questions of discursive power (the voice), social, cultural and ultimately textual authority. The politics of discursive and social representation that underlie them can and must no longer be contained within the ideological framework of the Self and strive for

totalitarian dominance. They must open up, enter the Third Space, and actively engage in the processes of translation and negotiation in order to come to a fuller understanding of the Other that in turn will shed more light on the Self. This complementary and dynamic model of social and discursive relations oscillating between the Self and the Other was developed by Bhabha on the basis of the post-colonial situation: "It's a constant worry, this *we*, this *them*", Atwood summarises the preoccupations of the post-colonial mind (2007: 100). Forced by historical and political processes to actively engage in the process of identity formation, of "assum[ing] an effective political identity or image" through performative agency (Bhabha, 2010: 319), postcolonial societies lead the way in managing and reacting to developments that have already reached most contemporary societies and that I will discuss in detail in my second part.

RPGs mirror these cultural and social strategies on a local level, training their players in the skills they will need to make sense of themselves and their environment in a world that is changing ever more quickly, while also connecting them to a global community of gamers. RPGs are thus a glocal medium, very much in line with the processes of change the contemporary individual must face. Although restricting their immediate creative processes to a secondary reality, the liminal spaces they offer provide the security needed for experimentation so that strategies can be developed and tested before they are transferred into primary reality. What is more, RPGs are an inherently communal medium and only work as group efforts, connecting people not isolating them like reading a book does. Altogether, I would therefore like to claim that the similarities between Bhabha's concept of the post-colonial Third Space and the medium of RPGs open up new possibilities to appreciate its subversive and evolutionary potential. To react adequately to a situation of increasing globalisation and the resulting equally increasing need to be able to negotiate differences peacefully and productively, Bhabha suggest to profit from the experiences of successful post-colonial societies and to take a more active and less descriptive approach: "To revise the problem of global space from the postcolonial perspective is to move the location of cultural difference away from the space of demographic *plurality* to the borderline negotiations of cultural translation" (Bhabha, 2010: 319). In my opinion, no other medium I am aware of can do more to foster

mutual understanding and acceptance, and to facilitate the necessary process of cultural translation than RPGs.

5.4 – RPGs as Systems: Narrative Self-organisation and Learning Systems

The fourth and last alternative perspective on RPGs is a bit of an experiment. During my research into possible angles to tackle the medium from, the concept of self-organisation kept popping up here and there, and after Communication- / Game Studies (Jenkins), Cultural Anthropology (Turner), and Cultural- / Postcolonial Studies (Bhabha), there was one big social science that was still missing: Economics. I could soon identify a central textbook used to teach organisational development at university level, Franz Xaver Bea and Elisabeth Göbel's *Organisation: Theorie und Gestaltung* (1999), and I will use it to apply the ideas presented therein on the nature and application of self-organising processes to the RPG medium. I am well aware that there are other, more scientific and/or philosophical texts on the topic out there, but for the purposes of this short subchapter, Bea and Göbel's book seemed more than sufficient to me.[13]

The central question of self-organisation, according to Bea and Göbel, is 'how **order** is created in dynamic, complex systems – like companies for example' (2006: 204; original emphasis). The theory originated in the natural sciences, but was quickly also applied to social and cultural questions (c.f. Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela: *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding*, 1987). Bea and Göbel also draw interesting connections to the economic theories of von Hayek's 'spontaneous order' and Adam Smith's in-/famous 'invisible hand' (2006: 204). Since the latter half of the 1980s, they argue, the theory of self-organisation has increasingly influenced the field of organisational development (ibid.).

The processes of organisation and the creation of order in natural and social systems are the focus of the theory, and order is here defined as the ability 'to form correct or at least likely expectations about the behaviour of members of a system' (Bea and Göbel, 2006: 204). This predictability produces 'consistency, constancy and

[13] Since the book was published in German, all quotes are my translations and therefore marked with single quotation marks ('…'), unless otherwise noted.

reliability, without which no member of a society can pursue their aims effectively' (ibid.). Order is therefore seen as the fundamental condition for self-realisation within a system. If there is no order, there is no reliable way to predict future states of the system, and strategic thinking as well as controlled development is impossible. Within the framework (and the term itself already implies a sense of order) of the RPG experience, it is the order of the explicit and implicit Social Contract, the chosen rule-set and background, as well as their consensual interpretation by ST and players alike that form this necessary element of order or structure. Within the binding constraints of this structure, the participating individuals can enjoy the free space of movement that characterises play.

Self-organisational approaches see other mechanisms at work to create order within a system than just the 'artificial order, commanded by a disposer and within which the principle of command and obedience rules' (2006: 205). The authors differentiate between two different kinds of these additional possibilities:

> **Autonomous Self-organisation:** Order is generated in self-determination by the members of an organisation. If there is a sufficient amount of freedom of action, all members can cooperate to create the order that affects them.
> **Autogenous Self-organisation:** Order is self-generated through the inherent dynamics of complex, dynamic systems. Certain regularities and patterns are spontaneously created, without any conscious human planning.
> (Bea and Göbel, 2006: 205)

The metaphors used to describe processes of autogenous self-organisation are frequently taken from natural processes (ibid.), but since the systems concerned are social and cultural ones, this must *not* result in a naturalisation of neither the processes nor the systems themselves. Earlier organisational models are largely based on mechanical metaphors, first machines then computers, and the emergence of more organic modes of understanding organisation is a fairly recent phenomenon. In some cases, this association goes so far as to call an institutionalised organisation a 'living system' (2006: 206). Like living beings, self-organised social systems (companies or RPG groups) attain a certain amount of independence:

> The result of self-organised processes is a limitation of target-oriented control over an organisation. Just like one can only offer favourable circumstances for growth to a plant, order in a company cannot be totally established but only 'favoured'.
> (Bea and Göbel, 2006: 206)

Both, the two basic concepts of self-organisation and this conclusion show clear connections to the RPG experience, so there seems to be some substance to the comparison. In my detailed discussion of the role of the hub-player (DM, GM, or ST), this 'limitation of target-oriented control' was a fundamental defining feature of the process of narrative creation and the role of the ST in it, with shades of grey between more or less of it. Order, the narrative order of plot, can never totally be under the control of the ST, or the RPG would cease to be a role-playing *game* and become something else: an exercise in storytelling or improvisational drama where the players can only act out the roles scripted for them by the ST. And the distinction between autogenous and autonomous self-organisation is reminiscent of the two basic types of STs or STing styles Rein•Hagen describes: The Rules Lawyer and the Freeformer (1991: 229). While the first clearly establishes the rules and thus the framework for possible and impossible interactions with the secondary reality, what Bea and Göbel call 'the freedom of action' and in Game Studies is known as 'agency', the latter gives in to the flow of the process and acts more like a mediator between the players and a consolidator of narrative strands. While autonomous self-organisation is determined by structure, autogenous self-organisation is determined by anti-structure.

The impact the participation in such processes can have on the individual is considerable, since it can lead to a total de-naturalisation of authority. The concept that 'order is always created by an authority that issues instructions and must be maintained by it' is thus revealed as an error, the authors argue, and the organisation of social systems can be understood as 'planned and consciously created, artificial order' (2006: 206). Another key experience is that order that is based on a single mind can only be of the simplest kind, 'as it only uses the knowledge of a single mind' (2006: 207). Self-organising systems that distribute power between their participants – such as RPGs – can use the resources of all members, creating synergies and

ultimately more efficient and adaptable, dynamic structures. This experience, once made first hand, disenchants the seemingly easy answers provided by autocratic and totalitarian structures. Transposed to RPGs, one could argue that by their very nature as collective, self-organised discursive and narrative systems they implicitly teach their participants about the nature, effective distribution and possible limitations of discursive power, with considerable impact on the conceptualisation of textual authority.

As soon as a certain level of complexity is reached in an organisation, it can no longer be controlled by a single individual: tasks will be delegated to others, and these assignments will be carried out with a certain irreducible amount of autonomy in decision-making. 'The 'gaps' left by the tasks assigned', Bea and Göbel explain, 'grow larger as the organisation grows more complex, resulting in more important autonomous contributions in additions to instructions given' (2006: 207). This is why contemporary theories of organisational development embrace and even promote autonomous self-organisation. Besides higher efficiency, flexibility and quicker processing, this can also be seen in context with a 'humanisation of the work space': by giving the individual more power to decide, they feel valuable and respected, as their contribution is appreciated. The free space provided by progressive management is used by employees to fulfil their role in a company in the way they think best, judging by their own first hand experiences. As they get to creatively shape their working environment, their attachment to and identification with the company intensifies: the sense of empowerment is profitable for both sides, employee and employer. This is also the case in an RPG situation. As soon as the ST gives his or her players leeway to contribute more to the narrative than *only* their character and is willing to bend or even suspend the rules to make these contributions possible in case of a conflict with the structural framework, the result is a win-win situation. Or actually, it is more of a win-win-win situation: ST, players, *and* the narrative created will profit. With the players taking over some of the narrative responsibility, the ST has less work, the players contribute more and therefore maximise agency and immersion, and the input from more than one creative source is certain to bring in and bring up elements in the narrative that would not have been

there otherwise. However, the gamist aspects of the RPG experience will most likely suffer in favour of a more narrativist and/or simulationist touch.

Whereas autonomous self-organisation is thus almost exclusively seen as positive in economics, its autogenous sibling is more of a mixed blessing. The absence of planning that defines it as 'the result of human action, but not human planning' (Hayek in Bea und Göbel, 2006: 207), can either be seen as something positive if one believes in the 'immanent rationality' of evolutionary processes (ibid.), but it can also lead to negative aspects such as the adoption of unreflected mental models or habits that hamper development (ibid.). Intervention from the side of an organising authority might be necessary to reflect upon and deconstruct restrictive views and processes. A ST who completely abdicates all additional discursive power and becomes *de facto* fully equal to the other players, or RPGs that are run without such a hub-player (such as *Ultimate Amber* as I explained earlier), both of these would be examples of autogenous RPG processes. The danger here is that structures and patterns emerge spontaneously that harm or even collapse the narrative process, and since there is no superior authority to intervene, these will go on as long as a majority of the participants (or at least the key participants that control the general direction of the process due to social and/or narrative competence) do not intervene. Ultimately, this can then lead to a failed narrative process. Such an autogenous organisation of an RPG group and their shared narrative process can, however, also maximise all of the advantages of the autonomous approach outlined earlier.

All RPGs are therefore at the very least semi-autonomous narrative collaborations or they become traditional storytelling with added on bits of improvisational theatre. The spectrum of game designs and individual play styles spans the whole range from the truly autonomous ('proper' role-playing) to the extremely autogenous (free-form make-believe). So on both ends of the scale the medium RPG ceases to exist: Too much control suffocates player freedom and self-organisation, and therefore one of the two essential features of RPGs; too little control brings the danger of the process spiralling out of control, utterly exploding all narrative and/or formal structure, the second and just as essential feature of the medium. It is in between these twin catastrophes of utter chaos and static sterility, the Scylla and Charybdis of RPG practice, that groups must steer to successfully create a narrative.

The means to make this easier are rules, or 'norms' as Bea and Göbel call them, 'binding rules and standards that exclude certain options and thus reduce complexity and create order' (2006: 209). These norms can originate outside or inside the systems they regulate (i.e. they can come from hierarchical organisation or from self-organisation), and they operate on three different levels inside these organisations: 'The interpretation of the reality of the organisation, social interaction, as well as structural and procedural organisation in a technical sense' (2006: 210). On all of these three different levels, internal and external norms can interact with each other to complement, correct, or interrupt each other (ibid.).

This analysis is easily transferable from Economics to RPG theory, from the organisation of a company to the organisation of an RPG group and their procedural narrative. External norms would be the ones defined by the conventions of the medium in general and the specific rule- and sourcebooks used, the setting information and the rule-set adopted by a group. This collection of both formal and narrative norms is generally binding for all players using the same game, and in the vast majority of cases it was not created within a group using it, with the exception of so-called 'home-brew' systems that are created and used only locally. Internal norms are the norms that originate within the group playing an RPG, but in the case of traditional pen&paper RPGs, there are at least two degrees of 'internal' within the group, as discursive power is – by definition – distributed asymmetrically between the ST and their players. One could thus differentiate between 'external-internal' norms autocratically defined by the ST as part of the group but not one of the players, and 'internal-internal' norms that emerge from interactions among group members or play itself.

The three levels governed by the norms are just as easily identified in RPGs. The interpretation of the reality of the organisation is equivalent to norms concerning the narrative created. These concern the genre conventions activated, their combination or re-writing, the general assumptions about how plot works (causality) and about the elements required for plot (setting, characters, events), as well as the ideological meaning of the narrative procedure, its 'purpose', no matter whether it is fun, education, the social element, or personal growth, just to name a few. Obviously, these can (and most certainly will) appear in all possible combinations, varying from

game to game, group to group, according to the actual composition of a group at the time of play (people might be absent or just visiting), session to session, or even moment to moment. The second level of norms regulates social interaction, and this is what The Big Model would call the Social Contract, all of the implicit or explicit rules about how a player or an ST are supposed to behave as people in primary reality in order for interaction to be productive and supportive of the narrative process. The third level of norms, the structural and procedural organisation, affects what is generally called the rules of the game: What you can or cannot do within the secondary reality created, how you do it, and what system is used to simulate secondary reality.

As RPGs are inherently self-organising systems on all of the three levels of the experience mentioned above, narrative, social contract, and rules, all of these are normally subjected to what gamers call 'house rules', internal norms or internal variations of external norms that are only valid locally, meaning within this one, specific group, and that other players have to learn through explicit or implicit training when they enter an existing group. Based on my own experience and my theoretical and practical reading, I think it is safe to say that there is no RPG group in existence that does not practice house rules to a larger or lesser degree. This aspect of the norm-structure of the medium most clearly speaks of the essential role self-organisation has on all three levels of norms in RPGs and also makes it a truly glocal medium: negotiating between the global (general) norms set up by medium and pre-text used and the local (special) interpretation of these norms within the group actually producing text. This oscillation between passive and active, global and local, general and specific is what makes RPGs RPGs, even though some proponents of the medium, like Gary Gygax, might not agree. Ultimately, as soon as an RPG text is published, it will be appropriated, interpreted and used (or not) by thousands of individual groups in their very own way due to the de-centred and rhizomatic social structure of the community and the medium, and there is nothing an author can do about that. In this positive and affirmative way, RPGs *are* the death of the author, but in a fertile, explosive and life affirming, not a sterile, implosive and catastrophic manner: forms and contents (norms) are seeded in a public socio-cultural space and

then picked up creatively by individuals and the groups they form. Just another layer of self-organisation that opens up in the discussion of the medium.

What I appreciate about Bea and Göbel's account of self-organisation is that they explicitly point out that there is a paradox at the heart of their theory of self-organisation, as what is needed is an 'organisation of self-organisation' (2006: 211). Abandoning pronounced hierarchies and empowering individual members of a group will result in an increase of autonomous self-organisation, that in turn will maximise efficiency. Who abandons and who empowers? The person(s) holding more power than the others. Acts of external organisation thus foster increased internal self-organisation. This is exactly the ST's function in pen&paper RPGs: Invested by his group with that additional discursive and social authority needed, it is the ST's job to use this power to kickstart the self-organising narrative process and to keep it going by dynamically shifting power back and forth between all participants, including the ST him- or herself. They need to be able to let go of their power to provide players with the opportunity to take power and responsibility and to affect the process, and to take it back when the moment and/or the group dynamics require it to either set-up a new scene or to let other players step into the spotlight if they are hesitant to do so themselves. This is why I deem the shift from DM to GM and eventually to ST to be the most momentous development in the evolution of the medium: leaving the competitive and conflictual reign of the DM behind to hand provisional power to the administrative GM (emphasis on functional game/simulation) or the artistic ST (emphasis on functional narrative).

And while this function of the ST seems easily understandable for autonomous self-organisation in RPGs, with its autogenous counterpart the question remains: 'Can one interfere with self-organising processes in the first place? The answer is: 'It is possible, if the autogenous processes are understood correctly'' (Bea und Göbel, 2006: 212). So this procedural competence adds to the long list of competences needed for a successful ST besides the narrative, social and structural ones (knowledge of rules). Concepts of autogenous processes and norms as learning experiences or as evolutionary experiences (or both) require different strategies for successful intervention in case of unwanted or destructive occurrences: The authors suggest a reward strategy to give incentives for behaviour that is deemed to be

beneficial to the intended direction of processes, and an open and communal reflection of choices made and their effects on the group to affect autogenously emerging patterns. In most RPG groups I know of both of these strategies are in effect, and in the form of Experience Points (or similar concepts) they are even part of the game system itself.

Watching a character grow is one of the central motivations for most role-players to spend their time on RPGs. The system that administers character growth is usually called 'experience', but other names also exist, depending on the flavour and goal of a given game. How does experience affect autogenous self-organisation in RPGs? It rewards only *certain* modes of character and player behaviour. A quick look at the ur-text, *Dungeons & Dragons*, shows not only its origins in wargaming, but also tells the observant reader a lot about the implicit ideology of the game: "As is typical for most of us in real life, each character begins at the bottom of his or her chosen class (or profession). By successfully meeting the challenges posed, they gain experience and move upwards in power [...]" (Gygax, 1980: 7). So, *D&D* wants its players to live the American Dream (or Power Phantasy), to seek out challenges to overcome and accumulate power. Power and money, actually: "Treasure and experience gained must be taken at great risk or by means of utmost cleverness only. If the game is not challenging, if advancement is too speedy, then it becomes staid and boring" (Gygax, 1980: 8). The greater the risk the characters (and thus the players) take, the greater the reward in money and power is going to be. And the challenges just keep coming, as one can always achieve more, accumulate more power and more money, if one is only willing to take more risks. By setting up a reward system like this, *D&D* promotes risk taking as strategy for success on a systemic level, but on an ideological level it promotes the entrepreneurial model: more risk is more profit, more profit is more power. Within the game, the group will therefore automatically prefer and produce autogenous processes that follow this ideological and structural logic, and I would argue that this can also have an effect in primary reality behaviour if the system is not reflected by the participants. *D&D* is thus a true child of its socio-cultural context determined by 'the pursuit of happiness' on the one hand and Manifest Destiny on the other.

Once again, *Vampire: The Masquerade* can be seen as a countertext to *D&D* here. Even though it also has an experience system, the points collected for 'appropriate' behaviour do not accumulate like in *D&D*, they are used up to develop the character, they are thus 'reinvested' into the narrative and ludic system. Unlike the barely veiled power phantasy that is *D&D*, *Vampire* proposes a different understanding of character 'development':

> However, in **Vampire**, development doesn't always mean the character gets better. Oftentimes it means the character is slowly and steadily sinking into the abyss. Such is the nature of this game. Focus on getting better and surviving the rough periods, and try to appreciate the artistic impact of losing your Humanity or your mind.
> (Rein•Hagen et al., 1991: 113)

Since at the core of the game stands the metaphorical meditation on human nature, and more specifically the nature of Western societies at the time of writing, the inevitable loss of Humanity and the resulting inevitable defeat and destruction of the character makes for a completely different dynamics: You do not rush towards victory (linear progress), you can only try to delay defeat (cyclical regress).

D&D is essentially about *winning*:

- its central conflict is *externalised*: you quest to find monsters out there (the Other)
- it is *heroic*: you kill the monsters you find (the Other)
- it is *optimistic*: if you die you get resurrected anyway, permanent harm is unlikely
- it expresses a *Capitalist ideology* of accumulation and a military/political one of *Manifest Destiny*: you are *entitled* to kill monsters (the Other) and take what is theirs

Vampire is essentially about *losing*:

- its central conflict is *internalised*: "A Beast I am, lest a Beast I become" (Chupp and Greenberg, 1993: 18), the Other is found *inside*

- it is *anti-heroic*: you play the monster yourself (the Other)
- it is *pessimistic*: you cannot survive, combat is deadly and moral degeneration almost unstoppable
- it expresses an *anti-Capitalist, anti-conflict ideology*: it exposes the destructive ugliness of the logic of accumulation and of predatory behaviour

Since these concepts also need to be promoted in play itself (the more or less autogenous self-organising production of narrative), the experience system provides incentives to behave accordingly. At the end of each session of play, the following aspects are rewarded:

> 1 point – Automatic: Players get 1 point after every game session.
> 1 point – Educational Experience: The character would have learned something from their experiences during the Chapter. Ask the player to describe what their character learned before you award them the point.
> 1 point – Roleplaying: The player roleplayed well. Not only entertainingly, but appropriately. Award for exceptional roleplaying only, your standards should get increasingly higher.
> (Rein•Hagen et al., 1991: 114)

Besides the mere continuation of play, it is the educational experience and the roleplaying that will get the player experience points to spend on his or her character. On the one hand this reinforces the aspect of the internalised meditation on important themes and topics of human nature (education), on the other hand it promotes immersion and a narrative style of play (roleplaying). Unlike these, the rewards at the end of a story (not a session), however, still feel a bit like remnants of an older, more linear and progressive logic in RPGs, as the criteria applied there are Success, Danger, and Wisdom (Rein•Hagen et al., 1991: 114)

But there are many more approaches to experience and how it aims to produce a certain autogenous style of play preferred by the designers for their game. One of the most creative and interesting examples is *7th Sea* (1999), a faux-17th century swashbuckling-cum-archaeology RPG (think *The Three Musketeers* meets INDIANA JONES via PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN) by Jennifer and John Wick. Besides a meagre

amount of one to five XPs (experience points) depending on the general difficulty of the story, players also gain so-called Drama Dice during play that then turn into XPs at the end of a story. What are the conditions to get those? Simple: Style!

> You earn Drama Dice through roleplaying. If your Hero snaps off some witty banter at a Villain while engaged in deadly swordplay, you'll earn a Drama Die. If he pauses for a moment before leaping out the window to give the beautiful princess a good-bye kiss, you'll get a Drama Die. In short, whenever you pull off an Action with unusual flair, you'll earn yourself a Drama Die. (Wick and Wick, 2000: 23)

By introducing a concept such as Drama Dice, Wick and Wick, even though they know they cannot - and knowing their game most likely also would not - regulate the styles used by players, can exert a considerable influence on the autogenous narrative process by rewarding characters (and thus ultimately players) that engage in the dramatic and tongue-in-cheek swashbuckling style they consider most appropriate for their setting. Negotiating between freedom and structure also means to know about and understand the processes that emerge from social interaction and how to affect them to produce a desired effect or avoid an undesirable outcome such as Monster-of-the-Week hack'n'slash orgies in *7th Sea*.

The last aspect in Bea und Göbel's survey of self-organisation in organisational development that I can apply to RPGs is the idea of human nature that such an approach conveys. The authors see two basic assumptions in the argument: the limited rationality and self-interest of human beings (2006: 212). Even though they both sound negative, they are not meant to be. The assumption of limited rationality is nothing but the awareness of the limited capacity of the human mind to assimilate and process information. Instead of the older concept of the omniscient and infallible leader which is unfortunately still present in several religious, political and academic institutions, a world-view favouring self-organisation accepts the existing restrictions and hopes to circumvent them by creating collective think-tanks: 'Everyone's knowledge instead of the omniscience of the few!' is the motto (2006: 212). The second assumption smacks a bit of egotistical, economic theory, but again the authors immediately relativize this impression: 'Human beings are motivated in a

certain way to their actions and they want to fulfil their needs' is the neutral definition they provide (ibid.), and later they add: 'The reasonable human being acknowledges that as a member of society it can only fulfil its self-interest within the collective norms and rules that also guarantee the interests of others' (2006: 213). This is the concept of 'enlightened' self-interest known from Adam Smith's theories (ibid.), a differentiated position that is unfortunately largely absent from Late Capitalism. What self-organising systems can contribute to a re-structuring not only of traditional concepts of how companies are to be run, or RPGs for that matter, but - on a much more general level - how society itself could function differently, is that they upend classical misconceptions about human nature, the authors argue:

> The ideas of human nature in older approaches like to overestimate humanity in regard of its cognitive abilities (there is sufficient knowledge for total and optimal organisation), and to underestimate its character (we are lazy, passive, shy away from responsibility, and are opportunistic) […]. […] Self-organisation is connected to the opposite assumptions.
> (Bea and Göbel, 2006: 213)

So everyone's knowledge is limited, but that is not a problem since individuals are supposed to work together and can thus use more, and more diverse cognitive resources and their synergies. All participants in such processes are trusted to be willing and able to take responsibility, to invest themselves and show initiative and independence according to the possibilities and restrictions of the framework provided. Bea and Göbel later develop the concept of organisational learning on this basis, and they define three core problems that need to be overcome in order to create such a 'learning system':

> (1) The collectivisation of individual knowledge
> (2) Securing the use of existing knowledge
> (3) The continued and continuous promotion of learning processes
> (Bea and Göbel, 2006: 438)

Using these three cornerstones, one could define RPGs, or rather their process of narrative creation in play, as self-organising systems, constantly oscillating between

the autonomous and the autogenous end of the spectrum of possibilities in order to keep the group dynamics, the processes of social and cultural translation and negotiation, and the resulting narrative going. This is a procedural, narrative medium, that also constitutes a 'learning system' (in both meanings of the phrase): individual knowledge is brought into the process and shared; implicit competences are thus made explicit, evaluated, elements adapted and adopted by others if use- or helpful; and through the social bonds and the experience of agency and immersion that is often absent in primary reality, the process is perpetuated so that the participants can continually build upon everyone's previous experiences and evaluate new experiences. The fun and companionship resulting from the process of playing RPGs signals to everyone involved: 'learning is desired and will be rewarded' (2006: 438).

It is thus that, using theories of self-organising systems originally developed for Economics, I would like to argue that RPGs as a medium can provide highly efficient and pleasurable learning environments. The contents made available in these continually evolving and ambiguously named 'learning systems' (I appreciate the double-encoding), are, however, not intrinsically connected with the complex and intricate system itself: they can range from the predatory and unreflected Capitalism and Manifest Destiny of *D&D* to the ponderous and introspective critique of Late Capitalism in *Vampire*. And sometimes the only thing one wants to learn from an RPG is how to swing across a ball-room on a chandelier in style, and there is nothing wrong with that either.

Part 2 – The Power of Words: Understanding Postmodernism

The first part of this thesis was used to define and situate the medium RPG in its own practical and theoretical environment. The focus here was on the narrative situation that makes RPGs unique, the historical development of the very special hybrid form of story-games resulting from it, as well as theoretical approaches to the medium from both within and outside of the community of gamers.

This second part of my argument will now take a step beyond the medium itself, its complex textualities and procedural narration, and I will try to establish the wider socio-cultural and philosophical context that – and this is my thesis – made the creation of RPGs possible in the first place and that still determines all of their elements and mechanisms on a formal as well as a content level. The term used most often for this context is 'Postmodernism', and this is where the problems begin.

6 – What's in a name?: The Terminology of Postmodernism

Before one can even begin to understand such a complex and oftentimes contradictive cultural discourse as Postmodernism, the term itself needs to be defined and put in context with others that are sometimes – successfully or not - used interchangeably with it, sometimes as differentiations of a common core of shared meanings. Since language and culture are not dead things, however, but live and change over the years and decades, it is also necessary to take a closer look at the historical perspective of the terminology and the concepts it has been and still is used to convey. Only by taking both dimensions into consideration – the diachronic change and the synchronic alternatives – can one even hope to approach a fuller understanding of the elusive Postmodern, Postmodernism, and its critics, which I will attempt in the remaining two chapters of this part, before I try and bring RPGs and Postmodernism together in my conclusions.

6.1 - The 'Post'-Problem: Constructing a Terminology of Postmodernism

'Postmodernism' is a curious concept, for unlike other socio-cultural movements or schools of thought its proponents most often identify it not as something it *is* (positively), but rather as something it is *not* (negatively). Thus the term itself does not circumscribe a concise and comprehensive cultural theory in itself, it signifies a turning away from or reacting to what came before: the Postmodern comes after ("post") and/or transcends that which is Modern. And again, the prefix itself rejects a clearly defined meaning, destabilising any possible construction of an understanding of the change from one to the other.

Richard Appignanesi poignantly formulates the questions this seemingly simple prefix raises in *Introducing Postmodernism* (2007): "But in what sense exactly is it [i.e. Postmodernism] **post**… As a **result** of modernism? The **aftermath** of modernism? The **afterbirth** of modernism? The **development** of modernism? The **denial** of modernism? The **rejection** of modernism?" (2007: 4; original emphases). His suggested answer to this conundrum is just as unsatisfying in that the term "has been used in a mix-and-match of some or all of these meanings" (ibid.), ultimately coming to the conclusion – or rather lack thereof - that "Postmodernism is a confusion of meanings" (ibid.).

In *The Postmodern Turn* (1997), their analysis of the emergence of new paradigms in the socio-political, economical and cultural systems of Western societies during the last decades of the 20th century, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner defined this as a "Time of the Posts" (Best, 1997: 3) where an almost obsessive use of the prefix becomes an expression of a sometimes even "apocalyptic sense of rupture" (ibid.), a pervading but vague foreboding of the end of an era and the profound changes this would bring. Some critics would take the linear, teleological concepts of history and change (or 'progress') this sequencing implies to its extreme, such as Francis Fukuyama who even proclaimed *The End of History and The Last Man* in his eponymous book of 1992, arguing that liberal democracy and free market economy were the logical culmination and end-point of human cultural development and the stable states of post-historical societies (Fukuyama, 1992: 276). On the other end of the spectrum of certainties Jean Baudrillard came to a similar conclusion, namely the "disappearance of history and the real" in US-American society (Baudrillard, 2000:

101), but not in achievement of utopia, but the collapse of all meaning in the hyper-reality of the simulacrum, the self-referential image without reference to an extratextual, primary reality.

Even though leading critics of the Postmodern debate such as Linda Hutcheon refuse to give in to these "claims of radical revolutionary change or any apocalyptic wailing about the decline of the west under late capitalism" (Hutcheon, 1999: ix), the 'post' in Postmodernism strongly anchors the term in a historical perspective. And so Hutcheon comes to the conclusion that "what I want to call postmodernism is fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political", dominated by "the presence of the past" in the present (ibid.: 4). For Madan Sarup Postmodernity "refers to the incipient or actual dissolution of those social forms associated with modernity" (Sarup, 1993: 130), but again this only leaves us with still more unanswered questions: "[Should] the postmodern be regarded a part of the modern? Is it a continuity or a radical break? Is it a material change or does it indicate a mood, a state of mind?" (ibid.). The first two questions again hinge on the reading of the 'post' in Postmodern, the third one refers to the problematic ontology of the concept of Postmodernism itself, an issue that I would like to look at in more detail in the following section. Continuity versus change, the Postmodern as logical development and continuation of the (Late-)Modern or as a radical break with it, this central dilemma of all theoretical discourses about Postmodernism is already inherent in the seemingly simple prefix 'post'.

Either reading, however, runs the risk of falling to the temptation of the construction of historical periods or eras: Modernism followed and supplanted by Postmodernism, which in turn will give way to the next large socio-cultural discourse. The teleological, progressive model of history inherited from Enlightenment philosophy that underlies any such reading immediately signifies an ideological *parti pris*, becomes not only the expression of a certain, preconceived notion of the workings of historical development, but beyond that a political position associated with it: Fukuyama's pseudo-utopian and neo-liberal "End of History" is one of the logical final destinations of such a journey. Thus critics like Peter V. Zima that are aware of the problematic nature of all notions of eras or historical periods warn that 'such classifications are not only constructed according to logical and semiotic, but

also ideological criteria' (Zima, 2001: 23)[14]. History itself becomes the subject of Postmodern scrutiny and analysis: "our beliefs in origins and ends, unity, and totalization, logic and reason, representation and truth, not to mention the notions of causality and temporal homogeneity, linearity, and continuity" (Hutcheon, 1999: 87), and both history and literary discourse are seen as "determined by underlying theoretical assumptions" (Ibid.: 99).

Beyond simplistic historical periodisation, Postmodernism can then only be understood as a set of developments that occurred in the context of Late-Modern western societies in reaction to the social, economic, political and cultural environments they were formulated in. As vague as this reading of the 'post' in Postmodernism might sound, the complex and intertwined relationships between Modernism and Postmodernism that refuse any more concrete definition will be the subject of an entire section later.

The precarious reading of a deceptively simple yet so incomprehensively complex prefix already shows the heightened contextual awareness and the lack of theoretical unity (or unification) that pervades Postmodern discourses as well as discourses on Postmodernism, sometimes bordering on the implosion of any possibility of a meaningful statement about the nature of the subject as "'postmodern' is a term *bon à tout faire*" (Eco, 1984: 31).

So why then not find a different name, one that better grasps the nature of these perceived changes in cultural production and reception most critics can agree on, one that helps focus theoretical discourse? In his seminar article "Postmodernismus: Ein begriffsgeschichtlicher Überblick" Michael Köhler suggests a whole plethora of possible replacements, 'post-history, post-Aristotelian, post-Christian, post-Humanism, post-rational, post-liberal, post-industrial' (Köhler, 1977: 9)[15], only to expose them all as over-simplifications of a complex present focussing on and using only certain aspects of the past, an approach he deems acceptable, however, as long as there is critical awareness of its purely heuristic function. Knowledge, according to

[14] Since the book was published in German, all quotes are my translations and therefore marked with single quotation marks ('…'), unless otherwise noted.

[15] The article was published in German, so all quotes are my translations and therefore marked with single quotation marks ('…').

Köhler, is all about the discovery of difference, not about the (re-)presentation of a stable and closed reality (ibid.).

In tune with the deeply serious and self-destructive implications a unification of Postmodern theories would have for the logical and argumentative integrity of the concept itself, violating some of the core aspects of what is constructed as Postmodern – namely the incomplete, local and partially random nature of knowledge (Köhler, 1977: 9; FN3), there have been several attempts to establish alternative terminologies, some of them more successful than others, but all of them eventually superseded by Lyotard's use of the term 'Postmodernism' in his seminal analysis *La Condition Postmoderne* of 1979 in a complex struggle between the centrifugal and the centripetal forces at work.

In *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (1973) Daniel Bell defined this 'new' society he expected by a structural change from production to service industries, accompanied by a growing importance of the technical and scientific sectors (information technologies, cybernetics), and a loss of influence for the working class due to this growing importance of intellectual instead of manual skills. Science and technology become motors for economic and social innovation, and as consumption replaces production as the driving force of society, it eventually undermines the basis of the ideology of capitalism itself: hedonism and individualism lead to the atomisation of society (Zima, 2001: 35). In his attempt to describe the socio-cultural changes Bell perceived, the economic infrastructure becomes his primary focus of attention. The replacement of production by consumption, of industry by the tertiary sector as the heart of society creates a fittingly named "Post-Industrial Society" of individualistic, narcissistic hedonists disinterested in Modern/-ist utopias.

Unlike Bell, Jean Baudrillard concentrates his attention in *The Illusion of the End* (1992) on the role and function of the media in western societies. According to Zima he takes up ideas developed in the 1950s by Arnold Gehlen and constructs a theory of 'Postmodernism as *Posthistoire*' (Zima, 2001: 106), claiming that "total media simulation in late capitalism suspends event, politics and history" (ibid.). Echoing the strong connection of Postmodernism to the historical, this argument is superficially reminiscent of Fukuyama's concept of the End of History. In nature these two

arguments could, however, not be more diametrically opposed: As Fukuyama's End is one that results in the establishment of a quasi-utopian, permanently stable global liberal democracy and free market, rendering the need for any further development and thus history itself obsolete and thereby achieving ultimate closure for the narrative of human history, Baudrillard's *posthistoire* signifies the instability or utter implosion of the historical narrative, indeed all reality in hyper-real simulation built around simulacra, images that have lost all connection to a reality other than themselves, "substituting the signs of the real for the real" (Baudrillard, 1994: 2). Postmodernism and posthistoire are not one and the same, but there are clear connections identified by Zima: the incredulity towards grand narratives, a re-ideologisation of society accompanied by a complementary collapse of the cultural energies of market economy societies (2001: 34). *Posthistoire*, used almost synonymously with Postmodernism in Baudrillard's work based on the French homonym *histoire* for "story" and "history", becomes the state after the collapse not only of the specific narratives of history, but of all stories, all narrative, secondary representations of an inaccessible primary reality.

Strongly influenced by Baudrillard's ideas on the one hand and his Neo-Marxist background on the other, Frederic Jameson identifies Postmodernism as the cultural logic of what he terms Late Capitalism where

> [in] the gradual disappearance of the physical marketplace [...] and the tendential identification of the commodity with its image (or brand name or logo) [a] symbiosis between the market and the media is effectuated, in which boundaries are washed over [...] and an indifferentiation of levels gradually takes the place of an older separation between thing and concept (or indeed, economics and culture, base and suprastructure).
> (Jameson, 1999: 275)

Like Baudrillard's *Posthistoire* Jameson's Late Capitalism thus implodes all meaning as the economic sphere using the influence of the media encroaches upon and consumes all other spheres of social life, subjecting them to a market logic and translating all other values into exchange value. What remains are only empty signifiers, simulacra that bear no relation to the real. Images (both in the literal and metaphorical sense) are sold, replacing produced goods. Marxist scepticism towards

free market economy together with the Baudrillardian dissolution of reality in simulation makes Jameson's perspective on the Postmodern (or Late Capitalism in his terms) an inherently negative and hostile one, weakening its possible constructive contribution to a positive definition.

Whereas Bell's Post-Industrial Society, Baudrillard's *Posthistoire* and Jameson's Late Capitalism seek to define the Postmodern without direct reference to the Modern in their choice of terminology, other critics express their understanding of the socio-cultural changes described by the use of different *prefixes* suggesting less a linear historical sequence ('post') and more of a conceptual development or metamorphosis of the Modern into the Postmodern.

The OED gives the possible meanings of the prefix 'hyper-' as "over, beyond, or above", "involving some extension or complication" or "over much, to excess, exceedingly" (OED online), so accordingly, Hypermodernism is either constructed as going beyond, extending or as an extreme, excessive expression of Modernism itself. Appignanesi cleverly combines the two claiming that "[we] are entering (have entered?) an amnesiac zone of 'postmodernity' which should be called hypermodernism. The meaning of so-called postmodernism turns out to be a technological hyper-intensification of modernism" (Appignanesi, 2007: 126). In this extreme and antithetical understanding, Modernism is simultaneously mediated and transformed by technology, and while Modernist core values are preserved and communicated, they are also perceived to be in crisis. Information technology shapes reality into hyper-reality, space into hyper-space, expressions of an encroaching cultural dominance of virtuality, secondary or even tertiary realities utterly free of any grounding in primary reality. In this hyper- or cyberspace, a term prominently disseminated by US-Canadian author William Gibson in his cyber-punk novel *Neuromancer* (1984), the focus of attention is the self, the perception and the active construction of realities. The question is whether this interfacing of humanity and machine in the hypermodern cyberspace is an act of resistance to the Modern, an attempt to go beyond it, to transcend it, or whether it is just a Neo-Romantic (or "New Romantic") withdrawal into the self and the quasi-magical. Gibson's suggested answer seems clear from the choice of title for his landmark novel. Other theoreticians like Paul Virilio, the French cultural theorist and urbanist, interpret the

'hyper' in Hypermodernism as an expression of the speed and power technological developments seem to suggest as the dominant discourse of western societies (c.f. Armitage, 2000). Again, the polysemy inherent to the prefix and thus the term created with it allows for several, even openly contradicting readings making Hypermodernism an even more precarious term to use than the problematic Postmodernism already is.

There is also another prefix that when used together with Modernism becomes a tempting alternative denomination for the Postmodern: 'trans'. But "[it] is not simply a matter of playing with words, of randomly assigning a prefix without further implications" when Spanish philosopher Rosa María Rodríguez Magda develops Transmodernity in her eponymous book *Transmodernidad* (2004) from Postmodernity and Modernity (Rodríguez Magda, 2008). She constructs a synthesis of the two in the context of globalisation. As the political and ethical spheres largely retain Modernist values and the cultural and aesthetical ones mostly express Postmodernist sentiments at the same time, the individual is constantly "jumping back and forth between two paradigms that have lost their momentum. Reality is forever changed and calls for a transmodern type of thinking" (ibid.). In a (Postmodern?) ironic twist on the Hegelian dialectical model, Rodríguez Magda finds her understanding of reality in a synthesis of the Modern thesis and its Postmodern antithesis, in a hybrid and virtual form that abandons system and the quest for the Absolute and gives in to self-organisation and the depletion of truth.

These ideas echo Enrique Dussel's concept of Transmodernity that he first formulated in his 2002 article "World-System and Transmodernity" and later developed in "Transmodernity and Interculturality" (2004). From his own Postcolonial experience as an Argentinean philosopher and theologian, he initially recognised a distinctive difference in the Latin American and Western European readings of Modernity and Postmodernity, and based on this experience started looking for a way of thinking beyond these Eurocentric categories. He claims that only the active affirmation of the alterity of non-European cultures from European Modernism can lead to a paradigm that truly reflects their perspectives, since as "they are not modern, these cultures cannot be 'post'-modern either" (Dussel, 2004: 18). He argues that Transmodernity would value "all those aspects that are situated

'beyond' (and also 'prior to') the structures valorized by modern European/North American culture" (ibid.) and that a transversal cultural dialogue between critical cultural innovators on all sides is to be established, a dialogue that would therefore be one between the respective fringes of the societies and cultures involved. This exchange between peripheries across dominant, central cultures would be truly 'trans-modern', "because [...] the creative force does not come from the interior of Modernity, but rather from its exteriority, or better yet from its 'borderlands'" (Dussel, 2004: 25). These two concepts of Transmodernity, born on opposite sides of a shared Postcolonial history, try to establish a new way of living in relation to others. In their critique of established discourses of Modernism and Postmodernism they promote multilateral, anti-centric alternatives that want to go beyond ('trans') these two by either attempting hybridity and synthesis (Rodríguez Magda) or by rejecting totalising synthesis, but favouring a continued, critical intercultural dialogue (Dussel).

6.2 – The Past of the 'Post': A Terminological History of Postmodernism

Of all the terms suggested over the last thirty years to attempt to grasp the perceived shifts in culture in Western societies in the latter half of the 20th century, none would enter and pervade public and academic awareness to such a degree as 'Postmodernism', the term that Lyotard adopted and adapted in meaning to signify his own construction of *The Postmodern Condition* in his eponymous and highly influential work of 1979. Already in the first few lines of his introduction, the author addresses the origin of his terminology:

> The object of this study is the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies. It was decided to call it 'postmodern'. This word is used on the American continent by sociologists and critics. It designates the state of culture after the transformations that have affected the rules of science, literature and the arts from the beginning of the 19th century. (Lyotard, 1984: xxiii)

Here Lyotard establishes a geographical, historical, and cultural context for the term – it is a continental American concept – and relates it to changes that are

supposed to have started in the early 19th century, but he does not give the reader any indication of the chronological context of the use of the term Postmodern itself.

Köhler claims that the Spanish and Latin American discussion of *postmodernismo* in literature predates its Northern American sister debate. He identifies the *Antologia de la Poesia Española e Hispanoamericana*, edited and introduction by Federico de Oníz in 1934, as the first appearance of concept and term, part of a suggested tripartite structure in the development of Modernism (Köhler, 1977: 10). Following de Oníz's argument, *Postmodernismo* was a conservative reaction whose beginnings date back to 1905 in an attempt to go against the perceived experimental and innovative excesses of *Modernismo*, in stark opposition to and coexisting with a clearly revolutionary *Ultramodernismo* that in turn sought to push creative freedom even beyond the limits of *Modernismo*. Although de Oníz provides a chronology (*Modernismo* 1896 – 1905, *Postmodernismo* 1905 – 1914, *Ultramodernismo* 1914 – 1932) and thus a historical context, he transcends a purely sequential understanding and states that both smaller movements also remained beneath the umbrella of the bigger one and did not succeed it (Köhler, 1977: 10). These ideas were later picked up and developed further by Octavio Corvalan, who subsumed *Post-* and *Ultramodernismo* within a redefinition of the term in *El Postmodernismo* (1961), and by José-Carlos Maine in his *Atlas de Literatura Latinoamericana* (1972), who shifted the historical division between *Modernismo* and *Postmodernismo* to 1930, effectively collapsing de Oníz's *Post-* and *Ultramodernismo* with its parent movement and applying the term to a whole new set of cultural and literary conditions (ibid.).

The first English language source identified by Köhler directly references the debate in Latin America, Dudley Fitts's *Anthology of Contemporary Latin-American Poetry* of 1942, although Köhler is careful enough not to claim that the term had been taken over from Spanish into English, and indeed to posit a (for the author at the time only) likely earlier use of "Postmodern" in the English language (Köhler, 1977: 10). While he remains unfortunately vague about the origins of the terminology, he however does point out that neither the Latin American tradition nor Fitts enjoyed a mass reception in the Anglosphere. When he attributes the achievement of introducing the term into English-language discourse to British historian Arnold

Toynbee, this is where he reconnects with other later attempts at terminological histories of Postmodernism.

Steven Best and Douglas Kellner in their comprehensive and interdisciplinary "Archaeology of the Postmodern", as well as Ihab Hassan, Peter V. Zima, and Richard Appignanesi, all situate the first use of the term 'Postmodernism' in the English language in or around 1870. They associate it with the Victorian British salon painter John Watkins Chapman (1831 – 1903) who at the time aimed at leaving behind and going beyond the then "modern" style of the French Impressionists, hoping to establish a 'post-modern', i.e. "more modern" and avant-garde style of his own (c.f. Appignanesi, 2007: 3; Best, 1991: 5; Hassan, 2000: 118; Zima, 2001: 30). Charles Jencks identifies the birth of Postmodernism in a "throwaway challenge in 1875" (Jencks, 2009: 20), so roughly at about the same time and closely connected to a then incipient cultural logic that he calls the "arrival of the 'posties'", symptom of continually accelerating cultural changes that led to Oscar Wilde's acerbic observation that already by the 1920s "all the Isms [had] become Wasms" (ibid.).

The next decisive step in the terminological development and a total semantic shift came with German philosopher and author Rudolf Pannwitz who in 1917 demanded a Nietzschean and 'post-modern' overcoming of the – according to Pannwitz - endemic Nihilism and decadence, the collapse of values typical of the era by the *Übermensch*. In Best and Kellner's reading this identification of the Postmodern with the militaristic, nationalistic élite values of the Nietzschean *Übermensch* place it firmly in a proto-Fascist frame of reference (1991: 6). Zima's interpretation is more lenient, seeing in this urge to leave behind the "ailments and errors of Modernity" an understandable (if not condoned) focus on the perceived *décadence* since 1850 (Zima, 2001: 30). Another connection to similar pejorative contexts in the fields of philology and religion by Spanish critics Federico de Oníz and Gilbert Azam (taken over from Wolfgang Welsch's *Unsere Postmoderne*, 1991) reinforces this more negative interpretation (Zima, 2001: 31).

Following Margaret A. Rose's account of the – as she calls it – "problematic" history of the use of the term "Postmodern/-ism" the next step was taken about 1945 at the very latest when it entered architectural discourse (Rose, 1991: 67). Although she mentions unidentified "others" that supposedly spearheaded this development,

she associates it closely with Joseph Hudnut's article "The Post-modern House" (1945) where it is used to define mass-produced, prefabricated buildings that according to dominant terminological usage today would rather be seen as Ultra- than Postmodern (ibid.). The situation is not helped at all by the terminological confusion Hudnut creates when he interchangeably uses "Postmodern", "Modern" and "Ultra-Modern" in his *Architecture and the Spirit of Man* (1949) for the industrial production of houses. But there is also a distinctly Postmodern aspect to Hudnut's vision, when he writes about the "eclectic soul" of the suburbs that is "by intuition if not by understanding, nearer the heart of architecture than those rigid minds which understand nothing but the economics of shelter and the arid technicalities of construction" (Hudnut in Rose, 1991: 69). This overt criticism of the rational, cold and technocratic side of Modernism, this Postmodern praise of the eclectic and intuitive, without the destruction of Modernist ideals, is exactly what lead to Jencks's claim that Hudnut entered the Postmodern into the "architectural subconscious" (Jencks in Rose, 1991: 69) and to Rose giving him a prominent place in her attempt at "Defining the Post-Modern" (1991).

All of the terminological histories I consulted converge again at the next, decisive step in the use of the term Postmodern/ism: Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History*, originally published in twelve volumes between 1934 and 1961. Unlike other critics, Best and Kellner claim that it was not Toynbee himself but rather D.C. Somervell, a British schoolmaster who produced abridged versions of the historian's magnum opus in 1946/47, who first introduced the term for a break with the socio-cultural and political framework of the Modern age that Toynbee had theoretically postulated and situated at the end of the 19th century. The original author was then so much taken in by this addition that he adopted it himself during his 1963 revision of volumes VIII and IX (Best and Kellner, 1991: 6). Rose directly contradicts the authors here attributing the terminological shift to Toynbee directly in several volumes of his Study published both during and after World War II, and especially Volume V where it is used for the period inaugurated by World War I (Rose, 1991: 69). It remains unclear, however, whether the author here refers to the revised editions of 1963 or the original ones.

Beyond these differences, Best and Kellner, Hassan, Jencks, Köhler, Rose, and Zima all agree that Toynbee's highly influential historical overview was a very decisive

step (c.f. Best and Kellner, 1991: 6; Hassan, 2000: 118; Jencks, 2009: 20; Köhler, 1977: 10; Rose, 1991: 69; Zima, 2001: 31) and that it was most likely essential to the mass reception of the term in the Anglosphere (Köhler, 1977: 10). The "Post-Modern" in Toynbee is the fourth, most recent and ongoing stage of Western history and culture, following in sequence after the Dark Ages, the Middle Ages and the Modern era. It is initialised by a transitional period of wars, social turmoil and revolutions where relativism and anarchy lead to a collapse of rationalism and the Enlightenment project. Toynbee even provides a more precise dating, with 1875 being a watershed moment that, according to him, transformed an earlier predominantly narrow national perspective into more global political interactions. Hassan reads this as the end of the dominance of the bourgeois, Western, Modern order (Hassan, 2000: 118), whereas Zima focuses more on Toynbee's ideas about the transnational, global shift in the Postmodern era, agreeing that globalisation does play an essential role on an ecological, political, and technological level, but that the author also turns a blind eye to contradictory movements and Postmodernism's strong focus on particularisms that we see underlying the works of Foucault, Baudrillard and Feminist theories (Zima, 2001: 31).

Rose and Jencks go into more detail about Toynbee's contribution to the terminological history of Postmodern theory. Rose constructs a reading that clearly establishes a link between the Postmodern and the rise of the industrial, urban working class in Western societies, contrasting it with the middle class's domination of the Modern era (1991: 69). In close connection to this internal change of the system, external changes like the rise of non-Western nations and their respective working classes, and of what she calls "post-Christian religions" and sciences exert additional pressure for social and cultural change (1991: 70). Even though this analysis might give a very bleak and doomed impression of the perceived processes at work, conjuring the "end of Western dominance, Christian culture and individualism" (ibid.), Rose argues that Toynbee himself saw especially his post-war editions as largely optimistic and that he openly criticised those who take the end of their own historical period as the end of history per se (1991: 71).

Jencks takes this argument a step further, providing an even more differentiated approach. He agrees with Rose that Toynbee's concept of the Postmodern is based

on the end of Western dominance, the decline of individualism, Capitalism and Christianity, the counterbalancing rise of non-Western cultures with a positive reference to pluralism and global culture, all of them still aspects essential to current definitions of the Postmodern, and that Toynbee himself was highly critical of the decline implicit in the use of the prefix "post" (Jencks, 2009: 21). Yet this negative reading was one that was taken up by literary and cultural critics such as Irving Howe and Harold Levine for their polemical attacks on the processes of cultural and social change in the societies of their time that they acknowledged but refused to attribute any validity to. In Jencks's argument, this ab-/use of the term still reverberates today in the negative connotations that the Postmodern has never been able to shake off completely, but ironically it is also constructed as helpful, since its "paranoiac overtones and suggestion of decline" tapped into the Zeitgeist of Western societies at the end of the 20th century and thus pushed its cultural pervasiveness (Jencks, 2009: 21). The empowerment of the Postmodern and its rise to the status of leading theoretical discourse in Western cultures thus is a direct result of this appropriation of an originally negative label based on a specific reading of Toynbee as a tactical insult against Modernists (like it happened with other labels before, such as Gothic, Baroque or Impressionism), and the resulting Modernist anger that turned Postmodernism into a media event and placed it at the centre of public attention for several decades (ibid.). Jencks here positions Toynbee at the origin and the heart of an ironic theoretical and cultural reversal, a very postmodern process that led to the rise of Postmodernism as a dominant theoretical and cultural discourse in Western societies.

Following the traces of the terminology further, Ihab Hassan next names Bernard Smith who applied it to Social Realism in painting in opposition to abstraction after World War II, and like Köhler he then moves on to Charles Olson, poet and essayist of the 1950s, who was part of a group of poets and artists of the Black Mountain College reverting to Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams's understanding of Modernism, rejecting the hermetic Formalism of people like T.S. Eliot (Hassan, 2000: 118). Köhler identifies a heavy use of the term 'Postmodern' in Olson's works between 1950 and 1958, but points out the utter lack of a definition, as the author relied more on the suggestive qualities of the label (1977: 11). He takes it out of the narrow context of

literary history and into the sphere of philosophy by describing a move towards a non-Socratic, non-Aristotelian humanity after 1875 who applies the "known techniques of the universe to man himself" (ibid.).

Best and Kellner next mention Bernard Rosenberg, a US-American cultural historian who in his introduction to an anthology on mass culture in 1957 described living conditions in such a culture as "postmodern", defined by the universality of globalisation and a pervasive commodification of all spheres of life (Best and Kellner, 1991: 7). Very much in line with the largely negative analyses of the time, Rosenberg centres his critique on the ambiguity of the processes and developments he observes, concluding that a "postmodern world offers everything and nothing" (ibid.). In stark contradiction to Rosenberg's perspective, US economist Peter Drucker published his *The Landmarks of Tomorrow: A Report on the Post-Modern World*, also in 1957. Here the definition of a Postmodern society is equated with the concept of a post-industrial society, following the expected argumentative logic of the economist. Drucker sees a turn away from a Modernist, Cartesian world-view and towards one that is dominated and defined by "pattern, purpose, and process" (Drucker in Best and Kellner, 1991: 8): new technologies allow ever increasing control over nature at the price of ever increasing dangers to their users, and together with an explosion of knowledge and education this overall results in a rather optimistic perspective, ironically carried by an unstoppable wave of worldwide modernisation.

But Drucker's is a minority voice at the end of the 1950s. The vast majority of critics are more in line with C. Wright Mills who termed the Postmodern the new, fourth epoch after the Modern Age in his *The Sociological Imagination* (1959). Best and Kellner, as well as Rose, bring up the US-American sociologist in their accounts of the history of the term. His is a more negative notion of Postmodernism, deploring a system in decline where all previous expectations, the images and categories of thought an feeling that were created to manage life are no longer useful. Both ideological sides of the socio-cultural conflict in Western societies, Marxism and Liberalism, are based on the rationale that reason creates more freedom, but this is no longer felt to be convincing after experiences where societal rationalisation has produced diminished freedom, threatening to reduce human beings to "cheerful robots" (Mills in Best and Kellner, 1991: 8).

Hassan, Best and Kellner, and especially Köhler see Irving Howe and Harry Levin as champions for the cause of this – in their eyes - deplorable decline in high Modernist culture (c.f. Best and Kellner, 1991: 10; Hassan, 2000: 119; Köhler, 1977: 11). Howe's *Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction* (1959) and Levin's *What Was Modernism?* (1960) are in Best and Kellner's reading elegies for an incipient decline in Enlightenment rationalism that breeds anti-intellectualism on the one hand and a loss of Modernist hope for social change through culture on the other (Best and Kellner, 1991: 10). Köhler takes this interpretation a step further still, attributing a sense of nostalgia to Howe and Levin's arguments – ironically a concept frequently associated with Postmodernism itself in a deprecatory manner (c.f. Jameson, 1999: 19 - 21). Looking back to the past, both authors fervently defend the last Modernist masterpieces (or what count as such for them) by Yeats, Eliot, Pound or Joyce published until the 1930s, disappointed by post-war authors who " exploit and diffuse, on a large scale and popular level, the results of [Modernist] experimentalism" (Levin in Köhler, 1977: 12). Although critical of these developments, both Levin and Howe do not formulate their grievances in terms of a reproach, however, but blame the historical context: after every period of experimentation and innovation necessarily follows one of consolidation. Postmodernism, in this understanding, is an expectable and expected conservative reaction to the revolutionary aspects of Modernism. Howe makes a close logical connection between the dynamics of a mass society and Postmodernism: The lack of social conflict and a binding moral codex to rebel against in a globalised consumer society inevitably leads to a lack of heroes forged from exactly that social conflict and rebellion against a binding codex, which in turn results in the absence of grand novels, traditionally the platform of the Middle classes to write and rewrite their heroes (Köhler, 1977: 12). And yet, perfectly in line with the cultural logic they establish, Levin and Howe themselves were content to withdraw to and remain in a position of larmoyant nostalgia for the past, neither actively and productively attacking Postmodernism and thus pushing a public debate, nor willing or able to celebrate its more creative aspects.

A completely different, and slightly more hopeful perspective is brought in by the Chinese-American religious studies scholar Huston Smith during the early 1960s. Bridging the cultural as well as the religious gap between Asia and the Western

hemisphere, he talks about Postmodernism on a conceptual and philosophical level, a cultural shift that affects the essentially human act of signifying and meaning-making in the spheres of science, philosophy, religion and the arts. Smith understands Postmodernism as a transitionary period, a process of transformation from a Modernist world-view based on an ordered reality determined by (natural) laws understandable to the human mind into a Postmodernist world-view of an unordered and ultimately unknowable reality. This uncertainty and scepticism at the heart of Smith's Postmodernity are symptoms of change towards what he expects to be a more holistic and spiritual outlook in the future (Best and Kellner, 1991: 9).

With Best and Kellner being the completionists that they are, it is no wonder to find that they are the only ones amongst all of the critics consulted for this chapter that even so much as mention British historian Geoffrey Barraclough, going so far as to even attribute the "first systematic and detailed notion of Postmodernism" to him (1991: 9). *An Introduction to Contemporary History* (1964) is based on the premise that a thorough analysis of the structural changes from a Modern to a Postmodern world necessitates a "new framework and new terms of reference" (Barraclough in Best and Kellner, 1991: 9). This notion of a terminological and conceptual break is then applied to history in general, deconstructing the Modernist model of historical progress, linear sequence and development by shifting the focus from the similarities and continuities to the differences and discontinuities. Meaning is thus constituted by difference, Postmodernism by scientific and technological revolutions, a new imperialism, a transition from mass society to individualism, as well as the rise of completely new cultural forms enabled and made possible by all of these other changes. Barraclough here directly contradicts close contemporaries such as Levin and Howe for whom Postmodernism is a result of exactly that mass society that the British historian sees as overcome or atomised by the Postmodern turn. And even though his attempt at constructing a totalising systemic theory *per se* is not, his concentration on the motifs of discontinuity and difference as defining features of Postmodernism are very much original for his time and could be seen as precursors to later theoretical developments. Later, the 1960s and 70s would be dominated by critics discussing how radical breaks with Modernist culture and art constituted a new, a Postmodern way of signifying.

During the 1960s openings and breaks occurred in Western consumer societies that in Ihab Hassan's eyes, using a phrase originally coined by Andreas Huyssen, constitute "the great divide" in the cultural development of these societies (Hassan, 2000: 119). He goes on to compile a list of pivotal elements defining this process: the rise of counter-cultural movements and a general sense of liberation; the blurring of categories such as high and low culture, art and theory, or even text, metatext and paratext; social interactions based on participation and (pseudo-)anarchy eclipsing the traditional models of elitism and hierarchy; and a shift from the static and hypotactical towards the performative and paratactical in thought and art. All of these changes came together at that specific historical moment to create a climate of cultural 'indetermanence' - Hassan's neologism combining indeterminacy and impermanence - and social delegitimation, to use Lyotard's expression, that re-energised a dying Postmodernism (ibid.). This coincided with a shift in the general attitude towards things Postmodern in the majority of the critical population.

The name most closely associated with this shift by Best and Kellner, Jencks, and Köhler is Leslie Fiedler, whom Jencks actually credits with the first positive use of the term 'Postmodern' (Jencks, 2009: 21), a notion I hold to be problematic, since it eclipses earlier contributions such as Huston Smith's concept of Postmodernism as a hopeful period of transition. In Jencks's reading, Fiedler's siding with the Postmodern in 1965 is inextricably connected to the then radical trends in counterculture, the "post-humanist, post-male, post-white, post-heroic" voices that demanded to be heard (ibid.). Even though these were not yet formulated as or termed 'Postmodern' developments by Fiedler or others at the time, a fundamental challenge to the monoculture of Western dominance on an intercultural level and hierarchical liberalism on an intracultural level reached a mass audience, now defined by its own diversity and no longer the faceless, imposed identity of Modernist culture. Köhler sees Fiedler's reinterpretation of Postmodernism as an expression of the tendency towards futurist rebellion during the mid-60s, epitomised by "The New Mutants" (1965) where Fiedler completely turns away from the past, including the denial of any necessity to refer to Modernism to define the perceived cultural changes, and reorients towards anticipating the future (Köhler, 1991: 12). This then emergent culture, or "post-culture" in his terms (Best and Kellner, 1991: 10), rejects the

traditional values of Protestantism, Victorianism, Rationalism, or Humanism in mass cultural forms that break down the Modernist distinction between high and low culture. It closes the gap between artist and audience, critic and layperson, deconstructing Modernist elitism. Hand in hand with this change of cultural production and reception, Fiedler argues Postmodern criticism changed, leaving pretentiousness and hermetic language behind for understandable analyses of subjective responses of recipients in a psychological, social and historical context (Best and Kellner, 1991: 11). Rose sums up this argument by giving a quote from the *New York Review of Books* (1977) decrying the "post-modernist demand for the abolition of art and its assimilation to 'reality'" (1991: 71).

Köhler makes a connection between Fiedler's theories and Susan Sontag's "new sensibility" (ibid.), one that is echoed in Best and Kellner's contextualising of Fiedler with Sontag and Hassan in a cluster of critics who during the late 60s and early 70s re-evaluated Postmodernism positively as a movement towards liberation from the more oppressive aspects of Modernism (Best, 1991: 10). As an interesting aside, this is also the point in my argument where Hassan is present not only as observing subject producing discourse that I in turn then disassemble and reassemble with other fragments to create my own critical discourse, but also as a discursive object, himself observed and (de-) constructed by others. A prime example of the Postmodern concept of ironic doubling.

To come back to the critics of the "new sensibility", I would like to use John Barth's famous descriptors for this essential change in perspective (c.f. Barth, 1984: 62 and 193): In their joyful abandonment of the past these critics no longer see their present as an anticlimactic age of exhaustion after a supposedly heroic previous one (like Levin or Howe), but for them this is a new beginning, an era of replenishment. Köhler theorises this as a perceived shift in the meaning of the term Postmodern itself: from 'post' as an expression of a fixation with the decline after an implicitly better past and sterile nostalgia, to the 'post' of successfully overcoming a stagnant system with the promise of a new beginning, a better future and hope (Köhler, 1977: 12 – 13). Sonntag – in a language game rich in Postmodern irony – even borrows the term "new sensibility" from Howe himself, exemplifying the semantic and ethical arbitrariness of terminology (Best and Kellner, 1991: 10). She openly confronts the

Modernist obsession with content, meaning and order, immersing herself and her readership in the "erotics" of art, the sheer sensual pleasures of form and style without any need for hermeneutics or even fixed meaning. Her Postmodernism transcends the limitations of Modernism in a creative explosion mixing media of high as well as low culture into a pluralistic, less serious, less moralistic mode of expression (ibid.).

Besides Fiedler and Sontag, Ihab Hassan is frequently named as a prominent exponent of this – according to Hassan ongoing - critical modification of Postmodernism, even by himself (Hassan, 2000: 119). Jencks, with a seeming propensity towards defining 'firsts', credits him with the "first explicit defence" of Postmodernism (Jencks, 2009: 21), but at the same time points out a terminological problem, because he reads Hassan's deconstructive Postmodernism as more akin to what he and Barth would call Late- or Ultra-Modernism (ibid.). Best and Kellner add another superlative in their analysis of Hassan, making his the "most prolific celebration and popularisation of literary Postmodernism" (1991: 11), ironically broken by his distancing himself from the terminology later (1987) as inadequate when it no longer is able to describe the changes that have taken place within Postmodernism (ibid.). For Hassan, they argue, the basis for the shift from Modernism to Postmodernism is to be seen in a mutation of industrial capitalism and Western categories and values, bringing forth an "anti-literature" or "literature of silence" defined by its inherent revulsion against Western civilisation itself (1991: 11). Interestingly enough, the authors state that this central thesis is proposed and developed by Hassan over the decades in a sprawling body of work that in itself could be defined as Postmodern: a collection of non-linear, playful, assemblage-like pastiche texts of quotations (ibid.). Köhler dates Hassan's first contribution in the discussion of Postmodernism to 1968 ("Frontiers of Criticism"), which he considers to be "fairly late" (1977: 13), but concedes a decisive influence to him, especially during the early 1970s. Texts like *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* (1971), focussing on the development of the Postmodern novel, his editorial work on *Liberations: New Essays on the Humanities in Revolution* (1971), or *POSTmodernISM* (1971) where Hassan attempted a description of the Postmodern enterprise through the changes in the characteristics of Modernism, can be seen as essential milestones. He later moved

into slightly different directions isolating "The New Gnosticism" (1973) as a distinctive feature of the Postmodern in an article subtitled "Speculations on an Aspect of the Postmodern Mind" that was later collected in *Pancriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times* (1975). In accordance with Postmodern expectations towards literature, a pancriticism is a discourse inspired by collage and then dramatized, so Hassan once again blurred the realms of literary production and criticism with his contribution (Köhler, 1977: 14).

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Postmodern insouciance, playfulness and eclecticism according to Best and Kellner openly opposed Modernist seriousness, purity, and individuality not only in the sphere of culture, where it lead to a desire for radically new art-forms, but also in other spheres and disciplines, most notably socio-political ones (1991: 11). The relationship with the past was fundamentally reconfigured, supplanting the negation and dissidence at the core of the Modernist revolution in art and life with Postmodern(-ist) irony, cynicism, and commercialism expressed in the dominant techniques of pastiche, quotation and play with past forms. Sometimes this would border on the nihilistic, mostly, however, the focus was more on a pluralism of voices and the coexistence of the past and the presence, a sense of "delight in the world as it is" (ibid.).

In art criticism, it was John Perreault in the *Village Voice* magazine who already during the mid-sixties started to perceive a "cluster of attempts to go beyond Modernism: either as revival of earlier styles or new styles" (Köhler, 1977: 13). Prefiguring and exemplifying this incipient shift in the understanding of art, the Boston Institute of Modern Art had already been renamed Institute of Contemporary Art in 1950 (ibid.). And it was in 1971, in close chronological connection to Fiedler, Hassan and Sonntag, that the May/June issue of the *Art in America* journal featured an editorial by Brian O'Doherty that left the titular question, "What is Postmodernism?" as yet unanswered (ibid.).

German-born sociologist Amitai Etzioni appropriated the term for his own discipline in *The Active Society* (1968), applying it to Western societies of his time (Köhler, 1977: 13; Best and Kellner, 1991: 12). In his analysis, an era – the Modern era - was coming to an end, and new choices were available and had to be made. He identifies World War II as the watershed moment that through the socio-cultural

impact of the extreme experiences made by individuals and societies, as well as new technological advances in communication, the organisation of information, and energy production would lead to either the destruction of all (Modern) values, or the solution of all human problems. Even though he was very conscious of the dangers inherent to the moment, his was one of the few positive visions of a Postmodern future at the time, as he argued that his "active society" would be able to produce and uphold the necessary normative values to guide technological progress in order for it to be only beneficial for humanity (Best and Kellner, 1991: 13 – 14). Etzioni's terminological innovation for sociology was, however, quickly eclipsed by Daniel Bell's preferred term "post-industrial society", and it should be much later, in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976), that Bell picks up on Postmodernism himself (Köhler, 1977: 13).

Unlike Etzioni, literary critic, philosopher and author George Steiner attacked the Postmodern or "post-culture" with *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture* (1971) for openly rejecting and thus eventually destroying the foundations of Western culture in general, and US-American culture especially. He joins the ranks of those critics bemoaning what they perceive to be a qualitative decline in culture from Modernism to Postmodernism. Central issues Steiner raises – thereby establishing his definition of what Western and US-American culture should be like – are the loss of centrality (in geography and society), of moral superiority of the West, of belief in progress as the goal of (teleological) history, of utopian values, of belief in a logical and inherent connection between liberal humanism and moral conduct (under the impressions left by World War II), of trust in science, art and reason as humanising influences. His diagnosis of the Postmodern mind-set is one of an utter loss of ethical absolutes or certainties, leading to the collapse of central (Modern) concepts such as community, identity, or humanism and to eroding standards of literacy due to the growing predominance of popular and no longer "high" culture (Best and Kellner, 1991: 12). Even though Steiner's understanding of Postmodernism reads more like a prophecy of doom, he at least concedes that a return to an idealistic "brave new world of science and technology" is impossible once Pandora's box of questioning the central, the authoritative and the absolute has been opened (ibid.).

Contemporaries of Steiner quickly adopted and adapted the new term, and so there was a rush during the early 1970s in literary journals, magazines and other publications to provide academic critiques and analyses of Postmodernism and the Postmodern. Köhler identifies the *New Literary History* (1969 – present) of the University of Virginia as the first academic journal to dedicate a special issue to the topic (1977: 14). In "Modernism and Postmodernism: Inquiries, Reflections, and Speculations" (1971), that directly influenced Ihab Hassan's *POSTmodernISM* of the same year, editor Ralph Cohen suggests the use of the term Postmodernism to designate the (then) contemporary avant-garde movements in opposition to earlier ones. With *Boundary 2*, co-founded in 1972 by US-American professor William V. Spanos and his Canadian colleague and well-known author Robert Kroetsch at the State University of New York at Binghamton, the first journal only dedicated to Postmodernism entered the academic arena. As a self-proclaimed "journal of postmodern literature" it supported attempts to provide more context to the term itself in different cultural spheres and disciplines in a series of articles by, amongst others, David Antin (art history), Ihab Hassan (literary theory), Charles Altieri (poetics of poetry), and W.T. Lhamon (poetics of the novel). Editor in chief Spanos based his very own concept of the Postmodern largely on Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (1927), as 'being in opposition to the substantial (reified), spatialised notion of being' (Köhler, 1977: 14). He attributes a strong spatiality to Modernism, a "circular imagination" (ibid.), and concludes that the Postmodern overcomes this impulse, disclosing the heretofore hidden temporalities and historicities of being.

Other, less specialised journals also followed the trend towards theories and critiques of the Postmodern. Köhler (1977: 15) gives the example of two issues of *TriQuarterly* (1958 – present). The first one is #26 (1973) where contributors Philip Stevick, Robert Onopa, and Gerald Graff use the term, even though Graff in a then rare positioning opposes the idea of a radical break with the Modern ("The Myth of the Postmodernism Breakthrough"), only to fall in line again with the majority of his contemporaries and revise his judgment in #33 (1975) in "Babbit at the Abyss: The Social Context of Postmodern Fiction". Also in issue #33, Robert Alter entitles his analysis of 1960s novels "The Self-Conscious Moment: Reflections on the Aftermath of Modernism", theorising an era after (or "post") Modernism. The *Journal of Modern*

Literature (1970 – present) focussed on this change of eras in a special issue entitled "From Modernism to Postmodernism" (July 1974), and the preponderance of Modernism that still shines through in the articles presented is easily explicable by the programmatic title of the journal itself. In March 1975, the *Drama Review* (1957 - present) featured a "Post-Modern Dance Issue" where Michael Kirby identified the beginnings of a new style of dance back in the early 1960s, and Marcia Siegel situates the first truly Postmodern dance in 1965.

By the Mid-1970s, at the time of the first publication of *Dungeons & Dragons*, Postmodernism was quickly becoming the widely accepted term for the new era and/or the artistic and social movements accompanying or informing the cultural shift that was finally agreed upon was actually happening (Best and Kellner, 1991: 13). In *Shaping the Future: Resources for the Post-Modern World* (1976), US-American philosopher Frederick Ferré created a largely positive reading of Postmodernism, but postulated the necessity of an alternative set of values and institutions for the new, Postmodern consciousness. As a Metaphysic, he expressed his hope for religious values to guide this new age, an argument echoing theologian Nathan Scott and his earlier *Negative Capability* (1969), where he borrows the Keatsian concept to deal with the new and rapidly changing conscience exemplified by the literature of his time (Köhler, 1977: 13).

Also in 1976, the annual meeting of the German Association for American Studies (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Amerikastudien*) established a research group for the "Modern, Postmodern, Contemporary as categories of literary analysis" where Ihab Hassan formulated the cornerstones of Postmodern criticism in his paper "The Critic as Innovator" and Jürgen Peper of Graz University produced the very first contribution to the discussion of Postmodernism by a German-speaking academic in his "Postmodernism: Unitary Sensibility" where he sees it as a step away from a philosophy deeply rooted in historical categories and towards what he calls a more "synchro-environmental" perspective, even though Köhler identifies François Bondy's "Auf dem Weg zur postmodernen Neo-Avantgarde" in *Aus nächster Ferne: Berichte eines Literaten aus Paris* (1970) as the very first *use* of the terminology in the German language (Köhler, 1977: 16). As this conference is also the context for Köhler's article, this is where his deliberations stop.

Best and Kellner, however, from their later perspective in 1991 end the first part of their journey through the long and complicated history of the use of the term Postmodernism, from early anticipations to before the explosive proliferation of its use during the 1980s, with the aforementioned Daniel Bell who finally adopted the new term himself in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976). As a sociologist, Bell defines the end of Modernism and the beginning of Postmodernism by the end of the central bourgeois idea of economic exchange. The rebellious, anti-bourgeois, antinomic, hyper-individualistic and hedonistic impulses expressed in the countercultural movements and open youth rebellions of the late 1960s have taken Western societies beyond reason and into the realms of instinct, impulse and will, he argues. The Postmodern age is nothing but the application of Modernist revolt to everyday life (Best and Kellner, 1991: 13). He blames aggressive narcissistic tendencies for the radical assaults on tradition, as well as bureaucratic, technocratic, organisational capitalism and democracy. The rationality, sobriety, and the moral and religious values of the bourgeois world-view that had dominated the Western world for almost 500 years were being demolished, and for Bell, just like Scott and Ferré, the only possible solution to what he perceived to be a decline in culture is a revivification of religious values. Bells premonitions of doom and somewhat simplistic accusations against Postmodern culture were at the time openly criticised by Jürgen Habermas for the failure to differentiate between problems that originate in the cultural sphere, and those that have their roots more in the economic and political context (Best and Kellner, 1991: 14).

The end of the 1970s is also the relative point in the development of Postmodern theory where Köhler's seminal article attempts to come to an understanding of this – then fairly recent and topical – concept, identifying two basic needs to overcome the utter lack of consensus as to what Postmodernism actually was/is in the first place: (a) a definition of the characteristics of this new era, and (b) a historical timeframe and its position in the agreed-upon structure of larger cultural movements and eras in Western cultures (1977: 16). Already then, the utter lack of consensus and definition marked and ironically 'defined' Postmodernism. But Köhler even traces this instability back to Modernism and the Modern itself, claiming that at the heart of the lack of a shared understanding of what 'Postmodern' means lies a confusion about what is or

is not 'Modern' in the first place (ibid.). I will bring this up in more detail in the following chapter, dealing with the quintessential but largely impossible separation of the Modern and the Postmodern.

Besides this refusal (or the inherent lack) of definition and consensus, Best and Kellner identify a second characteristic of Postmodern discourse before the 1980s (and I would extend that well into the 1990s): there were/are basically two conflicting camps in theory, "matrices" they call them (1991: 14), one positive – Drucker, Etzioni, Sontag, Hassan, Fiedler, Ferré, and I would add Hutcheon, Eco, and Lyotard to this one - and the other negative – Toynbee, Mills, Bell, Baudrillard, and my iconic addition here would be Fredric Jameson. Best and Kellner further differentiate even within the positive discourse into an affirmative social and a positive cultural wing (ibid.). According to their classification, the social matrix of positive Postmodern discourse is a direct result of the theories of a post-industrial society that after World War II grew out of the ashes of the Industrial Age, carried on a wave of 1950s optimism and a belief that – in spite of the horrors that it had visited upon millions of victims in Europe and Asia – modernisation and technology would make a break with the past possible. This reading of Postmodernism sees it as an affirmation of capitalist modernity like in the works of Drucker, Etzioni, Ferré, and Lyotard (Best and Kellner, 1991: 14).

The corresponding cultural matrix focuses primarily on popular culture as expression of the liberating impulses of Postmodern cultural forms, and thus prepares the way for the mass reception of the cultural discourse of Postmodernism during the 1980s and the early 1990s. It also feeds quite nicely into my argument about an essential connection between the rise of Postmodernism and the emergence of the new medium RPG. Here the emphasis is on difference, otherness, pleasure, novelty, and an all-out attack on Modern(-ist) reason and hermeneutics (Best and Kellner, 1991: 15). This then is the Postmodern discourse that will be most relevant for my argument, and it is largely founded on an epistemological angle. Unlike the affirmative social matrix in Postmodern discourse, it is no longer a continuation of the Modern/-ist emphasis on reason, totalisation and unification, but leans towards irrationality, difference and dispersion. In stark contrast to the more negative and destructive connotations these concepts trigger in a mind that has

internalised and naturalised Modern/-ist frames of reference, the positive cultural matrix of Postmodernism celebrates them for their creative and revitalising potential. Best and Kellner name Sontag, Fiedler and Hassan among the proponents of this movement (1991: 14), and I would like to add Hutcheon and Eco who also contributed a lot to my understanding of Postmodernism and especially the very peculiar form of (Postmodern) cultural expression called pen&paper RPG I have introduced in the first part of this argument.

The second, negative school of discourse about Postmodernism emerging from a historical overview is deeply rooted in a pessimistic perspective on the trajectory of Modern, Western societies. This is a largely apocalyptic cultural logic and discourse (Best and Kellner, 1991: 15), painting a picture of Western societies and cultures in decline after the heights of an élitist Modernism due to the growing influence of mass society and mass culture in neo-conservative attacks on contemporary popular culture (Toynbee, Mills, Bell), the implosion of all meaning (Baudrillard), or the late-Marxist lamentation of the ultimate ascendancy of capitalist superficiality (Jameson).

Peter V. Zima agrees with Best and Kellner that it is a cultural response to and result of the socio-economic dominance of the capitalist logic of consumerism that lead to the rise of Postmodern ideas, no matter what side of the argument. While Best and Kellner see the diversity of cultural forms and lifestyles and hedonistic affluence typical of what later got to be called 'Postmodernism' as an outcome of the expansionist cycle at the heart of capitalism, sharply opposing and eroding traditional values and mechanisms of social control (1991: 15), Zima paints a broader picture integrating a decline of rationalist ideologies, atrophying utopian-messianic mind-sets and the transformation of Western societies into one-dimensional entities dominated only by the economical exchange value as the context for this historical cultural shift from Modernism towards Postmodernism (2001: 11). In his 2001 foreword to the second edition of *Moderne/Postmoderne* (first published in 1997), Zima addresses the perceived split between what Best and Kellner call positive and negative matrices of Postmodernism, arguing convincingly that consumption based on exchange value as the motor of capitalist systems must inevitably lead to the negation of qualitative values and thus indifference – double-encoded as the exchangeability of things due to the lack of qualitative difference and the not-caring about things (2001: 12).

Indifference can then in turn result in in a positive sense of pluralism and diversity (positive Postmodernism), or manifest as the opposite: a sense of arbitrariness, non-commitment, and particularity (negative Postmodernism). Ironically enough, this indifference also triggers reactions of critique, revolt and dogmatic ideologies ranging the whole political, social and cultural spectrum from the ultra-liberal to religious fundamentalism.

It is thus that Zima suggests not to think of the Postmodern and Postmodernism as a dogmatic ideology, a system of values or an aesthetics, but as a dynamic ensemble of related problems and questions - what he calls a 'problematic' (2001: 12) - that encompasses different groups and individuals and their oftentimes contradicting reactions to this tension, or oscillation, between indifference (the market) and ideology. I would like to adopt Zima's more open, procedural and adaptive approach to Postmodernism for my own argument, since it seems to me the only one able to creatively accommodate and make use of even contradicting positions on Postmodernism that finally exploded into public awareness after the publication of Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition* (1979) and its mass reception in the Anglophone world after its translation into English in 1983. He will also be a central guiding voice in the following chapter that addresses the precarious line to be drawn (or not) between the Modern and the Postmodern, before I enter into a discussion of some of the dominant voices in Postmodern theory and what they contribute to my argument about the conceptual link between Postmodernism and RPGs.

7 – Post/Modernism: The Difficulty of Drawing the Line

In order to understand the Postmodern, Köhler argues, one first has to come to terms with what is Modern, its means and the ends to which these are put, and I tend to agree (1977: 9). The term *Post*-Modern itself shows that the movement, process, cultural shift or problematic – to use Zima's concept here – self-identifies only in relation to the Modern, not in and out of itself. Unlike Romanticism or Modernism, judging from its name it is not something *per se*, but rather meaningless, unless understood in relation to what preceded it or what it transcended ('post'). This idea

of relational meaning in the terminology mirrors one of the central theoretical and conceptual ideas of Postmodernism, and one of its points of contact with the medium of RPGs.

7.1 – Cutting-edge Gothic Cathedrals: The Historical Dimension of the Debate

Richard Appignanesi and Chris Garratt, in their witty and highly entertaining *Introducing Postmodernism: A Graphic Guide to Cutting-Edge Thinking* (1995), begin their genealogy of Postmodern art and their hunt for the "modern" in 1127: When Abbé Suger of St. Denis abbey in Paris for the first time introduced architectural elements that we now associate with the Gothic style in the reconstruction of his basilica, he called it "*opus modernum*", a modern work, a work "of the day", going back to the Latin expression *modo*, "just now" (Appignanesi, 2007: 6).

Yet even this early use of 'the modern' is easily predated by Charles Jencks's terminological archaeology. He identifies the creation of the term itself with the early Christians during the 3rd century CE and emphasises its close denotative connection to the present tense and the resulting progressive impulse expressed (2011: 20). Following his argument, in a chapter aptly entitled "The Battle of Labels and the Demon of Time" (ibid.), the use of *modernus* to self-identify showed the belief of Christians at the time that they and their monotheistic system of belief were inherently superior to the pagan polytheists and their multitude of gods who still dominated Roman society and politics (and would do so well after Constantine's 'revelation' after the Battle at the Milvian Bridge in 312 CE) and that they were of the present, while their opponents were already of the past. Jencks then omits Abbé Suger and jumps straight to the Renaissance artists and architects who used 'modern' to refer to *their own* style – itself a revival of ancient classic elements - to contrast it with the previous Gothic style they in turn considered to be a thing of the past. Appignanesi and Garrett point out the irony of this claim, questioning how the "*antica e buona maniera moderna*" and its proponents who had no qualms whatsoever to attack the Gothic as a barbaric style of the past could themselves

engage in a rebirth (French *renaissance*, Italian *rinascimento*) of the past (2007: 7). However, Jencks concludes that ever since a war has been waged in culture and society, called the 'Battle of the Ancients and the Moderns' between the 1600s and about 1850, a conflict among philosophers, architects, and artists who used the term 'modern' on both sides of their argument, both to insult and to praise developments they deemed to be detrimental or beneficial.

Köhler blames the lack of consensus as to what constitutes the Modern and Modernism for the early (and still largely ongoing) terminological confusion about the Postmodern and Postmodernism. The two basic, historical definitions are either the time since and including the Renaissance (circa 1500+), OR the most recent historical period (circa 1900+) defined by the what is widely called Modernism in the arts (1977: 16).

The dominant proponents of the first school of thought are Arnold Toynbee and Charles Olson, who define the beginning of the Modern era as the turn from the Medieval to the Renaissance mind-set around 1500, and the Postmodern era follows around 1875 with the age of Imperialism. Even though this dating coincides with other theories that put the early beginnings of Postmodern thought in the late 19th century, like Lyotard's example of Nietzschean perspectivism as one origin of Post-/Modern philosophy (c.f. Lyotard, 1984: 77), both Toynbee and Olson deny the existence of Postmodernism as a distinct aesthetic or cultural movement, or any break or difference between Modernism and Postmodernism at all, as Postmodernity encompasses Modernism (Köhler, 1977: 16).

The second, larger camp posits a more differentiated analysis of the Modern age and sees a clear break between Modernism and Postmodernism due to cultural and social developments that filter through into the arts. For Irving Howe and Harry Levin the end of Modernism coincides with and is brought about by the experiences of World War 2 (1977: 17). They associate the literature of the 1950s with the characteristics of 'their' Postmodernism: avoiding extremes and experimentation, and a return to tested and tries processes and themes (ibid.). The more experimental texts of the 1960s for them are fall-backs into the style of the Modernist avant-garde or fake, but their understanding of Modernism is a very narrow one, only focussing on classical authors like Yeats, Eliot, Joyce, Faulkner, or Hemingway, and excluding all

those they consider to be only epigones (like Pynchon, or Barth). Other critics who are more open towards the changes in the literary production during the 1960s, like Leslie Fiedler or Ihab Hassan, see these as the end of Modernism proper (Köhler, 1977: 17). For them the 1950s become a precursor stage to a fully-fledged Postmodernism emerging during the 1960s. A sense of rebellion against the canon (Howe and Levin's 'classical' Modernism), as well as references to and borrowings from Dadaism and Surrealism become essential stylistic and ideological cornerstones of this historical definition of Postmodernism. The 'post' here only stands for a break with the 'classical' Modernists, whereas a sense of continuity with and development of alternative Modernists during the 1950s is preserved. This is why the 1960s are sometimes also referred to as Late Modernism, to account for this coexistence of more classic and alternative Modernists and the general sense of fulfilling the aesthetic projects of the 1950s. Köhler identifies the first use of Late Modernism for this special cultural situation with Frank Kermode in 1968, but he cautions that it was still a derogatory term then (1977: 17).

The third and last subcategory of this approach defined by Köhler brings the first two together and is the dominant understanding in more recent theories. It is based on the intersecting development or coexistence of two movements. During the 1950s the Traditionalism of 'classical' Modernism still largely dominated the literary production, but slowly a Neo-Avant-garde of Dadaists and Surrealists emerged, only to fully unfold during the 1960s. During the second half of the decade, a new sensibility reminiscent of Susan Sontag's concept emerged, violating the basic principles of both Modernisms, Traditionalists and Neo-Avant-garde. At the beginning of the 1970s this bloomed into a tentative Postmodernism when various and rather different developments beyond Modernism slowly started to coalesce into a more coherent, new style and cultural mode of expression. Köhler thus defines the time between 1945 and the late 1960s as Late Modernism, with the early 1970s bringing a new and *per definitionem* very open model for later developments during the 1980s, 90s and 2000s that he considers to be specifically Postmodern (1977: 18). It is this third conception that I will adopt for my own argument, since it fits perfectly with the emergence of *Generations 1* and *2* of the new Postmodern medium of RPGs.

7.2 – Lyotard: A Radical Dualistic Break – Or not?

While Lyotard's 1979 essay on *The Postmodern Condition* can be seen as the beginning of the mass reception of Postmodern theory, or rather theory about Postmodernism, as Lyotard's approach is still very much a Modern one, it also suffers from the problems of all beginnings.

Fredric Jameson's foreword to the English edition of 1984 openly expresses the – thirty years later still largely predominant - understanding of the relationship between the Postmodern and the Modern based on Lyotard's seminal argument: "[P]ostmodernism as it is generally understood involves a radical break, both with a dominant culture and aesthetic, and with a rather different moment of socioeconomic organization against which its structural novelties and innovations are measured" (Jameson, 1984: vii). Ironically enough, Jameson goes on to accuse Lyotard himself of being rather unwilling to posit such a fundamental historical and cultural break, constructing an understanding of Postmodernism not as an era or movement following Modernism (as the name he chose would suggest), but as a cyclically recurring moment in a perpetual revolution, an expression of discontent with disintegrating High Modern styles that then leads to the emergence of ever new forms of Modernisms. He concludes that actually and ironically, Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition* is more of a "celebration of Modernism as its first ideologues projected it – a constant and ever more dynamic revolution" (1984: xvi). It is this quasi-eternal cyclical continuation of the Modern in the Postmodern in Lyotard that the Marxist Jameson immediately interprets as a lack of revolutionary ethics and a survival strategy under a capitalism reigning supreme (1984: xviii). Beyond these ideological musings, however, it is most certainly a deeply Modern way of thinking.

In spite of these theoretical insecurities on a meta-level, Lyotard's basic distinction between Modern and Postmodern thinking, summed up in his own introduction to his essay, has become the central pillar of most epistemological approaches to the problem: the watershed moment is a crisis of narrative in science, literature and the arts, with Modernists legitimising their discursive constructs (or narratives) by reference to meta discourses or grand narratives of justice and truth, be they political ideologies, scientific doctrines or religious dogmas, whereas a Postmodern mind-set

is determined exactly by a fundamental "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv).

This clear-cut dichotomy seems to be the root for simplistic readings of Lyotard's theories that have contributed to the predominant idea or ideology of a conceptual and factual dualism between Modern/-ism and Postmodern/-ism that even otherwise critical minds such as Ihab Hassan or Linda Hutcheon seem to take more or less for granted in their own theories of the Postmodern. Lyotard might have done his differentiated approach a disservice by adding this simple (or simplistic?) definition, but it certainly stuck and has developed a strong cultural and theoretical impact.

When he develops these ideas further, it becomes clear that for him both the Modern and the Postmodern go back to the very same roots, a "shattering of belief" and a "discovery of the 'lack of reality' of reality , together with the invention of other realities" (1984: 77). They are defined as prerequisites for Modernity, no matter in what age it appears. Modernity thus becomes a socio-cultural situation detached from a certain historical moment or even ideological or philosophical perspective, as Lyotard brings both Nietzschean nihilism and the Kantian sublime as examples of this lack of reality (ibid.). The Lyotardian Modern then is expressed in art when what is represented is the fact itself that the unrepresentable exists, that something can be conceived that can neither be seen nor be made visible, mostly in the absence of form, figuration or representation. What remains is but a "possible index to the unpresentable" (1984: 78). Lyotard calls this the "aesthetics of the sublime" (1984: 81), an art of missing contents, where form is the only remaining pleasure. This art constantly oscillates between the pleasure and the power of the faculty to conceive even beyond the limits of representation and the melancholia and pain due to the powerlessness of our faculty of representation, the absence of the human subject. Both of these modes can coexist in the Modern, and in Lyotard's perspective, the Postmodern itself is never quite 'post' the Modern, but always part of it: "All that has been received, if only yesterday (*modo*, *modo*, Petronius used to say), must be suspected" (1984: 79).

As all truly Modern works in the Lyotardian sense must be Postmodern first, the Postmodern is no longer the successor to or end of the Modern, but its perpetual beginning, it is Modernism "in the nascent state, and this state is constant" (ibid.).

The Postmodern moment of doubt and incredulity thus becomes the seed of a new Modernism, a refusal of what has been established as good form and consensus and an honest search for new presentations beyond the limitations of pre-established rules, as these artefacts are in themselves quests for new rules and categories. They are events that "formulate the rules of what *will have been done*", and as such "come always too late for their author" or, put in another way, "their realization (*mise en œuvre*) always begin[s] to soon" (1984: 81). Lyotard's definition of the Postmodern is summed up by himself in a clever reference to grammar and logic: "*Post modern* [sic] would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*)" (ibid.). The doubt expressed here points towards a theoretical future state, while itself being part of the past it attempts to overcome. Past, present, and (a hypothetical) future coalesce in a transient (Postmodern) moment, before a new (Modern) state is reached that needs to be doubted and transcended again.

Unlike Jameson and the dualistic readings of Lyotard's concept of Modernism and Postmodernism prevalent in criticism would want to make the credulous recipient believe, Lyotard, in my opinion is still a proponent of a belief in Modernism and thus not truly a Postmodernist himself. In a flight of Postmodern thought echoing later in Zima's dialogical theories, he clearly warns of a reconciliation or synthesis of the competing language games or discourses and the illusion of a transcendental unity or totality: "the price to pay for such an illusion is terror", he concludes, and prime examples are to be found in the history of the 20th century (1984: 81).

Even though Jameson accuses Lyotard of falling into the trap of only reproducing the logic of capitalist production in his attempt to separate Modern from Postmodern moments in a game of constant revolution (Jameson, 1984: xx), I would argue that similar accusation could be held against Jameson himself: Blinded by his own, unreflected, ideological position as a Marxist, he uses his own classifications and rules and applies them to Lyotard's concepts, unjustifiably simplifying them in the process. This ideological misreading of a promising if unsatisfying, early attempt to come to an understanding of the precarious and dynamic relation between the Modern and the Postmodern as it finally emerges is symptomatic of more recent theories during the 1980s and 90s, such as Hutcheon or Hassan's for example, where the revolutionary, cyclical dynamics of the Lyotardian model are either simplified into linear oscillations

(Hassan) or dualistic conflicts (Hutcheon). But the problem that undeniably remains with Lyotard's argument is that it theorises the Postmodern not only as part of, but also from the perspective of the Modern/-ist. His central merit remains undeniably the introduction of the term Postmodern/-ism and the awareness of a definite and definable change in the socio-economic and cultural conditions in a wider public awareness in the Anglosphere. Others could follow to pick up the torch and develop his ideas further.

7.3 – Sarup: Dual Dichotomies - One That Is and One That Is Not

Already in the title Madan Sarup's *Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism* (1988) establishes a connection between these two 'posts' that is worth a closer look at how the author differentiates between the Modern and the Postmodern.

The main focus of his argument is on the distinction between Structuralist and Poststructuralist discourses since the 1960s, yet he acknowledges a "profound mutation in recent thought and experiences" and establishes the need to know about and understand these changes, their symptoms and consequences (1993: xi). For the second edition he therefore expanded the chapter on Lyotard and the Postmodern and added one for Baudrillard, "a cult figure on the current postmodernist scene", and what he calls "postmodern cultural practices" in architecture, art, TV, video and film (ibid.).

In his introduction, Sarup defines the basic distinction between Structuralism and Post-Structuralism through the use (or not) of structural linguistics in the critique of the human subject, historicism, meaning and philosophy both movements share (1993: 1). For Structuralists, truth is located within the text itself, whereas Post-Structuralists prefer a more interactive understanding of textual interpretation or meaning-making, veering from passive consumption towards performative, active reader/text-relationships (1993: 4). They are highly critical of Saussure's unity of the stable sign and generally shift the emphasis in their analyses away from the signified towards the signifier itself: the notion of truth or finality becomes a highly untenable

one, replaced by more procedural, dynamic concepts. Together with a critique of the Cartesian unitary subject, the question of discursive authority takes centre-stage, as Post-Structuralists break with metaphysics and come to the conclusion that the human subject itself is structured by language: all objectivity is deconstructed, what remains are Wittgenstein's language games.

Sarup ends his chapter on Foucault with a handy summary of the main aspects of Post-Structuralist thought: a Nietzschean antipathy to systems, a rejection of Hegelian concepts of history as linear progress, an obsession with the subjective that affirms the anti-political individual (1993: 105). The central enemy in post-1968 Western societies are coherent belief-systems that are seen as totalising, repressive tools of power, and the counter-narrative is a Neo-Romanticist, individualistic philosophy of libidinal pleasure. Sarup sees the critical impulse of 1968 developed into a strange mixture of the idealisation of rebellion and passive pessimism (1993: 106). The numerous connections of these developments to the complex narrative situation of RPGs are obvious, even beyond the literal interpretation of 'language games' and the seemingly contradictory conflation of rebellion and passivity the author suggests.

This philosophical construct then forms the basis for the cultural and social changes the author perceives and describes as Postmodern. He equates Modernity with the modern, capitalist industrial state of the 18th century, which he defines as the "sum of all social, economic, political systems", driven by the twin motors of rationalisation and differentiation (1993: 130). The process of Modernisation is one of industrialisation, establishing a capitalist world-market, and Modernism is the set of aesthetic styles and ideologies in the arts and culture in general accompanying this process. Accordingly, Sarup identifies the beginning of Modernism not with the beginning of Modernity, but with the realisation of the Industrial Revolution during the 19th century. In its fully developed form he thus attributes it to the time around 1900, and defines it as the socio-cultural dominant in Western societies until the late 1900s (1993: 131). Modernist experimentation clearly opposes Classicism, but there is also still as strong belief in an inner truth behind the surface. And this is exactly where the author sees the main, critical difference between Modernism and Postmodernism, even though, he argues, they share many other features: aesthetic self-consciousness, rejection of narrative structure and preference of simultaneity

and montage, the deconstruction of integrated personalities in an ambiguous, paradoxical, open-ended reality (ibid.).

Postmodernism, in Sarup's reading, is the result of the dissolution of social forms associated with Modernity in advanced capitalist cultures, under the impression of largely Post-Structuralist theories (1993: 130). The author refuses any definition of the nature of the Postmodern as part of, continuity or break with the Modern, material change or mood. Central for any understanding of the phenomenon is for him the dispersal of the autonomous subject into "plural, polymorphous subject-positions inscribed within language" (ibid.), and this in turn results in a whole set of dichotomies Sarup then sets up between Modernity and Postmodernity: coercive totality vs. pluralistic, open democracy, Enlightenment progress vs. awareness of contingency and ambivalence, industrial productiveness vs. universal consumerism, and Puritan asceticism vs. the rule of the pleasure principle (ibid.). Socio-cultural and individual dispersal and distraction (the German *Zerstreuung* encompasses both aspects) replace totality and progress in all spheres of life, this is where Sarup sees the shift from the Modern to the Postmodern.

Unfortunately, Sarup here falls into the trap of easy and clear-cut oppositions when he attempts a description of the turn towards Postmodern discourse, but he is very helpful when he analyses the relationship between (Post-)Structuralism and the Postmodern. Ironically, on this level he also successfully avoids the lure of the either/or or historical periodisation, establishing Post-Structuralism as the preferred method of both Postmodern *and* Modern discourses critical of these socio-cultural developments. Postmodernism is not Post-Structuralism, even though they are closely related, they exist on totally different conceptual and ontological levels, sharing certain aspects but inhabiting different spheres. The Post-Structural (and Postmodern) insistence on language-games, dispersal, and distraction in constituting reality that dominates Sarup's argument appear as essential to understand how and why RPGs would be born from this very special philosophical and ideological context. When the Modern subject is deconstructed, what remains are the "plural, polymorphous subject-positions inscribed within language" of the role-playing process (Sarup, 1993: 130). For Poststructuralists we are *all* role-players *all the time*.

7.4 – Hutcheon: On Irony's Edge, or Postmodernism is Both and Neither

Hyphenated-(Italian-)Canadian literary critic and cultural theorist Linda Hutcheon is one of the central figures in the successful emancipation of Postmodern theory during the late 1980s and early 1990s from earlier predominantly apocalyptic readings of the observed cultural changes, mostly by continental European and US-American authors. She explains her central motivation for her approach to the Postmodern, and the urge to reassess its effect on western cultures, in her essay "A Crypto-Ethnic Confession" (1998) as that "paradoxical desire to blend into the majority Anglo culture while still retaining my ethnic difference", born out of her situation as what she calls a "hidden or 'crypto-ethnic'" Canadian, hidden behind her Anglo-Canadian husband's family name (Hutcheon 1998). This is, as Richard J. Lane argues (himself implicitly using Hutcheon's perspective), "the perfect background for approaching such an open, diverse and at times contradictory form as postmodernism" (2006: 158).

Paradox and contradiction thus become cornerstones of Hutcheon's critical differentiation between Postmodernism and other cultural movements, refusing the temptation of easy categories and classifications. In *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), that together with *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) and *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (1989) forms her seminal trilogy on things Postmodern, she argues that she is well aware that her set task, a description of the Postmodern, cannot ever be truly achieved:

> Postmodern representational practices that refuse to stay neatly within accepted conventions and traditions and that deploy hybrid forms and seemingly mutually contradictory strategies frustrate critical attempts (*including this one*) to systematize them, to order them with an eye to control and mastery – that is, to totalize.
> (Hutcheon, 2000: 37; my emphasis)

The internal logic of Postmodernism, harking back to Lyotard's famous "incredulity towards meta-narratives" (Lyotard, 1983: xxiv), is exactly *not* to systematise, control and master narratives, and even though Hutcheon herself describes this as the central problem or rather question for all those who write on the

Postmodern in her *Poetics of Postmodernism* - "From what position can one 'theorize' (even self-consciously) a disparate, contradictory, multivalent, current cultural phenomenon?" (Hutcheon, 1999: 13), I have to agree with Lane that her attempt at an answer to this question is "one of Hutcheon's finest achievements" (2006: 159).

True to her own perspective, Hutcheon avoids the trap of a neat opposition or dichotomy between the Modern and the Postmodern, at the same time keeping both popular arguments – that of a clear socio-cultural break and a seamless continuity – in creative tension. Starting from her premise that "[t]here is nothing natural about the 'real' and there never was – even before the existence of mass media" (2000: 33), she uses the concept of mimesis, the (unproblematised) representation of reality, as a linchpin in her argument to differentiate the Postmodern from other modes of representation. Postmodernism as a regime of meaning-making or signification, to borrow Lash's term, challenges our internalised assumptions of mimesis and thus representation, "about its transparency and common-sense naturalness" (2000: 32). Representation becomes a problem, because reality itself has become a problem, Hutcheon argues, referring to Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum, the image that has lost all connection with a real referent, while critically questioning whether there ever *was* a possibility to access an unmediated reality in the first place (2000:33).

Openly breaking with Baudrillard's and also Jameson's implicit nostalgia of "the older stable reality of reference and of the non-cultural 'real'" (Jameson in Hutcheon, 2000: 34), it is her conclusion, based on both Postmodern theory *and* practice, "that everything always was 'cultural' in this sense, that is, always mediated by representation" (ibid.). Unlike the implosive and degenerative theories of the Postmodern as a decline of culture into a state of hyper-reality, Hutcheon advocates a Postmodernism that questions "what reality can mean and how we can come to know it" in a socio-cultural condition where representation "self-consciously acknowledges its existence as representation – that is, as interpreting (indeed as creating) its referent" (ibid.).

The self-aware primacy of the cultural in the processes of meaning-making (*not* in the Radical Constructivists' creation of reality beyond the cultural or the human mind) becomes the ordering logic to Hutcheon's understanding of how Realism, Modernism

and Postmodernism interact. Realism, as the name already implies, is based on the fundamental assumption that there is not only a reality outside the cultural, but that it also can be represented unproblematically, defined by the author as "the transparency of the medium and thus the direct and natural link between sign and referent", mimesis or reference (Hutcheon, 2000: 34). Modernism is then the expectable reaction to this conceptualisation of representation. In order to challenge Realism, Modernism is focussed almost exclusively on the sign, or the signifier to be more precise: the opacity (not transparency) of the medium is king, "and the self-sufficiency of the signifying system" (ibid.). Modernist autonomy breaks the seemingly natural bond of Realist reference between the referent and the sign, and shifts the dominance in the process of meaning making from the first to the latter. Going beyond Saussure's dualism of signifier and signified and using Pierce's expanded triadic model of the relationship between sign, sense and object, one could argue that according to Hutcheon's theory, in the process of meaning-making Realism tends more towards the dominance of the object or referent, Modernism towards the sign or signifier, and that would leave Peirce's interpretant or sense for Postmodernism. In the author's words:

> What postmodernism does is to denaturalise both realism's transparency and modernism's reflexive response [i.e. autonomy and opacity], while retaining (in its typical complicitously critical way) the historically attested power of both. This is the ambivalent politics of postmodern representation.
> (Hutcheon, 2000: 34)

So, Postmodernism with its project of a critical inquiry into the processes and politics of representation is not a historical successor to or a break with Modernism. With its ambivalent and contradictive stance it appropriates and denaturalises aspects of both Realism and Modernism and still is not the continuation of either. Expanding on the easy opposition between a Modern 'either/or' vs. a Postmodern 'both/and', Hutcheon introduces a problematic of 'both/neither' that is focused both on the referent (like Realism) and the sign (like Modernism), but refuses to take sides (and thus is neither) in its obsession with the process of cultural meaning-making

from both aspects itself (in the sense or interpretant). The mode that allows for this being and not being, saying and not saying, the mode that thus defines the Postmodern, is irony.

In *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (1994), however, Hutcheon is quick to point out that "[t]o limit an analysis of irony to one cultural enterprise would be unnecessarily restrictive – and, as I've learned, an utter red herring" (1995: 3). Even though irony drives Postmodernism, it is not only Postmodern, neither is the Postmodern or Postmodernism *only* ironic. But the unease Hutcheon evokes in connection to irony, triggered by the "indirection, especially when combined with the idea of power" (1995: 9), and the thorny issue of authorial intention that necessarily comes up when one analyses it make irony a perfect candidate for the preferred mode of Postmodern representations. The complex interplay between the creators of representations and their receivers that begins in Modernism, is driven to a playful extreme in Postmodernism, and the web of what is said, what is meant and the context is never more complicated than in the case of irony. Hutcheon delivers a perfect example with her definition of irony, which I would like to give in full just to make my point:

> Irony, then, will mean different things to the different players. From the point of view of the *interpreter*, irony is an interpretative and intentional move: it is the making or inferring of **meaning** in addition to and different from what is stated, together with an **attitude** toward both the said and the unsaid. The move is usually triggered (and then directed) by conflictual textual or contextual evidence or by markers which are socially agreed upon. However, from the point of view of what I too (with reservations) will call the *ironist*, irony is the intentional transmission of both information and evaluative attitude other than what is explicitly presented.
> (Hutcheon, 1995: 11)

First of all, what I find noteworthy is that the author here sees a ludic logic at work: she talks of players, of moves. The set of rules and the markers used are "socially agreed upon", so they are negotiated in a communal way. The interpreter is actively making meaning from the elements that he or she is provided with by the ironist, not just passively consuming meaning. What makes irony finally happen is saying one

thing but meaning another. This then is the basis for Hutcheon's Postmodernism and the reason why it is different from Realism and Modernism: Using irony as the main tool of representation, it becomes a communal game of meaning-making, problematizing the process, not a mimetic copy of an external reality or a language game dealing only in experimental permutations of signs. Here I also see the close connection between Hutcheonite Postmodernism and RPGs as language games of a different type, since they are also focussed more on the process of meaning-making itself than a referent (since there is none if one produces fictional, secondary realities) or the language (since it is only an ephemeral tool). The result of the author's definition of the Postmodern via irony is the "paradoxical Postmodernism of complicity and critique" Hutcheon is (in)famous for, and that constitutes a cornerstone of my reading of the socio-cultural importance of RPGs (2000: 11).

7.5 – Lash: De-/Differentiation and the New Bourgeoisie

In his introduction to the *Sociology of Postmodernism* (1990), Scott Lash clearly establishes his own approach to Postmodernism as a "coherent and unified set of serious sociological analyses [...] in terms of social theory, the sociological investigation of culture, and the social-stratificational bases of postmodernism" (1996: ix). He argues that both Modern and Postmodern culture are specific regimes of signification that are the results of socio-economic changes, and identifies Bourdieu as his central theoretical point of reference. While for him Modernisation is the process of the differentiation or autonomisation of social structures into political, legal, aesthetic, intellectual, and other spheres, Lash argues that Postmodernisation – to borrow the expression he creates – is the exact opposite: "What I want to claim is that if modernization is a process of cultural differentiation, or what German analysts call *Ausdifferenzierung*, then '*post*modernization' is a process of de-differentiation, or *Entdifferenzierung*" (1996: 5).

Lash then follows Jean Piaget's model of developmental psychology, applying it to society and its development from a primitive, into a religio-metaphysical, and eventually a Modern collective mind-set. In the first stage, Lash's primitive culture,

religion and the social are undifferentiated and form an animistic amalgam. The decisive step away from this state and into the second stage is the differentiation between the sacred and the profane to form institutionalised religions. This development continued in Europe by differentiating secular from religious culture during the Renaissance, and finally autonomous theoretical, ethical, and aesthetic spheres during the 18th century. Lash identifies Realism as the aesthetic style associated with this state of beginning differentiation where the cultural is separate from the social (as representation), the aesthetic from the theoretical (as it is not 'true'), and the secular from the religious (art is purely aesthetical in nature and ethics no longer only religious) (1996: 6-7). With the establishment of the fullest possible autonomy for each of the spheres, the third stage is reached, where all of them are self-legislating, developing their own conventions and modes of valuation. This break with foundationalism, the heteronomous legislation from a universalist instance, is what constitutes the Modern moment for Lash (1996: 9).

The fourth and (so far) last stage in Lash's socio-cultural developmental history is the Postmodern. The main features of this shift are changes in the relationships between types of cultural artefacts (aesthetic, theoretical, ethical), in the relationships between the cultural and the social, the dominant cultural economy and the mode of signification. Using Walter Benjamin as point of reference, Lash argues that the three main cultural spheres – the aesthetic, the theoretical and the ethical – all lose their autonomy, and the cultural is no longer seen as separate from the social (or in Benjamin's terms auratic) as the distinction between high and low (or popular) culture fades away. Cultural objects are now subjected to commercial circulation, the author disintegrates, the audience becomes part of the artefact, and criticism and literature become one and the same. This is an excellent descriptions of what RPGs do. At the heart of this change from the Modern to the Postmodern Lash identifies a drastic shift in the dominant mode of representation: Where Modernism differentiated between an autonomous signifier, signified, and referent, Postmodernism now "*problematizes* these distinctions, and especially the status and relationship of signifier and referent, or put another way, representation and reality" (1996: 12). An increase in the signification of images, and a mutual invasion by signifier

and referent of their respective spheres are symptoms of this Postmodern mode of signification.

Even though this periodisation and the dichotomy between the Modern and the Postmodern that Lash establishes seem to indicate that he is caught in the trap of over-simplified readings of Lyotard mentioned earlier, he immediately counteracts this danger by stating that not all or even most of contemporary culture is Postmodern, that there is a coexistence, sometimes even a combination of Realist, Modern and Postmodern features in the majority of artefacts, and that "[i]n actual history as well there is no strict chronology of succeeding cultural paradigms" (1996: 13).

Based on social changes, Lash defines the Postmodern turn as a representational change: where Realism was still convinced that cultural forms represent reality, Modernism problematized the signifying practise, and Postmodernism all sense of reality itself in a world where the invasion of images transformed and destabilised basic notions of reality (1996: 14). In stark contrast to Jameson's implosive reading of Postmodernism that I will go into more detail about later, Lash sees Postmodernism as a major threat to social and cultural order, a bigger threat than Modernism ever was, as it pervades BOTH high and low (or popular) culture, and the de-differentiation typical for it does not stabilise reality and representation (like Realism), or destabilise only representation (like Modernism): "Postmodernist de-differentiation [...] puts chaos, flimsiness, and instability in our experience of *reality* itself" (1996: 15).

Lash being the sociologist, he also looks for connections between this ideological and epistemological shift and changes in society. Harking back to his model of four stages, he associates the rise of Realism with the rise of the Bourgeoisie to social and political dominance. Their mind-set defined Realism and Realism in turn defined their mind-set: "a secular ontology, with a mechanistic world view, and correspondingly as sense of linear temporality in which history was seen as progress" (1996: 16). At the end of the 19th century, massive social developments destabilised the bourgeois identity and public sphere: individualism was challenged once more by collective agents (corporations and unions), a literate working class emerged and appropriated ideas of secularism, natural rights and progress, and urbanisation as well as

transportation de-centred the experience of time and space. Liberal capitalism morphed into organised capitalism with the accumulation of capital as its sole aim.

As Modernism is contextualised with conflict and an open challenge to bourgeois identity and social predominance by other classes (mostly the working class), Postmodernism in Lash's theory reacts to this by rejecting the experimentation of the (aesthetic and political) avant-garde, by favouring figuration and content and reapproaching an affinity with bourgeois ideas of subjectivity. It might be tempting to read a counter-revolutionary reflex into Lash's analysis of Postmodernism here and thus set it in stark opposition to other, more revolutionary or deconstructive perceptions of the phenomenon, yet the sociological argument the author suggests warns that this semblance of a return to old bourgeois values is carried by a totally different class than the original rise of bourgeois Realism:

> [The post-industrial middle classes] are often upwardly mobile, and not from families of the old established groupings. They often have not gone to the elite universities, but to institutions of other levels, which themselves have been party successful in establishing and legitimating their own cultural capital vis-à-vis the established institutions. The post-industrial middle classes, further, are often based in different jobs and are from a different and younger generation than the older established bourgeoisie. [...] [T]he new 'elite' has effectively become no elite at all, but a 'mass', i.e. part of the masses.
> (Lash, 1996: 20)

The re-individualisation and the complicity with the processes of commodification expressed in Postmodern mass and popular culture is thus the product of the social rise of a new class of well educated, young professionals of working class or lower middle class origin during the 1980s. They are upwardly mobile, but still enough under the impressions of their 'more humble origins' to be very unhappy with elitism or hierarchies and to distance themselves critically from both pre-Modern belief (triggering a crumbling of the power of institutionalised religions) and Modern mass-ideologies (resulting in the disintegration of political systems). Instead of (Modern) conflict and opposition, they prefer (Postmodern) negotiation, assembling their identities freely and creatively from elements of all the different classes and cultures they are familiar with, creating and constantly re-creating their image(s). It is exactly

this social environment of upwardly mobile, young, non-élite university students that during the 1970s provided the fertile ground and the medium for the creation of role-playing games.

7.6 – Best and Kellner: In Search of the Postmodern

Beginning with their *Postmodern Theory* (1991), adapting their ideas to changing circumstances and developing them further in *The Postmodern Turn* (1997) and the *Postmodern Adventure* (2007), philosophers Steven Best and Douglas Kellner have accompanied the Postmodern and its many mutations over more than two decades now.

Like Lash, they see dramatic changes in society and a crisis in established ways of life and modes of thought as the impulse that resulted in theoretical discourses and aesthetic conventions articulating these new social experiences, "and a proliferation of emergent discourses [...] suggests that important transformations are taking place in society and culture" (1991: ix). In this specific case, transformations of a Modern into a Postmodern society and culture.

Even though the authors at the very beginning of their argument are quick to state that there is no and there can even be no unified Postmodern theory due to the inherent refusal of totality (1991: 2), they still use the oftentimes denied dichotomy between Modernity and Postmodernity as a basis for their analysis, anticipating criticism by indicating that Postmodernity is "the period which *allegedly* follows modernity" (ibid., my emphasis). Modernity or the Modern Age is identified as the historical period following the Middle Ages, driven by innovation and dynamism in opposition to traditional society. The Enlightenment project constructs reason as the sole source of progress and the locus of truth and knowledge, manifest in the aesthetic Modernity (or Modernism) of the avant-garde and a consumer culture enamoured with technology. Best and Kellner go on to describe the process of Modernisation as a cluster of "those processes of individualization, secularization, industrialization, cultural differentiation, commodification, urbanization, bureaucratization, and rationalization which together have constituted the modern

world" (1991: 3). In a critical turn not often seen in similar typologies in other authors, they also bring up the victims of these processes and the disciplinary institutions created to contain and control their suffering, thus exposing the dark side of Modern progress and the promise of liberation in processes of domination, oppression and control referring to Foucault, Horkheimer, Adorno and Habermas (ibid.).

Postmodernity in contrast (or complementary) to Modernity is seen through a Lyotardian and Baudrillardian lens as the socio-cultural product of the switch from a (Modern) industrial to a (Postmodern) post-industrial, high-tech media society, as new types of information and knowledge technologies become available to an ever increasing portion of the general population. Neo-Marxist critics, such as Jameson or David Harvey, associate the Postmodern with Late Capitalism, a higher and intensified state of capitalism heralded by the global homogenisation and a much deeper penetration of capital and capitalist logic into all spheres of public and private life. At the same time, the Modern sense of unity and control evaporates in a process of cultural fragmentation exponentially increasing in reach and rapidity, creating totally new experiences of space and time, as well as "new modes of experience, subjectivity, and culture" (1991: 3).

From the social and economical, Best and Kellner argue, the divide then extends into the spheres of aesthetics and cultural creation. Modernist avant-garde art movements such as Impressionism, Expressionism, *L'art-pour-l'art*, or Surrealism are replaced by the increasingly diverse, sometimes contradicting aesthetic forms and practices of artists such as Venturi, Warhol, Pynchon or Lynch, refusing easy classifiability. And the debate not only rages on a practical, but also, or even more intensely so, on a theoretical level. Modern thinkers such as Descartes, Comte, Marx or Weber are fiercely criticised for their vain (in both senses of the word) search for apodictic truth, their universalising and totalising claims, their fallacious rationalism. Postmodern discourses, on the other hand, are attacked for their perspectivism and relativism, their irrationalism, and nihilism, as their critique of the processes of representation as inevitably historically and linguistically mediated clash with the Modernists' belief in the possibility of mimesis. The Postmodern rejection of totalising macroperspectives leads to microtheories and micropolitics, the rejection of causality and social cohesion to multiplicity, plurality, fragmentation, and

indeterminacy, and the rejection of the (Modern) rational and unified subject to socially and linguistically de-centred and fragmented subjects. Eventually, Best and Kellner conclude, this leads to a Postmodern state of "'postmodern politics' associated with locally based micropolitics that challenge a broad array of discourses and institutionalized forms of power" (1991: 5).

The dialectic nature of Best and Kellner's theory is openly addressed by the authors in *The Postmodern Adventure* (2001) where one of their introductory chapters is even called "Crises of Mapping and the Dialectics of the Present" (2001: 5). Following the habitual paradigm, the Modern and the Postmodern, Modernism and Postmodernism are set in clear opposition to each other, and the Postmodern turn is constructed as a reaction *against* and a movement *away* from "the mechanistic and positivistic conception of modern science, [...] Enlightenment optimism, faith in reason, and emphasis on transcultural values and human nature", rejecting "foundationalism and transcendental subjectivities within theory, the modernist emphases on innovation and originality in art, and a universalist and totalizing modern politics" (2001: 6). Modernism, the authors argue, is perceived to be reductive, illusory, and arrogant, while Postmodernism favours "the countervalues of multiplicity and difference, antirealism, aesthetic irony and appropriation, ecological perspectives, and a proliferation of diverse forms of struggle" (ibid.). The latter claim directly contradicts Lash's concept introduced earlier in my argument about conflict being a Modern/-ist and negotiation a Postmodern/-ist thing.

Best and Kellner, however, then attempt to overcome this dichotomous and dualistic framework by insisting that they themselves would like to follow a Postmodern logic of 'both/and' and not the Modern 'either/or', "drawing on each tradition and situating the present era [i.e. 2001] between the modern and the postmodern" (ibid.). The titular "dialectics of the present" of their chapter would thus have to remain unresolved, in a move reminiscent of Zima's dialogical conceptualisation of Postmodernism as a problematic refusing synthesis (c.f. Zima, 2001). Postmodernism remains in a nascent, not fully realised state, and contemporary societies in an unpredictable, exciting transitional period of both continuities and discontinuities that the authors claim can only be hoped to be understood in a transdisciplinary framework.

This conception, although similar and related in nature to Kellner's 'solo-theory' discussed in the following chapter, is of totally different style, refusing the value judgments Kellner's 'hysterical' Postmodernism inevitably conjures due to his choice of terminology. Here the authors paint a picture of changes emerging in fundamental categories such as the definition of reality or practices of representation from a dynamic, on-going encounter with the new that is, however, still rooted in the past and showing continuities with Modernism. Context becomes the key to appropriate modes of representation that make sense of the ever-changing world and the construction of personal identities that face constant problems of alienation and authenticity alike. "[S]elf-construction in ludic performative modes" becomes the prevalent viable strategy to deal with the "contradictory amalgam of progressive and regressive, positive and negative, and thus highly ambivalent phenomena, all difficult to chart and evaluate" in a Postmodern socio-cultural environment (2001: 8 and 10). The critical reflection of Modern concepts leads to an enhanced awareness of limits, and that in turn to a delicate balancing of transgressing them and the need to uphold them: contingency, unpredictability, and non-hierarchical thinking step in to replace the Modern will-to-power over society and nature, dispersing Modern ideologies of domination, progress and growth, "while keeping the best aspects of modernity – humanism, individuality, enlightened reason, democracy, rights, and solidarities – to be tempered by reverence for nature, respect for all life, sustainability, and ecological balance" (2001: 11).

Although this conclusion might seem a bit trite and naïve with the hindsight of the late-comer - this is 2012 and much has happened and changed on the level of society, ecology and politics since 2001, the essential insight that Postmodern thought is not about rejecting *all* of Modern philosophy and practice is invaluable to me. It is more about critically reflecting upon the Modern and then judging according to the given context what elements are still relevant and appropriate, and which ones might need rethinking. After a dualistic beginning, this is where Best and Kellner are convincing in that they mean it when they claim to want to move beyond the 'either/or' of Modernism and towards the (still unreachable) 'both/and' of a post-Modernism in the making. Both the procedural and negotiated aspects of their theory echo strongly in my argument about RPGs as a deeply Postmodern medium.

7.7 – Kellner: Hysterically Seeking Postmodernism

In his *Media Culture* (1995), Douglas Kellner develops the joint, somewhat dualistic theory established by him and Best into the direction of Lash's tripartite model of stages from his *Sociology of Postmodernism* (1990). He classifies as pre-Modern or traditional societies those that show fixed, solid, stable identities, predefined social roles, and a system of myths to stabilise these conditions. In these unreflected conditions, the organisation of kinship and life's trajectory are fixed. Modern societies are more mobile, here identities are multiple, personal, self-reflexive and open to change and innovation. These systems are, in Kellner's words, "other-related" (2003: 231), built upon mutual recognition and the resulting self-validation. They are still relatively fixed and substantial, following only a limited set of roles and norms and their possible combinations, but reflection on these roles and departures from tradition are possible. This sets up identity as both a theoretical and personal problem, creating individual and collective tensions between anxiety (about choices, social recognition, alienation) and crystallisation (ennui, lack of possibilities, relations). Even if the Modern, unlike the pre-Modern self is a unique and individual one, it is also highly mediated as image, style or look in a media and consumer society: "[F]or some theorists, identity is a discovery and affirmation of an innate essence which determines what I am, while for others identity is a construct and a creation from available social roles and material" (Kellner, 2003: 233).

Postmodern critics dispense with essentialist theories and follow the constructivist argument while at the same time problematizing their own approach. They see identity and the individual subject itself as only myths and illusions vanishing into fragmentation in post-Modern mass- and media-societies of ever accelerating pace, extension and complexity. Kellner directly refers to Baudrillard and Jameson (both of whom share a rather negative, implosive understanding of the Postmodern) with his claims:

> [I]n postmodern culture, the subject has disintegrated into a flux of euphoric intensities, fragmented and disconnected, and that the decentered postmodern self no longer experiences anxiety (with hysteria becoming the typical postmodern psychic malady) and no

> longer possesses depth, substantiality, and coherency that was the ideal and sometimes achievement of the modern self.
> (Kellner, 2003: 233)

Building upon the prevalent logic inherited from his sources, Kellner goes on to describe the Postmodern self as defined by "schizoid, nomadic dispersions of desire and subjectivity" (Guattari/Deleuze) in which "identity is highly unstable and has [...] disappeared altogether" (Kroker/Cook), and media culture is the ultimate "site of the implosion of identity and fragmentation of the subject" (2003: 234). Even if he tries to make a point of his objective distance towards all of these readings, the predominant impression already created by his very catalogue of sources cannot be relativized completely by his style of referencing them. He admits to his choice of practical examples to be "hardly innocent although they are symptomatic of what are generally taken to be salient features of postmodern culture" (ibid.), and then immediately follows this concession with a list of largely negative or negatively connoted cornerstones of his compound reading of the Postmodern: "proliferation and dissemination of images without depth; glitzy, high-tech produced intensities; pastiche and implosion of forms; and quotation and repetition of past images and forms" (ibid.).

One can easily disagree with Kellner's assertion that these are "generally" accepted as "salient features" of Postmodern culture. First of all, because there is nothing "generally" accepted in Postmodern theory to begin with, as that would in itself be a very un-Postmodern thing to do. Secondly, there are many counterexamples such as Linda Hutcheon, Ihab Hassan or Peter Zima who do not share this quasi-apocalyptic and destructive/sterile approach to Postmodern cultural production. I would, however, like to salvage and re-appropriate certain aspects of his theoretical compilation that I see as very productive for my own argument about how RPGs interrelate with their Postmodern socio-cultural context. In agreement with Peter Zima, I am of the opinion that a problematized constructivist approach to Postmodern identity formation seems to be best suited to describe not only the experience of living under Postmodern conditions, but also the experience of actively

and creatively engaging in such processes in a fictional, collective environment as it is established in the new medium.

Euphoric, fragmented and decentred they might be, and I understand all of these in a positive and creative not a negative and destructive way, but the intensities produced by Postmodern life and creation are, however, never disconnected, as disconnection is no longer an option in a networked world. Dispersion does not end in an utter lack of connection, a socio-cultural Big Freeze. It is also not the result of an implosion of meaning (as theorised by Baudrillard, Jameson, and indirectly Kellner), as that would be more true of Modern/-ist ideological perspectives and most possibly lead to a Big Crunch of meaning. Dispersion is carried by an explosion of meanings. This is exactly where I would like to re-read the unstable, nomadic and schizoid aspects Kellner borrows from Guattari, Deleuze, Kroker and Cook, not in a western and Modern, which in that case means a destructive, pejorative, or pathological context, but a global and Postmodern one: What is unstable is in the process of becoming, of changing, adapting. What is nomadic is in constant motion, never settling down. What is schizoid is not delusional, but offers an 'abnormal' relation between thoughts, feelings and actions violating established conventions (OED online), making it possible to rethink them while - unlike schizophreniacs - being constantly held in check by the social network to prevent anti-social behaviour.

The same re-reading, beyond the 19th century pathological classification that was conveniently used for so long to disenfranchise and control women, is necessary when it comes to hysteria as the "typical postmodern psychic [sic] malady" (Kellner, 2003: 233), or – more neutrally formulated – the predominant socio-cultural state of the Postmodern collective psyche, a concept Postmodern critics would refuse in the first place. Dropping all of the (Modern/-ist) pathological vocabulary from the definition, which amounts to the larger portion of the text, what remains is that hysteria is a state of the nervous system dominated by emotion, excitement, and a realignment of the moral and intellectual faculties (c.f. Moore and Fine, 1990: 89 - 90). This would make Postmodernism a physical, a visceral approach using emotion and excitement not cool detachment and reason to affect changes in the moral and intellectual systems of our societies. I would like to activate this creative and constructive re-reading of Kellner's concept of hysterical Postmodernism for my

discussion of RPGs, focussing on the elements of choice, action and freedom and the resulting contradictory fields of creative tension the author himself identifies later on in his argument, when he claims that "the quest for identity is arguably more intense than ever in the present moment [i.e. 1995]" and that counterbalancing an understanding of identity as a purely individual achievement, there is an "increased emphasis on tribal, national, group, and other forms of collective identity" (2003: 258). The ironic reference to the questing narrative prevalent in many forms of RPGs aside, this active search for identity and meaning in a process of negotiation between the individual and the collective driven by emotional excitement or hysteria resonates strongly with my understanding of life in Postmodern societies and its representation in the form of RPGs alike.

7.8 – Anderson: Irony of Ironies – The Postmodern Truth About the Truth

Political scientist and social psychologist Walter Truett Anderson edited and published *The Truth About the Truth* as a collection of articles, book excerpts, and essays in 1995, claiming in its subtitle that it would help in the process of "De-confusing and Re-Constructing the Postmodern World". Bringing together well-known names across several disciplines (like Eco, Jencks, Foucault, Baudrillard, Derrida, Rorty, Kuhn, Feyerabend, and Havel, just to name a few), Anderson's aim – according to his introduction – is to come to terms with the historical transition felt to be happening during the mid-1990s, the "revolutions of belief", or "shifts in belief about belief" that bring together feelings of liberation and loss (1995b: 2 -3).

Situating the Postmodern, Anderson follows a sequential and historical logic, arguing that the term itself ("a puzzling, uppity term") seems to imply "that the modern era, which we have always equated with all that is new and progressive, has reached the age of retirement" (1995b: 3). He claims that he first encountered this change in Stephen Toulmin's *Return to Cosmology* (1985), which is rather late compared to the theoretical and critical developments during the 1970s, but coincides closely with the translation of Lyotard's essential essay into English in 1984, where the author describes the postmodern world as a "world that has not yet

discovered how to define itself in terms of what it *is*, but only in terms of what it has *just-now ceased to be*" (Toulmin in Anderson, 1995: 3; original emphasis).

Anderson sets these aspects of negative and procedural self-identification in contrast to Modern ideas when he brings up David Harvey's *Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), directly identifying the Postmodern with the collapse of the Modern Enlightenment project that believed in rationalism, the concept of truth, social control and order, following the ideology of linear progress and growth (1995b: 4). Like Lash earlier (c.f. *Sociology of Postmodernism*, 1990), Anderson creates a structure of three historical and cultural eras, centred on Modernity. During Pre-Modernity, people experienced universality, he argues, but had no concept of it, as their societies were largely undisturbed and there were no problems with pluralism. Modern societies have/had a concept of universality, with either the hope for or fear of individuals unifying society as political or religious leaders, but no experience of it, since wars and migrations brought constant culture shocks. In Postmodern societies, the concept of universality itself is deconstructed and questioned, as strategies of conquest, repression, and conversion are no longer effective, and cultures and realities interpenetrate: This is what Anderson calls "the age of over-exposure to otherness" (1995b: 6). Undisturbed traditional (or Pre-Modern) societies become just as impossible to maintain as (Modern) strong and well organised belief systems, and while all earlier belief systems still exist, commuters between them and innovators within plunge them into constant civil wars: Anderson's central idea here is that while Pre-Modern and Modern conflicts were largely between different societies or sub-societies, Postmodern conflicts are predominantly internal conflicts waged within them.

This - admittedly attractive - tripartite structure, however, must be seen as undifferentiated and to a large extent even be refuted with historical evidence: The "undisturbed" Pre-Modern societies Anderson theorises here have never existed, as economical and cultural exchange, as well as migration and war has been a constant of human civilisation from the very beginning, and the absence of stable societies in spite of unified belief systems that is supposed to be typical of the Modern condition cannot explain the French Revolution and the resulting nation-building, the British Empire and its Post-Colonial successors, or the creation of the EEC/EU. Even though

the large categories of the Pre-Modern, Modern and Postmodern are viable for analyses, Lash's more sociological argument seems to me to be more tenable than Anderson's focus on universality as concept and experience. Then again, the association of Postmodernity with the Other and the questioning of belief and truth are both valid and functional tools, not only in my quest for a deeper understanding of RPGs in a Postmodern context.

Another aspect about Anderson's differentiation between the Modern and the Postmodern that I find intriguing results from the constructive (vs. the metaphysical) concept of truth that he inherits from philosopher Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989), where "truth is made rather than found" (Rorty in Anderson, 1995b: 8). Truth and reality in Postmodern thinking, unlike in Modern Rationalism or Empiricism, is something that is always socially constructed and given meaning, not something that is out there as is and immediately accessible to us. Anderson does not fall into the trap of radical Constructivists, arguing that reality itself has no substance at all unless it is constructed by the human mind. Instead, he argues for a discursive and narrative notion of reality, that the stories we tell about the Self and the Other (identity, memory, history, social norms and values, science, religion, the arts) result from a procedural and creative interaction between the human mind and what is out there: "The cosmos may be found; but the ideas we form about it, and the things we say about it, are made" (1995b: 8).

The arena for this creative process is culture, and this is also another level in Anderson's attempt to create a classification of Pre-Modern, Modern and Postmodern mind-sets and societies. In Pre-Modern societies there is no notion of culture as a distinctive sphere, since there is no need for it and it is not problematized. The differentiation between the cultural and other spheres of life – when it happens – and the recognition of what Anderson terms "symbolic DNA" (1995a: 15) is exactly the step that takes Pre-Modern societies into a Modern context, while the eventual denaturalisation and problematisation of culture in Postmodern societies inevitably leads to the (subversive) conclusion that culture is something that is and can be created. The effects of this realisation on cultural production, social coherence, and the understanding of reality are enormous, because you "(a) notice that you live in a culture, (b) think of it as something that was created by human

beings, (c) wonder who created it and for what purpose, (d) wonder what it does to you and (e) think about making some choices and/or changes" (1995a: 16). This then, following Anderson's argument, is the watershed moment between the Modern and the Postmodern: the problematisation of culture as a "discourse-sensitive" theoretical concept and set of practical signifying practices after its differentiation from other spheres of public and private life under the regime of Modernist philosophy (ibid.). Once this happens, he concludes, Modern/-ist elitism and the distinction between high and low (or popular) culture disintegrate, and socio-political conflicts between groups become meaningless, as all discourses are created equal, or are equally created.

It is this Postmodern awareness of the semiosphere (to use Juri Lotman's term created during the early 1980s and fully developed in *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, 1990), the awareness of living in a largely symbolic environment and the resulting possibility to make choices, that allows the Postmodern individual to re-inhabit and actively take ownership of it in discourse. The quintessence of Postmodernism according to Anderson - an ironic contradiction in terms I hope he is conscious of - is formulated in reference to Canadian futurist Ruben Nelson: "[c]ulture does not simply happen to us anymore", as "[i]ncreasingly, we also happen to it" (1995a: 17).

This fundamental shift in the relationship with the semiosphere we find in Postmodern societies is central also to my argument about RPGs as a new medium created from and under these conditions. There is also another aspect to Anderson's theory that resonates strongly with my own understanding of the elusive beast that is the Postmodern: When he talks about how reality is made in the mind and through language and then shared in culture, he for once overcomes the rigid historical, chronological, and deeply western structure his argument otherwise implies by bringing up examples for similar ideas in other historical periods and cultural spheres: Buddhism, Heraclitus, Christian and Muslim mystics. "It is like a minor theme in a symphony that is heard at first faintly in the background and eventually swells into dominance", he concludes (1995b: 8). The postmodern has thus been part of the development of human civilisation for a very long time, recurring and reinvigorating cultural processes in moments of transition. Following this ahistorical and at the same

time ironically historical perspective that can also be found in Eco's deliberations on the subject where 'every period has its own postmodernism' (Eco, 1983: 77)[16], postmodernism is not unique, but it is a period in the development of western societies where this awareness of the semiosphere becomes dominant, for example in the contemporary cultural movement called Postmodernism. We are actively making meaning/-s, and now we know it.

7.9 –Jencks: How Postmodernism Began at 3:32pm, or Not After All

Glenn Adamson and Jane Pavitt, curators of the successful exhibition *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion, 1970 – 1990* in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (September 2011 – January 2012), name Charles Jencks's almost ironical proclamation of the death of Modernism at "3.32p.m. (or thereabouts) on 15 March 1972" on occasion of the demolishing of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis/MO in his *Language of Postmodern Architecture* (1977) as the most memorable of many such claims at the time (2011: 14). Even though his later approach is a less categorical one, he still seems to have conserved a vague idea of a "then and now", a sequence of historical eras, or of opposing ideologies and aesthetics. Since he founds his more recent understanding of the Postmodern on Lyotard (1979), Eco (1983), and Hutcheon (1989) it is interesting to note that neither of them show the same inclination, as I have explained earlier.

On the surface, Jencks establishes a simple (or simplistic) contrast between the "straightforwardness, transparency and honest simplicity" of Modernism and the "irony and ambiguity" of Postmodernism with Auschwitz, "the archetypal killing factory of Modernism", as the watershed moment (2009: 15), but he also indicates the undifferentiated and eventually untenable nature of this claim by introducing his argument with "It is no doubt a cliché to say so, but […]" (ibid.). Irony - in the form of Eco's quotation marks or Hutcheon's metafiction - is at the core of how Postmodernism in the Jencksian sense thematises the necessity for a constant

[16] I used a German version of the text, so the quote is my translation and therefore marked with single quotation marks ('…').

(re-)negotiation between past, present, and future in the process of meaning-making, or what the author calls "time-binding" (2009: 16).

So unlike the Jencks of 1977, the Jencks of 2011 has achieved ironic distance also to the concept of a clear-cut differentiation or historical periodisation between the Modern and the Postmodern. His preface to the second edition of his *Post-Modern Reader* (2011) is entitled "Post-Modernism: The Ism that Returns" (2011: 8), and it is dedicated to prove that reports of the death of Postmodernism that have been circulating in academia for several years now, are greatly exaggerated. Picking up ideas developed by Eco in the early 1980s and others since, a transhistorical concept beyond a sequential and linear-progressive periodisation of history emerges, an alternative branch of Modernism not in conflict with but besides Late-Modernism (ibid.). Jencks associates the current resurgence in critical interest in the Postmodern, after an ebb during the 1990s, with a new generation of academics and critics who experienced the heyday of Postmodern cultural expression during the 1980s and early 1990s and are now in an intellectual and institutional position to reflect upon the hegemony of Modernism and possible future developments. As the cultural dissemination of Postmodernism has reached a high-point and de-defined Modernist aspects filter into mass-culture, Jencks argues that the distinctions between the Modern and the Postmodern blur, and crossover becomes the rule: "The hybrid Post-, with its hyphen, is what I have termed […] a deepening of both traditions" (2011: 9). Double-coded, hybrid Postmodernism is seen as both a continuation and transcendence of Modernism, neither deconstructive nor anti-modern.

Already in his 2009 article, the author establishes a reading that goes beyond the clumsy, black-and-white dichotomy he unfortunately puts at its beginning. In an elegant metaphor that echoes one of the peculiarities of the Westminster parliamentary system and that reminds me of basic aspects of both British and Canadian in opposition to US-American culture, (the US-American) Jencks defines the Postmodern as "a slide away from its parent rather than an act of patricide, a sometime loyal opposition rather than anti-modern movement" (2009: 16). So it seems that he only introduced the either/or definition earlier to then develop this into a both/and one later, moving from a total break between the Modern and the Postmodern towards a continuation and combination of the apparent opposites,

claiming that they are actually "interdependent and today mutually defining" (ibid.). No Modernism without Postmodernism, no Postmodernism without Modernism, and both of them are therefore here to stay. And, I would add, to complain about each other.

On a conceptual level, reality mutates from Platonic ideals into a fractal collective of continuums, "[f]rom self-sameness to self-similarity, from repetition to scaling, from Modern to Postmodern, it shows a continuous meld" (2009: 20). From this more general approach Jencks distils a list of oppositions that are not to be taken as black-or-white, yes-or-no, binary 0-or-1 decisions, but rather as frames of reference, fields of tension, in-between-states, and problems dominated by (deeply Postmodern) Fuzzy Logic. The extreme positions of these problems could be summarised in the following structure, adopting Jencks's method (c.f. Table 7):

Modern	**AND**	***Postmodern***
Science of Simplicity	**AND**	Science of Complexity
Reduction, Analysis into Discrete Units	**AND**	Emergence and Feedback, Synthesis into Interacting Wholes
Mechanism	**AND**	Organicism
Materialism	**AND**	Self-organising Systems
Determinism	**AND**	Non-determinism

Table 7: *Modern AND Postmodern (Jencks, 2009: 18)*

Following Jencks's argument, the '**AND**' is the Third Space where reality and representations happen, individual experiences oscillating constantly between the (unrealised) extremes. And yet, looking at the Postmodern end of the continuum, I recognise a conceptual familiarity with basic functional principles and possible interpretations of the medium of RPGs that clearly set it apart from traditional printed and published texts and that make this a very fruitful approach for my own argument.

While many critics have moved "elsewhere, to adopt a spatial metaphor, both forward and back and to the side" (Jencks, 2009: 33), the author claims that the

Modern (in the guise of Modernity, Modernisation and Modernism) still dominates most cultures globally. Both world views, complexity AND simplicity, are functional and useful depending on the concrete frame of reference: while the science of simplicity (such as Newtonian physics) allows to successfully manage everyday experience with minimum effort, the science of complexity guarantees deeper and more systemic understanding (like Einstein's theories). Both are even conceptually intertwined in a necessarily dual and hybrid world-view, as the sciences of complexity "include the sciences of simplicity, the linear ones, as limiting cases" (2009: 34). This insight is then in turn transferred to the relationship between the Modern and the Postmodern: in a state of pluralism that rejects pedantic classification, they become complementary, synthesised, hybridised, and while religion crumbles, Postmodern spirituality flourishes (2009: 36). And here it is again, the reference to religion and spirituality that I already have encountered in many other critics' attempts to understand the dynamics of the Postmodern experience, and that I have addressed in relation to RPGs as well.

So Jencks has undergone a strong transformation from his (admittedly early and most likely at least somewhat ironic) attempt to draw a clear either/or-line between the Modern and the Postmodern down to the minute (3.32pm) into a both/and-voice of hybridisation and synthesis, where "as usual, an individual and culture are both mixtures of different epochs, sedimentations of various orientations" (2009: 36). And while he describes the "post-modern sublating the modern" as the predominant contemporary cultural mode, he also cautions that "the economy and society of the globe is still based on modernisation" (ibid.). The argument he builds locates different kinds of discursive power (Modern and Postmodern) in different spheres of life (culture and society/economy), and yet they are not supposed to be seen as opposed to or in conflict with each other: Jencks's "loyal opposition" (2009: 16 and 36), reminiscent of Hutcheon's "paradoxical postmodernism of complicity and critique" (2000: 11), is exactly what makes the Postmodern *Postmodern* in the first place. This is essential for my own localisation of discursive power in RPGs and how they relate to the socio-cultural question of dissent.

7.10 – Zima: Dialogical Postmodernism, or Talking About It

Zima dedicates a whole chapter of his *Moderne/Postmoderne* to the central problem of defining a triad of terms, *Moderne*, *Modernismus*, *Postmoderne* ("Modernity, Modernism, Postmodernity"), and posits early on that in order to be able to define the Postmodern, it is essential to first define the Modern, since the Postmodern can only be seen and thought as a complementary and contrastive discursive construction in a close relation of affinity to and difference from the Modern, signified by the prefix "post" (2001: 21 and 23). Another problem Zima brings up is that discussions of the Modern and the Postmodern frequently equate two levels: that of a certain era or period of history and certain value systems or ideologies. Centuries of history are thereby reduced to one ideological content, or one artistic or literary style. Diverging ideas and movements or social and cultural changes are ignored or glossed over. In order to prevent this reduction to a formal and abstract opposition or sequence of periods, ideologies or styles, Zima requires that historical, social, political and philosophical developments must be co-thought and negotiated in dynamic problematics (2001: 25).

This is why he rejects the interchangeable use of *Moderne* in German for both the sociological and historical category of Modernity (*Neuzeit*) as well as aesthetic and ideological Modernism (*Modernismus*), a result of Friedrich Theodor Vischer's Young Hegelian revision of Hegel's medieval-Christian era under the impression of late-Modern critical reflection of Modern thinking (Zima, 2001: 27). This critique of Modernity is what Zima calls Modernism, associated with Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, Musil, Kafka, Pirandello, questioning central tenets of Enlightenment and Rationalism (like Truth), doubting the idea of progress and dominion over nature, criticising both religion and science in anticipation of Lyotard and others, and it is still part of the Modern age (2001: 28). Here he openly diverges from a more traditional school of thought, going back to Bertrand Russell and his *History of Western Philosophy* (1946) that identifies the beginning of Modern thought with processes of secularisation and a scientific world-view that ended the Medieval mind-set rooted in religion and heralded the Renaissance era of Humanism, or the connection frequently made between the Enlightenment philosophy of the 17th and 18th century and Modernity,

such as in Anthony Giddens's *Consequences of Modernity* (1990). Zima openly attacks this model, especially when the Modern thus defined is then put in opposition to the Postmodern, since a Modernity stretching back to the 16th or 17th century is *per se* incomparable to a Postmodernity associated largely with the era after World War II: How can one meaningfully compare 500 years of socio-cultural development to 50 or 60? Zima proceeds to answer this question: It is impossible, as a Modernity identified with the age of Enlightenment and Rationalism is too long and too heterogeneous to serve as a valid model in an attempt to understand how precisely the Postmodern is 'post' to the Modern. He does, however, see a direct relation to the era between 1850 and 1950, which he calls Late-Modernity or Modernism, in the central role of ambiguity, ambivalence and indifference of linguistic and cultural values in politics, psychology, philosophy and aesthetics (Zima, 2001: 39 and 41).

Following these three concepts, Zima creates a tripartite model of understanding the problematic of Postmodernity and its origin in and debt to Modernity. During what he defines as Modernity (18th and early 19th century), *ambiguity* is still resolved in philosophy, psychology and the arts, reality appears to be knowable and controllable: Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* (1835 – 38) posit art as the sensual and sensible representation of an external reality, and his dialectics overcome the opposition between thesis and antithesis in synthesis. Reason dominates this unity of opposites in the synthesis of higher knowledge (Zima, 2001: 42). During the middle of the 19th century and well into the 20th, these certainties are shattered in Late-Modernity. A crisis of literary Realism and Hegelian philosophy, with the Young Hegelians de- and reconstructing their master's system, ushers in an age of *ambivalence* where the unity of opposites is no longer attainable in synthesis, but remains unresolved: good and evil, true and false, appearance and reality are perceived to be closely interrelated. Zima calls this recognition of the ambivalent nature of the Late-Modern world Modernism, the rejection of Rationalism, Hegelian dialectics, and all metaphysical truth claims (ibid.). In the middle of the 20th century this sense of pervasive ambivalence finally results in what Zima terms the Postmodern problematic, the *indifference* or utter exchangeability of all values: seemingly opposed values are in effect if not in essence one and the same.

The motor driving this transition from ambiguity to ambivalence and eventually indifference is the increasing dominance of the exchange value, until it remains as the only socio-economic or cultural measure in Late-Modern societies. Money, Zima quotes Marx, leads to indifference – in both meanings of the term - the confusion of all things, 'all natural and human qualities' (2001: 43). Thus Postmodernity both results from and breaks with Late-Modernity in an unresolved dialectic, openly rejecting central concepts of Modernity (individual, subject, truth, utopia) in a plural, polymorphous and indifferent manner. Postmodernity is not a totally new era, it is defined by the coexistence of pre-Modern, Modern, Modernist and Postmodern currents in politics, science and the arts in a state of global ambivalence (2001: 36). What makes Postmodernity "post"-Modernity for Zima is exactly this refusal of the (Modern) idea of the possibility of a new era and the preference for an amalgam of continuity AND discontinuity, a farewell to and continuation of Modernity by new means (2001: 14 and 36).

What Zima aims to avoid in his construction of the relation between the Modern and the Postmodern is an ideological conflict between quasi-mythical actants. This is what he identifies in Stephen Crook and Linda Hutcheon's theories, both in opposing camps with Crook identifying Postmodernism with Nihilism and Hutcheon accusing Modernism of hermetic elitism (Zima, 2001: 37). His socio-historical problematics define both Modernism and Postmodernism as concrete 'socio-linguistic situations looking for answers to certain questions' (ibid.), and it is these driving questions (and resulting answers) in their specific context that, according to Zima, most clearly differentiate between the two problematics, at the same time refusing a clear and distinct classification: Modernism is focussed more on questions about the subject and identity, whereas Postmodernism seeks to establish understanding on a higher and at the same time more basic level, the nature and construction of reality itself (2001: 38).

For my argument I would like to largely adopt Zima's theory of how to approach the difficult and ambiguous relation between Modernism and Postmodernism for the Postmodern qualities it exhibits. He critiques his own theory of problematics as just another discursive construct, part of the socio-linguistic situation it is meant to describe, admitting to the implicit omnipresence of an ideological impulse in all

constructs. The situation and position of the discursive subject responsible for any construction (the context in time and space) *must* be reflected alongside the content itself in order to safeguard against uncritical, ideological positioning (2001: 39). He reveals the narrative nature of his theory, clearly deconstructing all appearance of an unproblematic representation of a primary reality. His aim is a "narrative theory as [a] heuristic design in a constructivist sense" (2001: 45), a narrative that is not meant to convince and thus be naturalised, but to be tested in a critical and open dialogue for its viability, its ability to approach an (impossible) representation of certain aspects of the systems around us and our relation to them. This narrative, dialogical construction not only of the subject/individual but of reality itself is what I see as essential to Postmodernism and to my argument as to how RPGs can be seen as expressions of the Postmodern mind-set, and so Zima's theory of Postmodernism *itself* strikes me as a deeply Postmodern one.

7.11 – Hassan: The Indetermanence of the Glocal Postmodern

Ihab Hassan's central role in the definition and understanding of the socio-cultural phenomenon that we now know as Postmodernism has already been mentioned in the section on the historical development of the term itself and its use, but it is also essential to take a closer look at his more recent thoughts about this theoretical and practical beast of many heads and how it relates to other, related phenomena.

In his essay "From Postmodernism to Postmodernity: The Local/Global Context" (2000), the author starts with the provocative question "What Was Postmodernism?" (2000: 114), implying that at the time of his writing the article, the Postmodernism he had defined almost 30 years earlier (c.f. "Postmodernism", 1971) had already ceased to exist. What Hassan means here, however, is not that Postmodernism as such was no longer around in 2000 that would have been odd, considering that books and articles about that subject are still being written, but that like the world and the author, Postmodernism had *changed*. Like all other -isms before and after, Hassan argues, Postmodernism "will shift and slide continually with time, particularly in an age of ideological conflict and media hype" (2000: 114). This is one of the rare

instances I could make out in my research where a critic openly addresses the issue of how Postmodernism, the phenomenon that academics seek to define, classify and pin down (in itself a very Modern way of constructing discourse), will constantly refuse and shake off any such strings. So, not only is the project of defining the Postmodern in relation to other, related cultural movements doomed to failure and dissent on a synchronic level as a "contested category" (Hassan, 2000: 115), there is also the added dimension of the constant diachronic change of the concept according to the ever-shifting context of the production and reception of meanings. Thus it is only an *approach* to the Postmodern, a contextualisation and not a definition, that Hassan attempts in his essay.

Unlike the Modern worldview and the Modernist cultural artefacts it brought forth, neatly contained within an ideology of linear progress, order, and the possibility of truth, the Postmodern infused both the cultural sphere (as Postmodernism) and the socio-political, or geopolitical one (as Postmodernity) with a plethora of various and varied, sometimes even contradicting movements and philosophies. Hassan names a few of them, focussing first of all on Postcolonialism that "features globalisation and localisation, conjoined in erratic, often lethal, ways" (2000: 116), which he claims is sometimes falsely used interchangeably with Postmodernity, although it may be part of it. This Postmodern bringing together of opposites in an uneasy tension is very much reminiscent of Hutcheon's paradoxical Postmodernism, and he goes on to name other phenomena contained within but not subsumed by the Postmodern that support this connection: Poststructuralism, Feminism, Cultural Studies, Multinational Capitalism, Cybertechnologies, International Terrorism, separatist and religious movements (2000: 116).

While Postmodernism (the cultural movement) only applies to our "affluent, High Tech, consumer, media-driven societies" (ibid.) and excludes the former margins and colonies that in a turn of Postmodern irony are about to eclipse their former "mother countries" (a very euphemistic term for exploiters), Postmodernity is presented by Hassan as an "inclusive geopolitical process" that "refers to an interactive, planetary phenomenon wherein tribalism and imperialism, myth and technology, margins and centres – these terms are not parallel – play out their conflictual energies" (2000: 116). So to reverse-engineer Hassan's logic, while Modern times were dominated by a

logic of externalised and Imperialist conflict with and exploitation of the Other, and Postmodernism is seen as the withdrawal of Western societies into the (internal) spheres of consumer and media culture on the spoils of Imperialism, *Postmodernity* opens the concerned societies up again to renegotiate conflicts and differences between former centres and margins. After a Modern/-ist logic of conflict and a Postmodernist one of indifference, both based on asymmetries of discursive and political power and monological - or even a total refusal of - communication, Postmodernity attempts to establish a more symmetrical and dia- or even plurilogical communication. The essential shift or movement here seems to be one out of the sphere of the purely cultural (Postmodern*ism*) and into the social and political spheres of everyday life (Postmodern*ity*), a move I would like to argue is very much in keeping with my reading of the reasons for the development and success of the medium of RPGs.

What differentiates Postmodernism from other phenomena is what Hassan subsumes under his own neologism: Indetermanence, a combination of cultural indeterminacy and technological immanence that is supposed to be contrastive, not dialectical, as the Postmodern refuses any concept of Modern Hegelian or Marxist synthesis as a violation of the individual identity of the parties concerned (or as Hassan puts it: "I can think of no one less postmodern than either"; 2000: 116). Postmodern indeterminacies (Hassan prefers the plural) show a tendency towards under-determination in representation, using mechanisms of "openness, fragmentation, ambiguity, discontinuity, decentrement, heterodoxy, pluralism, deformation" to undo pre-Modern and Modern conceptions of "the body politic, the body cognitive, the erotic body, the individual psyche, the entire realm of discourse in the West" (2000: 116-117). The effect these discursive deformations have on our signifying practices, hitherto stabilised by tradition and classification, is enormous:

> In literature alone, our ideas of author, audience, reading, writing, book, genre, critical theory, and of literature itself, have all suddenly become questionable – *questionable but far from invalid, reconstituting themselves in various ways*.
> (Hassan, 2000: 117; original emphasis)

In the following chapter ("What Then is Postmodernism?") I will go into more detail about how this shift affects questions of textual authority and discursive power, but the utter deconstruction and reconstruction of the notion of literature made developments such as RPGs possible in the first place. Literature was no longer a sacred act of cultural transmission or of constructing spiritual frames of reference for certain images of reality. It was no longer a cerebral and highly exclusive social marker of élite membership either to be able to understand or even produce it. The canon of white, male, middle-to-upper class, heterosexual and preferably dead authors and all of the terminology they had created to assert their interpretative authority was shaken up fundamentally.

This development is complemented by what Hassan terms (technological) immanence as Postmodern indeterminacies are "dispersed or disseminated by the fluent imperium of technology" in a move towards "diffusion, dissemination, projection, interplay, communication" (2000: 117). Humans thus assert themselves as language animals using both the visual and the verbal code to "constitut[e] themselves, and also their universe, by symbols of their own making. Call it gnostic textualism if you must" (ibid.). The result of this immanence is the total dissolution of the public world as all boundaries (fact/fiction, theory/reality, machine/human) and restrictions of the human experience due to our biological sensory apparatus are overcome by technology and mediatisation. The form's Indetermanence creates are preferably labyrinths, networks and rhizomes (theorised by Guattari and Deleuze) that violate or transcend Modern/-ist linear or sequential logic and hierarchies, driven and defined by connectivity and ergodic movement (c.f. Aarseth, 1997: 1).

Yet even though Postmodernism has overcome the constraints of Modernism according to Hassan's theory, the author also warns about the degeneration of these liberating dynamics, as Postmodernism "has metastasised into sterile, campy, kitschy, jokey, dead-end games or sheer media stunts" (Hassan, 2000: 117). He claims that the indetermanences of Postmodernism have since mutated beyond it and into the local-global conflicts of Postmodernity, since the Postmodern mind is constantly engaged in historical introspection driven by self-apprehension and self-reflection. Again I can see a connection to Linda Hutcheon here, in this case her concept of the historiographical metafiction as the dominant mode of cultural creation under

Postmodern circumstances: this need to grasp, write and constantly re-write history, aware of the process of writing it and revealing it to the world to see as well (c.f. 1999: 124 - 140). But there is also a significant difference between Hutcheon and Hassan in his undifferentiated claim that Postmodernism as a cultural movement is dead (or rather undead), lost in faux glitter, the surrogate realities of the media and meaningless games. Like Hutcheon I would argue that the joyful games of meaning-making are still going on, and even if there is much detritus among the cultural artefacts created, which is true of any and all mass cultural movements, there are also still highlights and even game changers in literature, comics, electronic and other games, film, or even on TV, not to speak of the (oftentimes wasted) possibilities of the internet. So even if I agree with Hassan that there has been a shift in the Postmodern cultural production since the early 1970s, I do not necessarily see this in terms of a decline in quality, but rather a reaction to changing socio-political contexts: the Postmodern today is not better or worse that it was decades back, it is just different. And the acknowledgement and analysis of this change is Hassan's greatest merit.

8 – Cacophony: A Review of Theories of the Postmodern

Even though Scott Lash already warned in 1990 that "Postmodernism is, patently, no longer trendy" (1996: ix), with the following chapter I would like to come to a basic understanding of what, according to leading theoreticians and critics, it actually means: What it is, or is not. What it does, or does not do. And why and how this is relevant for the cultural production of a given society, RPGs being part of it. As the title of the chapter already gives away, I will take a closer look at different theories in this section and not force them all together under the roof of one, single synthetic reading, but try and distil central concepts from them to be used as the basis for my conclusion about the formal, textual, and contextual similarities to pen&paper RPGs later.

The reason why I chose to forego the traditional, totalising method in favour of a lose synopsis of different and differing voices is twofold. First of all, I respect the

Postmodern refusal of monological discourses and have to agree with Best and Kellner that the term "postmodern theory" itself is highly problematic because the traditional concept of theory – as a "systematically developed conceptual structure anchored in the real" (Best and Kellner, 1991: x) – violates that underlying assumption. The authors suggest to replace this totalising concept with a diversity of critical positions, and I take it that my more polyphonous approach respects this inherently different approach best. Secondly, as I hope to have shown in the previous chapter on the near impossibility to draw a clear line between what is Modern and what Postmodern, the conceptions of the Postmodern vary so widely among different authors that Eco concluded in his famous postscript to *The Name of the Rose*: "Unfortunately, 'postmodern' is a term bon à tout faire. I have the impression that it is applied today to anything the user of the term happens to like" (1984: 31). "Anything goes" is one of the catch-phrases often associated with explanations of the Postmodern to simplify its complex perspectives on reality and truth. Everything becomes Postmodern, the concept and term meaningless in the ultimate inclusiveness attributed to it by enthusiastic critics. A problematic echoed in Eco's witty caveat: "soon the postmodern category will include Homer" (1984: 31). Peter V. Zima also acknowledges the problematic web of "intersecting, contradicting or incommensurable object constructions" behind the deceptively simple term Postmodernism (2001: 31), and many others formulate similar ideas. So I will let the many voices of Postmodern criticism form a sort of intellectual quodlibet and only focus on intersecting moments without denying the individual melodies their right to exist.

8.1 – Lyotard: *The Postmodern Condition*

Even though theoretical analysis and criticism of the Postmodern did not begin with Lyotard (c.f. Chapter 3.1.2), I would argue that his *Condition Postmoderne* (1979), once translated into English as *The Postmodern Condition* in 1984 (and here I have to appreciate the irony of the date) sparked mass interest in this question and also helped establish the dominance of the term itself in theoretical discourse.

Why exactly the title-term Lyotard picked for his *Report on Knowledge* to the *Conseil des Universités du Québec* became one of the central concepts in much of the academic and media discourse of the late 20th and early 21st century cannot be said for sure. Charles Jencks's deliberations on that matter seem to raise more questions than they provide answers, and so he ends with a positive if indecisive outlook:

> I should add that one of the great strengths of the word, and the concept, and why it will be around for another hundred years, is that it is carefully suggestive about our having gone beyond the world-view of modernism – which is clearly inadequate – without specifying where we are going.
> (Jencks in Appignanesi, 2007: 3)

I would argue that what differentiates it most clearly from other attempts at establishing a terminology fit to describe the experience of living in western societies at the time - such as Bell's Post-Industrial Society, Baudrillard's *Posthistoire*, Jameson's Late Capitalism, the Hypermodernism defined by Armitage and Appignanesi or the Transmodernism of Rodríguez Magda or Dussel - Lyotard's Postmodernism is not closely associated with one given ideological framework (Bell, Jameson), it is not abstract and highly theoretical (Baudrillard, Armitage), and it is not the result of a specific cultural and/or historical experience (Rodríguez Magda, Dussel), but it refuses ideological positioning, is relatively accessible to a wider audience (or at least seems to be at first glance), and it addresses general tendencies in most western societies and those Postcolonial societies that are still predominantly influenced by Western mind-sets.

In an ironic twist that itself could be considered Postmodern as the following chapters will explain, Lyotard's Postmodernism defined by "the incredulity towards metanarratives" or master-narratives, the large ideological stories that legitimise all truth claims (1984: xxiv), might very well have been so successful as a model to analyse and understand socio-cultural developments, because it is not only easily appropriated by already existing ideologies and "theoretical discourse as a human construct cannot avoid such impulses" (Zima, 2001: 31 – 32), its intriguing combination of the individual and the universal, the local and the global, the

particular and the general also lends itself nicely to the construction of a "Postmodern master-narrative", a fundamental contradiction in terms.

At the heart of Lyotard's understanding of the Postmodern resides a deep crisis of narrative, based on the collapse of Modern strategies of legitimation by referral to what the author calls the metadiscourses (or grand narratives) of justice and truth (1984: xxiv). The result of this collapse is drastic:

> The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements [...]. Conveyed within each cloud are pragmatic valencies specific to its kind. Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these. [...] There are many different language games – a heterogeneity of elements. They only give rise to institutions in patches – local determinism. (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv)

The lack of generally agreed upon (or imposed) points of reference for truth or justice creates a coexistence of diverse discourses, or language games, that are able to create their own meanings, values and norms within their area of influence, but not beyond. Mass structures or ideologies disintegrate from within into camps and sub-movements that constantly renegotiate their internal as well as their external status amongst each other. This (on-going) deconstruction and reconstruction is not seen as something negative *or* positive by Lyotard – which in itself is a very Postmodern way of approaching the observed issues, as "the postmodern condition is as much a stranger to disenchantment as it is to the blind positivity of delegitimation" (1984: xxiv). Instead of giving answers (the Modern/-ist, totalising strategy), the author only asks essential questions in his introduction that should help to understand the Postmodern problematic in all its scope: Where can legitimacy reside *after* the collapse of metanarratives? Is the criterion of operativity (or viability) relevant for questions of truth and justice? How can consensus legitimise anything seeing that it is based on the violation of heterogeneity? And, most importantly, does Postmodern thinking fuel innovation by sharpening the sensitivity towards differences and the tolerance for incommensurability (Keats's negative capability), or is it only a tool of the authorities to contain innovation after all? (1984: xxiv – xxv).

Taking these questions into consideration, it makes even more sense to begin my search for an understanding of the Postmodern with Lyotard, as in one form or another they will pop up again and again all throughout the following chapters. If Postmodern thinking lacks a unified theoretical or methodological approach, one could argue that the search for possible answers to these and similar questions, brought up by a socio-cultural shift whose ripple effects have been and still are felt in many disciplines and by many, very different critical minds, is the closest approximation to a(n absent) theoretical common ground.

For Lyotard the watershed moment was a transformation of the status of knowledge in Western societies brought about by the impact of information-processing machines (computers) on the definition and circulation of learning. Following a Neo-Marxist line of argumentation, the author states that "the old principle that the acquisition of knowledge is indissociable from the training (Bildung) of minds, or even of individuals, is becoming obsolete and will become even more so" (1984: 4), as knowledge becomes a commodity to be produced, stored, sold, and consumed, losing all use-value and replacing it with exchange-value (1984: 5). Lyotard also cleverly predicts what we have seen happening in recent years: an increasing number of fights for control of information (replacing territories in earlier logics), and the questioning of the institution of the state as it loses the privilege of producing and circulating knowledge to multinational corporations. Eventually, knowledge and money/currency become interchangeable (1984: 6).

The second pillar of Lyotard's approach to the Postmodern is the increasing emphasis on language that we see in our societies since the end of World War II, and the author here borrows Wittgenstein's concept of language games to talk about how rules are established to specify properties and uses of certain utterances (1984: 10). To begin with, rules are never legitimised in and of themselves, they are always subjected to constant (re-)negotiation. Secondly, without rules, there is no game: modifying the rules of a language game alters the game, or in extreme cases creates new games, and not sticking to the rules means that the interlocutor is not playing the game. Eventually, every single utterance thus becomes a move in a language game: "[T]o speak is to fight, in the sense of playing, and speech acts fall within the domain of general agonistics. This does not necessarily mean that one plays in order

to win. A move can be made for the sheer pleasure of its invention" (1984: 10). It is very tempting to use this analysis of Postmodern linguistic behaviour and draw the obvious connection to pen&paper RPGs, and even if this obsession with language games was/is most certainly one of the driving forces behind the creation of the medium, Lyotard here speaks of a much larger context than just one medium. He describes a socio-cultural context that is determined by both the commodification of information and the obsessive playing of language games, and together these influences can be seen as essential for the emergence of the medium of RPGs, as I have explained in my analysis of this intriguing form of cultural expression.

Even though Lyotard's Postmodern seems to lead directly to an atomisation of society (dissolution of metanarratives, knowledge becomes possession, agonistics of language games), he insists that this is not the case: "A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before" (1984: 15). In this setup, no one is entirely powerless, as we are all senders, referents, and/or addressees of messages, and the language games that they create become the social bond. Communication thus makes communities, and in order to understand these communities, one needs to understand the rules of the language games that are being played to constitute them: the theory of communication thus becomes a theory of games (1984: 16). Written in 1979 and thus only five years after the 'invention' of RPGs in 1974, Lyotard here argues that there is an inherent connection in Postmodern societies between language games and the structure of society. Even if it took RPGs almost twenty more years before they openly acknowledged their origins in a formal shift towards a narrative critique of contemporary society with the publication of the Storyteller games in the early 1990s, they become understandable as narrative spaces to train their participants in and experiment with the negotiation of narrative and social rules and roles. They become role-playing games in a socio-cultural, not only a purely narrative meaning.

Knowledge itself becomes a problematized category in Lyotard's perspective when he differentiates between traditional, narrative knowledge and scientific knowledge. Traditional, or pre-Modern knowledge was transferred in narrative form. Stories established the criteria of "good" (or socially accepted) behaviour with

exemplary or cautionary tales and legitimised social institution and roles. They also closely followed the pragmatics of transmission that stabilised the pragmatic rules of the social bond by determining "what one must say in order to be heard, what one must listen to in order to speak, and what role one must play (on the scene of diegetic reality) to be the object of a narrative" (1984: 21). The narrative tradition thus defined the threefold communicative competence – as speaker, listener, and referent – that is necessary for a given community's relationship to itself and its environment. It also set up a very special relationship to time and temporality. Since narrative transmission constantly brings the past into the present, the categories collapse, and the telling of tales is situated "in the ephemeral temporality inhabiting the space between the 'I have heard' and the 'you will hear'" (1984: 22). The eternal recurrence of the past in the fleeting present is perspective communicated by narrative knowledge.

Scientific, or Modern knowledge is based on completely different concepts and thus shows very different properties. The quintessential condition for the acceptability of a statement is now its truth-value, and denotation is the only language game retained, while all others are excluded. Scientific knowledge, in stark opposition to narrative knowledge, is also no longer a direct, shared part of the social bond: knowledge and mainstream society are kept in two different spheres. There are no narrative competences expected of the addressees or referents of scientific knowledge (they are only talked to or about), and the knowledge reported can always be refuted by proof and argument, it is only provisional. The crucial difference between scientific and narrative knowledge is the assumption about time that is implicitly communicated: As narrative knowledge expresses a synchronic understanding of time (where past, present, and future collapse in/-to the moment of telling), scientific knowledge, and "the game of science" as Lyotard calls it (1984: 26), express a diachronic worldview where memory of past knowledge and new statements added drive a cumulative process. It is thus that scientific knowledge follows the Modern logic of progress and teleology, whereas narrative knowledge is concerned with the cyclical recurrence of the past in the present.

Based on Lyotard's analysis of these two regimes of meaning-making, and taking my argument beyond the author, one would have to conclude that contemporary

Postmodern knowledge is more akin to traditional, narrative knowledge than to its scientific counterpart: The Postmodern penchant towards quotation and pastiche together with its re-appropriation of past forms (that will be the focus of my chapter on Hutcheon later) echo the eternal recurrence of the past in the present. The refusal of all truth-claims and metanarratives, and the resulting withdrawal to a narrativisation of the rules of the social bond, as well as the reintegration of cultural transmission with the sphere of mainstream or popular culture all seem to hint into this direction as well. One essential difference, however, remains: Unlike traditional knowledge, that was supposed to remain the same over the generations, Postmodern knowledge is in a process of constant change and re-negotiation. And yet, looking into the cultures that still use the oral transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next, or the records of those historical examples that we know of (such as the Celts), there is also an understanding that one reason for not writing their stories down is/was so that they could 'stay alive', change and adapt to new circumstances to be able to remain valid for future generations (c.f. Birkhan, 1997: 475). Short-circuiting Lyotard's categories with these ideas, it seems as if Postmodern language games could very well be seen as a renaissance of the oldest tradition of human cultural transmission: storytelling. A true recurrence of the past in the present.

The essential role of "little narratives" for innovation under the circumstances of the collapse of metanarratives is explicitly stated by Lyotard, and they are constructed as socio-cultural countermeasures to the inadequacies of "the principle of consensus as a criterion of validation" (1984: 60). Consensus itself is a very problematic concept for a Postmodern mind, the author explains, because even in its most acceptable form (agreement through dialogue) it implies the validity of the metanarrative of emancipation, while on a systemic level it quickly becomes an instrument of terror and power used to maximise performance (ibid.). So dissent is the only force strong enough to change a given system, but it must be articulated and dosed in an appropriate way in order not to upset the language game engaged in: "The stronger the 'move', the more likely it is to be denied the minimum consensus, precisely because it changes the rules of the game upon which consensus had been based" (1984: 63). The reaction to be expected is terror: "By terror I mean the

efficiency gained by eliminating, or threatening to eliminate, a player from the language game one shares with him. He is silent or consents, not because he has been refuted, but because his ability to participate has been threatened" (1984: 63 – 64). Lyotard's suspicion of the system and its inherently violent nature, that can also be observed as the dividing issue between Structuralists and Poststructuralists, and the need to formulate criticism and implement change so that the system will not react with terror or ignorance, these determine Postmodern discursive and narrative practices. The result are local and temporary little narratives and games, limited in time and space, not the revolutionary metanarratives of the Modern/-ist mind-set, since "an attempt at an alternative of that kind would end up resembling the system it was meant to replace", Lyotard warns (1984: 66).

While he sees the problems of the "temporary contract" approach, he also points out that its inherent ambiguity is a great opportunity: "it is not totally subordinated to the goal of the system, yet the system tolerates it" (ibid.). Here, in this ambiguous in-between-space of complicitous critique, Lyotard argues, Postmodern critics re-examine "the thought of the Enlightenment, […] the idea of a unitary end of history and of a subject" (1984: 73). And they do so under the double threat of cultural politics on the one hand and the market on the other. While political power seeks to satisfy society's need for unity, simplicity and communicability, and therefore attacks all experimental forms, the power of capital establishes eclecticism as "the degree zero of contemporary general culture" (1984: 76), an "anything goes"-mentality that accepts none other than the exchange-value of things and needs to accommodate all desires in its urge to make ever more profit. Between utter sell-out and political assimilation, the creators of Postmodern "little narratives" such as RPGs try to make their way, oscillating between the extremes to give impulses for change from within the system, (ab-)using the structures and institutions of the system, while doing their best not to be *of* the system. This then is Lyotard's analysis of the Postmodern condition at the time of the emergence of RPGs as a new medium and right before Postmodernism entered its phase of proliferation and expansion during the 1980s and early 1990s.

8.2 – Derrida: *Writing and Differance*

Jacques Derrida's collection of essays *L'Écriture et la Différence* was first published in 1967, but it was not until 1978 that it was first translated into English. So like Lyotard's seminal essay that it predates by more than a decade in the original, Derrida's theories only belatedly influenced thinking in the Anglosphere.

Not strictly speaking a Postmodernist but a Poststructuralist, Derrida abhors totalities and the illusion of wholeness, so already in his introduction translator Alan Bass makes it very clear that the author's focus in his treatment of textuality is clearly on "the necessary spaces between even the finest stitching" (1977: xv) and that he sees Structuralism as philosophical totalitarianism violently reducing phenomena to only one formula in order to control them. Derrida's answer to this violence is philosophical-political counter-violence in the form of "*solicitation*, which derives from the Latin *sollicitare*, meaning to shake the totality" (1977: xviii). And Bass goes on to explain this basic procedure of Derrida's counter-philosophy: "Every totality, he shows, can be totally shaken, that is, can be shown to be founded on that which it excludes, that which would be in excess for a reductive analysis of any kind" (Bass, 1977: xviii).

It is in the in-between-spaces that Derrida finds the openings to pry open illusory Structuralist totalities, to shake them up and deconstruct them. Because Structuralism and its fascination with form, easily translatable into Modernism and its formal experiments, for him is an expression of a creative barrenness: "Form fascinates when one no longer has the force to understand force from within itself. That is, to create." (Derrida, 2010: 3). Structuralism in "Force and Signification" is furthermore associated with the past, with facts, the accomplished, the constructed, with eschatology and endings (ibid.), which would mean that Poststructuralism occupies the reverse positions: the present, negotiation, process, deconstruction, and beginnings – highly interesting concepts for my argument about RPGs and how they fit into a Postmodern logic. Even though I am aware that this is a simplification of the more complex relation between the two conceptual clusters, I would like to suggest the appropriation of Derrida's statements about Poststructuralism for the Postmodern, and equally for Structuralism and the Modern.

This obsession with the past and the accomplished creates disengagement and impotence under the totalitarian regime of Structuralism, thus it becomes catastrophic or destructive, leading to stagnation and the absence of creative energy or change, but to destroy the system would in itself only be a Structuralist move, so the only (Poststructuralist) way out is to methodologically threaten, or shake it to reveal its supports, fault lines and its lability. This is what Derrida calls soliciting (2010: 4 – 5), and this is exactly what Postmodern critics and artists do when they work *within* the system and its rules to point out its weaknesses, always running the risk of being assimilated into the system itself.

Derrida's general systemic criticism is in a second step applied in a more specific form to literature and writing, when he comes to the conclusion that "[t]he pure book, the book itself, by virtue of what is most irreplaceable within it, must be the 'book about nothing'" (2010: 7). Central to his concerns about how writing actually betrays speech is the impossibility of 'presentness', simultaneity, or instantaneousness, the absence of space, of presence. What remains is "the stasis of a form whose completion appears to liberate it from work, from imagination and from the origin through which alone it can continue to signify" (2010: 15 – 16), which is eventually crystallised into "the totality that is the literary fact as a concrete form" (2010: 16). Derrida here associates stasis, creative sterility and disengagement with written or printed textualities, like he did earlier with Structuralism, they become facts, forms, totalities, and all totalities in a Derridean perspective function on the basis of violence.

This inherent violence of the written or printed word is expressed most clearly in the concept of the supposed structural or theological simultaneity of the book, the "truth within reading", or the "myth of a total reading or description, promoted to the status of a regulatory ideal" (2010: 28 – 29). What this means is that the book – by rule – is supposed to offer the possibility of presence and thus truth on a total reading. Those who 'know' how to 'properly' read a book thus become the guardians of Truth, be they political or religious leaders, or academics. Those who do not know, cannot experience Truth. It is thus that those who hold discursive power make the others believe that truth exists within the written text, and this has become the basis of our society in the form of written laws, contracts, histories. But Derrida attacks this

metaphysical concept of truth, claiming that truth or presence can never be achieved, as meaning is lost, or deferred, in a constant and unending chain of signifier referring to signified that in turn signifies again and differs, so that what remains is the recognition that "that which is written is never identical to itself" (2010: 29). This is the process that Derrida calls *différance*, an amalgam of deferral and difference.

Postmodern (or Poststructuralist) texts are aware of the untenable nature of the metaphysical truth-claim and they attempt to find ways to work with Derrida's *différance* as an organising principle. Replacing totalising intentionality and the danger to "lose meaning by finding it" (2010: 31) with procedural, open and inclusive approaches, these artists try to disprove Derrida's conclusion that "[f]orce is the other of language" (ibid.). The oral and cooperative narrative processes of RPGs seem to me to fit in nicely with these attempts, with their organisational principles close to those of self-organising systems and the avoidance of any metaphysical truth through the ephemeral linguistic nature of the texts created.

As a good Poststructuralist/-modernist himself, Derrida also adds a caveat to his deliberations that it is eventually impossible to emancipate oneself from the language of dichotomies, since that would leave one stranded in meaninglessness, but what is needed is rather a "resistance to it, as far as is possible" (2010: 33), to not abandon ourselves totally to it. Awareness of the frame of reference and "force as movement" (ibid.) must flow into a Nietzschean "dance with the pen", constant movement, process (2010: 34). But the writer, according to Derrida, can never fulfil this: "Writing is the outlet as the descent of meaning outside itself within itself", "The moment of depth as decay. Incidence and insistence of inscription" (2010: 35). Writing is the alienation of speech, the absence of presence, and the *différance* of meaning. It is the futile attempt to hold down what cannot be grasped, to inscribe thought, breath and context. What it would take to even come close to Derrida's vision of an emancipation from the totality of the book, based on these deliberations, is a procedural, collective, and oral medium that within the confines of a structure (the language of dichotomies) allows for a space of free play for the necessary creativity (force as movement). I would argue that this is exactly what pen&paper RPGs can offer like no other medium, making them a quintessentially Poststructural or Postmodern medium.

Further textual evidence for my thesis can be found in Derrida's essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences". Here he presents the reader with two concepts of structures, a centred and a decentred one, that are separated by a historical 'event' - the quotation marks are used by the author "to serve as a precaution" against a reductive Structuralist reading of the term (2010: 351), but I will discard them in future occurrences after this warning. The nature of the event is briefly described by Derrida as well: "Its exterior form would be that of a *rupture* and a redoubling" (ibid.; original emphasis), and I take this to be the cultural shift from a predominantly Structuralist/Modern condition to a Poststructuralist/Postmodern one.

Up until the event, Derrida describes the structure as reduced in nature, ordered around a centre (or "point of presence") that orients, balances and organises the structure: it permits a certain amount of play for elements within the structure, but it also restricts play more the closer an element gets to the centre, and "while governing the structure, escapes structurality" (2010: 352). Such centred structures provide participants with the reassuring certitude that within all play there exists a presence of meaning "whose origin may always be reawakened or whose end may always be anticipated" (2010: 353), and this allows participants to master their anxieties, as the history of the structure can be understood as a chain of determinations of centres.

The rupture, in Derrida's theory, came about when the "structurality of structure had to begin to be thought" and "it became necessary to think both the law which somehow governed the desire for a centre in the constitution of structure, and the process of signification which orders the displacements and substitutions for this law of central presence" (2010: 353). So the mounting socio-cultural pressure to engage in a self-aware reflection of the need for a centred structure and the laws governing the processes of signification by the participants in the structures concerned created a fundamentally new understanding of structure. "This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic", Derrida writes (2010: 354), and the incessant questioning led to a decentring, where in the absence of a centre what remained was only non-local functionality without the possibility of the presence of the transcendental signified outside the system of differences. The author's conclusion: "The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the

play of signification infinitely" (2010: 354). This is the beginning of the age of language dominated only by language games when everything is transformed into signification.

Once again the parallel to RPGs as language games in the most literal sense becomes striking: The absence of a dominant and structuring centre of discursive power, the constant renegotiation of rules and content using only language, the ludic aspect of creative movement within the artistic free space created by the process, these are pillars of the experience of RPGs that all echo Derrida's post-rupture structurality. In addition, he also points out that even in these decentred structures there is an irreducible need to accept the premises of a given system of reference into the discourse without utterly giving in to them. Unlike a systemic and historic criticism of the concepts of language that most possibly leads to a sterilising effect, the way to do so Derrida suggests as the most fruitful is a both/and approach:

> [C]onserving all these old concepts within the domain of empirical discovery while here and there denouncing their limits, treating them as tools which can still be used. No longer is any truth value attributed to them; there is a readiness to abandon them, if necessary, should other instruments appear more useful.
> (Derrida, 2010: 359)

The refusal of truth value, the (ab-)use of elements of the system to point out its fault lines, while those still functioning under the new regime of signification are preserved and exploited, all of these are strategies later found in Postmodern discourse and RPGs alike. Derrida here acts in anticipation of the discursive formations that will later be subsumed under the label of Postmodern theory, and central ideas of e.g. Linda Hutcheon's writings follow these passages closely, like the "paradoxical postmodernism of complicity and critique" (2000: 11). The critical distinction between a viable method and truth is essential to these theories, and there is also a second central idea that results from Derrida's argument here and that is frequently used in attempts to describe the Postmodern: *bricolage*.

In reference to Claude Lévi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind* (1962), *bricolage* is defined as the use of the means at hand that are changed if necessary and combined into a new,

heterogeneous whole. The next step in Derrida's logic, however, is the essential one, when he claims that "[i]f one calls *bricolage* the necessity of borrowing one's concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is *bricoleur*" (2010: 360). Since no-one is the origin of discourse in Derrida's perspective, we all constantly engage in *bricolage*, collecting bits of discourse, breaking them up, filtering them, and putting them back together in new and heterogeneous combinations. And, using Lévi-Strauss once again, Derrida eventually comes to the conclusion that "bricolage is mythopoetic" (ibid.). It does not create second rate copies of discourses, this might be an idea based on the loss of information inherent in earlier processes of copying, or copies devoid of meaning, Baudrillard's simulacra, the discourses created though self-aware *bricolage* are potentially just as high in quality and meaning as their raw materials were.

Again, this positive reading of *bricolage* would not only redeem artefacts steeped in the Postmodern obsession with quoting and re-writing pre-texts (think Quentin Tarantino or George R. R. Martin), it would also allow for a seriously mythopoetic dimension in RPGs and position them as mediators between the Postmodern individuals playing them and the pre-Modern mythical and epical sources their settings are *bricolages* of. In that case they would not be a symptom of a decay in the ability of these texts to create meaning for contemporary generations and thus a loss, but they would be a catalyst in the de- and reconstruction of these texts in a manner that will allow them to still resound with meanings under totally different socio-cultural contexts than those of their original creation.

Derrida's text supports my positive, creative reading when he claims that "[t]here is no unity or absolute source of the myth", and "[e]verything begins with structure, configuration, or relationship" (both 2010: 362). Myth, like all other discourse, must follow the logic of form and movement, and centring the language describing such a decentred structure will only result in discursive violence. It thus follows that discourse that treats with myth must itself be mythomorphic, must have the form of that of which it speaks. And since Derrida argues with Lévi-Strauss that "[m]yths are anonymous" (2010: 363), mythomorphic discourses, which I would argue RPGs are, must also be anonymous, meaning they need to be structured around the absence of a centre, a subject, an author. For me, an ever clearer image of RPGs as Postmodern

mythomorphic language games of meaning-making emerges, the more I look into Derrida's understanding of the workings of post-rupture (or Postmodern) structuralities and discourses.

The ludic aspect of Derrida's theory has especially caught my attention, as play is what inherently drives these decentred discourses, like it does RPGs, and play for Derrida and Lévi-Strauss is always closely related to tension. First of all, a tension with history, defined as "the unity of a becoming [...] oriented toward the appropriation of truth in presence and self-presence, toward knowledge in consciousness-of-self" (2010: 368). Since play constantly creates new structures and meanings, it always also creates ruptures with the past, with ideas of origin or cause. In a way it neutralises history, as a concept of linear teleological progression, when discontinuity and chance take centre-stage and determine the outcome of processes. In Derrida's terms it causes a "catastrophe – an overturning of nature in nature, a natural interruption of the natural sequence, a setting aside *of* nature" (2010: 369). Play is thus the primary motor behind the denaturalisation of the illusion of the sequential progression of history, and by extension story. The Postmodern preference for ludic structures thus parallels one of the basic shifts in cultural awareness between the Modern and the Postmodern mind, and in the case of RPGs it created a new medium that inherently questions the sequential progression of traditional conceptions of literature and history through play by making the structuring processes overt and subjecting them to playful reassembly.

The second tension play as discursive practice establishes is the tension with presence, as play always automatically disrupts presence. Presence and the metaphysical truth of Structuralists and earlier cultural movements is either quickly lost or generally impossible in ludic processes, as they presuppose a state of "broken immediacy" (Derrida, 2010: 369): there are rules and players, moves are being made when game pieces are moved across game space, or in the case of narrative games like RPGs discursive power across the narrative space created. The medium itself becomes necessarily opaque so that the players know their options to interact with the game state, the illusion of immediacy in the transparency of the traditional narrative media is impossible. In contrast to the resulting negative attitude towards play and the feeling of nostalgia for something lost that (understandably)

predominated in Structuralist and earlier philosophy, Derrida opts for a Nietzschean "joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation" (2010: 369). And he concludes: "*This affirmation then determines the noncenter otherwise than as loss of the center*" (ibid.; original emphasis).

The procedural nature of play, the central role of language games in our construction of the world, and the necessity of an active engagement with textualities (rather than a passive consumption of the same), all of these are in constant tension with pre-rupture notions derived from the idea of the presence of meaning and truth *in* the text. The text loses its function as the centre of the process of meaning-making, and it becomes an element just as equally important as the creators, the recipients and the contexts involved. Truth no longer exists *in* the text, it exists in the in-between-spaces *outside* of the text. It is no longer metaphysical and singular, but relational and plural. It is no longer factual, but procedural. It is no longer made and thus of the past, but is constantly *being* made and thus of the present. And even though this is a catastrophe in Derrida's narrow sense, this is not a catastrophe in a more general sense of the word, as nothing is lost but illusion and everything is gained.

The price for this shift towards ludic and procedural authoring is a loss of the sense of security pre-rupture centred structures provided, and depending on the degree of the realisation of this new post-rupture (or Postmodern) style of authoring, Derrida argues, the degree of insecurity also varies: "For there is a *sure* play: that which is limited to the *substitution* of *given* and *existing*, *present*, pieces. In absolute chance, affirmation also surrenders itself to *genetic* determination, to the *seminal* adventure of the trace" (Derrida, 2010: 369). So the question of the degree of freedom and subsequent loss of security in discourse is once again not a digital 0/1, yes-or-no question, it is more akin to a Fuzzy Logic decision with varying degrees of maybes. Even if RPGs, for example, offer more narrative and discursive freedom (at the cost of higher insecurity) as a mainstream novel, or most experimental novels for that matter, within the medium there are also varying degrees of freedom/insecurity according to what game one plays and how one plays that game. I have already

addressed this issue in my chapter on RPGs as self-organising (narrative) systems earlier (c.f. Chapter 5.4).

In the second half of his essay "Ellipsis", a critical reading of works by Edmond Jabès, Derrida comes back to the motif of the centre and its connection to play, and his deliberations are carried by a very ironic set of questions: "But is not the desire for a center, as a function of play itself, the indestructible self? And in the repetition or return of play, how could the phantom of the center not call to us?" (2010: 375). So the ludic authoring of Postmodern narrative is not the annihilation of the centre, it is more of an oscillation between the refusal of and the desire for one. The refusal of the terror of the centre, but the desire for the sense of security it promises. Derrida uses a different word here instead of oscillation, a less technical and more poetic one: hesitation. And he writes: "[T]he hesitation between writing as decentering and writing as an affirmation of play is infinite. This hesitation is part of play and links it to death" (2010: 375).

His ideal book would therefore be a "*Book of Questions*", "[f]ulfilled as it should be, by remaining open, by pronouncing nonclosure, simultaneously infinitely open and infinitely reflecting on itself" (2010: 376; original emphasis). His critical approach here resembles Zima's much later attempt to describe the Postmodern in terms of an unresolved dialectic: to think and conceptualise in threes, to avoid the reduction of everything to the duality of the dialectic and the conceptual violence of synthesis. "Three is the first figure of repetition. The last too, for the abyss of representation always remains dominated by its rhythm, infinitely", Derrida argues (2010: 378). Representation itself is founded on repetition, the repetition of the sign that only becomes meaningful in repetition. Thus meaning itself is founded on repetition. But meaning is always different from itself, as all repetition is never exactly the same and therefore representation is always dominated by three. In play, this becomes a structural dominant, as play is about the force and movement (to use Derrida's terms), the creative impulse in varied repetition.

Derrida does not situate the past or present (or truth) beyond closure, as they remain inaccessible to us, since beyond "is *there*, but out there, *beyond*, within repetition, but eluding us there" (2010: 378). It is there as what he also terms "traces" (2010: 369), or in this case "the shadow of the book", "the distance between the

book and the book" (2010: 378): the unending deferral, or différance of meaning in the space between representations. The search for the centre and the meaning it offers in spite of the anxiety its terror instils in the critical mind, remain essential as motors of the narrative process. But in Postmodern procedural and ludic narratives, and especially in RPGs, hesitation leads to a constant renegotiation of discursive power and meaning.

8.3 – Baudrillard: Simulacra and Simulation

With *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981, first translated into English in 1994), Jean Baudrillard wrote one of the most influential texts of Postmodern thinking. At the core of this work stands the titular concept of the simulacrum, the final phase of the image and end state in the process of image degeneration (1994: 6).

The first or sacramental phase in this process is the "good appearance" where the image is seen as the reflection of a profound reality and a representation of order. When it enters the second phase, the "evil appearance" or maleficence, the image starts to mask and denature profound reality, and in the third phase, or sorcery, it only plays at being an appearance and actually masks the absence of any profound reality. In the final phase, simulation, the image has no longer any relation whatsoever to any reality and no longer even acts as appearance, "it is its own pure simulacrum" (1994: 6). The simulacrum is therefore not unreal, since it never was or will be exchanged for the real but only for itself. It is "an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference" (ibid.), caught in the momentum of what the author terms the "precession of simulacra" where the map precedes the territory, and the simulacrum precedes reality, engendering, creating, substituting it. While representation, according to Baudrillard, is based on the utopian equivalence of the sign and the real (the sign represent the real), simulation is shifted by one ontological plane: it is based on the principle of the utopia of the principle of equivalence, the "radical negation of the sign as value" (1994: 6).

In direct opposition to Derrida's positive and creative reading of what he calls the rupture, the socio-cultural shift from a Modern to a Postmodern mind-set, Baudrillard

is a proponent of a negative and implosive reading. So when the ideological misrepresentations of reality are replaced, it is not by Derrida's procedural and ludic narratives, but with simulacra that only superficially fulfil the role of "concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle" (1994: 13). Postmodern civilisation leaves the realm of the real and enters the realm of the hyper-real, regenerating its imagery, recycling lost faculties and reinventing naturalness (ibid.). Alienation and an accompanying exponential inflation of the semiosphere are the result, driven by capital. Baudrillard's criticism of the nature and role of capital in this process is devastating:

> Capital, in fact, was never linked by a contract to the society that it dominates. It is a sorcery of social relations, it is a challenge to society, and it must be responded to as such. It is not a scandal to be denounced according to moral or economic rationality, but a challenge to take up according to symbolic law.
> (Baudrillard, 1994: 15)

Capital thus – as "a sorcery of social relations" – according to the phases of the image explained earlier only masks the absence of social relations, it masks the collapse of communitarian processes, and at the same time it is free from any social (or moral) restraints. This is why Baudrillard argues that it must not, cannot be attacked on a moral or economical level, but on a symbolic level. This is the only plane where it possesses substance. And he also defines the weapons of choice, hyper-reality and simulation, since they turn the well-honed strategies of power against itself:

> Because in the end, throughout its history it was capital that first fed on the destructuration of every referential, of every human objective, that shattered every ideal distinction between true and false, between good and evil, in order to establish a radical law of equivalence and exchange, the iron law of its power.
> (1994: 22)

As crisis and desire are both useless, since the first only reinforces power through anti-power (1994: 18) and the second is used to offer surrogate realities that mask the

anti-systemic effect of the hyper-real (1994: 22), simulation is the only way not to allow power (and capital) to either dodge or assimilate critical impulses. The creation of (secondary or even tertiary) realities without reference to a primary reality and well-grounded in the awareness of the utopian truth-claim of representation, such as RPG textualities, thus becomes the ultimate act of critique and resistance under the regime of the hyper-real. As open rebellion from without stabilises power from within, and the mock realities and communities produced by our desire for sociability and productive living amount to a withdrawal from power, exposing the hyper-real, the "scenario of power" (1994: 27), through simulation from within the system, and honing people's understanding of the power- and language games that are being played is the only chance to deal the system "the mortal blows of simulation" (ibid.). Baudrillard here manages to give an impression of the potential impact simulation (in opposition to representation) can have on society. The very ontology of simulatory media, be they video-, board-, or pen&paper role-playing games, lends itself to an effective counter-strategy to the power of capital. Just by playing one of these in awareness of the processes that shape the experience, a player will pick up on how realities are created and shaped through signification, how the semiosphere can and will determine our impressions of what we term (primary) 'reality'. Once the construction of a simulated game or narrative space is understood, these abilities can be applied in everyday life to resist such or similar strategies in the language and power games that determine primary reality.

Another aspect of simulacra and their effect on simulation is the contraction of simulated space and the resulting implosion of meaning:

> [N]othing separates one pole from another anymore, the beginning from the end; there is a kind of contraction of one over the other, a fantastic telescoping, a collapse of the two traditional poles into each other: *implosion* […] *That is where simulation begins*.
> (Baudrillard, 1994: 31; original emphasis)

As soon as all distinctions have collapsed, leaving passivity behind, absolute manipulation becomes possible in an indifferentiation between passive and active, true and untrue elements. What is created is a "single nebula whose simple elements

are indecipherable, whose truth is indecipherable" (1994: 32). These localised nebulae of possibility are the opposites of the vast and deadlocked systems we have inherited from Modern attempts to approach their idealistic utopias. Within these systems – in an ironic reversal of the revolutionary impetus – stasis and control has increased in direct proportion to their liberating potentialities: "This was already the aporia of the modern revolution", Baudrillard concludes (1994: 40). Creative impulse or even basic categories such as subject and project have become unthinkable, what we witness is the "vast saturation of a system by its own forces, now neutralised, unusable, unintelligible, non explosive" (ibid.). The author therefore suggests that since explosion is no longer an option, implosion towards a nuclear state is the only expectable change of state.

The localised nebulae of possibility within a larger static system Baudrillard describes are reminiscent of the "narrative architecture" of game space, to borrow Jenkins's term (c.f. Jenkins, 2004), especially the narrative spaces of RPGs where literally 'anything goes', as long as the group of participants allows it. And another consequence of the contraction of the game space, the confusion between medium and message (c.f. McLuhan, 2008: 7 - 24) and between sender and receiver, reinforces this connection quite nicely. Baudrillard uses these as examples for "the disappearance of all dual, polar structures that formed the discursive organisation of language, of all determined articulation of meaning reflecting Jakobson's famous grid of functions" (1994: 41). What results is a circulation of discourse where sender and receiver are unlocatable, where they are both included within the cycle without distinction. There is no longer a single instance of discursive power or transmission to be identified, as power circulates with discourse: "the dominator and the dominated are exchanged in an endless reversion that is also the end of power in its classical definition" (1994: 41).

The abolition, or rather dispersion of traditional discursive power in the narrative process of pen&paper RPGs is one of the most intriguing aspects of the medium. As members of the group alternate in assuming discursive power and in contributing to the common, shared narrative architecture that is created, sender and receiver stop being categories or classifications and become momentary roles that are appropriated and then given up willingly in turn. Even in more traditional RPG-setups

where the Storyteller, or in that case rather Game Master, still holds seemingly more discursive power than the rest of the players, he or she is not the only sender and the players the only receivers. The text is created in a constant back-and-forth between Storyteller and players, or between players and players. And the discursive power of the Storyteller is always only based on an unspoken contract with the players and can be withdrawn or curtailed through renegotiation at any time.

Even though the setup described by Baudrillard might seem rather positive and conductive to the generation and circulation of creative energy, one must never forget that ultimately he is very critical of the Postmodern condition. This is why unlike in my favourable reading, in Baudrillard's own conclusions about the situation he warns that "[t]he circularisation of power, of knowledge, of discourse puts an end to any localization of instances and poles" (1994: 41). Where do people get power from when all roles are reversible and/or reversed? Eventually, this situation leads to the loss, dissolution, and resolution of power. It changes in nature and "is no longer of the order of directive power and of the gaze, but of the order of tactility and commutation" (1994: 41 – 42). This ultimately leads to the complete collapse of power structures and social distinctions with all the attributive problems this creates for social cohesion.

Baudrillard also identifies a second way into an atomisation of society that goes back to the circularisation of (discursive) power: "Impossible now to pose the famous question: 'From what position do you speak?'" (1994: 42), since *you* are the answer, *your question* is the answer, as the circulation of discursive power emanates from and circulates trough every individual equally. The concept of consensus loses all validity, and individual interpretation takes its place, entailing a phenomenon that Baudrillard calls "the violence of interpretation" (ibid.), the implicit assumption that my individual interpretation is correct, no matter what others might say, no matter the explicit assurances that we strive to take everyone's point of view into consideration.

What happens here is that ironically – and in support of his theory - Baudrillard reads his understanding of the Postmodern circulation of discursive power as a potentially negative or harmful process, whereas I see it in close connection to what is one of the most appreciated aspects of the object of my inquiry, the pen&paper RPG with its complex and shifting, deeply democratic dispersion of narrative voice

and discursive power, and authority. For Baudrillard, democracy itself is a simulacrum, a "discourse of manipulation" (1994: 42), that was needed and used to replace the simulacrum of God when the power of institutionalised religion slowly faltered in order to provide our societies with a source of power in the power of the people as a justified emanation or representation:

> [E]verything comes from the people and everything returns to them. It is with this magnificent recycling that the universal simulacrum of manipulation, from the scenario of mass suffrage to the present-day phantoms of opinion polls, begins to be put in place.
> (1994: 42)

Unlike Baudrillard, I see the dangers and illusions of democracy, but I am convinced that no other political and social order in the history of human civilisation has brought us closer to the state of *eudaemonia*, or the largest possible amount of happiness for the largest possible number of people. And, again in awareness of the historical personality who spoke these words and the context they were spoken in, I cannot help but remember Winston Churchill's famous speech in the British House of Commons in 1947:

> Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time; but there is the broad feeling in our country that the people should rule, continuously rule, and that public opinion, expressed by all constitutional means, should shape, guide, and control the actions of Ministers who are their servants and not their masters.
> (Churchill, 1947)

Following this conviction, I would like to use Baudrillard's ideas about the circulation of discursive power in Postmodern simulations and apply them to pen&paper RPGs to make them understandable in the context of a re-democratisation of narrative through the creation of narrative architectures. For me, these nebulae of possibility could be seen as hotbeds of revolutionary counter-narratives, as part of a learning process of individuals to develop and create an

increased awareness of the language and power games that are used to stabilise the system. And it does not hurt that they are also a good way to spend an enjoyable evening with friends.

In "The Beaubourg Effect" (1994: 61 – 75) Baudrillard develops his idea of the state of culture in the Postmodern condition, and he sums it up quite succinctly early on: "culture is dead" (1994: 63). He diagnoses total disconnection, a pervasive state of hyper-reality and a general implosion of culture in what he terms a "culture of hydrocarbons" (1994: 64) where cultural elements, like molecules in the process of refinement, are constantly cracked, broken, and recombined into synthesised products. For him, the whole ideology of cultural production under conditions of total visibility runs antithetically to what culture is, and Beaubourg, the wide open, polyvalent cultural space, is a symptom and metaphor for that malaise: "[C]ulture is a site of the secret, of seduction, of initiation, of a restrained and highly ritualised symbolic exchange. Nothing can be done about it. Too bad for the masses, too bad for Beaubourg" (Baudrillard, 1994: 64). He extends the metaphor of Beaubourg even onto a conceptual, theoretical level when he describes how that Postmodern superficial building contains Modern and pre-Modern artefacts of "a traditional culture of depth" (ibid.): "An order of prior simulacra (that of meaning) furnishes the empty substance of a subsequent order, which, itself, no longer even knows the distinction between signifier and signified, nor between form and content" (Baudrillard, 1994: 64). So this then is the author's image of Postmodern culture: a hollow, superficial shell where signifier and signified, form and content have become indistinguishable and that needs to use remnants of earlier cultural movements to give itself even the appearance of depth and to fuel the process of cultural production, the synthesis of commodified cultural products from the bits and pieces taken from earlier traditions. In itself, Postmodern culture for Baudrillard thus has no substance other than that which it cannibalises. It is only a space and process, not content.

Once again I would like to re-read this very bleak and implosive analysis of the Postmodern, imposing the tyranny of my interpretation in all awareness, and to point out that much of what Baudrillard says could also be seen in a more positive, or at least less negative light. I concur that Postmodern cultural creation is very well

described by the spatial and procedural metaphor, as unlike Modern or even pre-Modern artefacts Postmodern ones suffer less constraints and can draw on a larger body of pre-texts and available media that form, and here I use Baudrillard's words, a nebula of possibilities out of which elements are eclectically selected and assembled in *bricolage*.

In RPGs this process is even more overt, as the printed texts available only provide the rules structure and a general description of the setting as a frame of reference, while the actual creation of the textuality takes place in cooperative, alternating narration. The elements required for a successful assemblage are taken from the printed rule- and/or sourcebooks used, but also from general knowledge and culture, history, other texts and media. The RPG itself, like Beaubourg, has no substance, it is a meaning-making machine that establishes a narrative architecture, a neutral narrative space that contains all these snippets from other cultural artefacts that are then selected and refined to create the collective narrative experience. What happens here is on a localised, concrete and communal level what happens in all processes of Postmodern creation, even if they are more abstract, individual and/or general.

Looking back to Baudrillard's definition of culture as secret, seductive, initiatory, "a restrained and highly ritualised symbolic exchange" (1994: 64), I would claim all of these to be true especially for pen&paper RPGs: the creative process happens in closed, small groups (secret, initiatory), the narrative dynamics keep everyone coming back (seductive), and the cooperative storytelling using a pre-negotiated set of rules to tell a common *ad hoc* story in my opinion qualifies quite well for a restrained symbolic exchange. This is also reminiscent of the ritualised aspect of RPGs and the interpretation of the medium as a liminal activity following Victor Turner's theories that I have developed earlier.

Baudrillard himself further supports my reading of his theories when he talks about how Beaubourg should have been "a labyrinth, a combinatory, infinite library, an aleatory redistribution of destinies through games or lotteries" (1994: 64 – 65). RPGs as ergodic literature, as labyrinthine narratives that need to be navigated, do nothing *but* deal with the "redistribution of destinies through games". And when the author goes on to describe how Postmodern culture is about experimentation with

different processes of representation in a "culture of simulation and fascination" (1994: 65), this reminds me very much of the two concepts of agency and immersion that are essential to Game Studies and the description of the power of ludic (or playable) media.

On a socio-cultural level, Baudrillard is a proponent, or rather an observer of the abolition of the distinction between high and low, or élite and mass/popular culture. Deploring the impossibility of "production and meaning" in Postmodern creation (1994: 65), or as he calls it "miserable anticulture" (ibid.), he concludes: "From today, the only real cultural practice, that of the masses, ours (there is no longer a difference), is a manipulative, aleatory practice, a labyrinthine practice of signs, and one that no longer has any meaning" (Baudrillard, 1994: 65). Again I agree with the gist of his argument and the observations he makes, but would differ from him in the evaluation of his findings. The strict social boundaries between high and popular culture have, luckily in my opinion, eroded in recent decades, following a welcome trend towards a popularisation and democratisation of culture on the one hand, and a less unproblematic pervasion of the logic of commodification of all spheres of life on the other. Mass culture - or I prefer the less ideologically coloured term popular culture, 'the culture of the people' - is the only remaining culture. I also see the rise of manipulative (or less negatively put 'immersive') and ergodic textualities that allow for interaction and chance in their processes of meaning-making to the status of the *dominant* cultural artefacts as an essential expression of a deep cultural shift that has taken place.

In 2002, for the first time in the short but highly successful history of the medium, video and computer games globally outsold film as far as revenue is concerned with US$30bio (Dyer-Witherford, 2004: 1), and from then until 2009 the money spent on such games in the US alone more than doubled and has remained constant ever since, in spite of the recent economic crises (ESA, 2012). I am well aware that I am using the logic of commodification here, a move that Baudrillard would immediately have attacked, but I am too much of a pragmatist not to acknowledge that cultural impact and creativity are no longer values that are seen as essential in our Postmodern culture of commodification. Neither am I saying that all of these games are highlights of the Postmodern creative impulse, but the sheer number of games

present in the public sphere and the central role they hold in the lives of so many people, expressed in the willingness to invest hard earned money in them, is a fact that is worth stating.

Where I totally disagree with Baudrillard though, is when he diagnoses the total incapability of this "miserable anticulture" to produce meaning (1994: 65). What happened here, in my opinion, is that the concept of meaning itself has changed to such a degree that meaning *means* something completely different under a Postmodern regime of signification. The meaning whose demise Baudrillard – ironically – deplores in a flight of nostalgia is the Modern and pre-Modern metanarrative, or Meaning, denounced by both Lyotard and Derrida as a tool of control, coercion, and ultimately socio-cultural violence. Postmodern artefacts cannot produce Meaning in the sense of metanarratives claiming metaphysical and generally valid truth, but unlike Baudrillard I do not see this resulting in an implosion of Meaning (as there is none any longer), but an explosion of meaning (as there is so much more of it now). Postmodern meaning is local, provisional, and based on (re-)negotiation. It changes diachronically and also synchronically amongst different groups or individuals. Postmodern meaning is only Meaning within a given context and needs to be translated into different contexts, changing, adapting, adopting new elements and shedding others. It is procedural and never finished. This is exactly the meaning produced by pen&paper RPGs, far more so than in video games that still suffer from the tyranny of the image and the pre-fabricated and pre-planned nature of the experiences provided.

The other point of disagreement concerns Baudrillard's depiction of 'the masses', that is everyone really, since mass culture, he argues, is the only one left. His distaste for the people and their culture/-s is palpable in the text, for example when he describes popular countercultures as the apotheosis of "a culture finally truly liquidated" (1994: 66), and parody as "a hypersimulation in response to cultural simulation" that "transforms the masses, who should only be the livestock of culture, into the agents of the execution of this culture" (ibid.). Here, too, behind the irony I see nostalgia for a Modern world where Truth and Meaning were still available and guarded by select groups of individuals, the cultural, social, and political élites. I cannot share this nostalgia or sense of loss, as I have myself, like so many others,

profited from the social permeability and popularisation of culture that has made it possible for me to achieve an education that under a Modern or pre-Modern regime would only have been accessible to the élite. And the violence that Baudrillard describes as inherent "in any mass of men" (1994: 68) I can also make out in decisions being taken by just a chosen few to serve their own, special interests, and that includes the (metaphorical) violence of withholding knowledge and culture from the people to be able to control them.

I find the author's analyses most helpful when he withholds not knowledge but his moral judgment. When he describes the contradictory expectations or demands of the system towards its participants in "The Implosion of Meaning in the Media" (1994: 79 – 87), I can see that he only judges one of the two expected behaviours so harshly: the constitution of the self as object, "the renunciation of the subject position and of meaning" under the alienation and passivity of the masses (1994: 85). Even though he claims that "[n]either strategy has more objective value than the other" (ibid.), from the choice of words it becomes clear that Baudrillard sympathises more with the second position: "constituting ourselves as subjects, of liberating ourselves, expressing ourselves at whatever cost, or voting, producing, deciding, speaking, participating, playing the game" (ibid.). So what he actually criticised earlier was not the mass (or the people) *per se*, but the alienation and passivity of the herd mentality that can easily tip into excessive violence against out-groups or external individuals. He is even more differentiated in his systemic analysis than this, ending his essay on a caveat:

> To choose the wrong strategy is a serious matter. All the movements that only play on liberation, emancipation, on the resurrection of the subject of history, of the group, of the word based on "consciousness raising", indeed a "raising of the unconscious" of subjects and of the masses, do not see that they are going in the direction of the system, whose imperative today is precisely the overproduction and regeneration of meaning and of speech.
> (Baudrillard, 1994: 86)

Here I can finally agree with Baudrillard wholeheartedly. His polemic attack on the masses is in this case much more qualified and reasonable and includes a warning that the opposite extreme will also only play to the system's favour. What is required

is a constant movement between the object and subject position, never quite taking any of them but tapping the strengths of both and using them to subvert the system from within. This ongoing play between the collective and the individual, between complicity and critique (to use Hutcheon's phrasing once more), is what makes Postmodern creation so immensely powerful in its socio-cultural impact, while always running the risk of assimilation and appropriation on the one hand, and meaningless destruction on the other. As a deeply Postmodern medium, pen&paper RPGs can be seen as protected, narrative spaces that allow for exactly this experimentation with both positions, always negotiating between the system of reference (the rules and setting), the needs of the group (the narrative and the party) and of the individual (the character and the player). They can therefore train players in negotiating successfully between all of these different and sometimes conflicting demands not only in a secondary, or tertiary, but also in primary reality, as competences acquired can be transferred outside the diegetic framework.

Baudrillard develops his criticism of hyper-reality and simulacra further in his essay "The Orders of Simulacra" (1983) where he applies his critical observation to a reading of simulated space. Even though he talks about electronic simulation, I suggest that his theory can be applied equally well to narrative simulation, the narrative architecture of pen&paper RPGs. Unlike traditional, repressive space, "the police-space that still corresponded to a *signifying* violence" and was aimed to induce "behaviors of terror and of animal obeisance" (1983: 138), this new space does no longer require passivity (objectification), but replaces it with the "'active response' of the subject, […] its implication, its 'ludic' participation" (1983: 139). The environmental model that emerges from this conceptual change is "made out of incessant spontaneous responses of joyous feed-back and irradiating contact", and it culminates in "the great festival of Participation, made out of myriads of stimuli, miniaturized tests, infinitely divisible question/answers, all magnetized by a few great models in the luminous field of the code" (ibid.). Simulated space transforms the individual navigating it from a passive consumer into an active and interacting player. The sheer act of navigating this space is already a participatory act that takes more effort than the watching or reading of traditional media. In order for anything to happen, one must do something: action is the result of interaction. The "joyous feed-

back" underlines the pleasure that drives the navigation of the simulated space, the pleasure of exploration, of agency, and the "irradiating contact" underlines the social aspect of the required interaction.

Participation becomes the cornerstone of this totally new medial space, and even non-simulatory Postmodern media (like books, TV-series or films) require a much higher degree of audience cooperation for a successful process of meaning-making than the vast majority of earlier textualities. For pen&paper RPGs this is even more true than it is for video games, because the latter would at least present a consciously non-participating individual with a given game state, and in some cases this state would even change without any input to simulate an independent world, like in all of the incarnations of THE SIMS (2000 - present). With a pen&paper RPG, the narrative only exists and changes when it is spoken, exchanged, complemented. It is an ephemeral medium (like all oral media) that is founded upon the principle of participation. Without participation, RPGs are instances of storytelling, most possibly the oldest art-form of human civilisation. Through participation they become one of the newest media created and a true child of the Postmodern mind-set.

As the hyper-real effaces all distinction between the real and the imaginary, "[t]he unreal is no longer that of dream or of fantasy, of a beyond or a within" (1983: 142), and the definition of the real shifts accordingly. The hyper-real as pure simulation transcends representation, it becomes an integral part of the semiosphere, or coded reality, without changing it, it is even incorporated to such an extent into everyday reality and our political, social, historical and economical discourses that "reality itself [...] disappears utterly in the game of reality – radical disenchantment, the cool and cybernetic phase following the hot stage of fantasy" (1983: 148). This takes the idea of gamification, the use of game elements for non-game activities, to a whole new level, gamifying reality itself. Simulation replaces representation as the dominant mode of engaging the world, and the systems that regulate socio-political life pick up on this shift and reproduce it in their structures. To best describe the result one could (ironically) reformulate Gary Alan Fine's definition of RPGs: "As a result reality is in some ways more like games, and less like reality" (original quote in Fine, 1983: 8). In such a situation, the individual will look for adequate ways to understand the mechanisms at work, and games are the perfect medium for this. They not only

provide content, narrative, but they also, one could even argue predominantly, are about the formal level, the permutations of systems themselves, and participation in these games is a twofold one: the "esthetic pleasure [...] of reading and of the rules of the game" (1983: 150).

Based on Baudrillard's systemic analysis of the socio-cultural changes that have transformed Modern, sometimes even pre-Modern societies into Postmodern ones, it is the rise of simulation over representation and the development of the image into the simulacrum, leaving all truth-claims behind and joyfully engaging in games of meaning-making, that have defined our relationship with the semiosphere and the world we access through it in recent decades. After the implosion of representation, simulation exploded into the collective awareness, but also the collective subconscious of western societies. RPGs, as language games in the most literal sense, were created in the wake of these changes, and, following Baudrillard but leaving his polemics behind, I would argue that they also most perfectly impersonate all of the possibilities and problems that radical shift in our perspective on reality entailed.

8.4 –Hutcheon: The Poetics and Politics of Postmodernism

Linda Hutcheon's contribution to the study of the Postmodern is quite considerable. With *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) and *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989) she has provided a very readable and at the same time highly differentiated account of the socio-cultural and the artistic framework that has brought forth and was brought forth by the Postmodern condition.

In contrast to Baudrillard, Hutcheon paints a more positive image of the Postmodern. Central to her understanding of it are irony and parody, and she has dedicated two books to them specifically: *A Theory of Parody* (1984) and *Irony's Edge* (1994). She does not claim that they *only* occur in Postmodern artefacts, but what is new is the intensity, the frequency of their occurrence. They are both forms of or symptoms for the Postmodern as a problematizing force: "[I]t raises questions about (or renders problematic) the common-sensical and the 'natural'. But it never offers answers that are anything but provisional and contextually determined (and limited)"

(1999: xi). It is "the concept of process that is at the heart of postmodernism", she continues, "negotiating the postmodern contradictions that is [sic] brought to the fore, not any satisfactorily completed and closed product that results from their resolution" (ibid.). So while Modernism and the Modern are all about inquiry, providing answers, and the possibility to attain a metaphysical truth and synthesis, Postmodernism and the Postmodern both reject these ideas, refuse closure, completion, harmony. The logic of the fact (*factum*, 'that which was made') is replaced by a logic of the process (*pro-cedere*, 'to advance, to go forth'); the teleological *reaching* of the aim, by the meandering attempt to *get there*.

Based on this theory, Hutcheon goes on to problematize three subject areas that are touched and transformed most by the Postmodern: history and historical knowledge, subject-formation and the humanist assumption of the unified self, and cultural practices and their ideological subtexts. What makes her theories so help- and powerful is that she consciously avoids falling into extremes. Her concept of the Postmodern itself follows this approach:

> Wilfully contradictory, then, postmodern culture uses and abuses the conventions of discourse. It knows it cannot escape implication in the economic (late capitalist) and ideological (liberal humanist) dominants of its time. There is no outside. All it can do is question from within.
> (1999: xiii)

Instead of deploring the depredations of Late Capitalism and the dominion of Liberal Humanism - like the Neo-Marxist Jameson in his *Postmodernism* collected shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall (1991) - the Hyphenated-Canadian Hutcheon accepts them as given in the contemporary socio-cultural framework and decides to work *with* them, not *against* them. Modern/-ist revolution has been historically proven over and over again to not end the tyranny of the system, but to just replace it with another one, so the only option that remains is subversive criticism from within: evolution, not revolution. Hutcheon is also very much a realist as far as the reach and possible outcomes of the Postmodern turn is concerned:

> Despite the apocalyptic rhetoric that often accompanies it, the postmodern marks neither a radical Utopian change nor a lamentable decline to hyperreal simulacra. There is not a break – or not yet, at any rate. This study is an attempt to see what happens when culture is challenged from within: challenged or questioned or contested, but not imploded.
> (Hutcheon 1999: xiii)

The criticism of Baudrillard could hardly be any less open and direct, as Hutcheon rejects the idea of the simulacrum and the subsequent apocalyptic implosion of culture in the Postmodern, but she also rejects the cheap 'anything goes'-celebrations that inhabit the other end of the spectrum and that – thought through to their logical end – are just a happy apocalypse after all, reference to *Watchmen* (1986) not intended. There is no break, no revolution, no destruction, but there is a challenge, a questioning and contesting of the Modern status quo. A negotiation within the system for change, not the attempt to destroy the system from the outside. Here I see a strong point of connection with the RPG that is also a product in the commercial sense and as such implicated in the logic of the exchange-value, but that through its form uses and abuses this implication to open the system and its language games up for questioning. Entertainment and critique come together in an uneasy, contradictory and protean medium that is not about winning or losing, about the outcome, but about playing and the process, a medium that can be used as mere distraction, or as one of the most powerful tools to affect personal and societal change on a localised level.

This "fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political" Postmodernism revolves around "the presence of the past", the critical (and not nostalgic) revisiting and problematisation of the aesthetic forms and social formations of the past (1999: 4). The form of choice to do this, according to Hutcheon, is what she terms "historiographic metafiction", texts that are "both self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (1999: 5). Here literature, theory, and history come together in "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs" (ibid.), they are denaturalised and challenged, but – following Hutcheon's evolutionary principle - historiographic

metafiction, like all Postmodern fiction, "always works *within* conventions in order to subvert them" (ibid., original emphasis).

Hutcheon follows a long line of critics in associating the rise of this phenomenon and the transformation of the Modern into the Postmodern with the crumbling hegemony of the bourgeoisie and the expansion of mass culture, and she focuses on how this new regime of signification challenges basic assumptions of Humanism, like the notion of consensus or "the humanist separation of art and life (or human imagination and order *versus* chaos and disorder)" (1999: 7; original emphasis). When she exposes all of those as human constructs, as attempts to repair a broken and chaotic world, she does not follow Baudrillard's extreme conclusion that this makes them meaningless, but rather that "from that very fact, they derive their value as well as their limitation. All repairs are both comforting and illusory" (1999: 8). Once again Hutcheon here pronounces a theoretical discourse of both/and, and she destabilises and questions the seemingly inherently negative connotations of the constructed nature of these "repairs" in other critics' works, pragmatically accepting their necessity and helpfulness (or viability) while *also* warning about their insufficiencies. She openly acknowledges that her own perspective is largely based on Roland Barthes: "He suggested the need to question and demystify first, and then work for change" (1999: 8). The central themes of Postmodern narratives thus in the end almost always come down to two core problems: contesting the Modern notion of the unified and coherent subject, and "*any* totalizing or homogenizing system" (1999: 12). The monad and the centred system give way to "decentralised community" (ibid.), avoiding the trap of replacing the old centre with the former margins as a new centre. But this is not a radical break with the Modern nor a simple continuity of its ideas about subjectivity, "it is both and neither" (1999: 18), as the process is all about "inscribing that subjectivity and only then contesting it" (1999: 19).

What echoes strongly with my own attempt to understand RPGs as Postmodern media here, is the problematisation of consensus and the refusal of the separation between art and life. As the narrative created in RPGs is a collective and negotiated one, even if the negotiation and interaction is highly structured, consensus, its processes, opportunities and constraints, is at the very heart of the medium. Reaching consensus and the cost or violence - to use Baudrillard's term - of this result,

or not reaching it and the subsequent consequences of failure can be experienced first-hand. The overt systemic and procedural nature of the creation of the shared narrative makes self-aware reflection possible, while at the same time the immersion and agency provided by it foster emotional attachment and identification, making disengagement almost impossible. The separation between art and life, artist and non-artist is suspended as regular people with regular lives get together on a regular basis and become co-creators of fictional and imaginary spaces filled with characters and narratives created from the uncountable cultural fragments that they have picked up from the constant flow of artefacts they are constantly exposed to, fragments that are decontextualized, deconstructed, and then amalgamated and re-contextualised *ad hoc* in a spontaneous, active and creative way. These artists no longer are quasi-heroic outsiders hacking away at the system from their (supposedly) external point-of-view, as the Modern logic of either/or is no longer valid for them, they are insiders, links in the chain, wheels in the machinery, who know both rules and content of the system and anti-heroically appropriate, use and abuse them to form localised, provisional and ephemeral counter-stories celebrating and challenging the status quo.

As for the 'literary quality' (itself an élitist and Modern/-ist concept) of the narratives created, Hutcheon makes it very clear that in Postmodernism the gap between élite and popular art is constantly degrading, or rather imploding. One bleeds into the other, and vice versa, until they become virtually indistinguishable. Is a pen&paper RPG or a video game adapting Shakespeare of any less inherent cultural value that a film, or a novel doing the same? Is (and was) Shakespeare popular culture or élite culture, or is the "or" already the quintessential error in this question? Hutcheon tries to come to an understanding of this problematic, concluding that "typically postmodernist contradictory texts […] parodically use and abuse the conventions of both popular and élite literature, and do so in a way that they can actually use the invasive culture industry to challenge its own commodification processes from within" (1999: 20). So what makes the quality of a Postmodern text is how successfully it draws upon both cultural traditions to create a 'product' that is attractive for the culture industry to pick up, commodify and market, while this product is in itself a challenge to exactly these processes of selection and

commodification. It is a game of hide and seek that pervades all levels of cultural organisation, "élite, official, mass, popular cultures" (1999: 21), and where differences and contradictions are not dissipated, knowing full well that "being inside and outside, complicitous and distanced, inscribing and contesting its own provisional formulations" Postmodern narrative can "obviously not yield any universal truths", but it also never attempts to do so (ibid.).

The favourite mechanism of Postmodern expression in Hutcheon's reading is parody. Since the author refuses the common meaning of this term ("ridiculing imitation"), she comes up with her own definition as "repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (1999: 26). And she adds: "To include irony and play is never necessarily to exclude seriousness and purpose in postmodernist art" (1999: 27). Hutcheon's parody seems to me a very helpful concept in order to understand what RPGs are and how they tick on a content level. While on a structural and formal level RPGs as a new medium creating a verbal narrative architecture are very innovative, most of the settings they propose are fairly standard adaptations or amalgams of genre pre-texts and conventions of Sci-Fi, Fantasy, and Horror, sometimes also historical narratives or popular literary and filmic sources of other genres. Based on Hutcheon's assertion quoted earlier that the inclusion of play must never preclude "seriousness and purpose", I would argue that in spite of these texts being intended to be played and thus seen as entertainment, the Postmodern both/and logic will still allow for them to be parodies in the author's sense: repetitions with critical distance that are both different *and* the same. Picking elements from the genres they refer to, mixing them and sometimes even mixing genres, recombining them into new narratives, this is how RPGs keep their pre-texts relevant, meaningful and available to their audience, always growing and changing, adapting to the context of the moment and the location.

While J.R.R. Tolkien's trilogy of *The Lord of the Rings* (1954 – 55) was written in a very special context and thus meaningful for its readership at the time, this context will be totally different for a reader today. An interpretative adaptation of fixed textualities has always happened and is nothing new, so the reader today would see different things in the text from the 1950s than the author or even his readership at the time of publication. What is totally new though is that using the parodic quality of

the RPG, one is now able to gather a group of friends and sit down to play *Middle-Earth Roleplaying* or *MERP* (1984), in which case you would most likely be more of a 30-year-old, or *The One Ring: Adventures over the Edge of the Wild* (2011), and one would 'pick'n'mix' – to use a sweets metaphor here to bring in the enjoyment-factor – elements from the original texts that still carry meaning today, rearrange them and combine them with references to and elements from texts and other artefacts created well after the death of the original author. In this way, the resulting narrative would be different from the pre-text *and* the same, and that repetition would produce critical distance to the original, as it points out ideological and historical shifts that have taken place since the time of its creation.

The criticism does not have to by a criticism of the text *per se* in the sense of an attack looking for weaknesses, quite the opposite: "Parodic echoing of the past, even with this kind of irony, can still be deferential. It is in this way that postmodern parody marks its paradoxical doubleness of both continuity and change, both authority and transgression" (Hutcheon 1999: 35). As such the sources mined by Postmodern creativity for cultural resources are not destroyed, rejected or invalidated by the process and its participants, quite the opposite: this is a practical example of the eternal recurrence of the past in the present where both appreciation and reverence mix with the urge to re-appropriate the material in order to adapt it to the constantly changing circumstances. The procedural aspect of Postmodern narrative here finds its strongest expression, as the text is never finished and closed, but remains ever changing and open to new active and creative engagement. And this goes hand in hand with the project of Postmodernism as defined by Hutcheon: "The challenging of certainty, the asking of questions, the revealing of fiction-making where we might have once accepted the existence of some absolute 'truth'", and later: "The myths and conventions exist for a reason, and postmodernism investigates that reason" (both 1999: 48). Unlike disruptive Modern revolutionary social and artistic movements, or pre-Modern structures relying on a unitary and communitarian sensibility, Postmodern expression *oscillates* between chaos and order, the individual and the collective, myth and parody, favouring multiplicity, provisionality and process in a kind of "play with purpose" (1999: 49), but always staying *within* the confines of the social contract, never breaking it.

The Postmodern mind-set is highly aware of "context and discursive process" (1999: 79), "[h]ence the concept of single, closed 'work' shifts to one of plural, open 'text'" (1999: 80), bringing many earlier theories together that focussed only on the author, text, or the reader. Process, context, and enunciative situation all flow together in the text, "that *social* space which leaves no language safe, outside, nor any subject of the enunciation in position as judge, master, analyst, confessor, decoder", Hutcheon quotes Barthes (1999: 81; original emphasis). Postmodern textuality thus is something social, something political that happens in the real lives of real people through language, as "postmodern 'texts' move us to consider discourse or language 'in use' (1999: 82), and authorial power or interpretative authority are distributed amongst people, dispersed, and no longer in the hands of a select few, as the textual production process becomes the new centre of attention.

With historiographic metafiction and its guiding interest in the concepts of subjectivity, textuality, and ideological implication, traditional concepts of truth and falsity no longer apply: "there are only *truths* in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness *per se*, just other's truths" (1999: 109). History loses its status as truth and (re-)becomes narrative, text, one possible representation of a past that is no longer (or never was) accessible to us. As a text, it can be re-written, and this is exactly what – perfectly self-aware in their Postmodern subjectivities - authors of historiographic metafiction do, from Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) to Guy Gavriel Kay's *The Sarantine Mosaic* (1998/2000). This explicit re-writing of history is also a recent trend in RPGs, with Jean-Philippe Jaworski's *Te Deum Pour Un Massacre* (2005) and its procedural authorship of the French religious civil wars of the 16th century as one of the highlights.

But Hutcheon, too, avoids the trap of radical constructivism and the claim that we construct reality through textuality. It is not that there is no external reality outside of textuality, but that "there is a loss of faith in our ability to (unproblematically) *know* that reality, and therefore to be able to represent it in language" (1999: 119; original emphasis). Reality itself is not questioned, but "the process of narrativization has come to be seen as a central form of human comprehension, of imposition of meaning and formal coherence on the chaos of events […]. Narrative is what translates knowing into telling […], and it is precisely this translation that obsesses

postmodern fiction" (1999: 121). This narrativisation or cultural representation of reality is the only thing accessible to us as human beings, as we turn 'events' into 'facts' by giving them meaning. "Historiography and fiction [...] constitute their objects of attention, on other words, they decide which events will become facts" (1999: 12). And even Hutcheon hides the true agency behind abstracts, as it is actually not historiography or fiction, it is the *creators* of these textualities that do. Human beings make their own meanings of external reality through the process of narrativisation, and Postmodernism makes these processes overt in its artefacts, with RPGs being the best examples of this challenge to the transparency of the medium.

"Today", Hutcheon writes, "there is a return to the idea of a common discursive 'property' in the embedding of both literary and historical texts in fiction" (1999: 124), but since Postmodernism works in contradictory pairs, this "returning the text to the 'world'" (1999: 125) is counterbalanced by a will to retain aesthetic autonomy. Postmodern textualities happen in this field of unresolved tension between the public and the private, the collective and the individual, the commercial and the artistic, and in RPGs this ongoing and unresolved negotiation becomes clearer than in any other medium. The preference for the location of discursive power in the "'ex-centric' – as both off-center and de-centered" (1999: 130) also sets up another unresolved tension: that between "élitist, alienated 'otherness'" and "the uniforming impulse of mass culture" (ibid.) in a "parodic mix of authority and transgression, use and abuse" (1999: 131). With the inherent inability to locate discursive power in the process of meaning-making in RPGs, the best approximation is to define an area in the narrative architecture somewhere between printed rule- and sourcebooks, players and Storyteller, where – always according to the individual gaming style of each group – discursive power must be located while it can never be pinpointed. And on a contextual, socio-cultural level, RPGs are very much carnivalesque forms reinforcing and undercutting the system from a position always veering from the indie fringe on the one to the multinational companies on the other end of the spectrum. As a quintessentially Postmodern textuality, the medium opposes "modernism's potential for hermetic, élitist isolationism that separated art from the world" (1999: 140), taking art and the active creation of it back *into* the world and everyday life.

Discourse, as "both an instrument and an effect of power" (1999: 185) is the central object of criticism and reflection in Postmodern thinking, and the artefacts of Postmodernism both inscribe and challenge this discursive power, never situating themselves outside of power relations but acknowledging them and at the same time demystifying "those totalizing systems that unify with an aim to power" (1999: 186). The Postmodern individual itself is no longer the "free, unified, coherent and consistent" entity of liberal humanism, but – and here Hutcheon quotes Rosalind Coward and John Ellis – "the individual in sociality as a language-using, social and historical entity" (1999: 189). Language, society and the textualised past determine the individual and its functions. Like the ephemeral narrative of RPGs is negotiated verbally in a localised community from the shared textual repertoire of pre-texts, so individual identity is constantly negotiated through language in synchronic interplay with society and in diachronic reference to the past. We are not only the stories that we tell, we are stories - full stop.

Since "[l]anguage paradoxically both expresses and oppresses, educates and manipulates" (1999: 199), all discourse must be ambiguous, and Postmodernism accepts this ambiguity, celebrates it "in a curious mixture of the complicitous and the critical" in an uneasy "'inside-outsider' position" that is deemed to be the only appropriate way to represent it (both 1999: 201). Essential to the questioning of all authority that results from this insight, and the renegotiation of "the borders between the public and the personal" that in turn results from it (1999: 202), is the unhindered accessibility of Postmodern artefacts. Hutcheon concludes: "Perhaps the most potent mode of subversion is that which can speak directly to a 'conventional' reader, only then to chip away at any confidence in the transparency of those conventions" (1999: 202 – 203). To intensify its reach, Postmodernism not only produces artefacts that are understandable by everyone, it also *appropriates* and uses the laws and logic of commodification: maximised sellability and aggressive advertising.

Even though its critics frequently deny Postmodernism the will or possibility to be political, its overt use of manipulation (in its marketing and narrative strategies alike) clearly exposes the mechanisms not only of commercialism, but also of political propaganda, or religious proselytization. What is more, Hutcheon argues that

freedom and responsibility are frequent leitmotifs in Postmodern artefacts where they are frequently problematised "by showing how narratorial (and authorial) freedom is" (1999: 206). Postmodern artists and theoreticians alike know that they cannot be 'free', i.e. outside of the/a system, and that like everyone else they are deeply implicated in the economic and political structures of their communities. They are also aware of the ideological quality of their own, Postmodern/-ist positions and this "renders unlikely the possible extremes of both political quietism and radical revolution" (1999: 209). This is exactly why ideologically-minded critics on both end of the political spectrum have such problems acknowledging Postmodernism.

Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) for example oozes the author's Neo-Marxist conviction from every pore. In need of a totalizing theoretical, social, and political structure, Jameson cannot or does not want to develop the negative capability necessary to actively and positively engage with the Postmodern. He outright condemns it for its "depthlessness, which finds its prolongation both in contemporary 'theory' [notice the passive-aggressive use of the quotation marks] and in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum" (Jameson, 1999: 6), and concludes his judgment as follows:

> We are left with that pure and random play of signifiers that we call postmodernism, which no longer produces monumental works of the modernist type but ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of pre-existent texts, the building blocks of older cultural and social production, in some new and heightened bricolage: metabooks which cannibalize other books, metatexts which collate bits of other texts [...].
> (1999: 96)

This unwillingness to grant Postmodern theories or theories of the Postmodern other than his own any moment of truth or insight (signified by his disdainful use of quotation marks), paired with his openly professed rejection of Postmodern cultural artefacts that – in his opinion - can never reach the quality of modernist works or contribute anything, but can only cannibalise earlier texts of higher quality into commodified trash, is the reason why I chose not to use Jameson for my theoretical background in spite of his supposed status as one of the leading critics of the Postmodern.

I find his approach intellectually destructive, ultimately bordering on silence on the subject, and demeaning towards the artists that - against Jameson's predictions otherwise - have managed over the last twenty years to produce highly complex and socially as well as culturally relevant artefacts in literature, film, games, comics and on TV. Hutcheon, when trying to understand this barely hidden hostility towards Postmodernism in Jameson, comes to the following conclusion: "He does not want the contradictions and paradoxes; he does not want questioning. Instead he wants answers, totalizing replies – which postmodernism cannot and will not offer" (Hutcheon, 1999: 214). Looking back at past experience, the Postmodern does not do utopias, does not believe in the resolution of dialectics in harmonious synthesis. "It has little faith in art's ability to change society *directly*" (1999: 218), and even though Hutcheon attests many parallels between historiographic metafiction and Brecht's epic theatre (c.f. 1999: 219 – 220), she still rejects the availability of the dialectic as method for Postmodern artefacts: "the borders between art and reality are indeed challenged, but only because the borders are still there – or so we think. Instead of synthesis, we find problematization. It may not be much, but, once again, it may be all we have" (1999: 221). The borders will not go away, there will be no revolutionary change resulting in the establishment of a utopian new state of society and culture.

The Postmodern is firmly grounded in the present, not the future, and this results in "its deliberate rejection of either a positive Utopian (Marxist) or negative apocalyptic (neo-Nietzschean) orientation toward the future" (1999: 230). But this is not defeat, it is the conclusion drawn from the constant presence of the past in the present and all the revolutions that have eventually eaten their own children. Rather than losing itself in dreams of utopia that will inevitably turn into dystopia, Postmodernism in Hutcheon's Postcolonial, Hyphenated-Canadian perspective is about acknowledging and problematizing boundaries, questioning concepts such as "historical knowledge, subjectivity, narrativity, reference, textuality, discursive context" (1999: 231), and the creative energy that process releases for change *within* the system. Evolution through negotiation under the constant tension of an unresolved dialectic might well be the cultural heritage of John Ralston Saul's Métis nation in Hutcheon's theoretical body of work (c.f. Saul, 2009).

While the emphasis in Hutcheon's *Poetics* (1988) is – understandably – more on Postmodern aesthetics and discourse, she gives more weight to the social and political side of her argument in the subsequent *Politics of Postmodernism* (1989). Right at the very beginning of her argument she openly contradicts vocal critics of the Postmodern like Baudrillard or Jameson by claiming that it is "resolutely contradictory *as well as* unavoidably political" (2000: 1; my emphasis). Even if Postmodernism is oftentimes seen (or constructed) as a playful but ultimately shallow mode of representation, lacking or even incapable of any political impulse, Hutcheon is convinced that its preference for the "self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement" (ibid.) and commitment to duplicity - reinforcing the conventions it uses and at the same time undermining and subverting them - creates a tension that ultimately serves to de-naturalise aspects of social, political and cultural life. As all representations "in high art or the mass media are ideologically grounded" (2000: 3), and representation, or the "textualised extratextual" to be more precise (Hutcheon, 1999: 155 – 156), is the main interest for Postmodern thinking. Postmodern theory and artistic practice *cannot* escape the "politics of representation" (ibid.). It is inherently and necessarily political, even more so than many Modernist works enamoured with formal experimentation created by artists who perceived themselves to be outside of society, a claim a Postmodernist would have to refute in the first place, as there *is* no 'outside of society' for them. This is also why critics on both ends of the political spectrum accuse Postmodernism of 'selling out' to the economic and political powers-that-be and their ideologies, consumerism and liberal humanism respectively. In a disarming show of Postmodern self-awareness, Hutcheon even admits to this, in a way:

> Yet, it must be admitted from the start that this is a strange kind of critique, one bound up, too, with its own *complicity* with power and domination, one that acknowledges that it cannot escape implication in that which it nevertheless still wants to analyze and maybe even undermine. The ambiguities of this kind of position are translated into both the content and the form of postmodern art, which thus at once purveys and challenges ideology – but always self-consciously.
> (2000: 4)

When the author later identifies Louis Althusser's definition of ideology as "both a system of representation and a necessary and unavoidable part of every social totality" as the basis of her understanding of ideology, and thus subsequently the Postmodern (2000: 6), it is clear that within her discursive and argumentative system the intricate link between the cultural and the socio-political makes anything but complicity with power unthinkable. The Postmodern therefore is, and cannot *not* be, political.

Another interesting aspect Hutcheon brings up in her introductory sketch of the politics of the Postmodern is the strong influence of performance art on the definition of Postmodern practices and approaches to creation (2000: 9), resulting in a catalogue that reads: "irony, playfulness, historical reference, the use of vernacular materials, the continuity of cultures, an interest in process over product, breakdowns of boundaries between art forms and between art and life, and new relationships between artist and audience" (ibid.). To a point all of these can be found in RPGs, and this practical resemblance is also mirrored in a theoretical interest of performance theory in the medium of RPGs, such as Daniel Mackay's *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game* (2001). I see this new relationship between artist and audience that is a non-hierarchical one, based on mutuality and communication, and especially the emphasis on performance as a strong link to contemporary theories of identity (be it class, ethnic, or even gender identity) that also foreground the performativity in active identity creation and the essential role of communication and context (c.f. Butler, 1993: 187 - 222). So also in that aspect, Postmodernism and RPGs are both political in nature.

What emerges from Hutcheon's famous and often quoted "paradoxical postmodernism of complicity and critique" (2000: 11) is a highly political agenda after all: "call[ing] into question the messianic faith of modernism" (2000: 12). Whether this challenge politically comes from the left or the right the critics cannot agree upon, but once again Hutcheon gives the most Postmodern of answers to this conundrum – 'both and neither': "it [i.e. Postmodernism] sits on the fence between a need (often ironic) to recall the past of our lived cultural environment and a desire (often ironized too) to change its present" (both 2000: 13). This unresolved and unresolvable paradox is due to the critical perspective from within the system that

Postmodernism has adopted. Being part of that very system it tries to challenge and question, the Postmodern is appropriated by all participants in the political game for their own ends. It is therefore political beyond party-politics, located everywhere and nowhere within the political spectrum at the same time, inscribing and deconstructing the messianic impulse deeply ingrained in our cultures. For every CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE FIRST AVENGER (2011) out there (and I still hope that this film *was* a failed attempt at irony), there is also a CHRONICLE (2012). And I do not even want to think about the muddled and all-over-the place ideological and political mixed messages *The Walking Dead* (both the comics, 2003 – present, and the TV-series, 2010 – present) or *A Song of Ice and Fire* (again both the novels, 1996 – present, and the TV-Series, 2011 - present) are sending.

Engaging with Postmodern artefacts, no matter in which position in the complex web of meaning-making they spin, is not only a cultural, it is also a social, and eventually a political action. It is cultural politics live: "As producers or receivers of postmodern art, we are all implicated in the legitimization of our culture", Hutcheon writes (2000: 15), and, quoting Victor Burgin, she claims what Zima later made the pivotal point of his own essential contribution to the theoretical discourse on the Postmodern: "The postmodern is seemingly not so much a concept as a problematic: 'a complex of heterogeneous but interrelated questions which will not be silenced by any spuriously unitary answer'" (2000: 15). And she adds: "The political and the artistic are not separable in this problematic" (ibid.). It is thus not politically irrelevant when you pick up your dice whether you play *Dungeons & Dragons*, a conflictual, competitive, mainstream US-American power-Fantasy (pun intended) courtesy of Hasbro and driven by the pursuit of not so much happiness but (virtual) profit, or *Reign* (2007), an equally US-American, self-published and print-on-demand indie-RPG that predominantly deals with the unavoidably messy interactions between the personal and the political and how they are always inextricably linked. Your choice will *always* be a politically motivated one, you are sending a political message by choosing one over the other, and the effects it has on you and your immediate environment will shift the political climate. There is no 'outside of the system' under the Postmodern condition.

RPGs are also excellent examples for Postmodern creation, since their cooperative and procedural authorship puts a central theoretical interest of Postmodernists into practice, "foreground[ing] the productive, constructing aspect of their acts of representing", while as a playable medium they are (unrightfully so, I would argue) still considered to be mostly entertainment not geared towards social change, which echoes Postmodernism's lack of a "theory of positive action on a social level" (both Hutcheon, 2000: 22). "To 'de-doxify' is not to act, even if it might be a step toward action or even a necessary precondition of it", Hutcheon concludes, adding later: "Postmodernism may not *do* that something, but it may at least show what needs undoing first" (ibid.; original emphasis). The Postmodern does not produce or favour concerted, social or political action, as that would require an ideological (and most likely unreflected) 'one-ness' of minds that willingly accept the violence of consensus in hope of breaking or exchanging the system. Postmodernism is not a philosophy of political action, it is one of critical, of political and cultural thinking, and "[p]ostmodern representation is self-consciously all of these – image, narrative, product of (and producer of) ideology" (2000: 31).

This filters down from a collective to an individual level, where "subjectivity is represented as something in process, never fixed and never as autonomous, outside history. It is always a gendered subjectivity, rooted also in class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation" (2000: 39), and Postmodern artefacts reveal representation "as the process of constructing the self", emphasising "the role of the 'other' in mediating that sense of self" (2000: 40). The purpose of Postmodernism, if any *one* purpose can be defined in the first place without leaving the frame of reference of the Postmodern, is to make the processes of representation and thus subject construction overt, challenging the transparency of Modern and pre-Modern media with the opacity of Postmodern ones, creating fiction about the writing and interpretation of fiction: metafiction. The metafictional impulse is the central tool in Postmodernism's attempt to understand our construction of reality and a sense of self through cultural interaction. In that sense, RPGs not only show us how we tell stories, they also show us how our stories in turn tell us, "the nature of narrative as a major human system of understanding" (2000: 49).

Storytelling for Hutcheon becomes an assertion of "the communicational bond between the teller and the told within a context that is historical, social, and political, as well as intertextual", it is a "historical and political act", especially with Postcolonial authors and other groups that still need to assert their voices (both 2000: 51). The Postmodern proliferation of mass-produced narratives across all available media has led to a renaissance of storytelling, "but as a problem, not a given" (2000: 51), as the Postmodern audience is much more aware of the "clashing discourses" (2000: 53) that are the result of the ideological nature of all representation. We are more inclined as both producers and recipients of narrative to acknowledge our active role in the process: "we *make* sense of and *construct* order out of experience" (2000: 54). And even though the Postmodern mind is focussed on the present, it lives with the constant presence of the past in the present: "postmodernism reveals a desire to understand present culture as the product of previous representations" (2000: 58).

By challenging the concepts of teleology, closure, and causality, Postmodernism highlights the tools of discursive and narrative power and its urge to master its material, problematizing the totalising and sometimes violent "process […] by which writers of history, fiction, or even theory render their materials coherent, continuous, unified" (2000: 62). The result of this approach is a discourse that is carried by both "the desire for and the suspicion of narrative mastery – and master narratives" (2000: 64). The Postmodern also goes beyond inherent qualities and internal processes of narration, bringing in context and discursive situation as essential components of meaning-making. Together with the tendency towards particularisation, this contextualisation shifts narrative from the realm of the absolute (and metaphysical truth claims) into the nebulous realm of the relative. "But the resulting postmodern relativity and provisionality are not causes for despair; they are to be acknowledged as perhaps the very conditions of historical knowledge", Hutcheon reassures (2000: 67).

Depending on how the narrative process is structured and how much discursive power the group agrees to give to the Storyteller, RPGs are excellent showcases for the workings of narrative mastery in relation to context and particular interests. As input from many different sources comes together, the Storyteller is charged with

establishing the narrative unity of plot from the multiplicity of interaction, respecting the demands of logic and causality, structuring the experience based on the conventions of teleology prevalent in the given genre, and providing a sufficient amount of closure at the end of each session and at the end of a particular story. As they work openly and through constant negotiations with the rest of the players, the Storytellers apply the expected master narratives and let everyone understand and participate in what goes on. The medium in all its opacity lies open to the critical questions of the participants.

The preferred mode of Postmodern narrative creation, according to Hutcheon, is parody, which she defines not necessarily as humorous, but "ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality", adding that "not nostalgic, it is always critical (both 2000: 93). The concept of parody alone is by definition an interplay of continuity and difference, and furthermore "it also contests our humanist assumptions about artistic originality and uniqueness and our capitalist notions of ownership and property" (2000: 93). Following her own theory, Hutcheon here uses 'our' when she talks about humanist and capitalist expectations, including herself in the ideological systems mentioned and thereby fulfilling the programme of Postmodern theory even within her own theory: "challeng[ing] the concealed or unacknowledged politics and evasions of aesthetic representation" (2000: 98). Her discussion of parody is also very differentiated, for example when she openly admits that "parody was also a dominant more of much of modernist art", offering her take on the difference between the two: "postmodernism's irony is one that rejects the resolving urge of modernism toward closure or at least distance. Complicity always attends its critique" (2000: 99). This is further developed later into her theory of Postmodernism as "authorized transgression", based on the doubly coded principle of parody that "both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies" (2000: 101) and reinforced by its complicitous aspect as "mass-media images" that by their ability to be understood by everyone preclude any élitist developments that parody might render possible (2000: 105). What is essential is that "the doubleness of the politics of authorized transgression remains intact: there is no dialectic resolution or recuperative evasion of contradiction" (2000: 107).

This then is the politics of Postmodernism as defined by Hutcheon: authorized transgression based on parody and mass-market appeal to be able to (a) work from within the system and (b) attract a maximum number of (active) recipients in an attempt to create critical awareness of the ideological and provisional nature of representation. And in my opinion this is also the heart of the medium and experience of RPGs.

8.5 –Barth: The Exhaustion and Replenishment of Literature

The author John Barth is widely associated with Postmodernism, and in addition to a large oeuvre consisting of novels and short-stories, most of them with a decidedly metafictional aspect, he has also published three collections of non-fictional, critical texts, *The Friday Book* (1984), *Further Fridays* (1995), and most recently *Final Fridays* (2012). Taken from the first of these three, his two essays "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) and "The Literature of Replenishment" (1979) are well-known attempts to come to terms with literature under a Postmodern signifying regime. I will use these to texts interspersed with passages from other, smaller texts from *The Friday Book* to try and reconstruct Barth's perspective on Postmodern literature based on his first hand and practical experience. This should complement my other, more theoretical and abstract sources to provide a fuller picture.

In his short introduction to "The Literature of Exhaustion", the Barth of 1984 explains how his artistic and creative journey started out from an interest in exploring the oral narrative tradition "from which printed fiction evolved" (1984: 63). It was the live element of fiction as a performing art that in a general climate of appreciation for experimental art (this *was* the mid-1960s) brought Barth to set down his thoughts about his "mixed feelings about the avant-gardism of the time" (ibid.). The author regrets that many critics have misunderstood his intention in the following decades and, fixated on the title of his essay, have constructed a reading of it that situates Barth's perspective – much to his chagrin - in the Death of the Author debate. This "poststructuralist catchphrase", to quote Jane Gallop's introduction to her *The Deaths of the Author: Reading and Writing in Time* (2011), "efficiently and evocatively

represent[s] the poststructuralist dismissal of the author, signifying polemically that the author does not matter, only the text" (Gallop, 2011: 1). Barth was, and in 1984 still is, unhappy with that reading of his text as a swan song of literature (or literary quality), and he makes a point of still standing by his central argument: "that virtuosity is a virtue, and that what artists feel about the state of the world and the state of their art is less important than what they do with that feeling" (1984: 64). Both of these statements put him in direct opposition to Hutcheon and others following an argument similar to hers, but Postmodern theory always had to contain such contradiction and dissent.

Barth defines three subject areas for his essay:

> [F]irst, some old questions raised by the new "intermedia" arts; second, some aspects of the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges [...]; third, some professional concerns of my own related to these other matters and having to do with what I'm calling "the literature of exhausted possibility" – or, more chicly, "the literature of exhaustion".
> (Barth, 1984: 64)

Knowing full well about the negative connotations the term 'exhaustion' conjures up, the author immediately proceeds to reassure the reader that it here should not be understood as decadence or despair, but only as an expression that the forms available to artists at the time were used up, their creative possibilities exhausted. He also acknowledges "the romantic tradition of rebelling against Tradition" at work in what he perceived as a struggle with received definitions of media, genres, and forms (1984: 65), and takes a closer look at the effects the democratisation of the arts had on the cultural artefacts produced. In a move very much reminiscent of later definitions of Postmodernism, the intermedia art of the 1960s eliminated both the traditional audience and the traditional author: as audience frequently became cast and/or collaborators, the omniscient author as well as the controlling artist were both "condemned as politically reactionary, authoritarian, even fascist" (1984: 65). The Aristotelian concept, handed down over the centuries from Greek philosophy, of the uncommonly gifted, conscious agent who masters his talent into virtuosity and then achieves an artistic effect through technique and cunning was dead.

Barth's situation of these changes in "an age of ultimacies and 'final solutions' – at least *felt* ultimacies, in everything from weaponry to theology, the celebrated dehumanization of society, and the history of the novel" (1984: 67; original emphasis), might not have been very helpful in order to avoid being read as critic of a culture and society approaching implosion and – ultimately – silence, but there is also hope in his text, the hope that after the silence it will be possible to "rediscover validly the artifices of language and literature – such far-out notions as grammar, punctuation … even characterization! Even plot!" (1984: 68; original emphasis). And while his formulation of this hope is in itself very ironic (a hope that, I would argue, has in the meantime been realised, especially as far as the renaissance of plot is concerned), it is in satire and irony that Barth sees the greatest potential to create awareness in and give intellectual validity to the exploration of forms past and present. Prefiguring much of what Hutcheon later elaborated on in her *Poetics* and *Politics of Postmodernism*, Barth produces a catalogue of strategies to reinvigorate the artistic landscape: reproductions of works of art (not non-art), ironic comments on genres and the history of art (not culture in general), a return to metaphysical not purely aesthetical debates, acknowledgment of the difficulty (maybe even unnecessity) of writing original works of art, and, on a discursive metalevel, a confrontation with the perceived intellectual dead-end by turning it against itself to produce something new, like the mystics of various religions have been doing for centuries – "it's a matter of every moment throwing out the bath water without for a moment losing the baby" (1984: 70).

A Postmodern comment on many of these suggestions, at the very least the reference to mysticism with its idea of the possibility of a presence of and a communion with a metaphysical truth, might come to the conclusion that they are Modern or even pre-Modern in nature, and Barth's definition of an artist would dispel all doubts: "the combination of that intellectually serious vision with great human insight, poetic power, and consummate mastery of his means – a definition which would have gone without saying, I suppose, in any century but ours" (1984: 70). So while Barth's diagnosis of the state of his society and culture corresponds to Postmodern theories about the perceived cultural shift (challenging of the artist/audience opposition, problematisation of the means and forms of cultural

production, irony as mode of self-aware exploration of culture), his suggested reaction – the return to the Modern artist and the pre-Modern mystic as enlightened guides on a quest for meaning – can only be refused from a Postmodernist's point of view: It propagates and perpetuates an élitist and hermetic understanding of culture that is no longer viable, today even less so than it was during the late 1960s.

From his fascination with and analysis of Borges, Barth then goes on to extract the insight that since the fact/fiction-, reality/dream-distinction has collapsed to a large degree in contemporary culture and society, Borges' "contamination of reality by dream" (Barth, 1984: 71), mode and form becomes themselves metaphors for the concerns expressed. Form and content are suspended, or as Barth puts it in an adaptation of Marshall McLuhan's famous and ubiquitous quote: "the medium is (part of) the message" (1984: 71). Referring to an unnamed editor of Borges, this first idea is then brought together with a second one: "For [Borges] no one has claim to originality in literature; all writers are more or less faithful amanuenses of the spirit, translators and annotators of pre-exiting archetypes" (1984: 73; square brackets in the original). And again, both observations echo in Postmodern and Poststructuralist theories of literature and cultural production from Derrida to Hutcheon and Zima. The impossibility of originality, because "literature has been done long since" (1984: 73), only leaves one possible solution: "A librarian's point of view!" (ibid.). Postmodern authors are no longer inspired creators of new forms, they have become librarians of the amassed hoard of thousands of years of cultural expression: Hutcheon's parody as ultimate Postmodern mode and her presence of the past in the present in a more poetic diction. "And it would itself be too presumptuous if it weren't part of a lively, relevant metaphysical vision, slyly employed against itself precisely to make new and original literature" (1984: 73), Barth concludes his analysis of Borges. Again, the self-aware, self-ironic, and contradictory aspects of the Postmodern are present, but the invocation of a "metaphysical vision" expose Barth at the time as a non-Postmodern thinker, nostalgic for the loss of metaphysical truth and political visions for social change.

When he finally identifies the labyrinth as the central metaphor in Borges's oeuvre, "a place in which, ideally, all the possibilities of choice (of direction, in this case) are embodied, and […] must be exhausted before one reaches the heart" (1984: 75), this

again sounds like a Postmodern way of thinking: ergodic navigation through a narrative architecture of possibilities. Together with Barth's earlier concept of how form and content are suspended and coalesce in the literature of exhaustion, I almost feel tempted to make the obvious connection to RPGs and the beginning of the medium – *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974), with all its insufficiencies and restrictions. Here too, the players, or rather the heroes they play, typically enter a labyrinth, find the villain or monster and – in the crude and simplistic manner of a newly created cultural form – dispatch it by force to bring the plot to its expected conventional ending. In a similar manner, Barth places the Minotaur at the centre of the Borgesian labyrinth and a conflict that can only end in defeat and death, or victory and freedom. He even concludes that it takes a hero to make the journey and bring it to a successful ending, since "[d]istressing as the fact is to us liberal democrats, the commonality, alas, will *always* lose their way and their soul" (1984: 75; original emphasis). The hero needs to be aware of all possibilities, acknowledge them and then use his special gift to overcome the challenge. No-one else could do so. Only the (s)elected few. Once more this is a very Postmodern argument and a deeply un-Postmodern conclusion to it.

But like the new medium of RPGs has grown more complex, differentiated, and more socially relevant in its problematisation of narrative and social structures since *Dungeons and Dragons*, Barth has also refined his argument with "The Literature of Replenishment" (1979) that must be read as a necessary counter-text to his earlier essay.

The first major difference between the two texts is that the later one, "companion and corrective to [the] 1967 essay" (1984: 193), specifically and explicitly addresses Postmodernism as its subject matter, whereas the earlier text talks about the cultural condition without ever naming it. Quoting his own headnote in a 1982 collected edition of both sister essays, Barth states: "My purpose was to define to my satisfaction the term postmodernism, which in 1979 was everywhere in the air. Almost no one agrees with my definition, but I remain satisfied with it" (Barth, 1984: 193). The author also seems to have himself adopted a more Postmodern mode of thinking in the years since the creation of the first text that was still broken between Postmodern observation and Modern conclusions drawn, ending his introductory

piece on a self-aware and self-critical note, conceding that his theories are, after all, only theories and not incontestable truth: "what matters is not the exhaustion or the replenishment, both of which may be illusory, but the literature, which is not" (1984: 194).

The beginning of Barth's search for a definition is a statement about the chaos, profound disagreement, and utter lack of any generally accepted definition in the academic, critical, and artistic scene of the time in both the US and Europe:

> Well, but what is postmodernism? When one leaves off the mere recitation of proper names, and makes due allowance for the differences among any given author's works, do the writers most often called postmodernist share any aesthetic principles or practices as significant as the differences between them?
> (1984: 196)

The term itself, Barth finds, is awkward and faintly epigonic, "suggestive less of a vigorous or even interesting new direction in the old art of storytelling than of something anti-climactic, feebly following a very hard act to follow" (1984: 196). Going back to Robert Alter and Ihab Hassan for confirmation and authority, he then suggests a very Postmodern solution to the problem of the relation between the Modern and the Postmodern, one that most other critics have since managed to agree upon: "that that program is in some respects an extension of the program of modernism, in other respects a reaction against it" (1984: 197). Adopting this both/and solution for himself, Barth builds his argument by first defining Modernism and then, in a second step investigating how Postmodernism diverges from it, develops and extends it further. The reason why my discussion of this essay is not found in my chapter on various attempts at (the impossibility of) drawing the line between the Modern and the Postmodern but here is that I was hesitant about separating the two sister essays without damaging their synergetic meaning.

The basic theoretical approach Barth takes towards Modernism, referring to two articles by Gerald Graff in *Tri-Quarterly* 26 and 33 (1984: 197), is that it was based on a criticism of the social order and worldview propagated by 19th century bourgeoisie. Modernism, in his reading, thus becomes an anti-bourgeois, anti-establishment

aesthetics, even though this does not account for the more conservative proponents of the cultural movement. The artistic and aesthetic method or strategy preferred by Modernists was "the self-conscious overturning of the conventions of bourgeois realism" (1984: 199), and Barth gives a longish catalogue of examples: critical revival of themes and motifs from antiquity contextualised with contemporary issues; radical disruptions of linear narrative; frustrating conventional expectations of coherence and causality in plot and characters; questioning moral or philosophical meaning in ironic or ambiguous juxtapositions; breaking naïve Bourgeois rationality in epistemological self-mockery; opposing the inward consciousness to rational, public, and objective discourse; and using subjective distortion to point out fragile and ephemeral nature of bourgeois social world (1984: 199). Barth the artist then adds to this already extensive list by Graff three more items: the Romantic insistence on the special and alienated role of the artist (within or outside of society); the foregrounding of language and technique over content; and the central position problematics of language and literature take on a metalevel (ibid.).

Taking a closer look at the two lists, I would have to say that most items on Graff's version could just as well describe Postmodernism: presence of the past in the present, disruption of a reading process based on causality and coherence, ironic and self-aware textualities that deconstruct totalising discourses, the dominance of subjectivity over objectivity. If one accepts these as apt descriptions of the Modernist project and its methods, what emerges is the clear image of Postmodernism as the continuation of Modernism, a reading that makes perfect sense considering the title of one of the articles by Graff that Barth uses as his source here: "The Myth of the Postmodernism Breakthrough" (in *Tri-Quarterly* 26, 1973). While Graff opposes the idea of any real break, least of all a breakthrough, between Modernism and Postmodernism, the items added in Barth's much shorter list are more intriguing. This is a man who self-identifies as a Postmodernist, or at least as an "alleged practitioner" of it (1984: 194), and so expectedly the image created is a much more differentiated one. On the one hand Barth sees a continuation between the two movements when he talks about the focus on issues of language and literature that I would extend into 'representation' to include audio/visual media, yet on the other hand the Romantic ideal of the alienated poet and the emphasis on technique not

content are clearly aspects of Modernism that do not apply to Postmodernism. The return of content into artistic expression and of the artist into society are two of the essential shifts from a Modern to a Postmodern sensibility.

The Postmodernism Barth constructs with his reading thus is a typical both/and-Postmodernism: both a continuation of Modernism *and* a break with it (or at least a shift from it). Change and continuity come together.

Thus it is not surprising that the author then looks for theoretical backup in Ihab Hassan's theories (a both/and proponent), as well as Robert Alter's article in *Tri-Quarterly* 33 that is even subtitled "reflections on the aftermath of modernism" (1984: 197). Barth here finds a construction of Postmodernism that is founded on the idea that it at the same time intensifies or emphasises the self-consciousness and self-reflexiveness of Modernism, but also adds a performative quality to it, paired off with a pervasive cultural subversiveness: "postmodernist writers write a fiction that is more and more about itself and its processes [i.e. metafiction], less and less about objective reality and life in the world" (1984: 2000). The metafictional aspect and especially the explicit emphasis on performativity not only agrees with Hutcheon, whose construction of Postmodernism and the Postmodern form the theoretical core of my argument, they also remind me of the features of RPGs that I hold to be a result of the conceptual and chronological correlation between their creation and the rise of Postmodern theory.

There are other aspects necessary for a fuller understanding of the Postmodern, and Barth also tries to address them. He claims (with Graff) that the Postmodern takes the anti-rationalist, anti-realist, and anti-bourgeois programme of Modernism to its extreme, but that it has lost its logical adversary, since Modernism has already been assimilated and appropriated by the bourgeoisie that "turned its defiant principles into mass-media kitsch" (1984: 200). Furthermore, he emphasises the importance of the context:

> [A]rt lives in human time and history, and general changes in its modes and materials and concerns, even when not obviously related to changes in technology, are doubtless as significant as the changes in a culture's general attitudes, which its arts may both inspire and reflect.
> (1984: 200)

While still a believer in the individual work of art more so than in collective movements ("[t]he particular work ought always to take primacy over contexts and categories"; 1984: 200), Barth here acknowledges the inherent, essential and mutual connection between cultural changes and changes in the arts. In a process of give and take, art inspires cultural change inspires art. It is important to note here that Barth focuses on the *work*, not the artist as such, so this is less an echo of the Romantic genius-slash-artist Graff associates with Modernism, but more of a Poststructuralist, or even Postmodern insistence on the individual expression in procedural context with its artistic and cultural environment (i.e. the semiosphere).

Barth concludes that Postmodernism is not supposed to be a mere extension of Modernism, nor an intensification, or a total and radical subversion or repudiation of it (or Realism for that matter), because this would mean that "postmodernist writing is indeed a kind of pallid, last-ditch decadence, of no more than minor symptomatic interest" (1984: 201). What this means is that a Postmodernism that is merely a 'post-Modernism' (the 'post' bringing together the intersecting meanings of extension, intensification, *and* refutation) is not anything in and of itself. It becomes a creatively and artistically barren appendix to whatever came before or to what it reacts to: *reacting*, not acting. Barth the Postmodernist understandably rejects this notion, or it would disqualify his own cultural creations.

The argument that Barth then develops is a very interesting one, and one that I have not seen elsewhere in critical literature. Maybe this is because, as he explains in the introduction, "[a]lmost no one agrees with my definition" (1984: 193), but I think this unjustified, as a new perspective on the problematic definition of the Postmodern can only be an enrichment to the debate.

Modernist texts, following the aesthetic conventions and methods described earlier in reaction to the rigidities and limitations of Bourgeois Realism, are infamously difficult to access for exactly these reasons. This unpopular aspect of the movement - in both its literal and metaphorical sense, or its "aristocratic cultural spirit" as Hassan calls it (Barth 1984: 201), creates the necessity for a whole industry of professional mediators between texts and audiences like cultural critics, or academics in the Humanities. What is lost in Modernism to the vast majority of people is "democratic access, […] immediate or at least ready delight, and often […]

political responsibility (the politics of Eliot, Joyce, Pound, Nabokov, and Borges, for example, are notoriously inclined either to nonexistence or to the far right)" (1984: 202). Postmodernism, for Barth, is an understandable reaction to this, as due to changing cultural and social circumstances there is no more need or even tolerance for hermetic texts and élitist mediators. And yet, the author also warns that a wholesale refutation and rejection of the Modern enterprise and maybe even a return to 19th century Realism would be more than deplorable. This is where the intriguing step in Barth's argument comes up, when he claims that "it is no longer necessary, if it ever was, to repudiate *them*, either: the great premodernists" (1984: 202 – 203; original emphasis). Pre-Modern and Modern aesthetics and methods *both* are accorded moments of truth, or rather viability, as representations of certain aspects of reality here. And just like Postmodernism should not reject Modernism outright, the late-Romantic notions of Modernism in its reaction to pre-Modern forms – "[d]isjunction, simultaneity, irrationalism, anti-illusionism, self-reflexiveness, medium-as-message, political olympianism, and a moral pluralism approaching moral entropy – these are not the whole story either" (1984: 203).

Barth's suggestion is a synthesis, or better a *transcension* of the antitheses between the pre-Modern and the Modern in the Postmodern. From his perspective as an artist, not a theoretician, the ideal Postmodern author something that Derrida, Baudrillard, and even Hutcheon would doubt can even exist is like this:

> My ideal postmodernist author neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his twentieth-century modernist parents or his nineteenth-century premodernist grandparents. He has the first half of our century [i.e. the 20th century CE] under his belt, but not on his back. Without lapsing into moral or artistic simplism, shoddy craftsmanship, Madison Avenue venality, or either false or real naïveté, he nevertheless aspires to a fiction more democratic in its appeal than [...] late-modernist marvels [...]. He may not hope to reach and move the devotees of James Mitchener and Irving Wallace – not to mention the great mass of television-addicted non-readers. But he *should* hope to reach and delight, at least part of the time, beyond the circle of what Mann used to call the Early Christians: professional devotees of high art.
>
> (Barth, 1984: 203)

Well aware of the possibilities and impossibilities of art in the late 20th century, the limitations of appreciation for new forms in traditional and professional critical circles but also the fierce competition from new media, Barth wants Postmodernism to rise above the dichotomies of Realism/Irrealism, Formalism/Contentism, pure literature/junk fiction, and argues for a creative output that "will not wear its heart on its sleeve, either; at least not its whole heart" (1984: 203). He claims that this wish for synthesis is not necessarily sentimental or impossible, as he sees aspects of it already realised in the works of Italo Calvino and Gabriel García Márquez, proponents of Postmodernism and Magic Realism respectively.

The conclusion to his argument and article uses a somewhat Formalist approach, arguing that since art lives in history it is subject to the eternal process of movement between present and past: forms and conventions are used up, exhausted (and here he brings up his earlier sister article), but then also subverted, transformed, transcended and eventually "deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work" (1984: 205). The literature - and in extension the cultural production - of Postmodernism according to Barth is not broken or "*kaput*", as his "Literature of Exhaustion" is frequently misread, since "no single literary text can ever be exhausted – its 'meaning' residing as it does in its transactions with individual readers over time, space, and language" (1984: 205). The process of literature and meaning-making is thus contextual, transactional, ongoing and never-ending in nature. Derrida and Hutcheon could certainly agree with this analysis, and also with Barth's final diagnosis: What is exhausted is not language or literature itself, but rather the aesthetics and conventions of High Modernism as an essential, but ultimately completed cultural programme. And Postmodernism is "not [...] the next-best thing after modernism, but [...] the *best next* thing", a movement that Barth hopes "might also be thought of one day as a literature of replenishment" (1984: 206).

Barth's is thus a special case for so many reasons. First of all, this is the perspective of an artist, a creator, not of an theoretician, a critic. Secondly, his - in my opinion - convincing attempt not to conceptualise Postmodernism in a thinly veiled opposition to Modernism, but rather as a movement born from a synthesis between the Modern and the pre-Modern, is a very peculiar but fruitful enterprise. Thirdly, and this is exactly why I wanted to bring this up in my chapter on attempts at defining the

Postmodern not the Modern/Postmodern divide, what we have here is a u-turn in perspective and point-of-view from a deploration of and nostalgia for the lost programme of Modernism ("The Literature of Exhaustion"), towards a hopeful celebration of the necessity for and possibility of synthesis and revitalisation in Postmodernism ("The Literature of Replenishment"). To use a metaphor here, Barth transforms from a Jameson into a Hutcheon.

I also think that on a more concrete level his revised thesis has much to offer to my investigation into the socio-cultural connections between the Postmodern and the medium of the pen&paper RPG. The coming together and mutual exchange between pre-Modern and Modern aesthetics, of – and here I use and re-write Barth's words borrowing a Postmodern method – Realism *and* Irrealism, Formalism *and* Contentism, Pure Literature *and* Junk Fiction is exemplified in RPGs and the way they make meaning on so many levels. Harking back to his fictitious "ideal Postmodern author", the critical but appreciative use of pre-texts in narrative freedom, the self-aware avoidance of moral or artistic simplism, and the realisation of a truly democratic form of language games, as far as access to them is concerned and the process of how they create narrative, this is what Barth was looking for. RPGs might just be the one medium that could easily reach beyond professional 'art-lubbers', while offering them enough literary qualities to stay interested, and at the same time providing a ludic sense of interaction to the large mass of people that not normally deal with literature or art. The medium could thus be seen as a form of inherently democratic artistic expression in Barth's tradition of the literature of replenishment, a renaissance of the oldest tradition of storytelling (oral transmission) in a new medium, re-energising and opening up the arts to an ever wider audience.

8.6 – Zima: Between the Universal and the Particular

For Peter V. Zima, Postmodernism is an ambiguous and polysemic expression that can easily become the 'starting point for numerous intersecting, contradictory or

even incommensurable object constructions' (2001: 31).[17] Like all theoretical discourse, it is a cultural construct and as such needs to be (self-)ironically relativized and historically contextualised, in order to come to terms with the inherent contradictions and overlaps with other theoretical concepts and to prevent any ideological or dogmatic appropriation (2001: 32).

Zima identifies the Postmodern era as one of pervasive systemic indifference, following Early Modern ambiguity and Late Modern ambivalence (2001: 42), but unlike most critics with a generally positive outlook towards Postmodernism, Zima also warns of the twofold dangers of such a philosophy of indifference: 'Indifference as commutability in relation to the exchange value can thus produce two opposite reactions: indifference [i.e. complacency] or ideologisation' (2001: 15). His is the only account of Postmodernity I have found that manages to logically and conclusively explain both, the "anything goes" mentality of liberal forces and the resurgence of conservatism and fundamentalism that tear our societies apart from within and without. What makes his theories most attractive to my endeavour to understand RPGs as a new – and inherently Postmodern - medium, is the suggested way out of this conundrum: a dialogical approach, bringing together the particular and the general in an active debate with the Other. He replaces the concept of (metaphysical) Truth we find in Plato, Descartes, and Hegel with interdiscursive 'moments of truth' (*Wahrheitsmomente*), that are provisory and heuristic in nature, thus allowing statements about a given system well aware of the fragmentary knowledge about its entirety and the temporary quality of the consensus, thus necessitating constant renegotiation according to the changing context (2001: 16). Zima's Postmodernism defends the notion of truth (lower case t) and of the general acceptability of concepts against Relativism, while at the same time using the alterity of the Other, the interlocutor of his dialogical approach, to guarantee constant self-reflection and a 'genuine and shared search for truth' (2001: 16). The implicit or explicit negativity and implosive quality of theories of the Postmodern such as Baudrillard's is here overcome by a dialogical or rather plurilogical process of communication and

[17] Since Zima's *Moderne/Postmoderne* (2001) was written and published in German, all of the quotes in this chapter are my translations and marked with single quotation marks ('…').

negotiation, resulting in what Zima calls 'a polyphonous identity and a polyphonous *we*' (2001: 17).

In a slightly different definition from the habitual one, Zima uses Modernism not as the artistic and cultural movement during Modernity, but as a term for the Late Modern cultural and artistic movement reacting critically to Modernity (2001: 39). Unlike the literature of Modernity, that could – depending on the exact definition of Modernity used – encompass up to almost 500 years of literary production, Modernism as the literature of Late Modernity only covers a period of about 100 years from mid-19th to mid-20th century (Zima, 2001: 42), and thus is more easily comparable to a Postmodernism whose beginnings as a cultural phenomenon are usually dated to the mid-20th century. According to Zima, Postmodernism appropriates the Modernist criticism of rationalism, Hegelianism, and the notions of the subject and reason, and radicalises it. His central thesis is thus 'that postmodern literature refutes the metaphysical remnants of Modernity in Modernism' (2001: 238).

The results of this refutation are manifold: fears of modernisation and rationalisation are abated; the culture industry and commercial cultural production are accepted; technology, the market, and the culture industry become central components of Postmodernism. The Postmodern could be argued to be nothing but a push in the process of modernisation within Modernism (2001: 240). The danger of this development certainly is the potential for modernisation to end in indifference, where concepts of truth are replaced by the debates of criticism, eventually rendering both meaningless. In a pluralistic society based on radical indifference, social criticism and cultural criticism become unnecessary and actually impossible: Since there are no generally accepted norms and values any longer, there is also no basis for arguments any longer. 'If this assessment were true', Zima writes, 'an essential aspect of Modernity would be obsolete or irrevocably lost' (2001: 240). Another problem in coming to terms with the Postmodern the author points out is that the meanings of Modern, Modernism, Postmodern and Postmodernism are very heterogeneous in the various cultural and artistic disciplines, since the problematics they signify are also very different. This is why Zima's deliberations only deal with verbal communication (literature, philosophy, sociology) that as discourses constantly interact and influence each other. This discursive focus lends itself nicely

to my argument, since RPGs are also language games, literary and narrative mechanisms, that in themselves act as intersections between literature, philosophy and sociology.

Zima defines Postmodernism as a pragmatic philosophy of contingency, and 'just like postmodern literature playfully deconstructs or destructs in revolt without intention to convey general insights (truth-claims), pragmatists bring forth thoughts hoping that others like them and adopt them' (2001: 375). Referring to Richard Rorty, the author argues that chance and contingency dominate in pragmatism and that 'humanity' as a collective construct is only a fiction, victim to an extremely particularistic notion of truth. This socio-cultural context is mirrored in Postmodernism and Postmodern literature where authors refuse and renounce any aesthetic search for generalised values: 'Everyday life is dominated by commercial discourses and rivalling ideologies, and each of those batters the others with its special truth or reality, until all notions of truth and reality finally become interchangeable in the context of indifference' (2001: 376).

Zima's solution to this dilemma of life in a Postmodern society is elegant and simple: from a universalistic approach he switches to a dialogical one, one 'that allows for a negotiation between the special and the general, the self and the other' (2001: 377). This is the only method, Zima argues, to avoid both extremes, the Modern/Late-Modern universalism of Habermas and the Postmodern particularism of Lyotard and Baudrillard. His suggested theory of a dialogical Postmodernism is (ironically) based on Habermas, whom he credits with a 'dialogical turn' in Critical Theory (2001: 377). In his *Vorstudien und Ergänzungen zur Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (1986), Habermas describes what he deems to be the only acceptable groundwork or fundament for social and cultural viability: 'the shaking ground of rationally motivated consensus among participants in a debate' (Habermas in Zima, 2001: 377). Using this as a guideline, Zima argues, universal truth can no longer be monologically decreed, but it will also not disintegrate and be eroded by indifferent pluralism or extreme particularism. The dialogical negotiation between both universalism and pluralism generates the recognition 'that the general always emerges from the particular, but can never be reduced to the particular' (2001: 378).

Theoretical dialogue - and I would argue any other dialogue as well - needs to follow certain basic rules defined by Zima to guarantee a successful negotiation between the particular and the general, of the individual and the collective: participants must not be subjected to pre-defined, general language rules; there must always be the possibility to recognise the particuliarity of individual and thus ideological positions; the necessity to think beyond individual positions in order to remain open for dialogue must be acknowledged; and individual discourse must be nuanced and open to new problematics (2001: 378). Zima takes his discussion to an interesting metalevel, when he reflects upon the precarious position of theory itself between indifference on the one hand, required to guarantee relativity and pluralism and to acknowledge that social reality is defined by the plural, and ideology on the other, values and norms that create a necessary frame of reference while avoiding the danger of dogmatism. 'Ideology and indifference can only be understood as ambivalent units, not as positive or negative ('ideology is good, indifference is bad' or vice versa)', Zima concludes (2001: 378).

In order not to fall prey to unreflected discursive behaviour, Zima suggests to cultivate reflexivity, 'awareness of the semantic, syntactic, and narrative procedures of my discourse [...], originating in certain value judgments, selections, and classifications and precluding other procedures (semantic, narrative options)' (2001: 381). What results from this reflexivity – that reminds me of the processes that I have identified in RPGs earlier - is the recognition of the particular and contingent nature of one's own discourse as just one possible construction of reality that is not identical to it. The motor of real dialogue for Zima is interest in the 'alterity of the other', especially in the Humanities (2001: 384), and he refers to Bakhtin's theory of the dialogue when he points out the essential nature of dialogue for the formation of the self: The subject needs the other as contingent, historical being to be able to articulate and form itself; discourse develops from both consensus with and dissent from people who are the same and different; alterity and dissent are vital impulses whose absence will lead to sterility and death (ibid.). This reflexive and dialogical approach contributes nicely to my reading of RPGs as a Postmodern medium, as they realise many of the demands Zima formulates to avoid the pitfalls of both universalist/collective and particularist/individual interests. As a group of people

comes together to negotiate not only the content of the narrative that they want to create, but also the rules that manage the dialogical process of getting there, they actively engage in an exercise in reflexivity. Every participant has their own position and their fair share of discursive power, and no-one gets to dominate the discourse, as this would lead to a loss of creative input and energy from other participants. Everyone around the table is equal, but they are not the same: They bring their own subject-positions into the narrative and have to acknowledge that everyone else does so, too.

In their abhorrence of the repressive aspects of Modern and Modernist universalism, Postmodern theoreticians such as Lyotard have favoured particularisation, sometimes bordering on the radical. This strategy of resistance to a totalising system, however, has only created a massive concentration of power with the principle of exchange and the exchange value: As all particular positions are isolated, non-committal, and commutable, contradictory truths become indifferent, and in a final ironic turn the particular and ephemeral positions *confirm* the *status quo* they set out to rebel against. The power of the market, enforcing individualism and artistic autonomy, can only generate indifference which, Zima argues, makes it impossible to criticise a market society (2001: 384). His 'solution': 'It appears to be more sensible and honest to repeat the question [i.e. "How can one criticise a market society"?] and leave it open in self-criticism' (ibid.). No solution, no answers, only more questions. Process, not outcome - RPGs, not printed text.

Zima's suggestion to come to terms with how Postmodern particularism confirms and does not question the state of contemporary society and culture, is a modified revival of Late-Modern thinking that was defined by ambivalence and a penchant for dialectics: to bring the historically and socially particular together with a demand for generalisation and truth; to negotiate between universalist Modernism and particularist Postmodernism in an interdiscursive dialogue; to fully recognise alterity in its potential for self-realisation and a shared search for truth and to no longer negate it; to also not relativize and pluralise one's own point of view until it becomes meaningless, since one is always someone else's other (2001: 406). This approach will not provide systemic closure nor final insights, it will create 'moments of truth' and hold true to them for the time being. Thus indifference will be held at bay, and

individuals will still have to recognise their historical position, as well as the contingency and transience of their moments of truth. There is no other solution available, as the 'post-ideological time has not come yet' (2001: 406). Talking about his hopes for a future, fully formed EU as a possibly post-ideological project, Zima explains why this is so: 'intellectuals first need to get accustomed to the seemingly trivial thought that somewhere between revolution and resignation exists a contradictory and conflictual reality, created by more or less competent and corruptible people' (2001: 410). As long as this is not the case, however, a post-ideological reality 'beyond indifference and ideology' remains unavailable on a societal macro-level (ibid.), but maybe it is already available on a local micro-level: the collective, procedural and ephemeral textualities of the RPG.

8.7 – Best and Kellner: From *Postmodern Theory* to *The Postmodern Adventure*

In their *Postmodern Theory* (1991), Best and Kellner situate the beginnings of what they later call *The Postmodern Turn* (1997) in the 1960s with the rapid growth in number and size of social movements that created a dynamics that would lead to major socio-cultural transformations during the 1970s and 80s:

> An explosion of media, computers and new technologies, a restructuring of capitalism, political shifts and upheavals, novel cultural forms, and new experiences of space and time produced a sense that dramatic developments have occurred throughout culture and society. (Best and Kellner, 1991: ix)

These developments were nothing else than the breaking of Modern modes of social organisation that had structured western societies for decades, if not centuries, on an abstract and conceptual level. the "explosion of media" and emergence of "novel cultural forms" at exactly the point in time when Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax wrote up their new game *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974) also serves well to underpin the chronological coincidence here.

The approach the two authors take in their attempt to make sense of these changes is anchored in socio-historical theory, encompassing the social, as well as the cultural dimension, oftentimes bordering on the philosophical. Poststructuralism is seen as part of the "matrix of postmodern theory" that "appropriates the poststructuralist critique of modern theory, radicalizes it, and extends it to new theoretical fields" (Best and Kellner, 1991: 25 – 26). Like many other critics favourable towards these cultural changes, Best and Kellner advocate a both/and approach when it comes to the relationship between the Modern and the Postmodern, claiming that the inherent ambiguity of the prefix 'post' also echoes the ambiguity of Postmodern/-ist discourses. On the one hand it signifies that something is not modern, a move beyond the Modern and an explicit and open break or rupture with Modern ideology: "this rupture can be interpreted positively as a liberation from old constraining and oppressive conditions", or "negatively as a deplorable regression, as a loss of traditional values, certainties, and stabilities" (1991: 29). On the other hand, the 'post' can also be read as in continuity of the Modern, and that would lead to an understanding of the Postmodern "as merely an intensification of the modern, as hypermodernity" (1991: 29 – 30).

Best and Kellner try to come up with their own definition of Postmodernism in a nutshell, and try to include all of "the avatars of the postmodern within the fields of philosophy, cultural theory, and social theory" (1991: 30). For them, the Postmodern is all about attacking the Modern, describing and supporting breaks in knowledge, culture, and society. It overcomes perceived insufficiencies in Modernism to address and represent the fundamentally shifting socio-cultural landscape by calling for entirely new categories and even modes of writing and thinking, affecting changes in the political structure as well as value system. What is intriguing about their position is that they themselves remain ambiguous about their own position towards the Postmodern, or even its existence at the time: "Thus, we shall discuss the opposing positions concerning whether we are or are not in a new postmodern age or are still within modernity, and whether postmodern theory does or does not have the resources to deal with the problems of the present age" (1991: 31). With no final *parti pris* or answers from the very get go, Best and Kellner follow a catalogue of questions to guide their investigation (1991: 32 – 33), and while they signal that they can accept

some aspects of Postmodern criticism of Modernism, they are also not willing to renounce Modernism completely. In a stance very similar to Zima's a decade later, they define themselves as "neither apologists and celebrants of the discourse of the postmodern", nor as dismissive of its achievements. They remain open to Postmodern challenges and critique *and* sceptical of the exaggerations and high rhetoric accompanying the more celebratory accounts of the cultural changes during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Actually, theirs is a very Postmodern attitude and stance to begin with. How very ironic.

One of the chapters in their comprehensive discussion of the Postmodern, "Lyotard and Postmodern Gaming" (1991: 146 – 181), immediately caught my attention for obvious reasons. In it they give a brief account of Lyotard's seminal ideas about the Postmodern, developing them into the direction of gaming, language games, and debates about consensus that are very helpful in understanding how RPGs pick up and realise these (Postmodern) ideas.

They argue that Lyotard, in reference to Derrida's conception of how western philosophy is organised around binary oppositions, always defends the devalued side, the one that is traditionally connotated negatively or perceived to be the weaker one: the sensible, seeing, perceiving, and the singularity. Ultimately, he thus "champions figure, form, and image – in other words, art and imagination – over theory" (1991: 149). The concept of desire is also a very ambiguous one in Best and Kellner's reading of Lyotard, as it can be both a negative, disruptive force subverting reality for its end, and a positive, affirmative one, promoting the use of and energising words, sounds, colours, forms, or objects. Against the theoretical and abstract conception of philosophy and the world conveyed by Western philosophy for the biggest part of the last 3000 years, Lyotard advocates a practical, concrete and experiential philosophy where reality is not only something thought about but also something felt and experienced. Desire is a primary process, unlike the secondary process of discourse that "proceeds by the rules and rational procedures of the ego" (1991: 150), able to produce intensities of experience and creative liberation from repressive conditions, at once transgressive *and* affirmative. The aim, according to Best and Kellner, of this shift in cultural practices is "to paint with and in words" (1991: 152), to emphasise polysemy, poetry, and ambiguity in order to disrupt abstract theoretical

discourse with new, figural discourse, overthrowing hegemonic (Modern/-ist) discourse using transgressive literary strategies.

This reminds me a lot of Hutcheon's conception of the Postmodern as authorised transgression in a carnivalesque way both transgressing and affirming social norms and values, and it also echoes in Game Studies in the concept of immersion, this sense of identification with and being part of the virtual world that is experienced as emotionally empowering. In language (or discourse) this primary desire is bounded and structured by the rules of language and communication, so language games (in the literal sense) like RPGs harness both: the energising, transgressive/affirmative power of desire and the distancing, regulation and reflective qualities of language.

The authors attest Lyotard's early ideas a "Nietzschean drift" (1991: 153), a refusal of theory, critique, or dialectics and a shift towards a "micropolitics of desire" (ibid.) and a critique of representation, "an affirmative philosophy of desire which celebrates the circulation, flows, intensities, and energetics of desire" (1991: 154). The semiotic sign is replaced by a 'tensor', "a conduit for desire that does not terminate in a unitary and identical meaning but which generates libidinal effects" (ibid.), and this change in conception not only allows for a multiplication and dissemination of signification (like in Derrida or Kristeva), but also of new flows and intensities. The aim here is to go beyond the capital, beyond art or the refusal of art through libidinal investment: "We do not desire to possess, to 'work', to dominate … What can they do about that?", Lyotard asks (in Best and Kellner, 1991: 155). The aesthetic and the political thus go hand in hand, and even if Lyotard later abandoned this politics of desire in his texts (like *The Postmodern Condition,* 1979) for a politics of justice and discourse, it is still very helpful to understand the libidinal drive in the Postmodern. Unlike Modernist art and cultural production that mostly favours cool, intellectual detachment and analysis, Postmodern expression in general, and especially the new media created and defined in Postmodernity, appeal very much to the sensual and instinctive, preferring synthesis (or immersion) to distance, with all the dangers of complicity that entails. Best and Kellner's reading of Lyotard's early Postmodern (micro-)politics of desire make this connection comprehensible, while warning about the inherently apolitical perspective it creates on a social (macro-)level.

Another concept they distil from Lyotard's theories is just as essential for my understanding of RPGs as a Postmodern medium: Postmodern Gaming. As under a Postmodern regime of interpretation all discourses are narrative in nature, the analysis of narrative takes centre-stage in Postmodern theories, formulated around the fundamental tenets that (a) all narrative always takes place in a specific context, and (b) that references in narrative can only be to other narratives (1991: 160). Besides these principles of contextuality and intertextuality, there is a third principle defined by Best and Kellner, one that Lyotard calls paganism: "'Paganism' breaks with the modern concern for truth and certainty. Yet it manifests a concern for justice [...]. For paganism there are no privileged narratives, no metatheories of truth or grand historical narratives" (1991: 160). This paganism prefigures Lyotard's incredulity towards metanarratives that is the central argument in his *Postmodern Condition*, valorising little, localised narratives and a general proliferation of narratives in culture over grand and totalising narratives. The drive towards justice is perfectly expressed in gaming, Lyotard argues: Playing by the rules and preserving the autonomy of the rules in different language games. So the logic of theory cannot and must not be applied in ethics or aesthetics. Pagan justice judges without criteria, it is "local, multiple, and provisional, subject to contestation and transformation" (1991: 161). What is just and what not is therefore always dependent on the *context*, and pagan discourse is well aware of its limitation to a specific context. Political discourse would disintegrate into local, specific, and strategic interventions under the influence of a pagan logic. Postmodern politics, Best and Kellner argue in reference to Lyotard, are politics of discourse, a struggle within language games and between them:

> Yet Lyotard insists that there is no overarching language game, no privileged discourse, no general theory of justice within which struggles between different language games could be adjudicated. Justice in each case will be the matter of a provisional judgment which allows no generalization of universal rules or principles.
> (Best, 1991: 163)

Questioning and disagreement, as well as the recognition of the incommensurability between different language games, are the necessary antidotes

to the terror of a totalising system. But Best and Kellner also identify the paradox (or irony) at the heart of this respect for individual language games and their specific justice: It rests on a universal prescriptive to accept multiplicity, thus violating its own prescription. What if the local justice of a language game is based on the refusal or even desired destruction of other language games? This is the unresolvable conundrum, the aporia of Postmodern justice. So even though Lyotard's concepts of paganism and Postmodern gaming, as described and theorised by Best and Kellner, seem to me an apt model to deal with the question of discursive power and textual authority in RPGs, closely linking them to central concepts of Postmodern thought, they also point out possible weaknesses of the medium in a social and political context, resulting from the incommensurability of language games and the provisional, local nature of all consensus negotiated in them.

So when Best and Kellner eventually develop Lyotard's theories towards their Postmodern turn, these problems colour their critical judgment of Postmodernism's ability to address the social and cultural changes of the time. Since Postmodern art and literature are described as pagan, resulting from the absence of a regulating ideal or an assigned addressee, they distort the materials, forms, and sensibilities they use in their processes. The core of the Postmodern relation to language and reality is the differend, a term adopted from Lyotard's *The Differend* (1983):

> The differend is the unstable stat and instance of language wherein something that must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be … What is at stake in a certain literature, in a philosophy, or perhaps even in a certain politics, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them.
> (Lyotard, 1988: 13)

This concept of the differend is the guarantee for and the driving principle of what Best and Kellner, adopting Lyotard's term, call 'honourable' postmodernity: an understanding of conflict where no single judgment is applicable to all participating arguments, and where one side's legitimacy does not and cannot imply the other's lack of such. To overcome the oppression of minority discourses in Modern metadiscourses of truth, differences are actively and positively articulated, "giving

voice to minority discourses" and following a logic to "preserve rather than suppress differences" (1991: 169). The differend becomes the sole principle of (Postmodern, pagan) justice, as all are equally allowed to speak and participate in social debates. Since the arena of these debates is language, this reinforces its central role in the constitution of subjectivity, politics, and even everyday life: "[Lyotard's] agonistics and emphasis on dissensus suggest that conflicts also take place in language and that contesting existing discourses is an important component of social criticism and transformation" (1991: 171). This would refute claims of the apolitical and asocial nature of the Postmodern, since it is, as I established earlier, obsessed with language and language games. The general human need for narrative, and here Best and Kellner refer to Jameson and Ricoeur, means "that we are condemned to narrative in that individuals and cultures organize, interpret, and make sense of their experience through story-telling modes" (1991: 173).

The Postmodern turn towards language and narrative as central cultural and theoretical principles makes language games of a metaphorical and literal kind essential tools in understanding the socio-cultural condition they reflect and that created them. Best and Kellner - through their critical reading of Lyotard - establish contextuality, intertextuality and paganism as guiding principles in the Postmodern experience of the textualised extratextual. The active construction of the self and reality and the differend, the finding of words to express previously unverbalised experiences, are made overt in the procedural, collective and negotiated authorship of RPGs as an essentially Postmodern medium, and their political and social function confirmed.

When he published his *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and politics between the Modern and the Postmodern* in 1995 (this time alone), Kellner articulated his frustration with the state of the Postmodern debate at the time, attesting a proliferation of discourse that suffered from a symptomatic very superficial and "under-theorized" use of the term: "Negatively, the term is often an empty signifier and sign that more concrete theorization is being avoided and is needed. [...] But, positively, it is a sign that something is new and needs to be comprehended and theorized" (2003: 45 – 46). For him, and the title of his book already clearly hints at that, Postmodernism during the mid-1990s was still very much in a transitional phase,

it was a work in progress, the recognition that there was something important going on in society and culture, but observers and critics alike still lacked the language and vocabulary to grasp and define that change. Instead of a Postmodern theory (or a theory of the Postmodern), Keller sees "a series of competing paradigms and discourses" and in addition "the phenomena and discourses of the postmodern are constantly changing, becoming more complex, requiring new mappings and analyses to chart their trajectories" (1995: 46). Ironically, what this means in spite of Kellner's criticism is that the discourse on the Postmodern was in itself very Postmodern at the time: the overt arbitrariness of the sign (term), the absence of one master-narrative or definition, the constantly changing object of investigation and the resulting constantly changing theoretical discourses. The author acknowledges that himself, when he writes about the nature of discourse on the Postmodern as "a cultural and theoretical construct, not a thing or state of affairs" (1995: 47), concepts that are created in discourse and then applied to interpret the phenomena observed. "Thus, the discourses of the postmodern produce their objects", he concludes asserting the primacy of the discursive, narrative over the extratextual (ibid.).

This inadequate mapping and conceptualisation of the Postmodern for Kellner also is a clear sign that "we are living between a now aging modern era and a new postmodern era that remains to be adequately conceptualized, charted, and mapped" (1995: 49). The transient and transitional state of the Postmodern is an expression of how any historical and cultural change is a "contracted, contradictory, and usually painful" process (ibid.). Postmodern thinkers and artists alike share a deep sense of awareness of the procedural and gradual nature of change, going beyond the dialectical Modern model of revolution (a catastrophic overturning of the system) and digital states ('yes' *or* 'no', 1 *or* 0), and living (in) a more evolutionary acceptance of in-between states, gradual transformation of systems, and the shades of grey of Fuzzy Logic ('yes' *and* 'no', or rather '*maybe*'). The focus here is on *transitions*, and since these are always delicate times in the development of a given system, people need rituals and coping-mechanisms to help them along. I have already discussed the ritual aspect of RPGs in detail earlier, and I would argue that a general aspect of Postmodern artefacts – overtly negotiating between the past and

the present state of a system, between continuity and change – is something that is intensified in the communal narrative architecture of RPGs.

One of the motivations for the discursive creation and circulation of cultural and discursive constructs, according to Kellner, is the accumulation of cultural capital, or as he puts it: "Indeed, the emergence of the postmodern has much to do with battles for cultural capital in the present age" (1995: 48). Old rules and conventions are dismissed, new ones are looked for or even a state beyond them to either distinguish one's own discourse from the collective weight of the previously-said/written, or just to surf the new wave hoping to be taken along for a successful ride. Kellner's meta-discussion of Postmodern theory takes the theory and its conception back into its social context, which I think is an essential move to make, as theory, like all discourse, is essentially a cultural *and* a social phenomenon. Ignoring one of these aspects will leave a cultural critic blind on one eye, and this will lead to a loss of depth perception. Going beyond such a myopic observation, Kellner is now able to connect the rise of Postmodern discourse to its social context and the circulation of cultural capital on the personal or micro level distinguishing oneself/howling with the wolves, as well as the macro level of society:

> The following studies attempt to capture some of the tension in living in a situation whose contours are not yet apparent and in which intense conflict is occurring between those conservative forces who wish to maintain the established social order and those who wish to transform it. These cultural wars are replicated in what we might call theory wars between those competing voices who wish to map and guide the construction of the present and future.
> (Kellner, 1995: 49)

The Cultural Wars triggered by the destabilisation of Modern society and the Modernist worldview during the mid-20th century are the socio-cultural logic that allows us to make sense of what goes on on a personal and a collective, a social, political and cultural level since Postmodern discourse took on momentum in western societies during the 1980s and 90s. My conclusions will later on identify how this affects the content level of RPGs, but I am indebted to Kellner for making that clear connection in his theories. The author's suggested solution to the raging Cultural

Wars is "the development of cultural studies within the framework of critical social theory and radical democratic politics" (1995: 49), a new theory of society based on research done into the internal cultural logic of artefacts and the situation in their economic, social, and political contexts that created them and that they in turn helped create. It is my hope that I can make a valuable contribution to this necessary and important project with my attempt to understand the medium of RPGs as a Postmodern medium on a discursive, structural and contextual level.

Kellner's Postmodernism and the "images, scenes, stories, and cultural texts of media culture offer a wealth of subject positions which in turn help structure individual identity" (1995: 257). Like the cultural discourse of the Postmodern, Postmodern identity becomes unstable and in a state of constant restructuring, drawing on and feeding into Postmodern cultural artefacts. This, in the author's perspective, is neither a good thing, nor a bad one: *Ambivalence* is at the heart of the Postmodern experience, the constant negotiation between progressive and regressive impulses. In such a context, multiple and unstable identities become the norm, carried by "an acceptance of change, fragmentation and theatrical play with identity" (1995: 257). The procedural and performative aspect of Postmodernism emerges again from this argument, granting people more freedom to define and change their identities at the cost of the increased insecurity of a fragmented, disjointed life: a close connection to the way narrative and identities are constantly renegotiated through performance in RPGs.

The socially constructed subject that Kellner defines as typically Postmodern is neither unified, nor coherent, or essential. Identification, the process of *making* identity, results from an active engagement of media culture and its artefacts that produce and suggest subject positions and identity fragments, so "postmodern claims concerning the complete dissolution of the subject in contemporary culture seem exaggerated" (1995: 259). The author's view on this process is also not uncritical, as he warns that the critical observer of these shifts in contemporary culture and Postmodern theory resulting from these observations must not turn a blind eye to "the continuing role of capitalism in constructing contemporary societies and identities", as that would be harmful (1995: 259). The implication of the Postmodern subject in the logic of the exchange value that forms the basis of a

capitalist market economy is an additional aspect to the necessary contextualisation of the Postmodern experience in order to understand the complex changes that are taking place. The dictates of sellability and maximum profit have also interacted quite heavily with the development of RPGs, resulting in a seemingly unbridgeable gulf in contemporary RPG culture between a more commercialised and an indie community that I already thematised in my historical overview of the development the medium. Once again, Kellner's analysis seems to support my central hypothesis of a fundamental connection between RPGs and the Postmodern condition.

Kellner himself ends his discussion of Postmodern media culture on deliberations as to how this new concept of identity construction that functions through active work, "which requires will, action, commitment, intelligence, and creativity" (1995: 260), can sometimes also be seen as games that are being played, bringing forth "disposable and easily replaceable identities for the postmodern carnival" (ibid.). The implicitly negative tone of this more ludic approach is unfortunately continued when he brings up MUDs ("multi-user dungeons", also "multi-user dimensions") and role-playing games as examples for how Postmodern gaming supports processes of "tak[ing] on multiple personalities and play[ing] out different roles and identities" that result in decentered and multiplied instances of the self, verging on the pathological (1995: 260). Referring to a paper by Sherry Turkle, a connection between a rise in cases of MPD (multiple-personality-disorder) and RPGs is made that I find most unfortunate, and while I see a kernel of truth behind this assertion and the subsequent conclusion that gaming consists in an attempt at self-therapy, I would be more that hesitant to describe the processes in terms of mental illness. Maybe I can clarify with my present analysis of the that while I do agree that RPGs are expressions of a more unstable, negotiable and procedural Postmodern concept of identity, branding this as an unhealthy development, or even a kind of insanity, is merely evoking the classifying, condemning and excluding discourses of Modernism in an attempt to contain the perceived threat to the Modern concept of the monolithic and unchanging self.

With *The Postmodern Adventure* (2001) Best and Kellner (together again) try to both take a look back at the 1990s and the socio-cultural shifts that defined them and

to project the further development of Postmodern discourse into the third millennium, as the subtitle of their book already establishes.

They continue their reading of Postmodernism as an expression of contradictory and ambiguous socio-cultural transformations taking place that are experienced as both helpful *and* threatening by the majority of the people. A massive global restructuring of capital was made possible by a policy of deregulation of the financial markets during the late 1980s and 1990s on both sides of the Atlantic, initiated under the aegis of conservative politicians like Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Ronald Reagan, George Bush sr., and Helmut Kohl, and subsequently not dismantled but tacitly carried on by their social-/democratic successors such as Tony Blair, Bill Clinton, or Gerhard Schröder. "This 'great transformation', comparable in scope to the shifts produced by the Industrial Revolution, is moving the world into a postindustrial, infotainment, and biotech mode of global capitalism, organized around new information, communications, and genetic technologies", Best and Kellner argue (2001: 1).

Their *Postmodern Adventure* is an attempt to describe this prolonged and complex transitional period "in a multiperspectivist and transdisciplinary framework that illuminates the dynamics of the present moment" (2001: 6). An ambiguous co-existence of continuity and discontinuity, as the current moment has its roots in the past and in the Modern, creates a pervasive feeling of excitement and unpredictability, and definitions of reality, representation, and cultural practice, seem to be in a constant state of transformation.

The approach suggested by Best and Kellner is one they call *metacartography*, "reflecting on the various processes of mapping and the contributions and limitations of the classic theories of modernity and the fledgling charting of the postmodern" (2001: 8). This idea of mapping simultaneously evokes traditional (Modern) theories such as Saussurian semiotics, where signifier and signified are mapped to each other in the process of meaning-making, but they also remind me of Henry Jenkins's (Postmodern) understanding of narrative architecture and spatial storytelling that I brought up earlier in my Game Studies approach to RPGs: As quests are about the navigation through narrative and (fictitious) physical space to make meaning of the world and to shape the identity of the protagonist, they require and provide maps to

be able to follow the construction of the unfolding narrative. The authors point out that in a Postmodern context the pragmatic question of which representation (or mapping) is to be used for which context becomes crucial, as there is a general awareness that we *make* sense of the world (not find it in the world) when we organise our experiences and construct our personal identities.

Continuing Kellner's link made between gaming and this active, constructive stance towards reality and subjectivity in *Media Culture* (1995), here it is given a less negative, if still not appreciative tone of voice when the multiplication of "ersatz identities" and the possibilities for "self-construction in ludic-performative modes" are recognised as leading to an expansion of identity (2001: 8). The critical rethinking of the Modern project can only be achieved by a delicate negotiation between the need to transgress limits and the need to impose them – can it get any more RPG than that? What results is an "enhanced awareness of limits, contingency, and unpredictability, along with non-hierarchical thinking" in response to the Modern/-ist will to power (2001: 11). Like Zima, Best and Kellner however do not want a total deconstruction or leaving-behind of the Modern, and while its "values of domination, endless growth, mastery of nature, and a cornucopian world of limitless resources" must be dismantled, they also do not want to lose the best aspects of the Modern adventure: "humanism, individuality, enlightened reason, democracy, rights, and solidarities" (2001: 11).

They also make another interesting comparison with the past, arguing that the contemporary period of social and cultural change resembles the Renaissance, "a period of protracted transformation" between the pre-Modern and the Modern (2001: 12). Like back then, it will take a very complex theoretical framework to make sense of what goes on and to maybe have a hint of where this is going. Best and Kellner refuse a deterministic, reductionist monoperspective, and take in account a social reality pervaded by competition, conflict, and domination, arguing that societies work "as coherent wholes, with specific spheres of economics, politics, science, technology, culture, and so on" and that all of them "have their own history, autonomy, and conflicts, but interacts with each other in a holistic social context" (2001: 14). These spheres unfold, or co-evolve, in a complex web of interrelations, and within this context people shape and are shaped by cultural artefacts in a process

termed 'co-construction' by Best and Kellner (ibid.). Mutuality and exchange, active participation and passive consumption thus come together in the "dynamic coevolutionary, co-constrictivist, and reconstructive perspectives for theorizing the dynamics of the Third Millennium" proposed by the authors (2001: 15).

At the intersection of the individual and the collective, of power and knowledge, Best and Kellner encourage the translation of these theoretical concepts into practical artefacts and processes rejecting the high/low culture distinction and only requiring honest, socio-political commitment. Formal analysis (of style, texture, and surface) and content analysis (including the ideological implications of the values transported) must both be equally used to come to a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural artefacts of Postmodernism. Both, "the resources of 'theory' and 'fiction'" must be mobilised, "since each provides key illuminations of social experience from different vantage points that supplement and complement each other" (2001: 19). It is in this theoretical and conceptual framework that I navigate with my present analysis, using the Postmodern medium of RPGs to shed more light on the socio-cultural, economic, political, and historical contexts that have created it. Not only to understand RPGs *per se* that much better, but also to understand them as a medium resulting from and affecting the Postmodern experience of the people creating and playing them.

So when Best and Kellner conclude their investigation into the Postmodern adventure, what they theorise in their epilogue as "Challenges for the Third Millennium" and salient aspects of the most advanced Postmodern mappings (2001: 255), there is much that reminds me of RPGs: abandoning the imposition of ordering schemes on reality; renouncing repressive and reductive mechanisms of control over the social and natural world; enabling individuals to critically deal with contingency, paradox, ambiguity, particularity, multiplicity, and relationships; disassembling hierarchy for complementarity; stressing self-organisation; creating fresh cultural and social forms (2001: 275). They put the values of cooperation above domination, arguing that this would improve both the individual and collective levels of democratic forms, as the participants in social systems would understand that the futures we create "depend upon our individual and collective choices" (2001: 277). A new, truly Postmodern ethics would be a balancing act between the "principles of

individuality and community, difference and unity, particularity and universality" such as the one that drives and organises RPGs (ibid.), and these new ethics would make it clear that change "requires collective acts of will and imagination, rather than the prevailing fragmentation of identity politics, whose one-sidedness and limitations we must overcome" (2001: 278). Going beyond the localised micropolitics seen as typically Postmodern, Best and Kellner call for a qualified re-collectivisation of politics, "expansive, democratizing visions" that overcome crippling Postmodern fragmentation (2001: 278). And they conclude:

> The postmodern adventure holds more promise, more danger, and more surreality than any previous adventure known to humanity. […] In the Third Millennium, the choices agents make will determine whether the adventure of evolution itself will continue in creative ways on this planet, producing ever more biodiversity, or collapses into the sixth and perhaps final extinction crisis in the history of the Earth […].
> (Best and Kellner, 2001: 279)

Even though I find this vision of impending doom somewhat exaggerated, I support its general direction and understand the historical point in time and place it was formulated in, the context that created it and that it helped create. This understanding of context and choice is a key cultural ability in contemporary society, and I also think that a constant renegotiation of the Self in communication with the Other is the only way to re-establish a stronger collective and social bond, as well as more solidarity in Postmodern times. While they might seem like 'only' entertainment, an 'only' Postmodernists would challenge anyway, I would argue that the collective and collaborative narrative effort of RPGs provides an ideal sheltered space to discover, rediscover, develop and keep developing the necessary set of communicative and social skills to cope with Postmodern society and, ideally, to instigate change.

8.8 – Lash: The Sociology of Postmodernism

In his *Sociology of Postmodernism* (1990), Scott Lash describes the Postmodern as fixated on representation:

> We are living in a society in which our *perception* is directed almost as often to representation as it is to 'reality'. These representations come to constitute a very great portion of our perceived reality. And/or our perception of reality comes to be increasingly by *means* of these representations. Even much of our *perception* of representations comes via representations [...].
> (Lash, 1996: 24; original emphases)

Representation has replaced reality in the position of primacy in our experience of existence, and representation is necessarily subjective. While Modernism preserves the subject/object distinction, it is rendered problematic under the influence of Postmodernism, as subjective representations become objects of perception and "already abstract entities which previously were integral to subjectivity come to enter into the wholly unreflexive realm of the object itself" (1996: 24). But there is also not just one Postmodernism, as Lash creates another both/and reading of the phenomenon.

On the level of group identity and politics, Postmodernism manages to antagonise both extreme ends of the political spectrum. On the one hand, it undermines metanarratives and collective identities, leading to the deconstruction of Marxism and Social Democratic values and, as proponents of these ideologies would and do argue, subsequently the collapse of the working class as a political entity. What remains is individualism and consumerism. On the other hand though, Neo-Conservatives see Postmodernism as an attack on work ethics and an escapist flight into the mass cultural promises of consumerism. (The irony of both opposing camps coming to the same conclusion can only be appreciated.) But, as Lash argues, this is not a question of either/or, as "postmodernist culture can cut either way in the working class" (1996: 30). His analysis of the situation paints a picture where the result of collapsed collective identities is not individualism, but localised collectives, and where the working class, even though authority has been undermined by

Postmodern questioning, has itself adopted and internalised the values of managers. Still, Lash does not see this as necessarily a negative development, since "if the 'grid' and 'group' of working class identity is somehow deconstructed and loosened, then tolerance for other racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities on the part of working-class individuals is more likely" (1996: 30).

On a more conceptual level, the author identifies two coexisting strands of Postmodernism, using the example of Postmodern architecture and how the process of de-differentiation, crucial to Lash's reading of the Postmodern, affects it (1996: 34). There is what Lash calls a mainstream Postmodernism, where the auratic style of Modernism is replaced by a populist, playful one, and the Modernist approach to work the possibilities of *one* material through by Postmodern pastiche, the combination of different materials. The preferred style of this mainstream Postmodern architecture is one of re-historisation, but the revival of past forms results in a superficial and kitschy Disneyland. Opposed to this streamlining of the movement is Lash's oppositional Postmodernism that challenges the auratic conception of Modernism by superior craftsmanship that does not require genius or inspiration, only dedication and practice, and that supersedes the separation between the work (or economic) and leisure (or cultural) spheres. It also overcomes the separation of the cultural artefact (in the case of architecture the building) from its community, reintegrating art and community. As a Postmodern medium, RPGs show aspects of both kinds of Postmodernism: there are clear elements of the un-auratic populist and playful style of mainstream Postmodernism, but I would argue that it leans more towards the oppositional side of the spectrum. It embodies all of the three features defined by Lash: RPGs do not require 'artists' to play, as perfectly average and regular people can do it; the rule- and sourcebooks are highly commodified cultural artefacts; and they take art literally back into the community, as localised groups come together in everyday life to co-create a new narrative.

Starting from these basic ideas, Lash, however, goes on to develop an even larger conceptual dichotomy, or actually a frame of reference consisting of two extreme positions, to describe the Postmodern "'regime of signification' which articulate[s] with a regime of capital accumulation", namely the shift from Fordism or organised capitalism to post-Fordism or disorganised capitalism (1996: 37). Lash defines four

parameters to compare mainstream and oppositional Postmodernism: de-differentiation, individual identity, social class identity, and its effect on the urban space as the main arena for processes of social change. I will reproduce his argument in a table of complementary opposites for easier reference and understanding of the connections (c.f. Table 8).

Parameter	***Mainstream Postmodernism***	***Oppositional Postmodernism***
De-differentiation	*Implosion* of the cultural and the commercial and eclipse of the avant-garde	*Problematisation* of reality as image
Individual Identity	Subjects are positioned in fixed places, social hierarchies based on *distinction*, and cultural objects serve as status symbols	Open subject positioning and tolerance of others, non-hierarchical principle of *difference,* and cultural objects create collective identities
Social Class Identity	*Hegemony* of the new middle class furthered, and values of consumer capitalism promoted in working class	Different types of collective identities for new middle class (new symbols, new social movements), and radical democratic and decentralised worker *resistance* fostered
Urban Space	*Individualist*, ornamentalist, the new historicist financial districts	Reconstruction of *communities* and streets into labyrinthine form

Table 8: *Mainstream and Oppositional Postmodernism (Lash, 1996: 37)*

I have highlighted central terms to make the difference between mainstream and oppositional Postmodernism in Lash's theory clearer, one promoting implosive discourses, a hegemonial society based on distinction, and individualism, while the other deals with problematisations and avoids easy answers. Promoting an ideology of resistance based on an ethics of difference, it is more oriented towards community issues. Again I see impulses from both ends of the spectrum in RPGs, but can identify more kinship to the oppositional one: The medium problematises the nature of reality, ideology and narrative, only providing localised, negotiated, and provisional answers resisting to generalisations. Its creative process and narrative is driven by the differences between players and created as a community effort where everyone contributes and takes responsibility for the shared outcome.

Going back to Walter Benjamin's concept of 'aura', "the singularity, the uniqueness of a work of art" that isolates it from the social in inaccessibility (Lash, 1996: 156), Lash then defines seven principles of aura in order to build an argument for the non-auratic nature of Postmodern artefacts (1996: 159 – 167). First of all, the cultural text

itself can be auratic or non-auratic, depending on the subject matter and the means of representation chosen, and on whether it is reproduced or not. While the Modernist work of art was ideally unique and defined by "self-sufficiency, totality and organic unity", applying a single stylistic principle (1996: 160), Postmodern artefacts are often collages and montages of everyday items and easily reproducible. Secondly, the process of reception can also be auratic or non-auratic: Is it individual or collective? Is the audience immersed or distracted? Lash's argument holds that auratic reception would be individual and immersive, while post-auratic reception is collective and distracted (like cinema or TV). The third aspect is the production of an artefact. The auratic producer is a unique, creative and gifted individual and his work is highly personal, his post-auratic counterpart, however, is a collective entity and the process and its outcome is mostly impersonal. The fourth dimension of this dichotomy between auratic and non-auratic art are the institutions associated with them, the apparatus of production and distribution, as well as the criticism and intended reception, following Peter Bürger's definition (Lash 1996: 164). The institutions of the "bourgeois public sphere" (ibid.) are centred around the integral and auratic concept of the work of art and foster bourgeois identity, unlike institutions in "oppositional public spheres" that favour non-auratic and political readings of cultural artefacts (ibid.). The last three aspects are not really oppositional pairs between auratic and non-auratic art, they are more descriptive. The fifth principle in Lash's list is that non-auratic art is geared towards a cross- or interfertilisation between what Modernists term high and popular culture. It selectively and partially dissolves this classification for a large variety of aesthetic and political effects. The very political nature of non-auratic art is the sixth principle, and here Lash differentiates two movements based on the use they make of pop culture elements: there is a political Postmodernism that uses these elements for political reasons, and there is also a formal Postmodernism where they only fulfil an aesthetic, a formal role. Critique of and complicity with the marketplace logic is of central socio-political interest to non-auratic art. The seventh and last aspect in the demise of aura is the "obliteration of the distinction between the cultural and the social" (Lash, 1996: 159). Post-auratic (and thus Postmodern) art is based on the destruction of this Modern/-ist system of classification and division. Art and life are merged into one

sphere again in a process of de-differentiation undoing Modern differentiation of the social spheres.

Following Lash's argument, I think it is safe to say that RPGs are mostly - but not exclusively - un-auratic cultural artefacts. Their rulebooks and settings are – on the content level - collages of pre-texts ranging from the Bible to urban legends and Tarantino, from Tolkien to Barker and Asimov. Play happens in the form of rather informal oral storytelling and does not require any special skills, so anyone can participate. The printed books are commercially available and easily accessible. All of these define RPGs as un-auratic texts. Things are less clear-cut with reception though, as here RPGs would fall into a middle or hybrid category as befits a Postmodern medium: While the reception, which in this special case is also participation in the production (!), is generally a collective and thus un-auratic one, it cannot possibly be distracted, as players have to be constantly aware of the development of the narrative to be able to participate meaningfully, and they are emotionally invested in and identify with the secondary reality through the process of immersion. Thus, the reception of RPGs is a post-auratic one as far as the social dynamics are concerned, but an auratic one on a conceptual level. Resulting from the close connection between the reception and production of RPGs, the circumstances are similar for the production aspect. As collective and collaborative narratives, RPGs seem to clearly fall into the category of un-auratic production (collective, impersonal), but that would be forgetting about the special role of the Storyteller who is given more creative and discursive power in play than the other participants (at least in 'traditional' RPGs, but this is one of the innovations frequently found in indie RPGs). Since it is the Storyteller who filters the information and narrative building blocks provided in the rule- and sourcebooks and then creates a narrative framework, there is still a considerable auratic element to RPGs, and most players will agree that the Storyteller and their style are one of the most essential factors in players' decision which group to join. The institutional nature of RPGs is also not easily determined. While they grew out of a student context and most of them tap into the textual repertoire of counter-cultures (like the *World of Darkness*, or *Shadowrun* e.g.), the single commercially most successful RPG, *Dungeons & Dragons,* is strongly anchored in a bourgeois and entrepreneurial logic on both levels, content (indiscriminate Fantasy hodgepodge)

and system (profit and progress as driving forces). A clearly un-auratic position can be confirmed for the fifth aspect, the interfertilisation between high and popular culture, as this is one of the central innovations of RPGs: They open up classical epics *and* pulp texts alike to the narrative intervention of the players. As far as the use of these popular elements, and thus the political stance derived from it, is concerned, I would again argue for a continuum between a political (*World of Darkness*) and a purely formal use (*D&D*). The seventh and last principle of un-/auratic art, according to lash, is the key element in my argument for RPGs as a Postmodern, and largely un-auratic medium: No other medium I am aware of has done more in terms of taking art and cultural discourse back *into* everyday life and the social context than RPGs. In the process of playing RPGs, this distinction is no longer meaningful, it becomes a non-category. When friends and sometimes even strangers who then frequently end up as friends gather around a table after work to use their shared knowledge of thousands of years of pre-texts to co-create a narrative, negotiating constantly between individual needs and collective or narrative needs, both the cultural and the social converge and merge in an extraordinary, dynamic and powerful socio-cultural experience of agency and immersion for all participants.

This is why I, as a gamer myself, can relate very well to Lash's analysis of the understanding of Postmodern culture expressed in the theatre of Antonin Artaud: "Artaudian theatre was not to refer to life or represent life but instead to be life. Theatre was to be a 'genuine reality', an 'event' [...]" (Lash, 1996: 183). The author's reading of the four cornerstones of this theatre is also very helpful for my own, personal intellectual quest, to use a literary and RPG metaphor. Postmodern theatre takes on a ritualistic function, makes art into a cultural, not a religious ritual, an aspect I have already dedicated a chapter to earlier, since I also see this connection in RPGs. The separation between art and life is suspended, or even cancelled in Postmodern theatre, the ontological state of the play – a double entendre when one talks about RPGs - as art or life remains unclear. (What is a 'play' in the first place?). The third defining feature, the physicality of Artaud's theatre and the central role of the body, does not fully match RPGs as a medium. The strong and central performative, yet non-physical aspect of RPG-narrative (unless one engages in LARP), brings together drama and prose/poetry, performance and text, spoken and printed

literature in a complex new medium. The last cornerstone – there *are* four, so the metaphor seems to be an apt one – of Artaudian, Postmodern theatre is a direct communication through impact, "communicating not through the differentiated and 'shadow' realm of meaning, but, directly, through impact" (1996: 183). This again is typical of RPGs, as the *language* used for the narration proper is mostly a very simple one, and the process heavily relies on the *feeling* of immersion to attain the full impact of the meaning that is co-created.

Again and again, Lash's systematic attempts to describe and contextualise postmodern cultural production echo central features of the medium of RPGs that was created during the early 1970s, at a point of the development of Postmodern discourse where it gained momentum and socio-cultural pervasiveness. Lash's conclusions that postmodern culture is "a figural and de-differentiated mode of signification", and that "postmodern cultural objects signify differently than do modernist cultural objects" both support this connection (1996: 194).

As the referent of the narrative process of RPGs are other narratives, Lash's statement that Postmodern figural artefacts signify "through their resemblance to the referent" (1996: 194) seems to override his claim that discourse would be less de-differentiated from its referent than figures/images. The de-differentiation of the signifier and the signified in Postmodern cultural expression leads to a "devaluation of meaning" (ibid.): the in-/effectiveness of language as a means of communication is foregrounded, and the speech act, the central conceptual component of RPGs where what you say is what you do, collapses all separation between representation (speech) and reality (actions). The third conclusion, the Poststructuralist conflation and problematisation of the status of both the signifier and the referent, lead to a situation where "the materiality of language is only the flipside of [...] claims about life being a 'text'" (1996: 195). The textualised extratextual and the textuality of the extratextual both become observable and subject to play and experimentation in RPGs, as life and art flow into each other and question each other. And even though this questioning happens in cultural artefacts, "the spectator's attention is drawn instead to the referent, to the real world", according to Lash (1996: 195). A feedback loop is established between the cultural and the social, between secondary (or even tertiary) realities and primary reality, between art and life, and the competences and

new ways of perceiving and constructing reality developed in cultural processes are re-transferred back into social life. This is a an understanding of the Postmodern, Postmodern cultural production and its relation to everyday life that works as a perfect context to understand the ambiguous, but largely post-auratic and implicitly political Postmodern medium of RPGs.

But Lash closes his analysis with a caveat that I would also like to bring up here, a *questioning* of the political dimension and implications of this Postmodern project of de-differentiation on both a social and cultural level. Since Lash has convincingly argued that Postmodern cultural forms are not as apolitical as their detractors often hold against then, but on the contrary highly political *per se*, the question remains what political *agenda* they support or propagate? Lash here again goes for the both/an-approach: "The answer may be that some sorts of postmodernist de-differentiation are implicitly 'reactionary', and other sorts potentially integral to a reconstructed left political culture, and still other sorts can politically cut either way" (1996: 197). No simple and easy answers are available here either. The logic is simple and, in my opinion, convincing: While reactionary variants of Postmodernism use de-differentiation to promote consumerism, 'promoting' it both in the metaphorical and the literal, economic sense, there are also Postmodern artefacts leaning more to the left of the spectrum that articulate positions where de-differentiation leads to a view sympathetic of pluralism and even anarchy. And then there is a whole branch of Postmodern cultural and social textualities in between that focus on a problematisation of the normal and the normative, mostly related to discourses of gender and sexuality, that advocate a very mobile sense of subjectivity and that is hard to pin down politically, resulting in a third and highly ambiguous kind of Postmodernism.

Following Lash's socio-political analysis of the Postmodern, I will have to agree that romantic (no capital R here) notions of Postmodernism as the great liberator from Modern/-ist bourgeois hegemony and domination will and must be frustrated. Even though the Postmodern is inherently political, it mainly addresses and criticises the implicit politics of signification and of the construction of reality, and withholds explicit party-political statements, as all ideologies, no matter on what end of the political spectrum they are situated, are inherently systems built on violence against

individual freedom, imploding or at least transferring the personal sense of responsibility towards the other to a quasi-mythical structure (ideology, or 'the party'). And so RPGs, as a Postmodern medium, are political in a sense that they through the opacity of the process of meaning-making and the procedural negotiation of the narrative between individual and collective needs expose the workings of ideologies, fostering critical thinking, but their politics may range from the deeply capitalist and reactionary "kill the dragon, loot its treasure, and save the princess" of industry leader *D&D* to the independently produced and deeply philosophical *Eclipse Phase* (2009), a ludic meditation on the interaction between technology and humanity, the transhuman, or even posthuman condition, and the very definition of 'humanity', using a Creative Commons licence to invite others to share in and contribute to the creative process. The tag-line of the game gives a concise overview of its complex socio-political programme, so typical of a self-aware, Postmodern indie-RPG:

> Your mind is software – program it.
> Your body is a shell – change it.
> Death is a disease – cure it.
> Extinction is approaching – fight it.
> (Boyle and Cross, 2009: outside back cover)

8.9 – Moments of Truth in Two Collections and One Exhibition: Anderson, Jencks, and the Victoria and Albert Museum

In this last chapter dealing with Postmodern theory, I would like to have a closer look at two collections of articles and essays, one from the high-time of the debate about the Postmodern during the mid-1990s, Walter Truett Anderson's *The Truth About the Truth*, (1995), and the other one a recent re-edition of a collection originally published during the early 1990s that by now has the additional benefit of hindsight, Charles Jencks's *The Post-Modern Reader* (2011). The third source for this chapter is the eponymous catalogue, or rather accompanying collection of essays, to the

exhibition *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion, 1970 – 1990* of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (September 24, 2011 – January 15, 2012).

Even though these texts are only fragments (hence the title of this chapter) and do not provide (or even aim at providing) the reader with a comprehensive theory of the Postmodern like the authors I focussed on earlier, I still think that there are moments of truth, to borrow Zima's term, that can help to gain a richer, deeper understanding of the social, cultural and political phenomenon that is the Postmodern, and subsequently of the medium RPG that it has brought forth. Due to the fragmentary nature of the sources used, my argument will also be less coherent, and I will mostly act as a guide through the labyrinth of textualities.

Glen Adamson and Jane Pavitt, curators of the 2011/2012 *Postmodernism* exhibition and co-editors of the companion book, provide their readers with a foreword and an 80-page introduction to the Postmodern, largely following the logic and theme of their exhibition and thus choosing a focus less on discursive and more on figural arts and design. As the title of their exhibition and their book already hints at, they see 'style' and the socio-cultural context that gave rise to the concept as "explicitly antagonistic to authority" (Adamson and Pavitt, 2011b: 9), claiming that its territory is the periphery, not the centre, as its artefacts resist taxonomy, and its episodic cadence destabilises or even deconstructs historical order. Complementing this subversive aspect, there is, however, also an element of exhibition involved in style, and in extension Postmodernism, as artefacts are designed with their own mediation (sometimes even museumification) in mind and subjected to rapid circulation. They constantly circle back on their own tracks through their self-regarding methods. All of these aspects of style, even though they were developed for the visual arts, I find to be easily applicable to (discursive) RPGs: the open antagonism to authority expressed in the localisation in the periphery (not a mass phenomenon), the resistance to taxonomy (story-games or game-stories?), and the episodic structure of the narrative created, but also the awareness of their own mediality and mediation, the rapid circulation (games come and go, those that last go through several editions), and the circling back on their own tracks, as elements from older games get picked up and combined with others to create new games that in turn become material for others.

In their chapter "Apocalypse Then" on the conditions that led to the development from Modernism towards Postmodernism, Adamson and Pavitt argue that the energy required to be able to depart from Modernism was created by the "force of Modernism's collapse" itself (2011c: 36). The centrifugal cultural forces resulting from discontent with the limitations and insufficiencies of Modernism slowly but surely triggered a cultural shift. So the Death of the Author debate (driven by Barthes and his ideas) was the starting point of an explosion of new and experimental authorial as well as interpretative strategies, and the growing antipathy towards functionalism resulted in a resurgence of formal creativity. The deep distrust of the Modern progressive, teleological models of history sowed by Lyotard's refusal of grand narratives brought forth a harvest of disordered, temporal fragments where past, present and future collapsed into one. Ironically, thus, "the apocalyptic becomes an explosively generative idiom", as every cultural object already includes and "offers an elucidation of its own eventual obsolescence or decay" (2011c: 36). *Bricolage* becomes the method of choice, following the logic of "rip it up and start again" (2011c: 37). The compression of the past and the present, of time and space becomes the guiding principle of the Postmodern where "intellectual pessimism meets sensual optimism" (2011c: 40).

Under these conditions, Postmodern performances are always built around recursive effects, Adamson and Pavitt argue: the Postmodern subject is a cosmetic shell, and "identity is formulated through a process of disintegration" (2011c: 54). The performer becomes a completely synthetic creation, and the "Synthetic Identities" of the chapter title (2011c: 50) result in the "authentically inauthentic" Postmodern subject (2011c: 55). Identity is no longer an essential, monolithic, stable and unchangeable concept, it becomes a narrative, multiple, unstable and procedural one. The performativity of identity - like in Judith Butler's theory of gender and sexual identity (c.f. 1993, 2004, 2008) - sees this process as an open, fragmented series that assembles identities from pre-existing parts in a "combination of a specific narrative and an absent identity" (Adamson, 2011c: 59). The Postmodern gaze, unlike its Modern counterpart, is "calm and blank, seeing everything but withholding judgment" (ibid.), it - and here Adamson and Pavitt quote David Harvey – has a clear "focus on masks without commenting directly on social meanings other than on the

activity of masking itself" (ibid.). Postmodern identities are constantly in the process of their own creation and re-creation from a raw material of pre-existing codes.

This procedural and narrative creation of identity from pre-textual fragments, the process of *bricolage*, and the conflation of past, present, and future are all very strong links between the Postmodern logic theorised here and RPGs as a Postmodern medium. Swimming on the wave of new authorial and interpretative strategies caused like a cultural tsunami by the collapse of the Modern/-ist concepts of authorship and intellectual property, RPGs could be seen as training- and testing-grounds for the creation and recycling of synthetic identities, where the characters played become extensions or expressions of dynamics in an individual's identity process that are not yet fully formulated, or that are maybe deemed too risky to do so in the context of primary, social reality. The performativity of Postmodern identity creates authentically inauthentic personalities within the safe confinement of the negotiated narrative under a Postmodern collective gaze free of judgement.

But, as Adamson and Pavitt warn: "Big Money is Moving In" (2011c: 69), so the subversive, exhilarating, and critical qualities of these processes are subjected to implication by and complicity with the logic of commodification. The contradictory energies at play here create a "religion of commodity art", a celebration of banality that has left the Modernist attempts to shock the bourgeoisie behind (2011c: 69). As art follows the dictates of fashion and the market, it enters the sphere of the commodity and the economic exchange, dominated solely by the exchange value. It thus has to relinquish all critical autonomy and becomes part of the system it is supposed to criticise: "art", the authors conclude, "is no longer propelled by ideas, but by money" (2011c: 69). Even though one could argue that this is almost generally true for RPGs, as most of them are commercial products driven by their producers' need to make money, there is also the large indie RPG segment, that tries to avoid or circumvent the commercial channels normally used for publication, as I have mentioned earlier in my historical overview of the development of the medium. But then there is also (and any analysis of RPGs will always have to comes back to) *Dungeons & Dragons*, the starting point of the medium that is (unfortunately?) still around, now a property of the multinational Hasbro, dominating the market. It reminds me very much of what Adamson and Pavitt have to say about Disney

(quoting Louis Marin), the "most reviled and beloved entertainment company" that provides a "degenerate utopia", an "amnesiac intoxication, born of the triumph of forgetting over memory and of effect over cause" (2011c: 84). As for the status of RPGs as Postmodern artefacts and in how far they are critical of the processes of commodification or commodified themselves, there is no easy answer. There is only the by now well-familiar both/and solution.

The image of the Postmodern that Adamson and Pavitt paint in their conclusions, is a kaleidoscopic one, where the Postmodern subject is "adrift in frictionless space" and the "experience of media fragmentation constitutes the real message" (2011c: 94). After a period of relative exhaustion the Postmodern debate is now back again, and the reasons the authors give seem comprehensible to me: There is, first of all, a generational aspect, since those who are academics now were educated during the last great discussion of the Postmodern during the 1990s (like me). Then there is – *horribile dictu* – a general sense of similarity in the socio-economic situation between now and the 1970s and 80s. And lastly, Postmodernism is seen both as a historical subject and a set of as yet unresolved intellectual impulses. "Like it or not", Adamson and Pavitt end, "we're all postmodern now" (2011c: 95). But in a turn of truly Postmodern irony, theirs is not the last word in the book. The truly last words are given to David Byrne, artist of *Talking Heads* fame, and as Margaret Atwood explained to an enthralled audience at the *Literatur im Nebel* festival in Heidenreichstein/Austria: "The beginning sets the tone, but the ending is the key" (Atwood, 2009). Looking back on the early years of Postmodernism at the end of his career, the self-defined Postmodern artist Byrne muses: "Before long there was, according to some, a postmodernist look. Time to move on" (Byrne, 2011: 287). Maybe *this* is the most Postmodern thing to do after all.

Walter Truett Anderson managed to bring together several leading thinkers of the mid-1990s in his collection of essays on the Postmodern entitled (with Postmodern tongue-in-cheek) *The Truth About the Truth* (1995). The editor himself contributed an essay, "Four Different Ways to Be Absolutely Right" (1995), an introduction and epilogue, as well as short introductory bits linking the different individual articles,

which makes this a very homogenous and comprehensive guide to theories of the Postmodern at the time.

In his introduction, subtitled "What's Going On Here?" (1995b: 1 – 11), Anderson provides a framework for the following discussion in the articles by defining the "Four Corners of the Postmodern World" (1995b: 10), warning that the huge transition, or socio-cultural and political shift that is the Postmodern cannot be captured or pinned down in a simple summary. Instead of attempting this impossibility, he comes up with four descriptors, or "dimensions" of the Postmodern as he calls them: self-concept, moral and ethical discourse, art and culture, and globalization (1995b: 10 – 11).

The Postmodern self-concept is no longer that of a "found identity" based on predefined social roles or tradition, as it turns into more of a "made identity", actively constructed and continually reconstructed tapping the numerous cultural sources available to the Postmodern individual (1995b: 10). This idea – and how it sets up the emergence of RPGs as a new, Postmodern medium – has already been discussed several times now.

Additionally, the moral and ethical discourse also transforms from a "found morality", usually that of a singular and unquestioned cultural and/or religious heritage, to a "made morality" that is the result of a process of dialogue, questioning, and choice (ibid.). In opposition to many (mostly conservative, but also politically left-leaning) critics, Anderson does not understand this approach to be a relativistic one leading to an unwillingness or even incapability to make judgments, but *this* relativism is based on the knowledge "that when we do make our judgments we're standing on the ever-shifting ground of our own socially constructed cultural worldviews" (1995b: 10). So there *is* something like a Postmodern ethics and it is not about not choosing, but it is about making choices knowing that they are not founded in absolute and metaphysical truth in exclusion of all other truths out there but on my individual and socio-cultural context. One could actually argue that – according to Anderson's reading of the matter – a Postmodern ethics is about consciously choosing and taking responsibility for that choice, whereas a non-Postmodern ethics is about not choosing, because one merely adopts some pre-existing ideological framework, and transferring responsibility and discursive power

somewhere else. Modern individuals would be able to deny responsibility ('I only followed orders.'), Postmodern individuals *cannot* do so.

The related issues of discursive power and textual authority are at the core or Andersons third dimension of the Postmodern, art and culture. In a postmodern cultural sphere, there is no single dominant style or aesthetics, as endless variations and improvisations fill the semiosphere. Parody, in Hutcheon's non-comical sense of repetition with critical distance, and playfulness make the overt processes of meaning-making enjoyable and active pursuits, rooted in pre-texts but also straining against them and breaking them open. Eclecticism and *bricolage* pervade the logic of Postmodern cultural creation, as regular people "combine traditions, borrow rituals and myths", in a state where "[a]ll the world's cultural symbols are now in the public domain, and Santa Claus is on the cross" (1995b: 10). This joyful taking apart of the old and bringing elements from all over the cultural space together to form something new follows the same logic of active, cultural engagement that Anderson also sees in the construction of Postmodern identities and ethics, and it energises Postmodern media from literature, to video and role-playing games.

The second determining conceptual impulse besides this activation to participate and create is globalisation, the author's fourth and final dimension of the Postmodern: "For the first time in human history we have a truly global civilization. It is a civilization of rapid information exchange and unprecedented mobility", Anderson argues (1995b: 11). What this global network leads to is a broadening of people's horizons, as they get to look beyond their immediate, tribal surroundings and see and experience other people's lives and their ways. A relativisation of our tribal cultures is the result of this constant encounter of the other, as new options become thinkable, available. People start to choose and combine social and cultural elements from all over the world in a gigantic pick'n'mix. Civilizations change continually as new influences are absorbed and traditional borders become unstable: "People new see borders of all kinds as social constructions of reality and feel free to cross them, erase tem, reconstruct them" (1995b: 11).

Anderson's understanding of the ultimately unseizable and unfathomable phenomenon of Postmodernity is a very positive and joyful one as a time of "jangle, complexity and dissonance, a moment of great beauty and opportunity" (1995b: 11),

as an on-going process where new ways of thinking about ourselves and the world around us become available, new ways of coexistence with others, and a new sense of *ownership of* and *responsibility for* our worldviews and identities is established.

The first three of Anderson's dimensions are all directly applicable to my investigation into the connection between Postmodern conceptions of cultural production and textuality and the rise of RPGs as a new (Postmodern) medium. The active making not only of identities but of moral and ethical choices structures and motivates the narrative and creative process of RPGs, while the urge towards playful improvisation and variation in a public space of pre-textual possibilities seems to me a good description of the treatment of textualities in the medium. The aspect of globalisation also touches upon my subject on several levels. First of all, even though most gamers start out with RPGs that were created in their own cultural area (Germans/Austrians playing German RPGs, US-Americans playing US-American RPGs, etc.) very soon they discover and pick up others. Through play, the specific cultural aspects of these games then can be experienced first-hand, which promotes a deeper understanding of their socio-cultural background: Why does a French RPG 'feel' French? What is Canadian about a Canadian RPG? Are British and US-American RPGs different? If so, how? On a second level, these questions then might lead to a recognition of aspects in other cultures that one can identify with and that one would like to integrate with one's own socio-cultural identity. So both the active, constructive and the globalised aspect of Anderson's Postmodernism come together in RPGs.

But there is not only Anderson's perspective on the issue in his book. Several other articles seem to be worth mentioning, among them the texts by Umberto Eco, Steinar Kvale, Ernest Becker, and Kenneth Gergen.

Eco's text, "'I Love You Madly', He Said Self-consciously", is actually an excerpt from his *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*, first published in English in 1984. As I mentioned earlier in my chapter on the differentiation between the Modern and the Postmodern (or rather its impossibility), Eco's conception of Postmodernism is an ahistorical one: "Actually, I believe that postmodernism is not a trend to be chronologically defined, but, rather, an ideal category – or, better still, a *Kunstwollen*, a way of operating" (Eco, 1984: 31 – 32). It is an expression of moments of crisis that,

according to Eco, all eras know: as the past "conditions us, harries us, blackmails us" (1984: 32), we need to find a way to negotiate its influence on the present in order to function independently. The avant-garde, which Eco also defines as a "metahistorical category" (ibid.), attacks the past, wants to destroy and deface it. The process started by this urge to annihilate, however, inevitably leads to a point of total silence, "a metalanguage that speaks of its impossible texts (conceptual art)" (ibid.).

This implosion of meaning (or even the possibility of meaning) is an aspect that is frequently attributed to Postmodernism, but Eco here clearly differentiates between it and the avant-garde. So while the avant-garde reaction to the Modern ends in silence, Postmodernism is aware of this and tries to find other ways: "the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, [...] must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently" (Eco, 1984: 32). The solution proposed by the author is simple: 'quotation marks', avoiding false innocence by acknowledging that which has already been said. A dialogue determined by this recognition of the presence of the past in the present will end thus: "Neither of the two speakers will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated; both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony" (1984: 32 - 33). Living in an "age of lost innocence" (1984: 32) for Eco does not mean the necessity of nostalgically longing for what is lost and hoping for the impossible restoration of the past in the present, but the necessity of constantly engaging in language games, or as Eco puts it: "metalinguistic play, enunciation squared" (1984: 33), to show critical awareness of the recurrence of the past in the present. And while Modern/-ist games were of an exclusive nature where "anyone who does not understand the game can only reject it" (ibid.), Postmodern/-ist games are inclusive, open to all: "it is possible not to understand the game and yet to take it seriously" (ibid.).

In a truly Postmodern turn of his argument, Eco concludes that "in the same artist the modern moment and the postmodern moment can coexist, or alternate, or follow each other closely" (ibid.). This is why many artefacts that are considered to be Postmodern actually seem ambiguous or even contradictory in their content and form. What matters, according to Eco, is that a Postmodern discourse is "not the negation of the already said, but its ironic rethinking" (1984: 33). This ludic and ironic theory of Postmodern language games, formulated in the Italian original in 1983, is

predecessor and pre-text to later theoretical approaches such as Hutcheon's who built her entire understanding of the Postmodern on the concepts of irony, parody and paradox. The ahistoric dimension of Eco's reading, however, is frequently replaced by an overt or implicit historical sequence between Modernism and Postmodernism, and while this is also true in Eco, it is of a more conceptual nature, not liked to specific dates in a linear progression of cultural development, but to recurring states in a cyclical evolution of culture. For my own argument about RPGs and how they interact with Postmodernism, the concept of inclusive, joyful, metalinguistic play strongly supports my claim about them being deeply Postmodern joyful games of meaning-making.

Also in Anderson's collection, Steinar Kvale's "Themes of Postmodernity", first published in 1990, is taken from his anthology *Psychology and Postmodernism* (1992), so after the semiotic perspective of Eco, Kvale's psychological one adds a whole new layer of meaning to the debate about the Postmodern.

For the author, Postmodern thought is defined by a general loss of belief in an objective world, based on what Lyotard termed the incredulity towards meta-narratives of legitimation in his *Postmodern Condition*: " With a delegitimation of global systems of thought, there is no foundation to secure a universal and objective reality. There is today a public acknowledgement that 'Reality isn't what is [sic] used to be'", he writes (Kvale, 1990: 19). Instead, there is a growing focus on social and linguistic constructions of perspectival realities, supported by the multitude of media the Postmodern individual is exposed to and the diverse perspectives they convey. Kvale argues that the influence of the media goes even deeper, down to a conceptual, basic level of reality construction, as "the contrast between reality and fantasy breaks down and is replaced by a hyperreality, a world of self-referential signs" (ibid.), of a recursive intertextuality where texts constantly refer to other texts and no longer to extratextual reality.

At the same time the collapse of meta-narratives leads to a rise of local narratives, defined by their social and cultural context, and "particular, heterogeneous and changing language games replace the global horizon of meaning" (1990: 20). This emphasis on decentralisation and communal interaction guarantees that "valid interpretations of meaning and truth are made by people who share decisions and

the consequence of their decisions" (ibid.). New legitimation is created through linguistic practice and communicative action, and a "re-narrativization of culture" is the result (1990: 21): the impact of narrative on the audience becomes a central interest, and so narrative and storytelling become the focus of public attention. Storytelling is again perceived as a social act not only conveying information, but also constituting social roles, the position of participants in society, and the social bonds that maintain these distinctions: Who speaks? Who listens? And why? What is recognised and accepted is that "[t]he narratives of a community contribute to uphold the values and the social order of that community" (1990: 21).

Through this changing understanding of narrative and the accompanying linguistic turn, Postmodernism leaves the Modern ideal of universal consensus behind, replacing it with heterogeneous, non-commensurable language games that create a pervasive feeling of insecurity through the absence of a common frame of reference and the continuous change of perspective. This shattering of securities continues on an individual level, where the process of decentralisation also decays the Modern and western conception of subjectivity and identity: "The individual self becomes a medium for the culture and its language. The unique self loses prominence [...]" (1990: 22). Unfortunately, Kvale does not provide a psycho-social analysis of the impact this has on the Postmodern individual and Postmodern society, but a complete, system-wide loss or collapse of security is certain to have severe repercussions.

What he does, however, address is how Postmodernism expands Modern rationality, including ethical and aesthetic dimensions going beyond the purely cognitive and scientific. As the Kantian split of culture into science, morality, and art is transcended, "a rehabilitated rhetoric of persuasion" leads to a situation where "the values and the ethical responsibility of the interacting persons become central" (1990: 22). Art is again accepted as a way of knowing the world, but the fragmentation of the experience of reality and the critical stance towards tradition result in *bricolages*, pastiches, and collages of a highly ironical nature, and "the author's individuality and originality are lost in a pervasive use of and references to other texts" (1990: 23). Kvale paints a picture of the Postmodern that at the same time leads to a resurgence of art as a social tool of expression and that at the same

time is itself an expression of the deep insecurities fostered by the Postmodern crisis of legitimation and truth. Postmodernism contains aspects of both weariness and playful irony, doing becomes more important than thinking, fascination and seduction eclipse reflection and irony in a constant "oscillation of an intense sensuous fascination by the media and a cool, ironical distance to what appears" (1990: 25).

At the end of his argument, Kvale provides a short diagnosis of the effect Postmodernism has on a society, but it remains truncated and superficial. He claims that the loss of unitary meaning is accepted, that there is no despair and that people are generally trying to make the best of the situation, enjoying a quiet "relief from the burden of finding yourself as the goal of life" (1990: 25). In this state of "happy nihilism" (ibid.) with an insecure future, the only thing that matters is taking immediate, local and personal responsibility for one's actions.

While if find Kvale's concept of the re-narrativisation of Postmodern society based on the recognition of the essential social function of storytelling convincing and helpful for my analysis of RPGs that are, after all, a narrative social medium, taking it to the extreme of a happy nihilism is one step too far in my opinion. On the opposite, the author's final conclusion about the Postmodern necessity to take immediate, local and personal responsibility seems to me to be anything *but* nihilistic. The expansion of (Modern) rationality by ethical and aesthetical dimensions and the reinstatement of art as a tool of knowledge support a reading of RPGs both as artistic means to come to terms with the Postmodern condition, but also as an art-form brought forth by it. As such they seem to satisfy a need in the Postmodern mind that Kvale manages to define in his text.

Unlike him, cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1924 – 1974) chooses a deeply philosophical and conceptual perspective to explain the Postmodern moment in his short, but very dense and powerful piece "The Fragile Fiction" taken from *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (1962).

He situates the development of the Postmodern in the evolution of the human mind, claiming that all human aspirations are largely fictions, created by the ego and part of "a symbolic behavioral world removed from the boundness of the present

moment" (Becker, 1962: 34), and that this recognition is central to any attempt to understand the human condition. Only this symbolic environment allows for meaningful action in a world that is *per se* empty of meaning, so human freedom of action is ultimately "a fabricated freedom" and the price for this freedom is the need to "at all times *defend the utter fragility of his* [i.e. man's] *delicately constituted fiction, deny its artificiality*" (1962: 34; original emphasis). We know that the human mind, and the human mind alone, is the origin of all concepts of meaning, but in order to preserve the notion of meaning and to make sense of the world, we have to preserve the fiction of meaning.

For Becker then, fiction is not superfluous or lacks seriousness, the "ethereal symbolic conduct" of humanity as he calls it, is more serious and more essential for humanity than physical action itself, exactly *because* it is so fragile (1962: 35). The social bonds of community and interaction are dominated and defined by fiction, the author claims, and he sees the Postmodern moment, the moment where "the most anxiety-prone animal of all could come to *see through himself* [sic] and discover the fictional nature of his action world", "as one of the great, liberating breakthroughs of all time" (1962: 35). The recognition and acknowledgement of the semiosphere that we as human beings create and that creates us as human beings, this is for Becker the Postmodern moment of clarity. To know that the human mind alone is the source of all meaning attributed to physical and other phenomena has a liberating effect, as the self-aware Postmodern mind can now actively engage with and shape the processes of meaning-making instead of only being shaped by them passively, oftentimes even unconsciously.

Becker's Postmodernism, its metatextual, metafictional awareness and the liberating impulse it produces all enter my understanding of RPGs as a Postmodern medium where the self-aware Postmodern individual actively engages in the negotiation and production of meaning and thus even a living, changing and developing secondary world. The play between structure and freedom, convention and creativity, individual and collective is an experience we all make on an everyday basis in primary reality when we create it and are created by it, but in RPGs this process happens on a metalevel and in a contained environment. This is exactly the Postmodern self-reflexive, narrative behaviour Becker wrote about.

One last article taken from Anderson's collection will serve as a fitting reply to accusations frequently levelled against both Postmodernism and RPGs of promoting split or multiple identities in a pathological and not only metaphorical sense, as I have already mentioned in relation to Kellner and Turkle's analysis of MUDs and RPGs earlier: Kenneth Gergen's "The Healthy, Happy Human Being Wears Many Masks" (*Psychology Today*, 1972).

Anderson introduces Gergen as one of the leading Postmodern psychologists and applauds him for challenging the traditional (psychological and common-sensical) doctrine that in order to be sane and mentally stable, one needs to have a singular, coherent sense of identity, a concept whose origins Gergen firmly locates in the discourses of religious and moral values, adding: "But it is poor psychology" (1972: 136). Looking for reasons for the Postmodern diffusion of identity and the accompanying sense of bewilderment and self-alienation, Gergen identifies the rapid and increasingly rapid pace of social and technological change we live in that makes it impossible to create and maintain a strong, integrated sense of self.

Going beyond this search for reasons though, he also questions the basic assumptions behind it that only a firm and coherent identity is normal and that the absence of it is pathological: "I doubt that a person normally develops a coherent sense of identity, and to the extent that he does, he may experience severe emotional distress" (1972: 138). Like a total loss of identity, a calcified and monolithic one is just as detrimental to the individual. What is essential for a stable wellbeing is to be able to navigate successfully between the need for a unified personality and the need to constantly adapt by adopting outside influence in "social-role-playing" (ibid.). These "shifting masks of identity", as Gergen calls them, are under "the influence of the other person, the situation, or the individual's motives" (ibid.), so their making and unmaking happens in the field of tension between the self, the context and the other.

One of the key results of the author's experiments on these processes is central to understand the power of fiction in general and specifically RPGs over the human mind: "It is not necessary to act the role; fantasizing about how they would act is sufficient" to affect people's behaviour (1972: 142). The fiction of other personalities

carries over into primary reality and changes the subject's personality for real. Our self is therefore remarkably flexible, and even though we are easily moulded by social circumstances, our relationships and masks are not false: "Once donned, mask becomes reality" (1972: 142). The fiction, the secondary reality, thus determines primary reality. But we are also not just leaves in the wind of social change, Gergen argues: There are central tendencies to our concept of self towards which we gravitate. "The individual has many potential selves. […] The social conditions around him help determine which of these options are evoked" (1972: 142). The image of the self Gergen creates reminds me very much of the concept of reality in Postmodern and Poststructuralist theories such as Hutcheon's or Derrida's. The coherent sense of identity must be denaturalised, as we constantly receive different and inconsistent messages about our Self, constantly learn something new about ourselves in relationships of all kind and through contact with the Other, and all of these lessons are rarely connected or consistent.

This is why Gergen advocates acceptance of the multitude of interests, potentials, and selves we harbour, that we no longer think in oppositions, but in temporary identities. "All of us are burdened by the code of coherence", he concedes, but a rigid identity that is not responsive to adaptation will cause great pain (1972: 143). What we need to do in order to avoid this is to broaden our experiences with others, "the more unlike us they are, the more likely we are to be shaken from a rigid sense of identity" (1972: 144). We need to constantly try new masks, remain in honest communication with others to exchange images of the self and the other, and play more roles, as playing a role leads to real change in the self-concept of a person. When we regularly engage in this joyful role-playing, "a storehouse of novel self-images emerge", and our masks will no longer be mere symbols of superficiality but "the means of realizing our potential" (1972: 144).

Gergen's argument quite successfully undermines the accusations of the detrimental effect of Postmodernism and RPGs (*role-playing* games) on the (Modern) conception of the coherent and thus – or so we are told - sane mind or healthy identity. Not only is his text a celebration of plurality and procedural, active creation of the Self, it also specifically recommends regular role-playing, interaction and communication with others (not necessarily in games) in order to fully realise the

potential we carry inside of us. I could not have found a stronger psycho-social argument for the power and beneficent qualities of RPGs.

Anderson ends his *Truth About the Truth* with an epilogue that he subtitled "The End and the Beginning of Enlightenment" (1995c: 239), that together with his introduction forms a coherent and comprehensive reading of the Postmodern.

His main argument here is that Enlightenment, the driving force behind much of Modern thought, has lost its vitality even though many still believe in its project, and "[f]or a brief, strange moment in human history, premodernity, modernity and postmodernity coexist" (1995c: 239). The result of this coexistence is a new, a Postmodern Enlightenment project, not built around finding objective and universally acceptable explanations, but looking to deconstruct *and* reconstruct and to locate deeper commonalities.

In an on-going cyclical process between these two principles, the Postmodern mind discovers the symbolic universe, "the socially constructed nature of reality" (1995c: 241). History, rituals, and culture are revealed as inventions, and a new, global human "culture about cultures" is founded on the common ground of the recognition of the constructed nature of reality (ibid.). The world is no longer external and alien to us, something inhuman that does not relate to us at all, it becomes *more* human as we see it filled with human signs. People take control over their symbolic environment, playing with rituals and myths, revising doctrines (both religious and political). Even the Self is seen as an illusion, a socially constructed reality in a striking and surprising similarity between Postmodern ideas and traditional spiritual schools of thought: "That other, much older, Enlightenment project – the one that we associate with the Buddhists and the Sufis – was also built around a radically different notion of personal identity, a quest for liberation from the ego", Anderson argues (1995c: 242). The ideas of Postmodernism are therefore not new, and here Eco and his ahistorical understanding of the phenomenon comes back to mind.

The discovery of the symbolic environment (or semiosphere) is attributed to centuries of philosophical debate, the liberation from the Self and reconstruction of identity to spiritual traditions, but the Postmodern condition also adds new elements:

the mass media and the proliferation of discourses that they bring, the cultural mixing and improvising of a globalisation that is picking up pace. When these ancient and contemporary ideas come together they become "part of a general public discourse", "call[ing] for some rethinking of ideas about the course of history – about such things as progress" (1995c: 243). The Postmodern Enlightenment project, as defined by Anderson, also has its own concept of progress, so unlike the Modern "linear, onward-and-upward improvement in the human condition with increasing scientific knowledge" (ibid.), a progress that is not explicit, linear or simple, but where the learning process of cultural evolution is painful and conflicted and things do *not* necessarily get better. It is about "learning about learning, discovering something new about our own reality. It is, for many, a discovery full of hope", Anderson writes, refuting claims that the bleak collapse of truth and meaning that its critics see in the Postmodern is a necessary result of this project (1995c: 243).

The author thus posits the coexistence of three Enlightenment projects in time and space, that under the Postmodern condition of the presence of the past in the present and increasing globalisation all affect our cultural and social behaviour at once: the Western project aims at the promotion of rational though, the Eastern project at dispelling the illusion of the Self, and the Postmodern project reveals reality as socially constructed. Their common goal is the liberation from our self-imposed, symbolic, "mind-forged manacles" and our progress towards a humanity that "has taken possession of the symbolic skills that made it human, and in which people are no longer enslaved by their abstractions" (1995c: 243). Anderson's utopian Post-Enlightenment world would be one filled with actively creating, not passively consuming players of language games that continuously create and recreate not only their sense of reality but also of their Self through rational communication and negotiation with others – a world of people taking responsibility for themselves *and* others. Even though I do not think that this world can ever be a possibility as a fully realised *global* system, on a *local*, community level it can be achieved. And I think RPGs help their players develop the necessary conceptual, narrative and interactional skills.

Charles Jencks's *Post-Modern Reader*, first published in 1992, is considered to be one of the pre-eminent collections of theoretical and critical articles tackling the Postmodern from a large diversity of perspectives of different disciplines, as well as theoretical or critical schools.

In his introductory preface, "Post-Modernism – The Ism that Returns", the author defines his guiding principle in putting the book together: "Most Isms become Wasms and, it is the argument of this anthology, Post-Modernism is one of the few that did not" (2011: 8). Possible reasons for the pervasiveness of the phenomenon, as "post-modernism spread into every field from religion to science, from literature to music, to define its transhistorical identity" (ibid.), are also given by Jencks: the suggestive terminology that marks what is left behind but not where things are going; the continued questioning of Modernism and its conventions. Yet it is also suggested that the situation of Postmodernism today is less clear than it was thirty years ago: It is disseminated widely in theoretical and practical spheres, and the distinctions between what is Modern and what is Postmodern have blurred, as hybridisation and crossover, another reading of the 'post', become the rule. The Postmodern, according to Jencks, thus becomes "a continuation of Modernism and its transcendence, neither a deconstructive nor anti-modern tradition. Hence its hybrid nature, its double-coding, its deepening of Modernism" (2011: 10).

In one of his own two contributions to the anthology, "What Then Is Post-Modernism?" (2009), Jencks looks for answers to the very basic, but essential questions to be asked about the Postmodern: "[H]ow should our period be classified? Or who are we? Or where are we going?" (2011: 14). The strategy of double-coding that I have mentioned earlier is his preferred way of replying to these questions, reading the Postmodern on a cultural level as Postmodernism, or in his terminology Post-modernism, an "open, positive, reconstructive" movement (2011: 21), and on a social, economic and political level as Postmodernity, or post-modernism, a "global economy not open to control" at the same time (ibid.). He also keeps the hyphenation going to make "the hybrid nature of the movement" transparent, avoiding "the streamlined or elided postmodernism" (2011: 11).

Jencks is also one of the few critics of the Postmodern to appreciate John Barth's contribution to the attempt of creating a more comprehensive understanding of the

phenomenon in his "Literature of Replenishment" (1979) when he defines his *own* "ideal post-modernist" and explains how Postmodernism arises in continuity with Modernism out of a critical reflex against the process of modernisation (2011: 28). Essential to this understanding is the concept of time-binding, stating that "meaning must depend on a negotiation between the past, present, and future" (2011: 16). This is the by now familiar presence of the past in the present that echoes through much of Postmodern thought and stands in stark contrast to Modern progress and revolution: a cyclical and evolutionary model on the one side, a linear and progressive one on the other side of the same coin. According to Jencks, time-binding and the awareness of it is necessary to be able to correspond appropriately to the "myths embedded in contemporary life" (2011: 28).

The second dimension of his ideal Postmodernism is a complex and double-coded mixture of many discourses: high and low (or popular) culture, past and present discourses mingle and merge to create something accessible and new out of the old. Lastly, Jencks argues, Postmodern artefacts are to "eschew the reductive impulse of most Modernism work and while abstract at moments they resist the eliminative strain of the Modern" (2011: 28). The ideal Postmodern artefact is therefore one that is double-coded, concrete and diverse, one that openly acknowledges and engages in time-binding. To highlight his concept of the continuation between a critical Modernism and Postmodernism, Jencks applies these criteria to artists conventionally considered to be Modernists, such as Picasso, Stravinsky, Le Corbusier, Eliot, and Joyce (ibid.). Naming Anselm Kiefer as an example for an ideal Postmodernist, Jencks gives his reasoning: "[He] binds various epochs together in his contemporary constructions. The recent past [...], ancient myth, future hope, archetypal drama are realised in a new grammar. Many discourses cross on his large canvases and constructions" (Jencks, 2011: 30). The only thing Jencks identifies as missing from contemporary works for truly ideal Postmodern art is the presence of contemporary metaphysics, the insights about the workings of the universe science has made accessible to us: "Let me reiterate the shifts: from Newton to Einstein, from linear to nonlinear dynamics, from determinism to self-organising systems, or from simple to complex systems" (2011: 32). Complexity is *the* catch-phrase in Jenck's theory of the Postmodern which he defines, quoting his own article "New Science =

New Architecture" (c.f. *Architectural Design*, July 1988), as "the theory of how emergent organisation may be achieved by interacting components pushed far from equilibrium (by increasing energy, matter or information) to the threshold between order and chaos" (2011: 32). At this point, a system interacts in a new, non-linear, and unpredictable way, and this new organisation can be maintained through continuous feed-back and energy input. What emerges from a system in the state of complexity is self-organisation, meaning, openness, often also increasing complexity and "a greater degree of freedom" (ibid.).

Based on Jenck's analysis, I would like to argue that RPGs are ideal Postmodern meaning-making machines in the author's terms. They are double-coded as cultural and social artefacts, bringing together the openness and positive reconstructive impulse of the one and the economical and commodified aspect of the other. They also provide an active, productive and concrete nexus of different and diverse discourses of both high and popular culture, and are very much aware of their own time-binding qualities, as past, present and future come together in the ephemeral moment of narrative creation. Literary, mythological and popular pre-texts evoked across media, the rule- and sourcebooks used, the personal and socio-cultural background of the players all provide a link to the past, the narration is a dynamic process happening in the present, and the narrative decisions taken structure the possible future. I would even go so far as to claim that RPGs are quite successful in bringing in the contemporary, Postmodern metaphysics Jencks misses in other artefacts. As the increase in narrative information pushes the system that is the group of players beyond the point of equilibrium, they enter that state of flux between order and chaos, and through constant negotiation and narration - or feed-back and investment of energy - that state of complexity is maintained: narrative is procedurally co-created. The result is, according to Jencks's theory and my experience of the process, exactly the self-organisation, meaning, openness, and greater degree of narrative and personal freedom he predicted. RPGs are thus Jencks's ideal Postmodern complex systems of socially negotiated and culturally mediated meaning-making.

I have already mentioned Ihab Hassan's article in the collection, "From Postmodernism to Postmodernity: The Local/Global Context" (2000), earlier in my chapter on the differentiation between the Modern and the Postmodern, but there is still more to it as far as Hassan's appreciative but critical stance towards the Postmodern is concerned.

On a very fundamental level, he argues, Postmodernism is actually conceptually flawed, and the theoretical observable difficulties result from this situation. First of all, the term itself is "awkward", the author claims, "it is also Oedipal, and like a rebellious but impotent adolescent, it cannot separate itself completely from its parent" (2000: 119). The result is an ambiguous and parasitical relationship between Modernism and Postmodernism. Secondly, Hassan argues that the Modern itself is no longer 'modern', but that the historical development of culture is constantly pushing the modern forwards, having left the Modern behind since World War II. There is also an inherent conceptual problem with the term Postmodern, as it is very un-Postmodern to begin with: The Postmodern is polychronic, "it avoids categorical and linear periodisation" (2000: 120). Related to this, Hassan also sees the necessity for Postmodernism to function not only as a diachronic, but a "theoretical, phenomenological or synchronic category" (ibid.), since a clear chronological moment of separation between the Modern and the Postmodern is impossible to give, and both Modern and Postmodern aspects could co-exist in the work of one and the same artist. Furthermore, Postmodernism only emerges as a phenomenon if the constellation of styles, features, and attitudes are "placed in a particular historical context" (ibid.). It is a deeply *contextual* concept, so the ever changing context also shifts its meaning. And lastly, Hassan has serious doubts that one model of the Postmodern or of Postmodernism can actually cover *all* possible manifestations, or that such a model is needed in the first place.

Irrespective of these problems and difficulties with the conceptualisation of Postmodernism, Hassan appreciates its qualities as an interpretative category. The re-reading and critical re-appropriation of the past respects the past as it is, because Postmodernism is a "heightened mode of self-awareness, self-critical of its own assumptions, [...] and tolerant of what is not itself" (2000: 121). It is understood as a pragmatic philosophy by the author, trying to avoid the extremes of both dogmatism

and scepticism. Postmodernism taps into pragmatism, "its intellectual generosity; its epistemic or noetic pluralism; its avoidance of stale debates [...]; and its affinities with open, liberal, multicultural societies" (2000: 122), to suggest a structure that resolves problems with mediation and compromise, not by power or decree. It thus manages to stay clear of the nihilism and fickle, joyless play absolute scepticism would bring, but also of "the hubris of theory, the impatience of ideology, the rage of our desires and needs" (ibid.). What Postmodernism does, according to Hassan, is to nurture the negative capability theorised by Keats: the ability to successfully live in an in-between-state, to live with ambiguities and contradictions and to still be able to make meaning of them.

Here, in this pragmatic Postmodernism of negative capability, I can clearly see another connection between Postmodernism and RPGs. The negotiated narration of the medium fosters self-aware, self-critical, and tolerant mind-sets, as it constantly swings back and forth (or oscillates) between the dogmatic rules and setting material, and the sceptical need for agency and player freedom. The pluralism of its narrative voices and co-existing levels of communication makes compromise the key for success, while hubris, impatience or egotistical needs on any side will lead to a collapse of the narrative dynamics. RPGs thus can be seen as a deeply Postmodern medium in Hassan's sense of the term that also helps to renegotiate the Self/Other divide the author deems to be no longer helpful in a globalised, Postmodern world. Well conscious that this basic conceptual framework of the human mind will not simply go away, Hassan argues that "*we can make it more conscious of itself in our lives*" and that this would be the "*spiritual project of postmodernity*" (2000: 123; original emphases). The parameters he defines for this project are simple: speaking truthfully to the Self and the Other; cultivating a keener, dialogical sense of the self in relation to other cultures, nature, and the universe itself; and discovering self-transcendence, "avoid[ing] blind identification with collectives premised on exclusion of other groups" (ibid.). If this dialogical spiritual project of self-transcendence through a respectful and appreciating exchange with the other that finds it more secular counterpart in Zima's dialogical understanding of Postmodernism is not enough to make the link to RPGs overt, Hassan explains its political dimension as follows:

> [A]n open dialogue between local and global, margin and centre, minority and majority, concrete and universal – and not only between those but also between local and local, margin and margin, minority and minority, and further still, between universals of different kinds. (Hassan, 2000: 124)

He defines imagination and spirit as the breeding grounds of new values for a new global condition, a "sense of cosmic wonder, of being and mortality at the widest edge, which we all share" (2000: 124). In Hassan's understanding of the Postmodern project this collective, yet deeply individual and at the same time cosmic spirit is the only principle able to liberate humanity from the chains of *survival* and to enter a state of *existence* beyond the self-centred and tribal frames of reference that dictate it now. While I might not share the religious associations palpable in Hassan's text, I very much appreciate and support the socio-cultural project behind it, and in my perspective, the development of RPGs was one of the symptoms of an increasing trend towards emerging processes that question and redistribute discursive power and textual authority in plurilogical communication situations in a Postmodern push to get closer to this new state of existence.

Taking the debate about the Postmodern from the lofty philosophical and spiritual 'heights' of Hassan's deliberations back into the 'lower' realm of daily life, David Harvey's text "The Condition of Postmodernity" (1989) takes a critical closer look at how Postmodernism relates to cultural forms and socio-economic contexts.

Basically, he argues, Postmodernism is not only a theoretical whim of academics and intellectuals, but that there is a real and perceptible movement to "bring high cultural concerns closer to daily life" again (Harvey, 1989: 200). Harking back to Terry Eagleton's definition of the typical Postmodern artefact in "Awakening from Modernity" (*Times Literary Supplement*, 1987), Harvey agrees to its "playful, self-ironising, and even schizoid" qualities and to how it reacts to the "austere autonomy of high modernism by impudently embracing the language of commerce and the commodity" (1989: 200). This re-popularisation of the cultural production and the danger of complicity with the discourses of commodification used for strategic purposes is the cultural expression of a "widespread and profound shift in 'the

structure of feeling'", Harvey claims, a refusal of the metanarratives that have dominated life for so long (ibid.). For the Postmodern novel this means a shift from an epistemological and towards an ontological dominant, using the artistic voice to formulate and foreground "questions as to how radically different realities may coexist, collide, interpenetrate" (1989: 202). A blurring of boundaries between the fantastic and the non-fantastic ensues, a gradual influx of fantastic elements in all genres, modes, and media of the cultural production to thematise the precarious nature of identity construction under such conditions. Harvey quotes Borges to illustrate the inherent aporia of Postmodern identity: "'Who was I? Today's self, bewildered, yesterday's, forgotten; tomorrow's, unpredictable?' The question marks tell it all" (Borges in Harvey, 1989: 203).

Yet this dilemma does not lead to despair or self-destruction, since there is "total acceptance of the ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity and the chaotic" in Postmodernism (1989: 205). They are not transcended or counteracted as in Modernism, but accepted and affirmed as all there *is* in life. A preoccupation with Otherness and Other Worlds is the result, and characters are no longer able to reveal a central mystery in a narrative, all they have is more questions: "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" (1989: 208). Harvey's argumentation helps me understand the predilection for the fantastic that is a pervasive feature of Postmodern cultural production and thus also RPGs according to my theories, and it also makes sense of the building and questioning of other worlds, but there is another connection that I find most important: Since Postmodernism accepts fragmentation, pluralism, and the authenticity of other voices, Harvey argues, this "poses the acute problem of communication and the means of exercising power through command thereof" (1989: 209). Not only does this theory shed light on the conceptual and aesthetic link between RPGs and Postmodernism, it also includes the political aspect of discursive power and textual authority that again and again emerge as linchpins of my argument.

The author's reading of Derrida only reinforces the connection I have already established. As a text cannot be mastered, since other texts and meanings continually intervene, Harvey defines "collage/montage as the primary form of postmodern discourse" (1989: 210). Both producers and consumers of cultural

artefacts participate in the performative process of meaning-making, and "minimising the authority of the cultural producer creates the opportunity for popular participation and democratic determinations of cultural values" at the risk of incoherence and mass market commodification (ibid.). The cultural producer only provides the raw materials for the recipient to recombine, authorial power to impose meaning or a continuous narrative is broken. To me this sounds like a very comprehensive description of the creative process of a pen&paper RPG: A montage of continually intervening texts where producers and consumers co-create meaning in a performative process of popular participation and democratic negotiation. The threat of incoherence through insufficient negotiation during the process of narration and of commodification through companies selling out to the mainstream is there, and these are the very same companies that in their rule- and sourcebooks provide the raw materials for the recombination during narration. Elusive authorial power can neither be fully attributed to the people producing the books, nor the Storyteller, or the players for that matter. Harvey's reading of Derrida could be taken as a theory of RPGs as Postmodern (or Poststructural) artefacts in a nutshell.

Other factors support this claim, like when Harvey describes how action in a Postmodern context can only be decided and conceived within a *local* determinism or interpretative community, and that all meanings or effects fall apart outside of the local domain. Fine's idiocultural framework is an essential component of RPGs, and one reason why I would argue only a gamer can engage the medium critically. No transcript, nor video or audio record can convey the immensely emotional impact the medium has through immersion, or the intricate ballet of discursive power when five or six people assert their agency in a single narrative. Going beyond audio-visual communication and even body language, the shared memories and experiences of the group, their idioculture, feed into every narrative decision, and those in turn feed into their idioculture. No external observer can ever truly fathom the multiple layers and the depth of meaning created in an RPG session. Like all Postmodern meaning, it is highly contextual and can only be understood from *within* the local system.

This new mode of cultural creation in Postmodernism might well be, as Harvey argues in reference to a 1987 NY Times review of the state of the US novel by Charles Newman, the result of the Postmodern condition, since the "sense of diminishing

control, loss of individual autonomy and generalized helplessness has never been so instantaneously recognizable in our literature" (1989: 214). But unlike Jameson's conclusions drawn from this state ("contrived depthlessness" as the dominant motif in Postmodernism), I tend to favour Barthes' reading as an attempt to find and experience a "moment of *jouissance*" (Harvey, 1989: 214). Postmodern cultural production, in Harvey's theory, focuses on events, spectacles, happenings, media images: The fleeting quality of life and the present moment are emphasised and celebrated, popular and high culture converge in a commercialised and commodified space: "However this may be, much of postmodernism is consciously anti-auratic and anti-avant-garde and seeks to explore media and cultural arenas open to all" (1989: 215). Besides the psychological presuppositions of Postmodernism concerning the fragmentary nature of personality, motivation, and behaviour, and its special experience of time, this integration with daily life and the constant switch in position between producer and consumer of cultural artefacts determine the Postmodern project for Harvey, adding a caveat: "Whatever else we do with the concept, we should not read postmodernism as some autonomous artistic current. Its rootedness in daily life is one of its most patently transparent features" (1989: 218).

This and the fragmentary and ephemeral nature of cultural artefacts "wrapped in the mysteries of rapid flux and change" (ibid.) are the two central elements of Harvey's "Condition of Postmodernity" that I would like to claim as evidence for my theory of RPGs as intrinsically linked in their development to Postmodern notions of literature and cultural production by the essential role of the concepts of consumerism, textual authority, and discursive (authorial) power.

Conclusion: Making Connections

Now that the three central axes that intrinsically link the cultural logic of the Postmodern and Postmodernism with the medium of pen&paper RPGs - consumerism, textual authority, and discursive power – are established, it is time to attempt and answer the three sets of questions defined in the introduction. In an effort to make the connections clear and draw conclusions, several relevant aspects for each of the three sets of questions will be pointed out, thus offering *clusters* of possible answers rather than three definite and singular Truths - which would be highly un-Postmodern to begin with.

Before conclusions about the medium and its potential to affect individual and collective change through cultural practice will be drawn, it is, however, necessary to keep the argument grounded in the *reality* of the medium. RPGs have never been and will not be in the foreseeable future a mass-medium in the sense of TV, film, video games or literature. They are a fringe medium of several hundred publications per year that nevertheless attracts a more or less regular group of participants numbering into the millions of people (Jackson in Gellis, 2007: 167), mostly across Northern America where it was 'created', as well as Europe, and Asia. The RPG-scares of the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the obvious and destructive money- and power-grab at the turn of the millennium (aka 'the HASBRO-situation') have prevented the possibility of a breakthrough into wide public awareness, so it is very likely that the medium will *remain* a fringe phenomenon. But due to the dominant demographics of gamers, their influence in the mechanisms of cultural production and interpretation, and even their social influence, has been disproportionate to their relatively small numbers.

In 1983, Gary Alan Fine described the typical gamer as follows:

> This person is male, unmarried, and in his early to mid-twenties; he has read deeply in science fiction, fantasy, and history; he has completed college and may have attended graduate school for some time; he believes that he has a lively imagination; he either has a job commensurate with his skills or has decided to live as best as he can with a low paying job for the present, planning to look for a more appropriate job later; he often has strong feelings about war, either as a former member of the armed services or as a confirmed pacifist; finally,

> he disregards many of the normative requirements of conventional society, feeling a need to concentrate on his own interests without regard to the expectations of others.
> (Fine, 1983: 47)

The gender, age, educational and (mostly) professional background of the typical gamer therefore all predisposition him[18] to have more-than-average influence in society during and/or after his active gaming life. Since he is well read in fantastic literature and less likely to internalise the norms and values of his society unreflectedly, he is also a possible vector of societal and cultural change. But Fine also adds a caveat at the end of his description: The typical gamer is focused on his own concerns and not so much on social issues. This mitigates the direct influence he could exert on his environment.

And yet, the data that forms the backbone of Fine's concept is almost thirty years old. In 2004, the German RPG magazine *Envoyer* started their Grumf (*Große Rollenspielumfrage*, or 'Big RPG Survey'), and with a sample of 1810 participants it can be considered to be representative enough to be of use (Anon., 2004a: 63). The average age of (German) gamers at the time was 26.16, so slightly older than Fine's findings, confirming a trend that can also be observed in video gaming with an average age of 30 in 2012 (ESA, 2012): As the original adopters of the media concerned grow older, they keep playing. Still, the Grumf 2004 also identified the age segment from 21 to 25 as the strongest one (33.81%), and 62.4% of gamers are between 20 and 29: young, educated professionals (Anon., 2004a: 63). Furthermore, certain 'traditional wisdoms' concerning the (social) process of playing were confirmed by the data collected: the typical group (including the ST) is between five and six participants (63.04%), with a steep decline beyond six for reasons of group dynamics; the vast majority of players also acts as the ST (84%); and most groups meet once a week (54%), or at least once a month (34%) to play (ibid.). Flexibility, continuity, and an instinctual understanding of group dynamics come together in the experience, and they all describe the typical gamer as well. When asked for genre preference, 58.50% of respondents gave Fantasy as their first choice, historical settings follow with 15.99%, which not only connects the medium back to its origins in

[18] I am aware of the exclusion inherent to my choice of pronoun, but that is exactly the point here.

historical and Fantasy wargaming, but also to Fine's findings of the historical interest of gamers and their preferred textual repertoire in genre literature. Utopias and the 'reality' of history therefore both figure dominantly in the conceptualisations of reality of the 'typical' gamer, and they provide the elements for the communal meaning-making process.

The second aspect that must be mentioned is that the textuality of RPGs is very complex. Jaakko Stenros builds his central research question around this issue in his "Notes on Role-Playing Texts": "[W]hat is being analysed when we speak of analysing a role-playing game?" (2004: 75). He later defines six instances of textuality that together form the *medium* RPG:

> The primary type is what is here called the *role-playing text* itself, the transient product of role-playing. It includes some elements of most of the other aspects as well, namely that role-playing is conducted in a *session*, that it is to some extent based on a *scenario*, that some *rules* are employed and that the participants have used source material in *preparation* to the game. These four additional subservient aspects of role-playing also contain elements which are not present in the role-playing text and which can also be read separately. On the other hand, narrativised story [sic] of the game is not a part of the role-playing text but a result of narrativisation done to a reading based on it.
> (Stenros, 2004: 78; my emphases)

So there are five different kinds of textualities contained within the experience of RPGs, six the author claims, if one counts the ST's preparation differently from the players' which does make sense on an organisational and conceptual level (2004: 76). The role-playing text, the procedurally created shared narrative, contains traces and elements of all the other that in turn bring together a whole set of different modes and media: dramatic and social interaction (session), published printed or otherwise written narrative text (scenario), systemic prescriptive and descriptive text (rules), interpretation of pre-existing texts and production of texts on their basis (preparations by players and ST). Yet even published scenarios, or 'adventures' as they are frequently called, are not identical to 'traditional' literature. While the active participation of the reader and the filling of narrative and semantic gaps is a basic requirement of any reading process according to proponents of the reader-response

theory such as Wolfgang Iser (c.f. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, 1978), RPG sourcebooks are specifically designed with even bigger gaps, ready to be filled by player interaction, as Mark Gellis explains:

> [G]aming supplements do not simply invite players to enter an imagined universe; they can be treated as a kind of deliberately open-ended and incomplete work of fiction. The supplements use many of the standard components of fiction or drama, such as setting, mood, theme, and characters [...], but both the cast of characters and the plot are deliberately left incomplete. This is not surprising, since the purpose of a role-playing game is to enter the story and, sometimes, complete it. Thus, in most cases, the cast of characters is left incomplete, and the characters who have been left out are usually the most important ones, since the players will wish to be at the centre of the action.
> (Gellis, 2007: 167 – 168)

Traditional literature is narrative that cannot escape being riddled with gaps due to the restrictions of the medium and the human mind; RPGs are narrative that is not only aware of these medial and mental restrictions, but makes them its own *raison d'être*: RPGs make these processes visible and central to the experiences they provide through their complex and interactive web of interrelated textualities. Gellis is also quick to disperse a common misconception that is based on the special narrative situation and social set-up of RPGs across at least two co-existing levels of reality:

> Certainly, literature and popular culture can influence audiences; any work that makes us think about something has the potential to change us, for good or ill. However, the concern that role-playing games encourage criminal or anti-social behavior appears to be unwarranted. The existing research [...] suggests that the activity of gaming does not appear to affect the overall mental health of either players or referees. The vast majority of gamers are perfectly sane and can recognize the difference between play/fantasy and real life.
> (Gellis, 2004: 174)

Keeping all of these basic assumptions and clarifications about the medium and its practitioners in mind, provisional answers can now be provided to the questions acting as research focus to this inquiry in order to establish the cultural, social, and medial logic connecting RPGs to the Postmodern condition.

10 – Form Follows Function: The Postmodern Form of RPGs

Question number one concerned the formal aspects of RPGs, and it is reiterated here so that the following explanations are clearly contextualised:

> Is the process of textual and narrative production in RPGs truly a self-organising narrative and social system oscillating between creative freedom and restrictive structure, or is this agency the players experience only an illusion?
> (Schallegger, 2012: 7)

There are four aspects that come together in an approximate answer: the medium itself, the special narrative situation, the inherent intersemiotic nature of RPGs, and the question of discursive power.

10.1 – The Medium: Oral Renaissance, Opacity and Hybridity

RPGs are one of the latest new media created in the 20th century, but in contrast to others like video games or TV-series they are not the result of technological advances. On the contrary, they seemingly are a return to the very first device used for narrative communication: the human voice. Oral cultural transmission and performance both predate writing by several millennia, and even though Western civilisation is associated with the written word, RPGs relegate it to a secondary position in the process of textual production, as what Stenros calls "the role-playing text" – the procedurally created and performed oral narrative – is the primary function of the medium (2004: 78). Based on the written information taken from fixed, published and mostly printed texts, the playing group goes on to create a different form of textuality: oral, unseizable, ephemeral, and utterly private. This inherently hybrid state between the old and the new, the written/fixed and the spoken/ephemeral, the public and the private defines the medium and the experience of RPGs. It makes these story-games into a Postmodern medium producing parodies in the 'unfunny' sense of Hutcheon, "not the ridiculing imitations of the standard theories"

(Hutcheon, 1999: 26), merging established dichotomies into something new and original, creating a form of pastiches from a pastiche of forms.

The primacy of the oral narrative thereby highlights text as an unfixed and unstable potentiality of meaning, because none of the participants in the process can claim enough authority over the text created to alone define what is truth and what is not in the secondary reality, and there is also no physically existent text (book, video, film) after the moment of creation itself: As soon as it is created, RPG textuality is already lost and remains only as a cluster of different (and differing) interpretations in the subjective memories of the participants. The role-playing text therefore exists only through and during interaction with the other participants and the secondary reality. The seemingly transparent medium of storytelling – narrative and language – becomes opaque and visible: Players can see, experience, and participate in meaning-making first hand.

This interactive approach is also possible, because RPGs are story-games or game-stories, depending on a group's preference. The narrative structure of story and the freedom of play interact, and while narrative guarantees that the experience ends in a meaningful way, game lets the players navigate the narrative architecture created and make meaningful choices (agency). The simulational aspect of RPGs also faces players with the immediate consequences of their actions with an emotional impact no other medium can hope to achieve (immersion).

It could therefore be argued that the oral/performative medium of RPGs constitutes a Postmodern renaissance of the two oldest and decidedly pre-Modern forms of narrative creation – oral storytelling and performance. It was the invention of the printed word that amongst other things heralded the paradigmatic shift from the medieval, pre-Modern period of Western societies towards the early-Modern Renaissance era. Printing made knowledge available quickly, relatively cheaply, and to a wide audience: it pushed knowledge out into the world. Whereas knowledge earlier was mostly local, travelled slowly, was tightly controlled and steeped in ritual, it now was regional or even global, dispersed quickly, filling the available cultural space, largely free from control, be it political and/or religious. From a medial, a cultural perspective, it could therefore be argued that RPGs constitute a 'turn of the screw', a return to the old to create something new. By their very medial nature,

RPGs incarnate the presence of the past in the present, typical of the Postmodern condition: Their oral, performed, communal, and ritualistic procedural narrative is primary, integrating but also relegating the printed, written, individual, and commercial texts of the rule- and sourcebooks to a secondary position in the creative endeavour. While it is perfectly possible to have a pen&paper RPG without rule- or sourcebooks or any printed pre-text, I would argue that is impossible to do so without this special narrative situation, and I also did so with my classification of RPG experiences into three basic categories based on the predominant (not necessarily exclusive) platform of narrative creation: voice – storytelling a narrative text in pen&paper RPGs; body – performance of a dramatic event in LARPs; electronic devices – configuration of a virtual game state in CRPGs. On a conceptual level, RPGs can therefore be understood as a 're-volution', a closing of the circle. They constitute a violation of the Modern concept of linear progress and re-inscribe the pre-Modern concept of cyclical time, institutionalising the principle of the continuous return not only in their mediality, but also their organisational (regular meetings) and even narrative structure (creatively re-writing pre-texts through deconstruction and reconstruction). The difference and the evolutionary element in this return is that the medium is now *self-aware* in its opacity and hybridity: it draws the players into its powerful process to create awareness of the process itself. It is thus deeply Postmodern.

10.2 – The Narrative Situation: The Death of the Author?

In addition to the material platform, the narrative situation of RPGs reinforces their Postmodern character. The constant renegotiation of narrative content between players and Storyteller according to their creative agenda on the extra- as well as the intradiegetic level (or primary and secondary reality) highlights the aforementioned opacity of the medium while using the immersive immediacy of Realist transparency, thus "retaining (in its typically complicitously critical way) the historically attested power of both" (Hutcheon, 2000: 34) and denaturalising mediated 'reality' itself. In a process called 'frame-switching', first defined by Fine

(1983: 196) and later refined by Mackay (2001: 53), participants in an RPG session move fluently between various systems of reference.

Out of a deeply Postmodern incredulity towards metanarratives and a general distrust of monological authorial power, the latter is dispersed in the group and a plurilogical narrative situation, with an agreed-upon setting and system of rules acting as checks and balances for all participants, players and Storyteller alike. The (de-)localisation of the authorial voice can best be explained with a visual metaphor, I would like to call it the 'RPG diamond' (c.f. Figure 5).

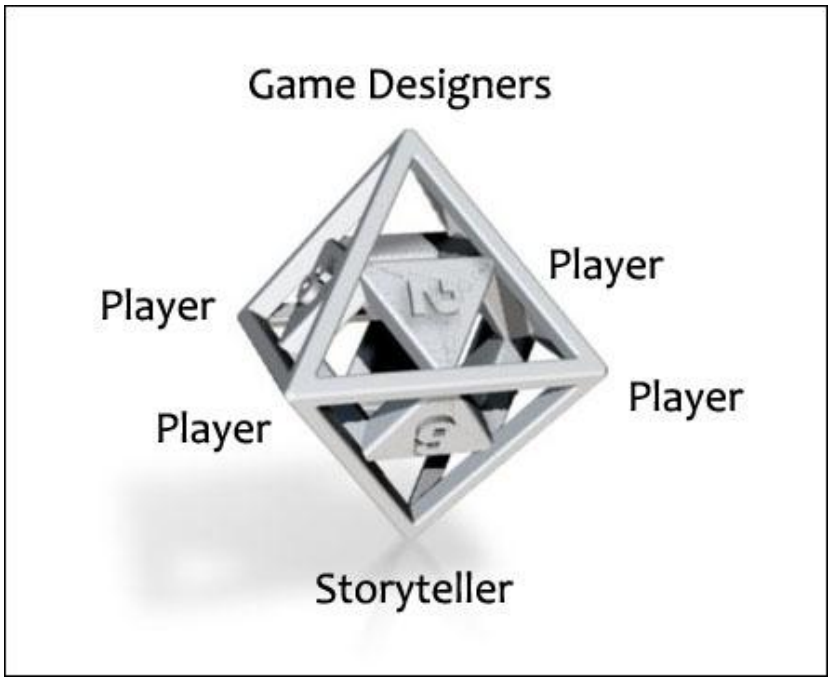

Figure 5: *The RPG Diamond (image taken from clsn, no date; my text)*

Imagine the published pre-texts, the rule- and sourcebooks authored by the designers, as the tip on one end of a three-dimensional diamond shape, the ST and his or her interpretation of these materials, as well as their preparations based on them as the tip on the other end, and the players with their individual interpretations of the material and their notes (including their characters) as the tips around the girth of the diamond – this then is the narrative and ludic imaginary space that is populated and filled by all of the participants. Game designers, STs, and players alike all contribute to the 'authorship' of the role-playing text. And where exactly are these authorial voices situated? They are hidden somewhere in a nebulous cloud of possibilities near the

centre of the RPG diamond, constantly flitting back and forth according to the dynamic development of the plurilogical narrative process.

Quantum theory has already come up as a metaphorical reference for RPGs before, and this is not a coincidence: What it did to the classic Newtonian concept of the universe and the scientific notion of reality, RPGs did to the classic concept of storytelling and the narrative notion of reality. Like the elusive electron, the authorial voice in the role-playing process remains unseizable due to a different kind of uncertainty principle.

Since the identity of the author in an RPG experience must by definition remain uncertain and his or her total absence an irreducible possibility, this immediately brings up the question of the role and the function of 'author' in the first place, leading directly into the Death of the Author debate going back to Roland Barthes's (in-)famous eponymous essay of 1968. Richard J. Lane admirably summarises Barthes's argument:

> The meaning of a text is no longer anchored in and explained by that point in time called 'author'; now the text is disentangled rather than deciphered, traversed rather than pierced. The multiplicity of 'writing' collects at the site known as 'reader': concomitant, then, with the death of the author is the birth of this reader as a site of multiplicities, as the destination (without end) of the text in all of its diversity. What does this reader experience in the process? The reader experiences intensities, the pleasure of the text, an erotics of reading texts that are always coming into being […].
> (Lane, 2006: 18)

The described disentangling and traversing of the text is very much reminiscent of Henry Jenkins's concept of games as narrative architecture and how the players make meaning from evoked and embedded narrative elements by enacting narrative scripts within the game space in an experience that ultimately produces an emergent narrative. The birth of the reader is given additional empowerment in RPGs by turning the reader into an interacting player (agency), and like Barthes's reader, the role-player also becomes the sole "destination (without end)" of the text, driven by the pleasure of not only witnessing but living the text-in-the-making (immersion).

But this Death of the Author is not to be conceived of as a destructive process at all, as one especially noteworthy approach and recent contribution to the more than forty year-old debate argues. In her book *The Deaths of the Author: Reading and Writing in Time* (2011), Jane Gallop re-writes the concept in a very Postmodern, ironic and productive way: "While 'the death of the author', as poststructuralist catchphrase, signified a way to rid the text of the author, I found that the author's death could make the reader think more not less about the author" (Gallop, 2011: 1). This is exactly the case for RPGs, as the Death of the Author that organises the whole medium and the narrative process that defines it is necessarily creative, not destructive. Gallop later also finds textual evidence that the final sentence of Barthes's essay that has (ironically) been quoted to death itself – "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes in Gallop, 2011: 30) – and that is frequently adopted by radical or militant 'anti-authoritarians', is relativized only three years later by the author himself: "The pleasure of the Text also includes a friendly return of the author", he writes in his introduction to *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* in 1971 (ibid.). This 'undeath' of the author is exactly the state of affairs in RPGs, where the asymmetrical distribution of discursive power at first glance would make the game designers or the ST the traditional author's successors, but during play this impression shifts drastically towards the players. In RPGs, we do not see the Death of the Author, but a rebirth of self-aware, collective, and empowered authorship. If anything, the narrative situation is not about death (or the absence of life), but since everyone involved contributes to the narrative, it is implicitly and explicitly about the presence of *life*. Its oral, procedural and communal nature that transcend the boundaries between author and reader based on agency and immersion bursts of life in comparison to even more experimental literary texts with their written/printed and fixed texts, and their rather solipsistic modes of production and reception.

10.3 – Intersemiotic Webs: A Hitchhiker's Guide to Mediality

RPGs are by their very nature an intersemiotic medium, as they bring together the processes and elements of narrative, as well as those of games. The ideological

debate between narratologists and ludologists that has been waged since the late 1990s has already been mentioned, and a point could be made that both camps miss an essential point that Henry Jenkins makes admirably: Contemporary culture is *convergence* culture (c.f. Jenkins, 2008). Media can no longer be separated from each other, since through the fundamental reorientation as far as theory, classification and categorisation are concerned that Postmodern thought has triggered, all definitions can and will be seen as insufficient and ultimately useless. Contemporary media exchange their features constantly and enrich each other, making new forms of expression possible that would have been unthinkable otherwise.

Leaving the black-and-white either/or approach behind and opting for a deeply Postmodern shades-of-grey both/and approach that helps the critical mind in structuring the experience of story-games, Tadhg Kelly - in a short piece in *Edge* magazine very humbly entitled "What Games Are" (2012) - suggests a quadrant graph to conceptualise the position of individual artefacts or even processes within them:[19]

> On the horizontal axis I place emergence vs. experience. I call this the 'frame' axis, because it's about the systems and mechanics of the game, irrespective of how it looks.
> [...]
> Meanwhile, role and rule are placed on the vertical axis. I call this the 'fantasy' axis, because it's about the importance of fiction, character and context.
> (Kelly, 2012: 148)

But the four axes only form a frame of reference to locate individual games, and, as the author remarks: "no lens tends to be wholly in the right" (2012: 148). His

[19] From this basic grid, Kelly goes on to define not two, but four basic concepts of how story, game, and simulation can interact in a way similar to Edwards's GNS/Big Model. The first basic type is Tetrism, where chaotic emergence and naked rules come together to form abstract games such as the name-giving TETRIS (1984). On the other end of the scale Kelly situates Narrativism that unites an auteurist pre-designed experience with the lure of playing a role in a coherent secondary reality that hides the rules. These games focus on the emotional impact and the immersion of the player, and show ambitions to tell story-arcs. Simulationism uses the immersive qualities of role, but applies them to open worlds fostering emergence. Ultimately these games are not meant to create stories but alternative realities. Their counterpart on the other tip of the quadrant graph is Behaviourism that produces games that are not concerned with story *or* simulation, but more with processes themselves, combining designed experiences with open rules. These can be found in gambling games or competitions, as well as in education or habit correction.

conclusion about how to make successful story-games that breathe a sense of wonder therefore is simple: "The secret to making great games seems to be to avoiding the extremes of any one lens – call it thaumatism", from Greek *thauma*, 'wonder' or 'miracle' (ibid.). Once again the Modern(-ist) separation into mutually exclusive and clear-cut categories is seen as insufficient to create the most Postmodern of all artefacts – story-games.

RPGs also bring in so many other intermedial / intersemiotic influences in their multi-facetted textualities. I would like to call them 'internal' intersemiotic relationships: They are not only 'literary games', they also include elements of board-games, table-top wargaming (still, or again), improvisational drama, film (if a group goes for a visual and cinematic style), and TV (through the cumulative, serialised narrative and the structure of the individual sessions). Other media from video to music enter the narrative process and make it multi-medial. And over the decades of its existence, the medium has also 'leaked' into other media in 'external' intersemiotic relationships, spawning more or less successful transmedial adaptations: in film - DUNGEONS & DRAGONS (2000) and two sequels (2005, 2012); on TV - DUNGEONS & DRAGONS (1983 – 1985) or KINDRED: THE EMBRACED (1996) based on *Vampire: The Masquerade*; video games – BALDUR'S GATE (1998) or VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – REDEMPTION and BLOODLINES (2000, 2004). I have already mentioned the whole web-based culture of playing by mail or by post in forums, the virtual gaming tables, and the attempt to use video conferencing for new and experimental RPG experiences.

But what is most essential about these intricate intersemiotic webs that *are* the medium RPG, is that whatever the platform or code used, RPGs always remain games that take on literary functions. They literally are what Hutcheon uses as a metaphor to describe the (philosophical and conceptual) language games that characterise the Postmodern and what I call her "joyful game[s] of meaning making" (Schallegger, 2001: 134).

10.4 – Social Functions: Democratic Art and Power Games

Elge Larsson, in his short but powerful essay simply entitled "Postmodernism" (2003), constructs a reading of the Postmodern that is primarily based on two central issues: the re-contextualisation of meaning, and the question of discursive/interpretative authority.[20] The idea of the subject being able to create an objective map of external reality is dismissed outright: "The simplest way to state what's wrong with the mapping representation of 'truth' is that it leaves out the mapmaker" (2003: 11). As reality is only ever accessible to the human mind through the mediation of its senses and preconceptions, 'truth' boils down to a question of interpretation: the Modern paradigm is replaced by a Postmodern one. Larsson identifies the insufficiencies of the Modern paradigm, and when he expands this idea to the levels of identity and society, he quickly makes an essential connection, not only for the discussion of RPGs as a Postmodern medium, but also of Postmodernism itself: "In the postmodern world every issue will turn into a question of who is master of the agenda, who get's [sic] to define the problem – that is: who got the power?" (Larsson, 2003: 12).[21]

RPGs constitute a deeply Postmodern medium, because, essentially, they are about the struggle to define what is real. They are procedural, so they are about the 'searching' not the finding – which is impossible anyway. They are contextual, as the group of people gathered, their identities, textual repertoires, and living conditions all colour the narrative process. They are about power, as the constant processes of translation and negotiation between all of the individual interests and perspectives

[20] These central ideas are presented early on in the text, when the author establishes the groundwork for his later deliberations: "For me the postmodern paradigm is primarily about transcending the cartesian dualism, realizing that the subject doesn't exist outside of context", he writes (2003: 10), and then goes on to deconstruct the paradigm of representation that he sees as central to Enlightenment (and Modern) philosophy.

[21] Larsson elaborates on these ideas as follows: "So we have defined the postmodern paradigm as the insight that everything is contextual, everything depends on everything, and wherever you look the only thing you see is your opinion of what is there to see. Das Ding an Sich is more elusive than ever, because now we know that it remains forever hidden behind the searching for it. The world is not there to find anymore – it's for you to define it. The one thing that is stable is the search for power to decide the agenda – which means that the fundamentalists have got something right: now more than ever is power the defining tool." (2003: 13)

highlight the distribution and dynamics of discursive and social power. RPGs are, therefore, the quintessential Postmodern medium – a contradiction in terms on a philosophical level.

Larsson expands his argument, originally developed for LARP, but equally – or even more so – applicable to the language games of pen&paper RPGs, in his conclusions:

> Participatory arts reclaims creativity for Everybody. The socially isolated artist, the creative genius was a product of modernistic individualism. The creative collective and the collective creating of the larpers is an expression of postmodernity. The modern individualism was always something for an elect group, the elite. Participatory arts returns to an [sic] much older and more profound truth: You are the creator of your own world.
> (Larsson, 2003: 14)

This then is the social function of RPGs as art: tearing down the inherently undemocratic icons of Modernist creative genius and elitist art, and replacing them with a re-written pre-Modern, popular and collective understanding of art and its purpose.

Playing an RPG is a process of collective creation of artefacts that are aesthetically pleasing to the group: It is art in everyday life and open to everyone, no genius required. The border between art and life is suspended, not erased, the "conflation of high art and mass culture" described by Hutcheon (2000: 28) becomes reality and constitutes a clear and conscious move away from Modernist artistic and cultural hermeticism and élitism. Their formal structure gives RPGs an intriguing social function: They become intra- and extradiegetic reflections on the use and abuse of discursive power as well as the power of discourse, and they make visible and critically engage the constructed nature of reality, subjectivity and identity as gamers constantly switch between various frames of reference, extradiegetic roles and intradiegetic characters.

In *Generations 4* and *5* of RPGs, the issue of balancing discursive power sometimes even becomes a central part of the rules and the system itself. *Vermine* (2004) by Julien Blondel and *Agon* (2006) by John Harper both restrict the power of the Storyteller with point contingents that they either have to earn by playing the game

according to the tastes of the players, thus turning the traditional experience system of RPGs on its head (*Vermine*), or that depend on the power of characters as well as the preferred playing style of the group (*Agon*). Reciprocity, translation, negotiation, and interdependence become core mechanisms of the social, formal, and narrative system itself making it impossible to precisely locate authorial power in the process. No one individual is in control, even if the narrative production is highly structured: Order and purpose emerge organically from a self-organising system oscillating continually between the autonomous and the autogenous ends of the spectrum of possibilities.

The players, constantly switching frames of reference and the roles they play – literally or metaphorically, become aware of the structures of power governing their lives in a playful and ambiguous way. They are empowered to take back their voices, to exert free will constrained by social necessities. As everyone becomes an artist, everyone becomes a potential critic of the social circumstances, in secondary reality at first, but the awareness created and the skills acquired can and will be used in primary reality as well. RPGs are therefore a medium whose formal nature is about the power of discourse and how to apply it. They are deeply Postmodern, and as a communal and collective medium, they are deeply democratic in a way Modern(-ist) media and artforms cannot be.

11 – Stories About Stories: The Postmodern Content of RPGs

Not only the formal aspects of RPGs express the Postmodern condition and its precarious relationship with authority. The content and background of many RPGs both reinforce the message. To take a closer look at this level of the RPG experience, it will be helpful to answer the second set of questions defined in the introduction:

> Can the strong orientation towards religion, mythology, mysticism and magic in the medium's contents be seen as a hint to a non-religious ritual function hidden behind the entertainment aspect? Could such a collective, cooperative and configurative reflection of the values and norms of our societies lead to a new understanding of what society can be and ultimately the Postmodern itself?
> (Schallegger, 2012: 7)

11.1 – Swallowing the Red Pill: RPGs as Critical Texts

When the medium RPG was first codified as such with *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), it did not look like it, but it would soon move away from a purely entertainment-oriented function, and engage in a critical and meaningful dialogue with social and cultural issues.

Even very early examples such as *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975), whose overwhelmingly complex world of Tékumel was created by M.A.R. Barker as "an intellectual exercise" over several decades (Arneson, 1987: 3), or *Chivalry and Sorcery* (1977), with its fully functional feudal society based on meticulous historical research in primary reality (Simbalist and Backhaus, 1983a: 2), show an abstract concern about societies and how they work: their power structure, world view, rituals. The ultimate breakthrough for RPGs as a fully functional socio-culturally aware and critical medium came with *Ars Magica* (1987), when Jonathan Tweet and Mark Rein•Hagen put an explicit reference to the reflective nature of their game into their introduction (c.f. Tweet and Rein•Hagen, 1989: 2). And while *Shadowrun* (1989) let its players experience the horrors of a Gibson-esque near-future dystopia of wage-slaves, corporate tyranny, and artificial food for the masses (resulting in a select few revolting and becoming outlaws, or Shadowrunners, attacking self-same system), it was in *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) that this socio-cultural critique became the single dominant *raison d'être* for the game and its guiding design principle.

Starting during the late 1980s and all through the early 1990s, highly critical RPGs appeared, such as Ray Winninger's *Underground* (1993) with its bitingly ironic comments on the state of US society and politics at the time. These texts picked up issues relevant to the societies that produced them and that they reflected. If it had been debatable earlier, there was no longer any doubt: RPGs had truly become an artform engaging in the aesthetic reflection and critique of society. Since then, strong RPG sub-societies have developed in most Western societies: the US (*Dungeons & Dragons*, the *World of Darkness* games), Canada (*Tribe 8*, *Mechanical Dream*), Germany (*Das Schwarze Auge*, *Engel*, and also translations of several leading games), France (*Nephilim*, *Guildes*, *Agone*), or Scandinavia (*Kult*, *Gemini*), just to name a few. In each of these socio-cultural contexts, RPGs became artistically and critically interesting

'con-texts', comments or even countertexts to social and cultural developments that pervaded their societies and were seen as problematic.

In Canadian RPGs, nature dominates the scene: It is vast, mysterious, unknowable, immensely powerful and inherently hostile to human (or other intelligent) life. Whereas the characters sit in their little 'garrison' of Vimary in *Tribe 8* (1998), an almost unmarked post-apocalyptic re-writing of Montréal aka Ville-Marie, afraid of the wilderness that surround them and completely isolated from other communities out there, it is the very nature of nature itself that becomes a mystery in *Mechanical Dream* (2002) as pockets of reality governed by reason co-exist with a chaotic and inhuman world of gigantic trees and deadly flora and fauna. Here the oft-quoted 'garrison mentality' of Canadians (c.f. Frye, 1995: 227) clashes with the utterly different US-American conception of nature as 'wild': something deadly to fear vs. something untamed to conquer. US-American RPGs, like the *World of Darkness* games, talk to their players about issues of freedom of choice and individuality. Their French counterparts differ from both North-American and other texts not only in their very lyrical, poetic quality, but also show a shift in their conception of Fantasy away from the Celto-Germanic Middle-Ages of Tolkien and his successors that dominate the genre in Anglo-Saxon and the Germanic countries, towards Renaissance and Baroque settings, a move that could well be connected to the cultural dominance of these ages in French culture.

No longer only games for entertainment, RPGs have become *artefacts* – 'that which is created with art' – of their respective cultures that reflect and reflect upon their identifying features. They have become platforms for socio-cultural debates, and in some cases, as I will explain later, also battlegrounds for the Culture Wars.

11.2 – Metafiction: RPGs as Joyful Games of Story-Making

RPGs are not only fiction contextualised in awareness of their sociocultural setting, they are also, by necessity, metafiction. I use this term, in reference to Hutcheon's understanding of it, for 'fiction about fiction', texts that reveal not only their own textuality, but elements of textuality in general, its processes and mechanisms. On a

macro-level, these artefacts focus on the concepts of society, culture, and ideology, on a micro-level questions of identity and subjectivity emerge as central concerns. Ultimately, they show us that all meaning is made, created, and not natural. They therefore abolish the notion of truth and in extension originality completely (c.f. Hutcheon, 1999: 109).

RPGs are instances of metafiction, exemplifying the process of Postmodern textual creation as such. They also thrive on intertextuality, 'cannibalising' pre-texts and 'growing' new meanings from their 'digested' raw materials according to the needs of the game, its designers and players. Artefacts of popular culture, history, and mythology are equally appropriated, taken apart, and recombined. The complex web of intersemiotic relations, of inter- and intramedial references spun around RPGs shows a rich repertoire of pre-texts that are de-contextualised, deconstructed into basic iconic building-blocks of meaning - Mackay's "imaginary strips of behaviour" (2001: 80), only to be reassembled and re-contextualised.

Media or genre boundaries, intellectual property and textual authority are disregarded with Postmodern nonchalance, cross-fertilisation often openly acknowledged by the authors of rulebooks. The Storytelling games of the *World of Darkness* series have established a tradition to indicate the pre- and intertexts as part of the rulebook, so that Storytellers and players can identify the origins of settings, characters and plots and expand their textual repertoires accordingly. Especially among indie-RPG designers that show a pronounced experimental interest in the medium, acknowledgement of pre-texts is common and has almost become part of etiquette. Harper writes at the very end of his *Agon*-rulebook: "And when I say [this game is] 'inspired by' I mean 'shamelessly stolen from'. This is a Frankenstein game, and I am not ashamed to say so. I've benefited greatly from the geniuses of game design that came before me" (Harper, 2006: 101). A courtesy returned in 2008 by Gregor Hutton when he in turn borrows extensively from *Agon's* rules to create his own award-winning indie-RPG *3:16 – Carnage Among the Stars* (Hutton, 2008: 96). This is how fiction and meaning-making works according to a Postmodern logic: taking what is there, and using it to create something new from it. The result is a constant cycle of creation, destruction, and recreation, of textual life, death, and rebirth. RPGs, as a Postmodern medium, no longer hide this process behind ideas of intellectual

property or artistic genius. They – fully self-aware - even *highlight* the nature of their texts as only links in an unbroken chain of storytelling.

11.3 – Re-Writing: RPGs as Carnival of the Mind

In RPGs, familiar and mostly pre-existing elements and concepts are unashamedly picked up, creatively recombined (pastiche) or rewritten (irony) in a process that not only establishes the opacity of the medium and the power of discourse, but only uses, even abuses them. Nothing is created *ex nihilo*, creation is always necessarily based on something, contextualised with its socio-cultural environment.

The secondary realities and textualities created become distorting mirrors to our own, primary reality (or realities, if you are a Postmodernist). They comment on our societies, our behaviours, our identities, and they do so using a 'time-out' mechanism: by transposing their comment and critique into secondary or tertiary realities, their breaking of norms, deconstruction of values, and questioning of authority does not happen 'in real life', it does not impact the real day-to-day existence of the participants. It happens in an enclosed space, both socially, as well as narratively. No real transgression is committed, as all is just make-believe.

RPGs are or rather provide Carnivalesque Third Spaces or ritual liminal spaces. In these in-between-spaces, dreams, fantasy, and insanity temporarily reign supreme and 'anything goes' - a catchphrase of Postmodernism that indicates its explosive, creative potential. Through their narrative situation, RPGs therefore privilege decentred perspectives, negotiating the resulting individualisation of reality with the need for a consensual space of interaction in society. Without consensus there is no communication, without communication there is no society. But this consensus can no longer be imposed from above, it *will* be negotiated from below. Again, RPGs emerge as a grass-roots democratic medium, similar to the rituals of Carnival.

The lax handling of intellectual property is part of this larger context of RPGs that Mackay describes on the extradiegetic level and also identifies as the Bakhtinian Carnivalesque (Mackay, 2001: 71): gamer subsociety in opposition to society at large. It also informs the texts themselves, produced by both authors of rulebooks and

players alike. In an atmosphere of controlled transgression players spin tales of 'what if' separated from, and often in opposition to 'official' society and culture. The fictitious actions taken do not endanger the player's social position, the narrative situation in all its privacy protects from real-life repercussions. Many RPGs, especially those developed since the early 1990s, focus on marginalised perspectives. In the *World of Darkness* games that together with *D&D* account for the vast majority of RPGs played, characters are the monsters of folk-lore: vampires, werewolves, or ghosts. In *Tribe 8* (1998), the PCs are outcasts who fight a guerrilla war against a theocracy in post-apocalyptic Montréal. Even *Dungeons and Dragons* with its system of alignments allows for the playing of evil characters, although it openly favours the traditional heroic mode of gaming.

RPGs are thus fundamentally expressions of the Carnival of the Mind, the Postmodern topsy-turvy world of questioned authority that, aware of the crushing weight of the systems of power in place in primary reality, have relocated their dissent and subversive deconstruction into a secondary reality, slowly letting it trickle back into the primary one, the real target of the evolutionary change aimed at.

11.4 – Ideologies: RPGs as Battlefields of the Cultural Wars

Even if the Carnival of the Mind RPGs create is not always and exclusively populated with outcasts and dissenters, the stories they produce thematise the use and abuse of power: the power to define reality both as players co-creating a story and as characters making decisions and moral choices based on interpretations of what appears to be right or wrong in a given context.

The Postmodern distrust of master-narratives surfaces in RPGs when national, religious and political ideologies are questioned and their fault-lines explored, and the medium becomes part of or battlefield for the so-called Culture Wars. James Davison Hunter defines this unarmed but nonetheless almost savage conflict as being driven by the tension between two different impulses, that "describe in shorthand a particular locus and source of moral truth, the fundamental (though perhaps subconscious) moral allegiances of the actors involved […] as well as their cultural

and political dispositions" (Hunter, 1991: 96 – 97). These two sides are frequently described by the political tags 'liberal' and 'conservative', Hunter – very befittingly – uses a terminology with religious overtones: progressive and orthodox. While "orthodoxy […] is the commitment on the part of the adherents to an external, definable, and transcendent authority", "what all progressivist world views share in common is the tendency to resymbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life" (both Hunter, 1991: 97). The orthodox belief in absolute, transcendent authority, and therefore Truth, clearly puts it in conflict with the progressivist concepts of constant (re-)contextualisation and evolution. These camps are functional categories for group identities beyond traditional, content-oriented allegiances: An orthodox Jew and a conservative Catholic, or even a fundamentalist Muslim, might have more in common than the same orthodox Jew with a secular one. "But these institutional alliances", Hunter claims, "are *culturally* significant", since they determine the dynamics of this secret war (1991: 99). Anderson himself actually ups the number of conflicting worldviews in Western societies from two to four:

> These four worldviews are (a) the postmodern-ironist, which sees truth as socially constructed; (b) the scientific-rational, in which truth is 'found' through methodical, disciplined inquiry; (c) the social-traditional in which truth is found in the heritage of American and Western Civilization; and (d) the neo-romantic in which truth is found either through attaining harmony with nature and/or spiritual exploration of the inner self.
> (Anderson, 1995d: 111)

All of these co-exist and compete for power in contemporary "multireality society" (ibid.), and Anderson links them to ideological positions of a Pre-Modern, the Modern, or a Postmodern mind-set as follows (1995: 111): The scientific-rational Humanists and Sceptics frequently ally with the social-traditional Nationalists and religious Conservatives under the banners of Modernity, opposing the postmodern-ironist playful deconstruction and/or constructivist re-writings of the Postmodernists. The neo-romantic New Agers and Environmentalists oppose both of these camps, looking towards a 'Lost Golden Age' in Pre-Modern, pre-Industrial and pre-Enlightenment times. Our societies are therefore battlegrounds between several

opposing ideologies, and RPGs, as largely postmodern-ironist artefacts, are right in the middle of these conflicts, reacting directly to the fault-lines of national, social, and religious ideologies that show under the resulting strain.

So the essential US-American myths of scientific progress and personal freedom are deconstructed by Mark Rein•Hagen's dark and labyrinthine *World of Darkness* where behind the seemingly safe, rational and scientific reality lurks a world of magic – the *real* world - where humanity is nothing but pawns in the power struggles of ancient and magical immortal beings, and players no longer take over the roles of the heroes hunting the monsters, but the monsters themselves, twisting the Neo-cons' Self/Other dichotomy used to stabilise their regimes and turning it against them (c.f. Fukuyama, 1998). The French RPG *Guildes* (1996), published by now defunct Multisim and reacting openly to Structuralist and Poststructuralist systemic readings of society, establishes a Secondary World that is literally a strategy boardgame played by unnamed and god-like Powers that move the characters over the board of the world until El Dorado appears, a former pawn and now self-made Power, come to reinstate the human dimension to the power games. In *Agone* (1999), also published by Multisim in Cartesian and rationalistic France, inspiration, the arts and dreams are the only effective weapons in a Cultural War of the most literal kind against a divine being and master of Realpolitik about to make the entire world a stage and humanity mere actors in his dramas. Reason remains helpless, inspiration and creation is seen as the only possibility for mass empowerment and the last way out from silenced obeisance. And in the Québécois game *Tribe 8*, the designers put the players into the shoes of outcasts who have to put an end to the theocratic regime of self-declared divinities, the Fatimas, that once saved humanity from a great terror, but have now become a greater terror still, as they do not tolerate dissenting voices or doubt about the dogma they preach. Certainly, this is not an innocent design choice in a land that has gone through the Quiet Revolution, shaking the shackles of the Catholic church after 300 years to create an open and vibrant society out of a stifling *de facto* theocracy.

Examples like these show that RPGs are not only Postmodern artefacts on a formal level, but also on the level of content, unashamedly drawing elements from a rich network of intersemiotic relations, favouring marginalised perspectives and

questioning master-narratives. They are hotbeds of the Cultural Wars between liberal/progressive and orthodox/conservative forces that have been waged more openly and brutally in our societies since the conservative backlash of the Reagan/Bush years in the US and the Thatcher/Majors governments in the UK. They are collective, creative, and dissenting voices that will not be silenced.

12 – Revolution or Bohème?: The Socio-cultural Relevance of RPGs

After the formal and the content aspect of how RPGs interact with Postmodernism, what is left is the socio-cultural context of the medium and its political (or apolitical) aspect. These are at the heart of my third and last set of questions that I seek to answer:

> Are RPGs a symptom of a fundamental change in the culture of meaning-making in our societies, an expression of Postmodern voices in all their ambiguous, marginal and fragmented nature, or does the medium only provide non-electronic but nonetheless virtual Bohèmes, social and artistic spaces that contain and disperse dissent in a manner tolerated and condoned by the system?
> (Schallegger, 2012: 7)

In a very Postmodern way, there are no easy answers to these questions.

Role-playing games were created as a new medium during the 1970s, at about the same time the radical shift in the perception and construction of reality initiated by World War II and felt in most Western societies was described in a diverse body of theories – theories of the Postmodern. The utter textualisation of human experience, the reliance on language games for meaning-making, and the resulting "incredulity towards meta-narratives" (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv) at the core of the Postmodern condition find their echo in the cooperative story-game hybrid medium of the RPG that dislocates authorial power from the centre to disperse it in an improvised, oral and plurilogical narrative process. From its origins in wargaming the medium has grown in diversity and complexity and has eventually started to exploit the possibilities of information technology, evolving into a serious and experimental

platform for the reflection of socio-political issues, while still retaining its original entertainment impulses.

Since the 1990s, RPG Theory has analysed the complex interplay of the social contract, the written and oral textualities produced, as well as player agency and immersion within the Secondary Worlds created and beyond. Both gamers and academics – and sometimes both in one person - have tried to come to a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted narrative situation RPGs develop from the interaction of participants' creative agendas with the various frames of reference involved and what they could mean for the socio-cultural context they inhabit.

RPGs as a medium reflect core concepts of Postmodern literary and cultural theory. The renaissance of oral storytelling, the production of ephemeral textual potentialities, the active co-creation of meaning in a plurilogical communication situation defined by constant renegotiation of content and frame-switching, all these formal aspects convene to create a medium that overcomes the Modernist separation between art and life, thematising the power of discourse and the construction of meaning as well as subjectivity and identity. The content of RPGs shows a dense network of intersemiotic relations, a rich pastiche of pre-texts beyond genre and media boundaries. It often favours de-centred, marginalised perspectives in a setting of controlled transgression reminiscent of the Bakhtinian Carnivalesque, and in its deeply rooted distrust of power explores the fault-lines of cultural, national and political master-narratives, making it a battleground of the Cultural Wars.

The Postmodern emerges from RPGs as a return of the pre-Modern, but with a deep sense of self-awareness and awareness of the mechanisms and constraints of the processes of meaning-making, as well as the distribution of discursive power within a given (sub-)society. As commercial products they are not *art-pour-l'art* created in and destined for a sphere cut-off from 'real' life: They are incarnations of a consumerist ethos of production and consumption using and abusing its structural logic to reach out to everyone and make everyone an artist. As games, they happen in the free space of movement within the given structure, providing players with agency and immersing them in the powerful experience of meaning-making. If everyone can make meaning, gone is the concept of textual authority – Whose truth is worth more

and why? – and what matters is only the distribution of discursive power. This central issue of Postmodernism is reflected in the cooperative and negotiated process that brings forth the ephemeral role-playing text. Power is invested in individuals by the community, not from on high. There is nothing natural in a given distribution of power, it *can* and *will* change. It constantly fluctuates. RPGs are, above all, power games: games about the power of the social contract, the power of language. They are language games in the most literal sense. They give people back their voice through the pseudo-ritual enactment of *communitas* and their inherent reflection upon the Self/Other dichotomy: "A Beast I am, lest a Beast I become" is the central phrase in *The Book of Nod*, the 'vampire bible' created by White Wolf from re-readings and re-writings of texts from scripture – the ultimate act of the defiance of textual authority that constitutes the setting for the RPG that changed the medium (Chupp and Greenberg, 1993: 18).

But are RPGs really revolutionary in their potential to change our societies, or are they just escapist and Bohemian parallel realities that contain dissenting voices, under the watchful eye of the Powers-That-Be so that their subversive qualities do not spill into primary reality? Looking at the present account of Postmodern thought, the only justifiable answer to this questions is that it is not *applicable*, that it is 'wrong' to begin with. The question itself is a Modernist either/or question, it can never hope to create understanding of a Postmodern medium such as RPGs or a Postmodern situation. The only answer that can therefore be provided is: Yes. RPGs produce a strong, subversive, evolutionary, even revolutionary potential, and they are also entertainment, escapism, Bohème. The best proof that they *are* indeed a deeply Postmodern medium is exactly this 'and', this little but decisive word that differentiates best between a Modern(-ist) and a Postmodern(-ist) mind-set. Linda Hutcheon managed quite well to put Postmodernism in a nutshell when she talked about the "paradoxical postmodernism of complicity and critique" (2000: 11). RPGs are *both and neither*, therefore they are Postmodern, and because they are Postmodern, they are also inherently and irreducibly *political*. The moment and circumstances of their emergence as a new medium are most likely not arbitrary, but indeed symptoms of a profound paradigmatic shift that seized Western societies at the time.

Role-playing Games therefore truly are joyful games of meaning-making in the most literal ludic and literary sense.

Glossary of Abbreviations

AD&D – *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*

C&S – *Chivalry & Sorcery*

CCG – Collectible Card Game

CCP – Crowd Control Productions

CRPG – Computer Role-Playing Game

D20 – Twenty-sided Die

D&D – *Dungeons & Dragons*

DDI – *Dungeons & Dragons Insider*

DM – Dungeon Master

DSA – *Das Schwarze Auge*

DTP – Desk-Top Publishing

EPT – *Empire of the Petal Throne*

FUDGE – Freeform Universal Donated (or Do-it-yourself) Gaming Engine

GDS – Game/Drama/Simulation

GM – Gamemaster

GNS – Game/Narrative/Simulation

GSL – Game System License

GURPS – Generic Universal Role-Playing System

ICE – Iron Crown Enterprises

IP – Intellectual Property

LARP – Live-Action Role-Playing

MERP – *Middle-Earth Role-playing*

MMORPG – Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game

MUD – Multi-User Dungeon

NPC – Non-player Character

OGL – Open Game License

P&P – Pen and Paper

PC – Player Character

RPG – Role-Playing Game

RQ – *Rune Quest*

SIS – Shared Imagined Space

SSoI – Shared Space of Imagining

ST – Storyteller

TSR – Tactical Studies Rules

WotC – Wizards of the Coast

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