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Roleplaying Games in the Digital Age

Essays on Transmedia Storytelling, Tabletop RPGs and Fandom

Edited by Stephanie Hedge and Jennifer Grouling

STUDIES IN GAMING
Series Editor Matthew Wilhelm Kapell

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Secondly, we’d like to thank the players and creators at all the tables featured in this book. Thank you to all of the role players who pulled up a chair for our research and generously granted permission for us to apply a critical lens to their fun games of Dungeons & Dragons. Thank you to the fan-artists, game designers, and podcaster who gave us amazing creations to enjoy and study. Special thanks to all of our interview participants who thoughtfully and generously shared their thoughts on creating, storytelling, and transmedia TRPGs: Isaac Childres, Nikki Valens, Nolan T. Jones, Griffin McElroy, Alex Schlitz, and Tracey Alvarez.

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Finally, we’d like to thank all of those who continue to create new and inviting tabletops, who continue to weave stories out of nothing, including all of those who will be inspired by the wonderful essays featured here.
Sample file
On any given Saturday in the mid–2000s, you could find Jennifer and five friends gathered around a dining room table deeply engaged in the adventures of her dragon-born sorceress Whisper and her companions Cuthalion, Maureen, David, and Fletch. Together they negotiated with orcs for the safety of the local town, played songs at the Foppish Wererat tavern, investigated mysteries in the town of Gateway, and fought evil along the way. Scott, the Game Master (GM), led their adventures in a world he created called Sorpreador and each session built on the story started at the last gathering. Their collaborative storytelling was guided by the D&D gaming system: a pen-and-paper character sheet indicated scores that affected how likely they were to succeed at certain tests of strength or will and the physical roll of the dice helped determine the outcome of the characters’ actions. The player characters (PCs) were physically represented by metal miniature figurines on a large physical game mat where the GM could draw outlines of settings with an erasable marker. Play was ephemeral: the text created by each session existed only in the memories of the participants, fading over time like those ever-stubborn marker lines on the “erasable” game mat.

During the course of these fictional adventures, Jennifer embarked on the real-life adventure of graduate school. During her first semester, she was assigned a project on narrative analysis and the text of her D&D game stood out as worthy of study. However, at the time there was little research on tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs), and others initially balked at the idea of analyzing this type of text. But what started as a seminar paper evolved into a master’s thesis and eventually a book that is now well-known for its contribution to role-playing game studies. The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games defined the TRPG as a rhetorical genre, one that focused not on traditional narrative forms but on narrative experience. Drawing on her own experience with the Sorpraedor campaign as well as several one-shot adventures, Jennifer stressed that it was not the form of D&D that made it a narrative but rather the experience of the players (Grouling Cover, 2010, p. 87). She expanded this idea by surveying tabletop role-players about why they played both TRPGs and their computer counterparts and concluded that TRPGs provided a sense of narrative agency—a control over the story—that was simply not possible in the digital world.

And then she walked away … divorced the GM, remarried, started researching
writing assessment instead of games, and didn’t even play TRPGs for years. Meanwhile, the TRPG, which she referred to as a genre that occupied “a marginal status within both society and academia” (Grouling Cover, 2010, p. 177) grew, thrived, and changed in ways she never could have envisioned.

* * *

On Sunday mornings in 2017, Stephanie could be found curled over her laptop, smashing through evil-doers (and nefarious gerblins) with Tiefling fighter Anahi-ta’s flaming sword, protecting her squishier companions Lupin, Ffion, Lysander, Binni, and Luka in a game of Dungeons & Dragons. The characters for this campaign, dubbed “Kairos” by GM Amber, were rolled from a D&D app that provided backgrounds, races, classes, and backstories at random. Steph’s laptop stands in for her physical tabletop as she and her friends connect across time zones, countries, and continents; erasable maps and metal mini-figures are replaced by detailed digital maps and hand-drawn digital art from player Tracey. Pen-and-paper character sheets are updated to digital, where the sheet itself keeps records and does the math to figure out how hard a sword hits, or how stealthily shadows creep, and hit points update automatically. Steph and her friends separate out-of-character (OOC) conversation from in-character (IC) role-playing by switching from IC voice chat to OOC text messages. All text chat messages live eternally on the Discord server; all maps, objects, and secret notes are saved in Roll20; and all gameplay audio is recorded and edited by player Eleanor, creating a permanent, stable record of the shared narrative.

Sitting in a coffee shop with Jennifer in 2018, Steph walked her through the features of Roll20.net, pointing out the ways the site works to replicate the “around the table” feeling—text, voice, and video chat features, robust and flexible maps, dice rollers, spell cards, mini-figures, soundtracks, and an emphasis on collaboration and play. Steph and Jennifer began to suspect that there might be something here to explore—a new way of creating narrative in tabletop role-playing games, both an extension and complication of the traditional analog game style. When Steph introduced Jennifer to the actual-play D&D podcast The Adventure Zone, and the collaborative, complex, and engaging narrative of Taako, Magnus, and Merle, it solidified their conviction that digital media had done something transformative to the idea of tabletop role-playing, and that there was a need for new scholarship that explored these digital affordances and the resultant transmedia narratives.

Whether your own experience with TRPGs fits more with Jennifer’s face-to-face play or Steph’s digital interactions, this book offers you the opportunity to expand your perspective on tabletop role-playing and collaborative storytelling. Through interdisciplinary essays that explore notions of canon and authorship, fan-created transformative works, the digital tools supporting tabletop role-playing, and the practice of creating narratives through games, this collection of essays offers a snapshot of the contemporary landscape of digital TRPGs and expands ongoing conversations about what it means to tell stories in a transmedia age. In Spring 2020, as Jennifer and Steph put the final edits on this edition during the COVID-19 global pandemic, both were sheltering in place in different states. Although we don’t know yet how this crisis will change the world, we do know—now more than ever—that the power and promise of shared storytelling and the ability of digital TRPGs is vital to connecting players, fans, and all those who are looking for a table.
Cultural, Technological and Disciplinary Shifts

A lot has changed in the landscape of D&D and tabletop role-playing since Jennifer published her book in 2010, as digital media catapulted this formerly marginalized game from basements into the mainstream. Broadly, the current cultural relationship to Dungeons & Dragons is a far cry from the fear-mongering and devil-worshipping panic of the mid–80s, where participation in D&D was seen as cult-like and dangerous—a stance perhaps best explored in the 1982 made-for-TV movie Mazes and Monsters starring Tom Hanks, wherein the protagonist finds himself unable to distinguish between the real world and the world of the game, with deadly results. The most salient contemporary example of D&D finding a way into the mainstream consciousness is the show Stranger Things, the Netflix streaming service cult hit that brought four children, their D&D game, and their D&D BBEG (Big Bad Evil Guy) into homes across the world.

Online, actual-play podcasts and live-streams like The Adventure Zone and Critical Role have built enormous, enthusiastic audiences—both shows now do live tours to screaming fans in cosplay; The Adventure Zone has upwards of 6 million downloads a month and remains at the top of the Apple podcast charts, while a Critical Role Kickstarter raised 11 million dollars in 46 days, breaking Kickstarter records with over 88,000 individual pledges. A search for actual-play podcasts (shows where the main entertainment value is listening to people play D&D) turns up results in the triple digits, with more shows being added every day. The proliferation of this style of podcast has led to a need for organization and genre categorizing—for example, the website RPGCasts.com exists to be “your best and biggest resource for currently-releasing RPG podcasts! We make it easy to find podcasts featuring women, non-binary people, LGBTQ+, people of color, women of color, and people with disabilities. Currently at over 400+ pods listed,” and the site provides extensive tags for their catalog, allowing interested users to find a podcast by length, topic, and a diversity of hosts or players. From long-running shows like Critical Hit, Rusty Quill Gaming, Friends at the Table or Live from the Magic Tavern to increasingly diverse outings like Exqueerience Points (with an all queer cast) or Fate and the Fable Maidens, an all women, family-friendly podcast, it seems that there is an actual-play podcast for every listener. This explosive growth of actual-play podcasts has led to greater interest in playing D&D (if for no other reason than to make a podcast about it).

TRPGs, and D&D specifically, have become easier to access and easier to learn. The proliferation of digital tools and access to tabletop role-playing game materials and play-spaces has enabled this tabletop renaissance. Sites like Roll20, Fantasy Grounds, and Tabletop Simulator make it possible to play with friends around the world across a virtual table, offering complex maps, in-game music apps, and robust character sheets, as well as communities to find players and games to join. These digital tabletops support other TRPGs and even board games, but Roll20 reports that 54 percent of all campaigns on their platform are D&D 5th Edition (Hall, 2019). This is, in part, due to the ease of learning 5th Edition D&D, which Wizards of the Coast released in 2014 as a streamlined, accessible game system that removed many of the complexities from the 4th edition and made it easier for new and returning players to jump in. They also released D&D Beyond in 2017, an officially licensed Wizards of the Coast digital compendium and a feature-rich app that brings together all of the official material published for D&D 5th Edition, a thriving fan and homebrew community, and even provides a pronunciation guide for monsters and races. Through this app, players can learn rules, build characters,
and create campaigns all in one spot. Unofficial D&D apps and guides have also proliferated; a search for “Dungeons & Dragons” on the Google Play app store returns hundreds of apps, from dice rollers to dungeon creators to hit point trackers to dungeon crawl playlists, each app designed to streamline all or a part of playing D&D. Guides for on-boarding new players abound, including fan-created wikis and Twitch channels. Actual-play streaming show Critical Role hosts a YouTube show called “Handbooker Helper,” where mini-episodes act as short introductions to D&D mechanics and features, easily onboarding newer players with succinct descriptions of features like Feats or class-based character builds, demonstrating how fans might move from consuming D&D content to playing on their own. Digital access supports a thriving homebrew community—from reddit communities dedicated to sharing campaign settings and guides to the fan-run dndwiki.com, which collects thousands of homebrew races, spells, backgrounds, equipment, creatures, and more. Funded through digital subscription company Patreon, groups like MacGuffin and Company produce system-neutral game settings and narratives that can be played via D&D or other game engines, while digital forums and distribution methods have supported a flourishing game development community on sites like itch.io—take the game Honey Heist by Grant Howitt for example, a powered by the apocalypse game based on the Apocalypse World engine where players create characters who are actual, literal bears infiltrating a honey convention in, well, a honey heist. PDFs of the central rules, character sheets, and GM notes are freely accessible online.

In short, it has never been easier to learn the complex game-system of D&D, never been easier to find community and groups to play with, and it has never been easier to say, “I love Dungeons & Dragons.” For good reason then, this collection skews toward studies of D&D specifically, although individual essays deal with other TRPGs.

These cultural and technological transformations, and the proliferation and popularity of D&D, have led to a growing field of scholarship on role-playing games, digital narratives, and transmedia storytelling. As the audience for tabletop games has grown, the nature of this work has shifted from the removed ethnographic approach that Fine took in 1983 to “para-academic scholarship” where gamers who are also academics study their own RPG experiences (Deterding & Zagal, 2018, p. 9). Mackay’s (2001) monograph on the TRPG as performance art, Bowman’s (2010) sociological study, and Grouling Cover’s (2010) study of narrative in the TRPG all take this approach. So, too, our book incorporates many studies by gamers themselves, and we, as editors, bring our own gaming experience to the table.

Studies of the TRPG are a part of a larger push for a field of role-playing game studies. In 2018, Zagal and Deterding declared RPG studies to be “a small but established and lively scholarly community with a diverse and growing body of organizations, conferences, journals, and monographs” (p. 11). Their expansive edited collection Role-Playing Game Studies: A Transmedia Approach (2018) highlighted the many different media of role-playing in an attempt to “lay the transmedia foundations for RPG Studies as a field” (p. 14). Grouling Cover (2010) challenged scholars from multiple fields to come together to study RPGs: “What if a ludologist, a narratologist, a rhetorician, and a media specialist all came to the table to study the TPRG?” (p. 177); Zagal and Deterding’s collection answered this call by synthesizing research in sociology, psychology, economics, education, communication studies and more (p. 13). This has presented a challenge for the field in how to connect such varying approaches to studying RPGs. To this end, specific conferences and journals have emerged that
focus on role-playing games. *The International Journal of Role-Playing* was started in 2006 with the goal of connecting academic work on role-playing with discussions in the gaming industry (Drachen, 2008). However, this publication, along with Zagal and Deterding's collection, focus more broadly on role-playing games that exist across media rather than on the TPRG specifically. Other journals, such as *Analog Game Studies* (2014), are committed to non-digital games, including TRPGs (Trammell, Waldron & Torner). These publications are significant in terms of moving the research away from the perspective that analog games and TPRGs are only valuable as a precursor to video games.

Because role-playing exists in many forms, the field struggles with defining its scope. In 2006, Dormans identified four types of role-playing games: pen-and-paper, live-action (LARP), computer games (CRPGs) and massive multi-player (MMORPGs), and scholarship has tended to focus on one of these types rather than draw conclusions across them. Yet the current landscape is far more complex. When a “pen-and-paper” game is played with a virtual tabletop and then recorded for an audience, what is the object under study? In 2004, Stenros defined the “role-playing text” as the “end result” of a face-to-face session, noting that each participant’s reading of the text would vary (p. 75–76). Stenros cited Padol (1996) in saying that if such a session was recorded for an audience, it would then be a new text (p. 78). But that was a rare occurrence in 1996 or 2004 compared to the millions of actual-play podcast listeners of 2019. Thus, the field of RPG studies—and the texts it studies—has become even harder to pin down.

While RPG studies has included studies of role-playing in a variety of media, it has yet to fully embrace the growing transmedia nature of TPRGs specifically. Zagal and Deterding’s (2018) collection is “a transmedia approach” only in its incorporation of role-playing from multiple media, not in its explanation of the TPRG as already trans-modal. Jennifer’s 2010 book concluded that TRPGs were uniquely dependent upon the analog tabletop, and that digital versions of the game would not thrive or proliferate. It is clear now, in 2020, that this conclusion did not anticipate the cultural, technological, and disciplinary shifts that would create a digital tabletop—a space where collaborative narratives are developed and shared across multiple platforms and channels, where narratives are created for and with fans and transformative fan-works, and where the multimodal narrative can become a transmedia story. Even scholarship within the last two years has not yet addressed these changes.

The cultural and technological shifts that we discuss in this book are not unique to TRPGs, but we argue that TRPGs provide us with a particularly rich setting for studying these changes. This collection is focused on TRPGs rather than other types of role-playing media because:

- TRPGs have a unique relationship with other game genres, as both an antecedent and concurrent form
- The TRPG genre affords flexibility and adaptability, therefore the changes are easy to trace in ways that may not be obvious in other genres
- These changes are also uniquely democratic—most people don’t have access to creating Marvel-style storyworlds, but TPRGs afford that kind of creation
- The stories we tell each other are important, and this vehicle for storytelling is important—TRPGs act as space for community creation and can be useful sites of resistance or discovery.
Defining TRPGs, Transmedia Storytelling and Fandom

As we work toward understanding RPG studies and analog game studies as new fields, it’s important that we start from common definitions grounded in scholarship. In the next section, we define key theoretical concepts of the book: defining the TRPG, multimodality/transmodality, transmedia and fandom.

Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TRPG)

A definition of the role-playing game (RPG) often begins with dividing it into components. For Deterding and Zagal (2018), RPGs exist at the “intersection of four phenomena—roles, play, games, and media culture” (p. 2). The intersection of these four phenomena exists in all types of role-playing games (RPGs) from tabletop role-playing games (TRPG) to live action role-playing games (LARPs), to computer role-playing games (CRPGs) and massive multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs). Scholars agree that all RPGs descended from the TRPG, which emerged from a combination of war-gaming and fantasy literature (Grouling Cover, 2010; Bowman, 2010; Deterding & Zagal, 2018). The combination of these two influences is key to understanding RPGs. To the widespread human phenomenon of playing roles, TRPGs added a game system—a system of rules that emerged from their war-gaming roots (Deterding & Zagal, 2018, p. 3). Drawing on archetypes from fantasy literature, gamers began to control an individual character rather than an army, and often that character evolved through multiple gaming sessions (Grouling Cover, 2010, p. 8). Although no longer always grounded in fantasy literature, this connection with an individual character has long separated RPGs from other types of analog and digital games. The connection to literature also marks the RPG as an aspect of media culture. RPGs have always been “part of the throbbing heart of fandom” (Deterding & Zagal, 2018, p. 6). They allow gamers to interact with and gain agency over their favorite storyworlds, and to create their own.

Scholars agree that all RPGs have common roots, but what specifically defines the tabletop role-playing game (TRPG), particularly as we see a migration from the physical to the virtual tabletop? Zagal and Deterding (2018) pushed us away from formalist definitions toward “real definitions”—those that capture the RPG as a social phenomenon (p. 24). We, too, see RPGs—and the TRPG in particular—as a social phenomenon and thus we privilege definitions based not solely on form but also on the function of role-playing within a community of fans. While TRPGs are often distinguished from other RPGs by their formal features, such as the presence of a game master (GM), we argue that they also occupy their own unique space within current media culture.

Grouling Cover (2010) began to address this niche by arguing that TRPGs needed to be defined separately from other types of role-playing games because they continued to exist and be valued among gamers as a different, unique experience. The TRPG responds to different rhetorical and cultural exigences more than other types of role-playing. Grouling Cover’s study is one of the few to base a definition on data from gamers. By asking gamers why they played both TRPGs and CRPGs, she concluded that interaction with others and a sense of narrative agency were key to defining the TRPG as a distinct genre (p. 45–46). Ultimately, she defined the TRPG as: “a type of game/game system that involves collaboration between a small group of players and a gamemaster.