

Tabletop Role-Playing Games and the Actual Play Show: Author, Audience, and
Adaptation

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ABSTRACT

Though tabletop role-playing games, or TRPGs, have received some scholarly attention since the creation of *Dungeons & Dragons* in the 1970s, very few scholars have considered how TRPGs function as a vehicle for long-form narrative. As an inherently collaborative form of narrative, the TRPG demonstrates a unique relationship between author and audience, as participants take on both roles during play. Previous narratological models of author-audience interaction are insufficient to understand the way that authorship functions in the TRPG, and the rise of actual play shows, where TRPGs are broadcast for an audience of nonparticipants, adds an extra layer of complexity to these author-audience relations. This thesis identifies key narrative elements of the TRPG, including game mechanics, framing, and collaboration, and examines how popular actual play shows and their graphic adaptations engage with these elements to create their narratives. This examination indicates that TRPGs create complex author-webs where each participant is both author and audience, and this influence pushes actual play shows and further adaptations of TRPG narratives to expand the ways in which audiences can influence and interact with narratives as they are created. The TRPG genre continues to explore how these elements can be developed beyond traditional understandings of narrative, and this development provides a framework for further narratological study of interactive works, which will only continue to evolve and grow in popularity and complexity in the continuing digital era.



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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

The tabletop role-playing game, or TRPG, has been growing in popularity since the creation of *Dungeons & Dragons* in the 1970s, and the rise of the actual play show, where a TRPG game is broadcast to viewers via video or podcast, has spurred both casual and scholarly interest in the TRPG. Players of TRPGs create narratives through collaborative storytelling moderated by certain rules and game mechanics, so each participant in a TRPG acts as both author and audience, as they create certain elements of the narrative and also witness the narrative creations of the other players. This particular collaborative author-audience model is not seen in any other form of narrative, and existing models of author-audience interactions do not account for authorship in the TRPG. Therefore, this thesis examines how several elements of the TRPG, such as the use of game mechanics to structure the narrative, the multiple frames in which players interact with each other, and the collaboration inherent in every game, contribute to the ways that authorship and audience interact in the narrative. It also looks at how popular actual play shows and the graphic novels they've created of their narratives engage with these elements to create their own unique audience interactions. As audience participation in the development of the stories they're consuming become more prominent with the rise of video games and other interactive media, an understanding of the evolving relationship between authorship and audience developed by the TRPG becomes important for examining interactive works in general.

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Introduction

Since the creation of tabletop role-playing games in the 1980s, there has been a small, though growing, group of scholars studying the nature of the role-playing game through lenses such as performance (Mackay), sociology (Fine), and psychology (Bowman). These perspectives are valuable ones, as the role-playing game is inherently a form of social performance. However, there has been a dearth of study of the role-playing game as a *narrative* act. While not all role-playing games, or RPGs, are equally centered around narrative (some have a stronger focus on puzzle-solving and combat than story), the creation of narrative is a fundamental part of the tabletop role-playing game which has not, prior to the last decade, received a great deal of attention.¹ The opening chapter of the interdisciplinary collection *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, edited by Sebastian Deterding and José P. Zagal, describes the RPG as an intersection of “roles,” “play,” “games,” and “media culture,” but says almost nothing about the RPG as narrative; like many studies before it, it prioritizes the RPG’s status as a game above its position as a vehicle for narrative.²

In part, this lack is likely because the opportunity to study narrative in tabletop role-playing games (or TRPGs) has been necessarily limited, as, unlike most forms of narrative, the creation of TRPG narratives is isolated and unrecorded; to study them, one must either draw from their own personal experiences of playing tabletop RPGs, as Jennifer Grouling Cover does; observe games taking place at conventions or game stores; or reach out to survey self-identified players of RPGs, as Jessica Hammer does. Rarely have there been opportunities to study RPGs and their resultant narratives in a stable, long term, accessible way. In this environment, it is

¹ The exception is Jennifer Grouling Cover’s *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*, 2010, which may be the first full-length book to give significant attention to narrative study in TRPGs.

² Sebastian Deterding and José P. Zagal, “The Many Faces of Role-Playing Game Studies,” in *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations* (New York: Routledge, 2018): 2.

much easier to study the form of the game—encoded in various rules and guidebooks—or the general sociological trends that can be observed in isolated instances of the game in play than it is to gain an understanding of the long-form narratives created by TRPG play.

Within the past decade, however, the landscape of TRPGs and their narratives has changed, thanks to the emergence of the “actual play” show, and this emergence allows for the study of the interaction of narrative, authorship, and audience in the TRPG. These shows, which are typically broadcast either as podcasts, video series on YouTube, or livestreams on sites such as Twitch (or, as in the case of popular *D&D* show *Critical Role*, cross-platformed to all three), allow audiences to watch (or listen to) a group of players play TRPGs such as *Dungeons & Dragons*. Unlike one-off games that occur in front of audiences at conventions, their goal is not brief entertainment or a demonstration of the game but rather the unfolding of a long-form story, much like television shows or radio dramas. These shows are therefore interested not only in the creation but in the *preservation* of a narrative, which audiences can consume—and analyze—long after the act of creation itself, much like any other traditional long-form media. This is a major shift in the nature of the TRPG story, which was previously focused on interactive creation far more than on consumption; the only audiences of the story were the players themselves. The actual play show is thus itself not only a demonstration of the narrative capacities of the TRPG but fundamentally an adaptation of it, and the shift in its capacity for narrative into a medium meant for mass consumption results necessarily in a change in the way these narratives are presented and interacted with.

The emergence of the actual play show allows for an additional layer of adaptation that was previously impossible as well. The success of the actual play show in creating complete and complex storylines is inspiring adaptations based on the narratives resulting from their play.

Critical Role and *The Adventure Zone*, two of the most popular actual play shows, have both created successful graphic adaptations of the stories created by their completed campaigns, and both of them also have animated series in the works. These adaptations must do the work of separating the story from the context of the players and mechanics that created it, proving that TRPG-created stories can function as their own narratives in different forms of media even when created in the context of a role-playing game. That is, the narrative drive of the TRPG that has been largely overlooked in scholarship has far-reaching potential to create independent narratives with longstanding social impact even toward those who don't play TRPGs themselves.

Of course, because these narratives are created within the very specific situation of the TRPG, they constitute a different formal genre than other more traditional narratives such as novels and drama. They are created within the confines of specific rules and mechanics, via a mixture of planning and improvisation, by a multitude of participants. These elements make the TRPG unique from other narratives. Tracking the way these narrative elements are adapted or preserved in the actual play shows and subsequent adaptations that allow for the widespread consumption of TRPG narratives establishes a set of qualities with which we can discuss the TRPG as a narrative genre, and also demonstrate the versatility of the TRPG narrative as it evolves and adapts.

Questions of how to analyze the authorship in role-playing games is a clear starting point. Chapter 1 considers three main elements of the TRPG narrative, with the aid of previous scholarship on the TRPG: game mechanics, multiple frames, and collaborative authorship. The authorship of the game rules—which define what is possible, encouraging some actions and discouraging others—is the easiest for scholars to study, as they are published and widely available. In games, however, the authorship of the players (who each create and control one

character) and the game master (who creates situations, describes settings, and handles the interaction with all characters not controlled by the players) becomes much more prominent, and the interaction between these three forms of authorship defines the game. Chapter 2 extends these issues to consider the added complexities and opportunities for authorship in the two most popular actual play shows, *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone*. These shows represent and dramatize elements of role-playing game authorship in their broadcasts while adding extra layers of author-audience interaction. Should the narrative focus on the characters' story, or the players, or both? In a game meant for collaboration, how can an outside audience participate in or influence the authorship of the story? Finally, Chapter 3 discusses how the constraints of the static graphic medium necessitate a change in the style of the narrative from live role-playing and introduces new conventions. The interactive and collaborative nature of the TRPG impacts each of these forms of the TRPG story, establishing modes of authorship, audience interaction, and pacing unlike other forms of narrative.

Chapter 1

Studies on the TRPG exist, and have existed since the 1980s, but they remain limited and somewhat disconnected. A variety of disciplines have dipped their toes into RPG studies, from performance studies to sociology to education to game design, but RPG studies have not had, as Sebastian Deterding and José Zagal note, “a shared recognized ‘canon’ of texts and concepts”; instead, scholars have “often talked past each other unawares rather than building on each other’s work.”³ Deterding and Zagal’s collection *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, published in 2018, attempts to bring these voices together by gathering articles that span many disciplines and move towards an interdisciplinary lens; hopefully, more collections of its kind will come to exist as the promise of the TRPG as a vehicle for narrative inches ever further into public and academic awareness.

While Deterding and Zagal are correct that scholars publishing work on RPGs have only been in limited conversation with each other, there have been some attempts to build a framework of concepts with which to understand the creation of narrative in the TRPG, and existing scholarship can help identify several unique elements that are essential to understanding the way narrative is framed and built in TRPGs, including game mechanics, collaborative authorship, and the multiple frames in which participants exist. All of these elements contribute to the complex modes of authorship that set the TRPG apart from other narrative forms.

³ Sebastian Deterding and José Zagal, ed. *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations* (New York: Routledge, 2018), viii.

Game Mechanics and Procedural Authorship

Commonly recognized as the first tabletop role-playing game, *Dungeons & Dragons* has an ancestry of war games on one side and literature, especially fantasy, on the other. It was a marriage of interactivity and strategy and an interest in story, worldbuilding, and character that quickly established itself as a unique form of collaborative storytelling.⁴ The RPG was not by any means the first form of interactive media, but its creation was contemporary with the rise in popularity of other interactive fiction, including “pick-a-path” or “choose-your-own-adventure” books as well as “text-based adventure games.”⁵ These sorts of games and books were, compared to the RPG, very limited forms of interactivity: because they are pre-written and noneditable, the number of outcomes and the ways those outcomes can be reached are necessarily finite.

By contrast, the TRPG is designed to allow for a number of outcomes limited only by the players’ imaginations. The game system provides a set of rules and mechanics that allows for almost any action proposed by a player to be checked for success or failure via the game mechanics. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, this is accomplished via dice rolls. A player may, for example, announce their intention for their character, a burly fighter, to attack an enemy giant with their sword. They then roll dice to determine if their attack has been successful, adding modifiers to the roll because their fighter is proficient with the longsword. A total roll of 19 beats the giant’s armor class, so the player rolls again to determine how much damage it takes. The Dungeon Master, or DM,⁶ then narrates the event as it plays out in the storyworld: the fighter lunges, thrusting their sword through the giant’s thigh as it roars in pain and anger. In another

⁴ For a more detailed overview of the influence of war games and fantasy literature on the birth of the RPG, see Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, 13-20.

⁵ Jennifer Grouling Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2010), 24, 27.

⁶ In many systems, or when talking about RPGs without referring to a specific system, this function is called the “Game Master,” or “GM.” “Dungeon Master” is a *D&D*-specific term. However, because this study is examining shows that use the *D&D* system, I will use “DM” throughout for consistency.

scenario, a charismatic bard may make an argument to an NPC,⁷ attempting to persuade them to let their party pass unheeded, and would then have to make a skill check with the dice to determine if they succeed in the persuasion. In both of these scenarios, the dice—the game mechanics—determine success or failure, but it is entirely up to the players how this success or failure plays out, what consequences occur, and how the characters react to those consequences. It is through a long series of these encounters—characters making decisions, taking actions, and reacting to their subsequent success or failure—that the story progresses, so while the game provides a system of chance and unpredictability, it does not limit the direction that the narrative created within this system may progress. This structure, wherein story unfolds within the bounds of the game mechanics, is one of the unique elements of the TRPG.

One way to describe this narrative-within-a-system is to say that TRPGs are, in part, procedurally authored. Procedural authorship is a term generally used to describe authorship in electronic media. Janet Murray describes procedural authorship as “writing the rules by which the texts appear, as well as writing the texts themselves...writing the rules for the interactor’s involvement, that is, the conditions under which things will happen in response to the participant’s actions.”⁸ The procedural author, she says, “creates not just a set of scenes but a world of narrative possibilities.”⁹ Generally this term refers to the coding necessary for digital interactive media such as video games, as every means for a player to interact with their environment must be mapped out in the code that is the framework and background for every game, but this term is also, more loosely, relevant to the RPG. A TRPG, too, is played within a framework of rules determining “the conditions under which things will happen in response to

⁷ A non-player character, that is, a character controlled by the DM.

⁸ Janet H Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 152.

⁹ Murray, 153.

the participant's actions"; these are the mechanics of the game and are written not by the players or the DM (except in limited cases of homebrewing rules) but by the creators of the system being played. Procedural authorship is, then, the very first step in creating a TRPG; it constructs the mechanics that define the TRPG experience and is the necessary precursor to all other levels of authorship which contribute to a TRPG narrative.

Authorship and Communication

If the procedural authorship of the TRPG is only the initial step, however, then of course there must be more. The inherently collaborative nature is another of the TRPG's defining elements: there are always multiple storytelling agents. In TRPGs, working within the existence of the system, the DM creates—or narrates, if they are working from a pre-written module—a world and a series of plot points, but the narrative cannot progress without choices from the players, and in fact these choices can often lead the narrative to places the DM does not expect. Thus the players and DM are all authoring the story and must all navigate their shared roles as author and audience. Though multiple participants author the story in RPGs, these participants do not generally have the same level of authority to make choices about the world in which they play. That is, to use the term coined by Lubomír Doležel, their *authentication authority* is not the same. The creation of a storyworld, Doležel explains in his 1980 article “Truth and Authenticity in Narrative,” is contingent on the narrator having the implicit authority to establish what does and does not exist within that world.¹⁰ That is, it depends on whether or not the audience feels they can believe the narrator when the narrator gives information about the setting or story. In literature, this often depends on whether the narrator is a first-person agent within the storyworld—that is, a character with biases and limitations—or what Doležel calls an

¹⁰ Lubomír Doležel, “Truth and Authenticity in Narrative,” *Poetics Today* 1, no. 3 (1980): 10-11.

anonymous Er-form narrator, a narrator with no particular identity which exists to relate the story.¹¹ First-person narrators, he says, have less authentication authority than third-person or “covert” narrators, as they are by nature more unreliable. They must continuously earn the right to establish a storyworld by not losing the audience’s trust in their authority.¹² In the context of the TRPG, it is the participants—or co-authors—themselves, rather than an outside audience, with the power to negotiate or deny this authority. A DM may deny a statement a player has made, for instance, because it breaks a rule or runs contrary to an established fact about the storyworld. For that matter, the mechanics themselves may negate a player’s authority; a player may declare that they hit an enemy, but if they roll too low on the dice a moment later, their narrative statement is not authenticated. In this way, Doležel’s framework sets up a useful means of examining the difference between authenticated and non-authenticated narrative facts based on the authority of the narrators, which becomes relevant within the multi-author framework of RPGs.

Jessica Hammer begins her own discussion of authority within RPGs by proposing different levels of authorship: primary, secondary, and tertiary. The primary text, she says, “outlines the rules and setting of the game in general,” while the secondary builds a specific situation from that material, and the tertiary text is created “as the characters encounter the situation in play.”¹³ The creators of a game such as *Dungeons & Dragons* and the writers of the handbooks and game guides are thus primary authors, creating sets of rules and the world in which the story takes place. (Procedural authorship is embedded in this level, encompassing the function of the primary text to create rules.) The DM would usually constitute a secondary

¹¹ Doležel, 11.

¹² Doležel, 17-18.

¹³ Jessica Hammer, “Agency and Authority in Role-Playing Texts,” in *A New Literacies Sample*, ed. Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc, 2007), 70-71.

author, building a set of narrative plotlines and opportunities from the materials provided by the primary author. Finally, the players are the tertiary authors; it is their choices that determine what actually occurs, and thus narrativity is not truly established until the tertiary text.

Having established this hierarchy, Hammer remarks that narrative authority is consistently being shared and divided among participants of RPGs in various ways.¹⁴ She describes several means of gaining authority: explicit, in which authority comes from concrete agreements between participants about what they are allowed to do within the game¹⁵; implicit, wherein a player's actions are assented to even when they were not agreed upon beforehand, often contingent upon the player's social status within the group¹⁶; and imposed authority, which comes from an outside source, usually a rulebook or campaign book that may delineate when DMs and players have the right to take certain actions.¹⁷ These means make it clear that authority in TRPGs is just as dependent on social dynamics as it is on the hierarchy of authorship. Secondary and tertiary authors—that is, DMs and their players—are often in the state of negotiating their levels of authority.

Hammer's model of leveled authorship offers a nuanced way to think about authorship within interactive narratives. The apparent hierarchy—primary, secondary, tertiary—indicates levels of temporality more than authority; the rules and setting generally exist before the narrative setup does, and the setup exists before the players engage with it and create story, but the secondary and tertiary authors can at any time choose to change elements of the primary texts to suit their needs. Hammer's text, however, implicitly assumes that the roles of the secondary and tertiary authors remain generally static. Jennifer Grouling Cover disagrees, proposing in

¹⁴ Hammer, "Agency and Authority," 72.

¹⁵ Hammer, 82.

¹⁶ Hammer, 83-84.

¹⁷ Hammer, 84.

Chapter 7 of *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-playing Games*¹⁸ that players often “straddle the line” between various modes of authorship and “[shift] between multiple roles.”¹⁹ The DM will often, in Cover’s view, switch between primary and secondary authorship. Many DMs, for example, will “homebrew” their games, meaning they create the entire setting and storyworld themselves rather than using the setting from a campaign book. Additionally, DMs and parties can choose to use “house rules,” rules that diverge in some way from the “official” rules set in the guidebook for the game they’re playing.²⁰ In these cases, the DM can take on both the first half of the role that Hammer defined for the primary author—the creation of setting—and the second half—creating rules. Thus, it might be more accurate to describe a DM who homebrews their own setting and uses house rules as employing both primary *and* secondary authorship, as Cover argues when she says that “the DM does not maintain one simple relationship with the text of the TRPG but must actively engage in role-shifting as he or she prepares for and runs a gaming session.”²¹

Hammer and Cover, then, both view all participants as authors or co-authors in their own right, as they all contribute to the creation of the narrative. This is certainly true, but there is also an aspect of player-as-audience that Hammer’s model does not quite consider. Players are authors, but they are also audiences to the DM’s storytelling and, indeed, to each other. Udie Ben-Arie recognizes this blend of authorship and audience more explicitly than Hammer does when he proposes his “bi-directional communication model” in “The Narrative Communication

¹⁸ Jennifer Grouling Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2010), 124-147.

¹⁹ Cover, 128.

²⁰ Cover, 139.

²¹ Cover, 144.

Structure of Interactive Narrative Works.”²² His model is a revision of and response to Seymour Chatman’s well-known uni-directional communication model, which strives to show a progression of communication from the author to the reader as story is conveyed, and goes linearly from real author to implied author, narrator, narratee, implied reader, and finally to the real reader.²³ This model, Ben-Arie points out, works well enough for traditional media but does not reflect the collaborative nature of interactive works. His response is a circular model, with two phases: the “initiative interaction phase,” which resembles Chatman’s model—albeit with more, and differently-named, narrative agents—where the narrative is first transmitted to the reader, and the “returning interaction phase,” where the reader becomes a participant and makes a choice that develops the story, which is filtered back around through the “dynamic narratee” to the “dynamic implied author,” starting the cycle over again. While this model is meant to represent interactive works more generally and does not necessarily represent the particular experience of the TRPG, it does well to imagine how one who interacts with a narrative, such as a TRPG player, can occupy both an authorship and audience position—though it does not anticipate a third dimension: that of an audience who watches this cycle take place.

In fact, those who come closest to acknowledging a potential third-party audience are Martin van Velsen, Josh Williams, and Gustav Verhulsdonck in their article “Tabletop Gaming Narratology for Digital Interactive Storytelling.”²⁴ They identify four different “narrative views” in a game, defined as “the vantage point(s) from which a participant, both players and Narrator,

²² Udi Ben-Arie, “The Narrative Communication Structure in Interactive Narrative Works,” in *Interactive Storytelling: Second Joint International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling*, ed. Ido A. Iurgel, Nelson Zagalo, and Paolo Petta (Germany: Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg, 2009), 153.

²³ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 151.

²⁴ Martin van Velsen, Josh Williams, and Gustav Verhulsdonck, “Tabletop Gaming Narratology for Digital Interactive Storytelling,” in *Interactive Storytelling: Second Joint International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling*, ed. Ido A. Iurgel, Nelson Zagalo, and Paolo Petta (Germany: Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg, 2009), 109-120.

observes an ongoing game.”²⁵ These narrative views are that of the Narrator, the players, the characters, and what they call the “universal observer.” The universal observer is a role that any and all participants can and do fulfill at various times. While playing, players maintain their own opinions of and reactions to the story just as they would if they were not direct participants. At times, players will step back and share their observations and reactions, “as if each member is a universal observer or a participant who is not part of the game,” just as a viewer might share their opinions of a film they’re watching.²⁶ This role of the universal observer is not only an astute way of accounting for the players’ simultaneous status as viewers of their own game but also foreshadows the role of the audience of an actual play show.

From all this, then, we see that participants are always occupying multiple roles in varying capacities: they are author and audience, negotiating their level of authentication authority with the other participants and with the game mechanics themselves. These negotiations speak again to the procedural nature of the TRPG, as a set of both articulated and socially-understood rules exist at the table to moderate the multiple authors’ interactions with each other and with the text. There is another layer of complexity to a participant’s place in the creation of a TRPG narrative, as well, however: they occupy multiple frames of reference, and shift between them, throughout a game.

Storyworlds and Frames

One of the many contributions to narrative theory that early narratologist Gérard Genette introduced was the idea of *narrative levels*: a way of describing the relationship between the act of narrating and the diegesis that the narration establishes. The concept of narrative levels

²⁵ van Velsen, Williams, and Verhulsdonck, 112.

²⁶ van Velsen, Williams, and Verhulsdonck, 113.

acknowledges that there can be multiple embedded instances of narration and establishes the position between the narrator, the story they are telling, and the audience. An *extradiegetic* narrator exists on the same narrative level as the audience—that is, outside of the story.²⁷ An *intradiegetic* narrator, on the other hand, exists *within* one of the levels of diegesis.²⁸ The narrated events an *intradiegetic* narrator relates, then, are *metadiegetic*, as they exist a level lower than the first level of diegesis.²⁹ In RPG terms, a DM narrating the actions of one of their characters, or describing the storyworld, would be an *extradiegetic* narrator speaking from outside the diegesis, but once the DM starts speaking as one of their NPCs, that NPC becomes an *intradiegetic* narrator, relaying information or history to other characters within the first diegetic level. These narrative levels are useful for situating any narrator within the context of their narration, and we see their influence when narratologists begin attempting to describe the relationships of players to their stories in RPGs.

Gary Alan Fine may be the first to separate RPGs into separate “frames.” Though his analysis is motivated by sociologist Erving Goffman’s discussion of frame analysis rather than Genette’s diegetic levels, the two end up in similar places: making distinctions between the different levels of story and reality. Fine identifies three different frameworks within which players of RPGs operate: they are gamers within a social world, players within a game world, and characters within a storyworld.³⁰ In each of these frames, they operate under certain rules: as gamers they’re subject to social rules, as players they’re subject to the rules of games, and as characters they’re subject to limitations of knowledge in ways that the player is not. The limitation of knowledge is two-way, as Fine points out—characters are not meant to know

²⁷ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 228.

²⁸ Genette, 228.

²⁹ Genette, 228.

³⁰ Fine, *Shared Fantasy*, 186.

everything the player knows, but the player also does not know everything their character knows. (This can be seen in-game when, for instance, a player might roll a history check, and on a successful roll, the DM will inform the player of what their character already knows about the history of their world.) Fine discusses these limitations in terms of “awareness contexts”: players and characters maintain a *pretense awareness context*, meaning that they are aware of each other’s existence but must pretend that they are not.³¹

Within a game, frames, much like authorship, are not necessarily stable; players frequently switch between them. This frame switching, which Fine refers to as “keying” up or down between frames, is voluntary and acceptable within the game. While one expects mainly to be immersed within the frame of the storyworld as characters, players will “down-key” to the game framework to discuss rules or mechanics, for example, or even, during idle moments, down-key all the way to the social world, where they may talk about their actual lives.³² Aspects of the game may also be “up-keyed,” from the social frame into the storyworld frame, such as when the DM takes something a player has said ostensibly out-of-character and incorporates it into the game.³³ This frame switching is a natural consequence of playing a game that requires real-time immersion into a storyworld.

Jennifer Grouling Cover builds on Fine’s frameworks in the chapter “Frames of Narrativity in the TRPG” in *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*. She calls these frames the *social frame*, the *gaming frame*, and the *narrative frame*.³⁴ For her analysis, she draws on possible world theory, a theory that originated in philosophy for use in

³¹ Fine, 187-88.

³² Fine, 196-97.

³³ Fine, 198.

³⁴ Cover, *The Creation of Narrative*, 89.

formal semantics but which has been adapted by narratologists to discuss fictional worlds.³⁵ In particular, she draws on terms used by Marie-Laure Ryan to differentiate between the Actual World, or AW, the real world in which the players exist and take actions; the Textual Actual World, or TAW, the world that the DM and players build through their narration; and Alternate Possible Worlds, or APW, which come into being when players suggest actions for their characters before dice rolls or consensus determine whether those actions actually happen.³⁶ Combining these terms with Fine's frames, Cover suggests that different kinds of speech acts taken by the players correspond to different frames and higher and lower levels of narrativity. Speech occurring in the narrative frame tends to create the TAW and thus has the highest level of narrativity; this includes the DM's narration, the players narrating actions that don't need confirmation from the DM, and in-character speech. Speech occurring in the game frame, such as narrative suggestions from the players, tend to create APW, which then are either authenticated or denied by dice rolls or the DM. Speech occurring in the social frame, such as "narrative planning speech" and "off-record speech," take place in the AW and do not establish the TAW, and thus have the lowest level of narrativity.³⁷ With this model, Cover conveys the way in which the different levels or frames suggested by Fine correspond to the narrativity of player speech acts and their authority to create or modify the world of the story.

Van Velsen, Williams, and Verhulsdonck also examine the different frames in which players and their speech acts take place, but they characterize these frames in terms of time. They identify four "time phases" that can occur during a game, which "encapsulate the table-top experience across the passive and active states between players and Narrator": in-context

³⁵ For more on possible worlds in narratology, see Doležel, *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds* (1998) and Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (1991).

³⁶ Cover, *The Creation of Narrative*, 91.

³⁷ Cover, 94.

(active), in-game (active), out-of-game (passive), and out-of-context (passive).³⁸ In-context time is analogous to Cover's narrative frame, where players are actively role-playing and narrating their actions, while in-game time is similar to Cover's game frame, where players discuss rules, make skill checks, and otherwise determine the mechanics of the game. Out-of-context time involves players discussing the game while it occurs but not actively role-playing, much like Cover's social frame, and out-of-game time encompasses time spent discussing the game *outside* of the gaming sessions. Using time as a framework allows them to acknowledge that time within the varying frames can pass very differently: a week of in-context time might pass in a minute of in-game time, as the DM skips through narratively uninteresting travel time, while in-context time stands still during out-of-context and out-of-game time, awaiting the players to pick the narrative back up.

Though they use different terms, these scholars all agree that it is helpful to think of players' interactions with the narrative and with each other as operating amidst different frames. Fine, the sociologist, considers the social dynamic of each frame, while Cover, working from a narratological standpoint, considers how the different frames affect the truth value of narrative statements made within those frames. Both are significant in understanding the way that narrative forms in TRPGs and the position players occupy as they shift between social, gaming, and narrative frames while they author their story.

³⁸ van Velsen, Williams, and Verhulsdonck, "Tabletop Gaming Narratology," 114.

Conclusion

Emerging from the works of these scholars, we can see several elements that make up the experience of authoring narrative in the TRPG as a player: collaborative authorship and interactivity, game mechanics shaping the otherwise open-ended structure and adding unpredictability, and the presence of multiple frames and ability to shift between them. This gives us a set of criteria that we can examine as we look at actual play shows and their adaptations, which subject these elements to an outside audience. It will be the work of the next chapter to unpack the ways in which these elements are adapted or preserved in the actual play show, and how the authorship of the resultant narratives is complicated by the broadcast format and existence of an audience.

Chapter 2

Actual play shows offer one solution to the long-standing problem of how to study TRPGs when they don't have external audiences or permanent records; however, in presenting game-play to larger audiences, these shows also develop their own conventions and techniques of audience engagement. As Jennifer Grouling Cover, whose book was published a few years before the rise of actual play shows, notes, "TRPGs often involve groups that develop over time and are by invitation only," and so narratives arising from TRPG gameplay are difficult to study directly unless a researcher uses their own home game as an object of analysis, as Cover does.³⁹ As long-term narrative campaigns are rarely logged or recorded in any way beyond the notes of the players involved, there has existed nothing approaching what we might call a set of "canon" TRPG narratives; instead they remained individual and isolated.⁴⁰ In many ways, this individualistic nature of the TRPG narrative is part of its appeal: Cover notes that, though players will buy products to facilitate their gameplay, "the outcome of their games (the narrative that is created through gameplay) rarely becomes a consumer product,"⁴¹ and furthermore that this ability to "create texts that cannot be reproduced or commodified is important to gamers."⁴² While the actual play show's existence does challenge the previous aversion to consumerism that Cover describes, it also does not threaten the privacy of those home games that wish to remain private. What it *does* do is offer a set of preserved TRPG narratives, in their entirety in the case of completed campaigns, easily accessible for study by scholars of any discipline with an interest in RPG studies. There is no longer a dearth of ways to study different systems, party setups, and

³⁹ Cover, *The Creation of Narrative*, 13.

⁴⁰ I am not referring, of course, to famous or enduring adventure modules such as *The Temple of Elemental Evil* or, more recently, *The Curse of Strahd*; these might be considered "canon" *modules*, but I am speaking of narratives *produced* from gameplay rather than texts *facilitating* gameplay.

⁴¹ Cover, 151.

⁴² Cover, 153.

gameplay dynamics; the multitude of actual play shows that exist today across a variety of formats offers a range of opportunities for examinations of TRPGs.

This application of the actual play show—as a means to study TRPG gameplay and narratives in general—is significant, but of course the actual play show is more than just a wholesale representation of TRPGs. The shift from private, self-contained gameplay to a narrative intended to be consumed by a broad audience necessitates changes to the way the game is played and displayed, and this makes the actual play show a genre at least somewhat distinct from its predecessor, the private TRPG.⁴³ Both of the shows I examine below have acknowledged that their setup and style of play is influenced at least in part by their awareness of playing for an audience. While actual play shows may display a greater or lesser desire to present an “authentic” representation of TRPG gameplay, inevitably some aspects of traditional TRPG narrative creation will be altered in order to provide an optimized experience for the audience in this new medium. Just like private TRPGs, these shows have game mechanics and multiple frames embedded into their structure, and they encourage audience interaction to honor the collaborative nature of the TRPG. However, the broadcast nature of the shows leads to author-audience interaction not encountered in private games, where audience participation and expectation influences the conventions of the actual play show.

⁴³ I use the term “genre” to define the actual play show in the way that a novel is a separate “genre” from a poem or a drama. Of course, this by no means constrains the many different subgenres—fantasy, mystery, horror, tragedy, etc.—which varying actual play shows, or even varying campaigns within a single show, may contain.

A Brief History

The actual play genre began sometime in the late 2000s, with shows like *Critical Hit* in 2009 and *Nerd Poker* in 2012 forming the earlier ranks of broadcast TRPGs.⁴⁴ It experienced a rapid surge in popularity throughout the 2010s, with hundreds of different Twitch streams, YouTube shows, and podcasts all broadcasting their tabletop campaigns, until in 2018 the concept of the actual play show itself was the winner of the Diana Jones Award for Excellence in Gaming.⁴⁵ “Actual Play shows — whether broadcast via audio, video or both — have done more to popularize roleplaying games than anything since the Satanic Panic of the 1980s, and in a far more positive way,” says the 2018 Award page on the Diana Jones Award website.⁴⁶ The popularity of the actual play show has, indeed, impacted the popularity of TRPGs as a whole—Wizards of the Coast, the company that owns *Dungeons & Dragons*, has said that “2018 was the fifth consecutive year of double-digit growth for D&D, and its best sales year ever.”⁴⁷ The popularity of the actual play show demonstrates not only a renewed interest in TRPGs, but also that TRPGs can create long-term narratives that are compelling to an audience even when they are not involved in playing the game itself.

The two actual play shows I examine here are perhaps the most popular shows in their respective media of video and podcast. *Critical Role*, a web series that streams live on Twitch, began as a home game: several LA-based voice actors would gather, once every few weeks as their schedules allowed, in their DM Matthew Mercer’s house to play sessions of *Pathfinder* based in Mercer’s original world of Exandria. It was only after they’d been playing their

⁴⁴ Chris DeVile, “The Rise of D&D Liveplay is Changing how Fans Approach Roleplaying,” The Verge, Vox Media, November 16, 2017, <https://www.theverge.com/2017/11/16/16666344/dungeons-and-dragons-twitch-roleplay-rpgs-critical-role-streaming-gaming>.

⁴⁵ “The 2018 Award,” The Diana Jones Award for Excellence in Gaming, accessed December 6, 2019, <https://www.dianajonesaward.org/the-2018-award/>.

⁴⁶ “The 2018 Award.”

⁴⁷ Ethan Gilsdorf, “In a Chaotic World, Dungeons & Dragons is Resurgent,” *The New York Times*, last updated November 15, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/13/books/dungeons-dragons.html>.

campaign for over two years that Felicia Day, founder of the production company Geek & Sundry, approached them about livestreaming their game on the streaming website Twitch as part of Geek & Sundry's programming.⁴⁸ Their first campaign, which converted to *D&D* but otherwise carried on from their home game, ended in late 2017, and as of the time of this writing they are over 100 episodes into an equally-successful second campaign. In late 2017, they announced that they had teamed up with Dark Horse Comics to create a comic book series called *Vox Machina: Origins*, detailing the first adventures of the heroes of Campaign One.⁴⁹ The series now has two full volumes and another volume in progress,⁵⁰ and in late 2020 they announced the forthcoming publication of *The Mighty Nein: Origins*, a series centered on the backstories of the characters from their second campaign,⁵¹ and *Critical Role: The Tales of Exandria*, a comic anthology exploring the side stories of NPCs from the show, indicating that their foray into graphic narratives has been a commercial success.⁵²

The Adventure Zone, run by Griffin, Justin, and Travis McElroy (chiefly known for their comedy advice podcast *My Brother, My Brother, And Me*) and their father, Clint McElroy, started as a single episode released in lieu of a new episode of their main podcast due to Justin's paternity leave. It soon became its own podcast, however, and their first campaign, entitled *The Adventure Zone: Balance*, was DMed by Griffin and ran for 69 episodes, from 2014-2017.

Balance became popular for its mixture of the McElroys' trademark comedy and the depth of

⁴⁸ Ben Kuchera, "How the Voices Behind Your Favorite Games and Shows are Reinventing Live D&D," *Polygon*, January 11, 2016, <https://www.polygon.com/features/2016/1/11/10589378/how-the-voices-behind-your-favorite-games-and-shows-are-re-inventing>.

⁴⁹ Geek & Sundry, "Cover Reveal & Release Date: Critical Role From Dark Horse Comics," September 6, 2017, <https://geekandsundry.com/critical-role-from-dark-horse-comics/>.

⁵⁰ Rachel Romero, "Available Now: Vox Machina Origins Volume I Trade Paperback and Standard Edition Hardcover," *Critical Role*, October 15, 2019, <https://critrole.com/available-now-vox-machina-origins-volume-1-trade-paperback-and-standard-edition-hardcover/>.

⁵¹ Charlie Hall, "*Critical Role's* Mighty Nein is Getting a Dark Horse Comic Series," *Polygon*, November 10, 2020, <https://www.polygon.com/2020/11/10/21557260/critical-role-mighty-nein-dark-horse-comic-series-release-date>.

⁵² Joe Grunenwald, "The World of *Critical Role* Expands in New Dark Horse Comics Miniseries," *The Beat*, December 15, 2020, <https://www.comicsbeat.com/the-world-of-critical-role-expands-in-new-dark-horse-comics-miniseries/>.

Griffin's complex storytelling. This successful first campaign was followed by two more: *Amnesty*, a game played in the *Monster of the Week* system, and *Graduation*, which returned to *D&D*. After *Balance*'s completion, the McElroys announced the release of a series of graphic novels based on the campaign, beginning with *The Adventure Zone: Here There Be Gerblins*, released in 2018 and named after *Balance*'s first story arc.⁵³ Two further graphic novels have been released, with a fourth to be released in mid-2021, each covering an individual arc of the *Balance* campaign.⁵⁴

There are many other excellent actual play shows beyond these two, encompassing a wide variety of game systems and play styles, and any number of them is worthy of study. Many do a better job than either *Critical Role* or *The Adventure Zone* of representing diverse casts of players and characters. However, I choose to engage with these shows in part because of their popularity within the genre, which makes them accessible to those who have engaged even casually with TRPG and actual play circles, and in part because they represent two very different styles of play and presentation, as we will see below. To that end, comparing these shows in particular will highlight the contrasts that exist between two shows with different approaches to the genre while also rendering their similarities more meaningful as a representation of the generic elements of the actual play show as a whole.

⁵³ Graeme McMillan, "How 'The Adventure Zone' Went From 'D&D' Podcast to Graphic Novel," *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 16, 2018, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/adventure-zone-mcelroy-family-explains-new-graphic-novel-1127134>.

⁵⁴ Courtney Enlow, "Exclusive: First Look at *The Adventure Zone: The Crystal Kingdom* Graphic Novel," *SyFy*, October 8, 2020, <https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/exclusive-first-look-at-the-adventure-zone-the-crystal-kingdom-graphic-novel>.

Game Mechanics and Pacing

One highly defining element of the TRPG narrative is the way authorship is structured within the bounds of the game mechanics and rules. These mechanics are present in both actual play shows examined here—as is to be expected; if they weren't, they would not be playing TRPGs—but how each show chooses to represent and work within and around these mechanics differ. *Critical Role* presents as authentic a representation of TRPG gameplay as possible, while sacrificing traditional narrative pacing, while *The Adventure Zone* prioritizes the presentation of story over a strict adherence to the rules of the game.

The agreement to stream *Critical Role* revolved around preserving the game's authenticity. Mercer, the game's DM, said that the group didn't want to change their experience of playing: “[T]his wasn't us trying to sell a product. This was us continuing to play the game that we loved and just opening it up to the internet.”⁵⁵ The Twitch livestreaming platform allows for this mostly-unfiltered experience: it ensures that fans see the game as it unfolds, and there is no editing. Even when the recording goes up on YouTube a few days after the initial stream, it is not edited or altered. The audience does, however, see graphics occasionally appear on screen with basic information about each character, functioning as a reminder of who each of the cast plays, what they look like, and their base stats, as well as an option to toggle a version of their character sheet. These graphics—which essentially perform the paratextual function of a reference page—help the audience keep track of elements of play that would otherwise be visible to the players but not to them, which in turn helps keep the game transparent. This format, livestreamed and unedited but with provided references, ensures that the viewers see the session itself exactly as it unfolds, with very nearly the same perspective as the players. In effect, the

⁵⁵ Liz Marsham, *The World of Critical Role: The History Behind the Epic Fantasy* (New York: Ten Speed Press, 2020), 16.

audience now takes the position of van Velsen, Williams, and Verhulsdonck's universal observer, watching the game unfold from an exterior position.

On the one hand, this unedited approach makes *Critical Role* a good place to see the game of *D&D* played out as it actually happens, with all discussions of rules and mechanics included; it preserves, therefore, the narrative structure of the game mechanics about as faithfully as is possible. On the other hand, fully representing the mechanics can clash with what we would traditionally consider elements of a well-presented narrative. The discrepancies between in-game and out-of-game time discussed in the previous chapter, for example, make an actual play show's pacing very different from most visual narratives. Combat is the obvious example, as it operates very differently in a TRPG than it would in a traditional visual narrative such as a film. Fight scenes in traditional narratives are quick-paced and action-packed, meant to cause excitement for viewers and mirror the hectic nature of the fight itself. Even in a written text, where discourse time—the time it takes to read the text—and story time—the time it takes the event being read to play out within the storyworld—are distinct, battles are generally written with the intent to simulate the intense or fast-paced nature of fighting. In TRPGs, however, in-context and in-game time are drastically different during combat. A round of combat in *D&D* is, per the rules, equal to six seconds in-game. Battles rarely last more than ten rounds, meaning that the entire encounter, in story-time, takes a minute or less. A minute-long encounter in the story, however, could take over two hours of discourse-time, as each character takes their actions in turn, and each turn involves deciding where a character will move, what they will do, and, if they attack, rolling to see if that attack lands and what damage it deals. Indeed, combat in *Critical Role* is regularly multiple hours long, drawing a brief, intense scene in the story out into a long, strategic

series of decisions that renders the experience for the audience very different than the experience for the characters.

This is not, however, to dismiss the combat as inherently uninteresting or even necessarily a narrative drawback. If a viewer watches an actual play show with extended combat expecting the same narrative pace as a film, certainly they will be disappointed. For fans of TRPGs, however, seeing combat play out this way is often quite interesting; those familiar with the rules of combat may enjoy seeing which tactics the players employ and how they make creative use of the mechanics as battles unfold. The effect may, then, be to make the actual play show somewhat insular—these mechanic-heavy portions of narrative, at least, are more compelling for an audience that is already somewhat familiar with the TRPG than one that is not. The effect becomes, in fact, something like a spectator sport, as an audience familiar with the mechanics can imagine what they would do in that scenario and make judgments on the choices of the players. Therefore, we might consider the discrepancy between in-context and in-game time, one of the vital parts of an RPG narrative, to be detrimental to an actual play show's chances of engaging an audience outside of the bubble of those already familiar with TRPG mechanics, but actually lead to greater audience interaction for those who understand the genre.

In contrast to the authenticity of *Critical Role*, *The Adventure Zone* provides a much more mediated experience of a TRPG. The McElroy brothers value the presentation of a compelling story for their audience over the presentation of authentic gameplay, so their games are prerecorded and edited. Griffin, the DM and main editor, might delete conversation that is extraneous to the story (such as debates over mechanics), add music and sound effects, or dub in voice effects over some of his dialogue. In an extreme example of editing for story, the McElroys even rerecorded a small portion of their game for one of the later episodes, having felt that they

had made out-of-character decisions in the original take that did not support the story they were telling.⁵⁶ While *Critical Role* invites audiences to sit in on their games, *The Adventure Zone* is concerned with presenting an entertaining and consistent narrative to their audience, even if that means sacrificing some of the spontaneity of traditional gameplay.

Combat in *The Adventure Zone* also doesn't tend to take nearly as long. Given that the average *The Adventure Zone* episode is an hour to an hour and a half, as opposed to *Critical Role*'s 3-4 hour long episodes, lengthy combat would take up far more narrative space per episode. To avoid this, the McElroys often flub the rules. It's been said that Griffin operates on what is colloquially known as the "rule of cool" in DMing, allowing the players to take actions that are dramatic or exciting even if they are against the rules of the game as written. Clint McElroy's penchant for having his character Merle cast spells that he should not yet have access to becomes a running joke, but it also speeds up combat and allows for flashy narrative beats. This rule-bending might be frustrating to an audience familiar with the game's intended mechanics, but it allows for greater flexibility of narrative beats. "As a rule I try to keep [combat] shorter than at least half the length of the episode," Griffin says in an edition of *The Adventure Zone Zone*, special episodes they occasionally release where they answer questions about their campaign. "I don't think there's anything particularly interesting about getting into a big long fight."⁵⁷ Later, he adds, "I do a lot of stuff in the planning of the campaign...to make it interesting radio."⁵⁸ With this focus on keeping things "interesting" for both them and their audience, they heavily adapt the form of the tabletop RPG to suit an

⁵⁶ Griffin McElroy, Travis McElroy, Justin McElroy, and Clint McElroy, "The The Adventure Zone Zone: Balance Finale Edition," August 24, 2017, in *The Adventure Zone*, produced by Maximum Fun, podcast, 1:16:15, <https://maximumfun.org/episodes/adventure-zone/adventure-zone-zone-balance-finale-edition>.

⁵⁷ Griffin McElroy, Travis McElroy, Justin McElroy, and Clint McElroy, "The The Adventure Zone Zone," March 17, 2016, in *The Adventure Zone*, produced by Maximum Fun podcast, 12:30, <https://maximumfun.org/episodes/adventure-zone/adventure-zone-zone/>.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 14:25.

audience who listen expecting a quick-paced and compelling story rather than an accurate representation of the game.

Occasionally, the story-centered nature of *The Adventure Zone* has led to controversy over whether it undermines the open-ended intent of a role-playing game. Griffin has been accused of “railroading,” a term used to indicate when a DM is perceived to be attempting to push their players in a particular direction to facilitate a certain narrative plotline rather than allowing the players full freedom within the world. The McElroys have pushed back against these accusations, with Justin claiming that they “create collaboratively and with guidance from Griffin,” but that if it “didn’t make sense for [their] characters or the story, [they] just wouldn’t...do it.”⁵⁹ However, this response from certain fans indicates an expectation that some people felt weren’t being met: that this actual play show conform to the etiquette of TRPG interactions and prioritize player choice and autonomy over any particular story. At the same time that this indicates an audience’s expectation for the structure and performance in the actual play show, it also demonstrates that these audience expectations impact how the game must be played. It is not enough for the players not to feel that railroading has occurred; the audience must also not feel that way, or else they may feel that the spirit of the TRPG experience being represented has been compromised.

In both shows, then, game mechanics play an important role, in large part because it is an element of the TRPG that the audience expects to be represented. Though they have different relationships to the rules-as-written, the narratives of both shows unfold within the framework of the mechanics. Dice are rolled, skill checks succeed or fail, and the narrative shifts accordingly. That *Critical Role* prefers an unedited, largely unmediated representation of their gameplay while *The Adventure Zone* elects to edit, trim, and optimize their play for audience engagement

⁵⁹ McElroy, McElroy, McElroy, and McElroy, “The The Adventure Zone Zone: Balance Finale Edition,” 29:30.

with the narrative suggests that a spectrum may exist within the actual play genre, spanning from those which prioritize authentic gameplay to those which prioritize more traditional pacing and a tighter narrative structure. Even so, mechanics remain a cornerstone for both ends of the spectrum.

Framing

Another aspect of the game which is preserved in both *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone* is the existence of multiple frames. Audiences—whom I have said occupy the “universal observer” role posited by van Velsen, Williams, and Verhulsdonck—can see and understand the difference between the characters in the narrative frame, the players discussing the game in the game frame, and the players as friends in the social frame. If there is a difference between the way the two shows display these frames, it stems from the fact that the players in *Critical Role* are actors, used to entertaining by putting on a character, while the players in *The Adventure Zone* are comedians, used to entertaining with their own personalities. Perhaps as a natural consequence, *Critical Role*’s time is devoted mostly to the narrative frame, with players dropping into the game frame mostly to ask questions or remark on their intentions, and, while the game is going (excluding, that is, the chatting that occurs at the very beginning and end of each episode before game has started and after it has ended), only rarely keying down all the way to the social frame to joke around with each other. In *The Adventure Zone*, however, while of course much of the episode is spent in the narrative frame, a good deal of time is allowed for the players—a family of comedians who know each other very well and have made a living off of riffing off of each other—to engage with each other in the social frame, which contributes to the

entertainment of the episode. The two casts navigate the frames in different ways, then, but in both they are clearly present and delineated.

This preservation of the frames is one of the elements that gives these and other actual play shows their true heart. There is little in other media to compare to the blending of in-character and out-of-character interaction that happens in the actual play show; it is rather like watching a movie and the behind-the-scenes making-of features of that movie all at the same time. One watches a movie for the story and to feel an emotional connection to the characters; one watches behind-the-scenes features to enjoy seeing the personalities and interactions of the actors, and the joy they take in what they do. When watching an RPG, then, the audience can be immersed in the story while also enjoying the interaction of the players, essentially providing two different layers of entertainment and emotional connection. At the same time, this function of the frames is in itself a differentiation from traditional TRPGs. In a private game, the out-of-character frames would not be a performance; they would be an absence of performance. It is only in the actual play show that these frames become a part of the entertainment, with player interactions sometimes just as meaningful to audiences as character interactions.

The emotional connections between players and characters can sometimes mingle in very poignant ways. In *Critical Role*, for example, players Liam O'Brien and Laura Bailey share a real-life birthday, though they are not related, and this led to their initial decision to make their characters, half-elves Vax'ildan and Vex'ahlia, twins.⁶⁰ In-character, the twins are very close, and this has led to Liam and Laura calling each other "twinnies" in real life and exchanging gifts based on their characters. After Laura received criticism from fans for a decision her character had made to steal a flying broom from an NPC, Liam gifted her a real-life replica of said broom

⁶⁰ Marsham, *The World of Critical Role*, 44.

on-stream, remarking, “I’m a big fan of all your decisions. Keep making them.”⁶¹ Later in the campaign, for Liam’s birthday, Laura gifts him a ring on-stream engraved with one of Vax’ildan’s iconic lines, spoken to Vex’ahlia: “Do not go far from me.”⁶² When audiences are attached to the relationship between Vex and Vax, they are also necessarily attached to the friendship between Liam and Laura, which provides an extra layer of meaning to that relationship.

Though the interplay between the social and narrative frames is a major element of actual play shows and a large part of their draw, the emphasis on the real people behind the characters can also sometimes cause conflict. As referenced above, actions carried out by the characters can lead to the audience making harmful judgments towards the players, as when Laura faced personal criticism in the aftermath of Vex’s broom thievery. Perhaps due to watching the players act out their characters’ dialogue and actions on the screen, some of the audience seem to forget that a characters’ actions do not necessarily reflect their players’ opinions, and debates about the characters’ morality can too easily become judgments about the players’ qualities as people. (It is worth noting, as well, that the female cast members of *Critical Role* tend to face these judgments from audiences far more often than their male co-cast.) These issues can lead to the players being careful with how they speak about their characters or what decisions they make at the table due to their awareness of playing for an attentive and opinionated audience. This is not inherently a bad thing, of course—performing for an audience *does* come with a responsibility to consider your portrayal of certain themes and characterizations thoughtfully, a responsibility which does not exist on the same scale in a private game. In some cases this audience pushback might be

⁶¹ Geek & Sundry, “At Dawn, We Plan! | Critical Role: VOX MACHINA | Episode 53,” June 29, 2016, YouTube, 3:37:36, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nfcja-6hr24>.

⁶² Geek & Sundry, “Masquerade | Critical Role: VOX MACHINA | Episode 99,” June 28, 2017, YouTube, 4:01:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B16lXrMK5t0>.

positive, leading to a more inclusive and thoughtful table; for example, audiences criticized *The Adventure Zone* for falling into the “bury your gays” trope in *Balance*’s third arc, when the only canonically gay couple that had so far appeared both died at the end of the arc. The McElroys responded positively to the criticism, recognizing this as an error that had hurt queer listeners, and made efforts to add more LGBTQ+ characters to the podcast and to handle their involvement thoughtfully.⁶³ Whether positive or negative, however, the audience’s position as universal observer certainly influences the way the game is played and the dynamics at the table.

The existence of multiple frames in the actual play show, then, comes with a host of implications and potential consequences that aren’t present in the traditional, private TRPG, as the presence of the audience adds a layer of performativity to even the non-narrative frames. Still, these frames are just as present in the actual play show as they are in any TRPG, though the preference given to different frames may vary across different shows, as they certainly do between *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone*. These frames, showcasing both the narrative and the social situations of the actual play show, make up a large part of the shows’ emotional appeal for an audience.

Collaboration and participation

It would seem that one way the actual play show must by necessity break from its origins is in its capacity for collaboration. While the cast of the show fulfill their collaborative roles of players co-authoring the narrative, the audience constitutes an outside element, separated from the events of the show by time and space and collective anonymity. For the most part, this is the case—however, both *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone* facilitate ways for their fans to

⁶³ Daniel Ryan Alarcon, “*The Adventure Zone* Proves Listening to Criticism Is the Way to Improve Representation, Not Avoiding It,” *The Mary Sue*, October 4, 2017, <https://www.themarysue.com/adventure-zone-representation/>.

influence the narrative in some ways, paying tribute to the spirit of interactivity that infuses the TRPG through modalities such as social media, aftershows, and live chats.

To begin, both *The Adventure Zone* and *Critical Role* make use of an aftershow in order to discuss the events of their shows and answer audience questions. *Talks Machina*—a pun on Campaign One party name Vox Machina and modeled after *The Talking Dead*, the aftershow for AMC's *The Walking Dead* that popularized the genre—airs weekly and features select cast members from *Critical Role* to discuss the episode directly preceding it, while *The Adventure Zone Zone* is *The Adventure Zone*'s chat show and airs more infrequently, generally during breaks between arcs or campaigns. Both of these shows welcome questions from viewers, and *Talks Machina* also highlights audience fan content by choosing a “Fanart of the Week,” “GIF of the Week,” and “Cosplay of the Week” from submissions to showcase during each episode. Of course, the aftershow is hardly exclusive to the actual play genre—rather, it was borrowed from television drama, where it originated—but the existence of these shows does highlight the actual play show's dedication to bringing in audience voices, a nod to the interactivity that is a hallmark of the RPG.

Both shows have taken further steps to invite audience participation, however. In *The Adventure Zone: Balance*, fans had the opportunity to have NPCs named after them by tweeting about the show with the appropriate hashtag. Some major and many minor NPCs bear the names of listeners. Listeners were also allowed to submit ideas for magic items the PCs could buy during the campaign at what was dubbed the “Fantasy Costco.” They would submit names and descriptions of the items, and Griffin would offer some of these to the players, who then chose

which their characters bought.⁶⁴ Many of these items were useful to the characters throughout the campaign, and some became a part of a character's design. The most notable example of this is the Flaming Poisoning Raging Sword of Doom, which was an overpowered magical sword designed by a listener's 8-year-old son. The boy, Colin, named and designed the sword, which added a +20 to melee damage dealt in combat, an exorbitant amount in any game. Accordingly, Griffin priced the item at a price far higher than the characters were ever likely to be able to afford, to avoid "breaking the game," that is, letting such a powerful item heavily unbalance encounters in the players' favor.⁶⁵ However, late in the campaign, Justin's wizard Taako manages a ploy that allows him to dupe the seller and trade another item for the sword.⁶⁶ While the players avoid using the sword in combat often so as not to abuse its power and unbalance the game, the scene where Taako obtains it is one of the more memorable moments in the show, and it is used or referenced both in and out of combat to great effect, becoming strongly associated with the fighter Magnus, who wields it. In this way, an item that would not have existed without fan interaction became a memorable and well-utilized part of the show.

Critical Role has also taken some opportunities, though different, to enable audience participation. Their weekly livestreams have a chat function where fans can react to the episode in real time. Currently, with an average of over 50,000 live viewers each week, the chat moves far too quickly and nonsensically to keep up with, and the cast rarely looks at it during their recording. In the show's early days, however, they engaged more directly with their smaller

⁶⁴ Griffin McElroy, Travis McElroy, Justin McElroy, and Clint McElroy, "Moonlighting: Chapter Three," March 11, 2015, in *The Adventure Zone*, produced by Maximum Fun podcast, 1:06:07, <https://maximumfun.org/episodes/adventure-zone/ep-9-moonlighting-chapter-three/>.

⁶⁵ Griffin McElroy, Travis McElroy, Justin McElroy, and Clint McElroy, "Lunar Interlude II: Internal Affairs," December 3, 2015, in *The Adventure Zone*, produced by Maximum Fun podcast, 1:14:32, <https://maximumfun.org/episodes/adventure-zone/ep-28-lunar-interlude-ii-internal-affairs/>.

⁶⁶ Griffin McElroy, Travis McElroy, Justin McElroy, and Clint McElroy, "Lunar Interlude IV: The Calm Before the Storm," October 5, 2016, in *The Adventure Zone*, produced by Maximum Fun podcast, 1:34:43, <https://maximumfun.org/episodes/adventure-zone/ep-50-lunar-interlude-iv-calm-storm/>.

viewership, and there were times when the chat made an impact on the game. The cast might look to the chat as a source of knowledge for a rule or point of contention, trusting that someone watching would know the answer or be able to find it quickly, and so the response of the viewers might determine the ruling made during the game as to, for instance, whether a particular spell could or could not be cast in that situation. Occasionally, viewers in the chat were even able to help the cast find notes they had misplaced. In one memorable instance, Laura was unable to find where she had put a card with important information on it, and about half an hour later, fellow player Travis, having noticed instructions from the chat, reached over and directed her to exactly where in her binder she had placed it.⁶⁷ Slight as it was, that intervention affected the game, as Laura would not have been able to use the ability without the information on the card. Even informally and unexpectedly, the presence of the livestream chat allows the audience the potential to impact the game.

In some cases, *Critical Role* actively invites the audience to influence the show more directly and deliberately. In Campaign Two, for instance, fans contributed to the design of Orly, an NPC who ends up helping the party run their ship, by suggesting character traits to Matthew Mercer during a livestream event.⁶⁸ This included everything from Orly's class and race (bard turtle) to memorable physical characteristics (one-eyed, with a shell modified to function as bagpipes) to his voice (Cajun-accented, with a stutter), and the result was a memorable character who became both meaningful and useful to the PCs. This mediated interaction—similar to the magical item designs in *The Adventure Zone*, in both cases allowing input from the audience which the DM can still choose to accept or discard as he sees fit—is generally the extent to

⁶⁷ Geek & Sundry, "The Fear of Isolation | Critical Role: VOX MACHINA | Episode 105," YouTube video, 4:08:19, August 16, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwNxxXtGxgM>.

⁶⁸ Critical Role, "Fireside Chat & NPC Build with Matthew Mercer," YouTube video, 1:07:39, August 9, 2018, <http://youtu.be/GEP-8IFTKKg>.

which *Critical Role* invites collaboration from its fans, but there was one instance early on in Campaign One where the live chat was granted much greater power. The cast played a one-shot meant to raise the number of subscriptions to Geek & Sundry, so every time another 100 subscriptions was reached, one suggestion was taken from the chat as to what happened in the game.⁶⁹ This radically changed the game, as the characters reacted to sudden, unexpected changes in their storyworld depending on suggestions made by the chat. While it made the game chaotically entertaining, it was also a strain for Mercer, the DM, as it took away a large part of his ability to author the story; he had to keep adjusting for changes to the world that were not authored by him and were beyond his control. This is probably the most direct example of the audience becoming part of the authorial process of the TRPG narrative, and it was an experiment that was never repeated again, which perhaps demonstrates that there is a line that should exist between audience and game in a successful actual play show. Some audience interaction can heighten the experience, but if the audience is given an authority on par with the players to affect the world, then they cease to be a separate audience, and the story rapidly becomes chaotic and difficult to manage. Even so, it proves that the actual play show *can* retain a certain amount of interactivity across all of its participants—player and viewer—depending on how willing the show is to welcome unpredictability.

Clearly, there is no way to facilitate collaboration in a way that renders all viewers also participants in the way that is traditional for a TRPG. If there were, it would not be a show but rather an extremely large-scale game. Without limitations and boundaries to the way an audience can affect the gameplay, an actual play show ceases to function productively. However, *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone*'s efforts to provide opportunities for audiences to participate in

⁶⁹ Geek & Sundry, "Critical Role: Critical Trolls for Extra Life!" YouTube video, 3:08:23, October 5, 2015, <https://youtu.be/EjimabBvZgw>.

controlled ways speaks to an appreciation for the spirit of collaboration that defines TRPGs and a desire for the audience to feel involved as a community.

Conclusion

Critical Role and *The Adventure Zone* both display, to at least some extent, all of the narrative elements identified here as particularly generic to the TRPG narrative: they operate via game mechanics, they include narrative, game, and social frames, and they encourage interactivity inside the boundaries within which it is productive to do so. It is clear, however—by the number of qualifying statements in the previous sentence if by nothing else—that actual play shows are not simply TRPG sessions presented wholesale and unaltered in front of an audience. The very existence of that audience has implications on the way the game is played, as the shows adjust their playstyles to be both entertaining for and considerate of a broad audience. The actual play show is a representation of the TRPG experience, but it is also its own entity, a genre shaped by the existence of the audience it was created to reach. There is a degree of freedom to which an actual play show can choose how much to mediate the reception of their gameplay and how much the audience is allowed to participate in the creation of narrative, and certainly other actual play shows than the ones I've discussed here approach these decisions in yet different ways. Regardless of where a show falls in its approach to these narrative elements, however, these elements lead to an experience of authorship and audience interaction that isn't present in traditional forms of media. The audience is not passive; because their reactions and interactions occur as the show is ongoing, the audience has the opportunity to influence the narrative in ways few audiences do, further complicating the author-audience spectrum.

Once the actual play show's campaigns are finished, their narratives exist as complete entities, associated with the TRPG gameplay that created them but not bound to them. They have a life of their own, and can be transported into different forms, removed from the context of the game and the mechanics that facilitated their creation. *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone* have begun to do just that, pioneering role-play adaptations through the media of comics and graphic novels. Authorship and interaction must necessarily manifest differently in these more traditional narrative formats than in the TRPG or actual play show, as the next chapter will examine.

Chapter 3

Critical Role and *The Adventure Zone* both ventured into new territory when they made the move to create graphic adaptations of the narratives created during their campaigns. Certainly, adaptations of stories created *for* TRPGs exist and have existed for decades. Books based off of settings and adventure modules, like the well-known *Temple of Elemental Evil*, have been around for almost as long as *D&D* itself has. These adaptations are not the same as an actual play adaptation, however, because no actual playing occurred to create the resultant narrative. Such works were not based on real gameplay, but on a stripped-down “ideal” version of the story: a straightforward narrative based on the successful progression of the story module, devoid of any of the twists and idiosyncrasies that both human improvisation and chance mechanics provide to actual play. “Adaptations” of this sort are not, therefore, adaptations of a *role-played game*, only of the modules written for those games; they bypass entirely the elements of RPGs that make their narratives unique.

Vox Machina: Origins and *The Adventure Zone: Here There Be Gerblins*, on the other hand, directly adapt played material created during the campaigns of their respective actual play shows. The study of graphic narratives—the name given to graphic novels, comic books, and comic strips collectively⁷⁰—has, like the TRPG, been slow to take root in narratology and literary studies, but the publication of multiple special issues of journals focusing solely on the study of graphic narratives within the past 15 years shows a concerted effort to give more focus to this medium. Narratology’s engagement with graphic narratives is, claim David Herman and Jared Gardner, “part of a wider attempt to come to terms with the narrative possibilities

⁷⁰ Hilary Chute and Marianne DeKoven, “Introduction: Graphic Narrative,” in “Graphic Narrative,” special issue, *Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 779n1, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26286669>.

presented by various storytelling environments.”⁷¹ The questions that Herman and Gardner ask of graphic narratives—how readers build storyworlds through interaction with the graphic medium, how prior theories of concepts such as focalization and characterization might need modifying to accommodate graphic storytelling, and whether graphic narratives provide different storytelling possibilities than other multimodal narratives⁷²—are reflective of the same issues of form and adaptation that drive this chapter. These graphic adaptations’ images convey some information far more easily than the spoken or written word and allow the narrative to play more with time and pacing. Though it is difficult to represent game mechanics or social frames in a graphic narrative, these adaptations show that there are still opportunities to experiment with narrative levels and references to mechanics within these mediums.

Game Mechanics and Pacing

I have spoken about game mechanics, in both private and broadcast games, as a defining and necessary element of the creation of a TRPG narrative. Decisions and outcomes are based on rolls and stats, and there are very few climactic or dramatic moments of a TRPG narrative that do not depend, in some way, on the dice. Once the narrative is complete, however, those mechanics are no longer essential; they can be removed, like the scaffolding around a completed building, and leave only the building itself, standing on its own—or, perhaps, it is more accurate to say that they exist underneath, like an artist’s underdrawing, no longer visible once the painting is complete. Though we are only beginning to see completed TRPG narratives being adapted to other media, this obscuring of the mechanics that contributed to the narratives’ creation will, I imagine, be a necessary part of the adaptation process for just about any of them. One could,

⁷¹ David Herman and Jared Gardner, “Graphic Narratives and Narrative Theory: Introduction,” in “Graphic Narratives and Narrative Theory,” special issue, *SubStance* 40, no. 1 (2011): 5, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41300185>.

⁷² Herman and Gardner, 5.

perhaps, display a stylized d20 at the corner of any panel in a graphic novel wherein a defining roll was made in the original game—but even that would only be a shallow representation of the many rules, abilities, and statistics that make up a game of *D&D*.

The stripping away of the mechanics, while thus an expected portion of the adaptation process, can still be done to a greater or lesser extent. *Vox Machina: Origins* exists, for the most part, as a narrative whose ties to the original mechanics have been heavily obscured. It reads much like a traditional fantasy narrative, and though *D&D* fans will recognize classes, spells, and monsters featured in the comics, no knowledge of the game is necessary to understand or enjoy them. A *D&D* player reading the comics might be able to guess where rolls were made and succeeded or failed in the original game—a character diving out of the way of a trap is indicative of a successful dexterity saving throw; a character whose bluff falls through has likely just failed their deception check—but no such references to the rolls exist in the narrative itself.

This is not to say that the comics are entirely devoid of any nods to *D&D*, however. At one point, while the twins Vax and Vex are traversing a dungeon, there are panels that show their positions on a map of the area, separated into a grid of five-by-five squares, which is reminiscent of the grid system often used to show the positions of characters on RPG battle-maps.⁷³ At another point, when the characters are facing the prospect of another fight soon after their previous one, one quips, “This is what we get for not resting,” which is likely a reference to the game mechanic in *D&D* wherein a character’s spell slots, hit points, and special abilities are not replenished until they take a short or long rest.⁷⁴ Therefore, while the narrative in the comics does not *rely* on game mechanics in the way the gameplay in the original show does, subtle references still hint at the influence of the TRPG on the story. And, indeed, there is one direct

⁷³ Matthew Mercer and Matthew Colville, *Critical Role: Vox Machina Origins*, illustrated by Olivia Samson (Milwaukie: Dark Horse Books, 2019): 62.

⁷⁴ Mercer and Colville, 131.

reference to *D&D* mechanics—not within the narrative, but after it, in the end-pages of the volume. Just after a map and before a “sketchbook” section where preliminary character designs are shown are a few pages highlighting two of the main villains of the volume and one of the main magic items. After a short blurb about each character, these pages list the characters’ and item’s stats, including such mechanics as armor class, hit points, actions they can take in combat, and other features, in precise *D&D* terminology.⁷⁵ While these reference pages are not a part of the narrative, they do clearly pay homage to the fact that these items and characters *were* a part of a real *D&D* game, and that these stats and mechanics played a key part in that game.

Here There Be Gerblins, by contrast, engages with *D&D* game mechanics far more heavily and directly. “Griffin the DM” exists as a character in the text—examined in more detail in the next section—and in his first appearance, he asks the characters to make a “perception check.”⁷⁶ At one point the party attempts to bluff some goblins into thinking they’re “very dangerous,” and when the goblin asks how dangerous they are, Taako, the elf wizard, references the leveling mechanic of the game by replying, “Level...level one?”⁷⁷ Characters remark how many hit points they feel that they have left and make references to saving throws and proficiencies, all of which are part of the game mechanics. Though combat is portrayed as a more traditional fight scene, taking up no more discourse space than necessary, Magnus, the human fighter, at one point yells to a goblin attempting to attack him that “it’s my turn, asshole, and I’m having a serious discussion with the M.D.!”⁷⁸ (He is erroneously trying to say “DM.”) In this way, though the RPG-typical element of strategic and drawn-out combat is not present, the narrative still references the turn-based mechanics of traditional RPG-style combat. These

⁷⁵ Mercer and Colville, 148-149.

⁷⁶ Clint McElroy, Griffin McElroy, Travis McElroy, and Justin McElroy, *The Adventure Zone: Here There Be Gerblins*, illustrated by Carey Pietsch (New York: First Second, 2018): 5.

⁷⁷ McElroy, McElroy, McElroy, and McElroy, 19.

⁷⁸ McElroy, McElroy, McElroy, and McElroy, 9.

references to the game mechanics in a context removed from the gameplay itself shows a desire not to diverge from its RPG origins but to showcase them, in a move Marie-Laure Ryan might identify as “the text yearn[ing] for another medium”—when the “narrative...actively fight[s] some of the properties of the medium for expressive purposes.”⁷⁹ In this case, the structuring around game mechanics is not a natural part of the graphic medium and is not easy to convey or recreate, but, instead of letting them go as *Vox Machina: Origins* does, the text finds ways to fight that dissonance by approximating elements of the original genre.

Framing

Much like the game mechanics, it is difficult, though not impossible, to imagine a faithful preservation of the RPG’s three frames in a graphic narrative that focuses on the innermost story. There are existing adaptations that manage to do so; one excellent example is a 10-minute “fan film” based on *The Adventure Zone*, posted to YouTube in 2017, which constitutes a live-action adaptation of a section of *The Adventure Zone: Balance*’s fourth episode. Using audio from the show, it opens on an establishing shot of a house, cutting to a close-up of a battle map complete with miniature figures representing the characters before showing the table at large, where the DM is describing to the players what they see while one of the players joins the table with a bowl of chips. Then, with the DM’s voiceover continuing, the scene switches to an exterior nighttime shot of the characters within the storyworld, entering the cavern that the DM has been describing. The camera continues to shift back and forth in this way, cutting now to the table—the game frame—to show the players as one asks an out-of-character question, and now back to

⁷⁹ Marie-Laure Ryan, “On the Theoretical Foundations of Transmedial Narratology,” in *Narratology Beyond Media Criticism: Mediality, Disciplinarity*, ed. Jan Christoph Meister (New York: De Gruyter, 2005): 21.

the scene as the characters speak to each other.⁸⁰ For a fan-made film, the production value is high, and it is well-executed proof that an adaptation of this kind can use a parallel format to preserve both the in-story and out-of-story frames of the RPG.

While the graphic narrative shares with film the visual modality that allows for easy signaling—via a shift in scenery—between the narrative frame and the game/social frames, neither *Vox Machina: Origins* nor *Here There Be Gerblins* attempts this. It would be difficult to sustain over a lengthy work, and beyond this, a faithful representation of the frames would center the adaptation around the experience of the *game* much more than around the *resultant story*. It would also necessitate representing the actual cast of the shows as characters, who on the pages of a fictional comic would appear to possess the same level of fictionality as their PCs. Perhaps for these reason, *Vox Machina: Origins*, just as it allowed the game mechanics that influenced its narrative to fade to nothing more than a subtle reference, also entirely loses the social and game frames, leaving only the narrative. It gives no reference to DM or players and no indication of any world but the narrative one.

Here There Be Gerblins also does not recreate the multiple frames of the TRPG; the world presented is the storyworld and there is no indication that players are controlling the characters. They appear, as in traditional narratives, independent and autonomous, separate from their authors. However, *Gerblins* chooses a different way to frame the narrative that still, in its way, honors the RPG format: it preserves the presence of the DM in the text. Griffin McElroy makes appearances in the graphic novel as the Dungeon Master, occasionally popping up in a bright circle superimposed over a corner of the current scene and interacting with the characters. The characters are aware of him, and startled by his presence: when they react with shock, he

⁸⁰ AZFanFam, “LIVE ACTION – The Adventure Zone Fan Film,” August 25, 2017, YouTube, 9:03, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWot_8E4g2c.

introduces himself as “me! Griffin, your D.M.!”⁸¹ He is not physically present with them—instead, we might say that he is poking his head into the narrative frame from the game frame in order to give an instruction, offer his opinion, or remind them what they can and can’t do.

In this way, *Gerblins* does not entirely discard the TRPG frames but rather plays with them unconventionally. One of the crucial elements of the frame theory as espoused by Fine and expanded on by Cover is that the frames are separate: elements of one frame might be adopted into another (a suggestion from the game frame becoming reality in the narrative frame, for instance, or a real-world joke making its way into the narrative), but it is understood that these frames don’t overlap. While a DM might appear to address a character (“What are you doing, Vex?” Matthew Mercer might ask when Laura is taking too long to decide her move in combat), it is understood that they are actually questioning the players, while maintaining immersion. The characters are never aware of the DM’s presence, and do not answer back from the narrative frame. In *Gerblins*, however, that is precisely what they do: the player role is bypassed entirely so that the DM can speak directly to the characters, preserving what is perhaps the most famous role of the game—the Dungeon Master—without needing to juggle the roles of the players *and* the characters.

Griffin-the-character even makes references within the narrative to his own level of authority over the storyworld and the plot. When the characters remark on the creepy atmosphere they’ve entered into, he materializes to quip, “You guys do realize that’s kind of the way this works, right? I fill a chamber with scary shit, and you fight it.”⁸² In this way, he references his role within the game that the narrative came from, with the result that the graphic novel relies on the audience having some preconceptions in place about both the DM’s role

⁸¹ McElroy, McElroy, McElroy, and McElroy, 5.

⁸² McElroy, McElroy, McElroy, and McElroy, 16.

specifically and the way the TRPG works in general. Without the frames to contextualize Griffin's role, he becomes an interesting anomaly: we understand that he is authoring the story in some way, but to the characters his presence is mystical and unexplained. Still, this does not turn into the metafictional commentary it has the potential to; the characters never wonder at their purpose within the narrative, and we are invited to accept Griffin's commentary as the lighthearted reference that it is.

Vox Machina: Origins is successful in its endeavor to present a narrative that feels natural in its omission of mechanics and game frames, and shows that a TRPG narrative does not need to be bound within its initial structure in order to make for a compelling and sound narrative. The way that *Gerblins* plays with the game structure, however, demonstrates that it is possible to engage with elements of the game even in a medium divorced from it. The tone of the intervention of game mechanics and the DM in *Gerblins* is light and comedic, but could perhaps pave the way for more serious or subversive explorations of the potential intersection between frames in stories from or about RPGs.

Collaboration

The front cover of *The Adventure Zone: Here There Be Gerblins* lists Clint McElroy, Griffin McElroy, Justin McElroy, Travis McElroy, and Carey Pietsch as the authors. On the inside title page, we learn that Pietsch was the artist, that she and Clint McElroy adapted the story, and that the story was “based on the podcast by” the four McElroys. The cover of *Vox Machina: Origins* sports the names of Matthew Mercer and Matthew Colville, the writers; Olivia Samson, the artist; and Chris Northrop, the colorist. Inside, the title page gives an acknowledgement, “Characters Created by the Cast of *Critical Role*,” and the cast members are

thanked by name on the copyright page. These are, however, the only indications of the particular collaborative endeavors that created the narratives these graphic novels are adapting. Except for the inclusion of Griffin-the-character, discussed above, there is no way to know, reading the narratives, that the characters were piloted by individuals playing off of each other, or that their actions were a response to a greater plot orchestrated by the DM, or, still, that the story was created within the confines of the primary text of the game system itself. The collaborative authorship is acknowledged in the paratext, but otherwise obscured.

Of course, one could argue this is the case for many if not most narrative works. Films and television shows are shaped by hundreds of hands, with only the ending credits as evidence; even traditional novels are seen by several pairs of eyes before they reach shelves. There is nothing unusual about the collaborative element to the creation of narrative being obscured in the final product, except for how pivotal that collaboration is to the RPG prototypically. Moreover, because these graphic works are working with a narrative that is already complete, there is no easy way to involve its intended audience in its creation in the manner that the actual play shows have made passes at. The graphic narratives become, then, culminations of great collaboration, but not representative of collaboration in themselves. Adapting the TRPG narratives to this medium strips away the opportunities for true interaction.

Even so, both *Here There Be Gerblins* and *Vox Machina: Origins* reserve space in their graphic texts for an acknowledgement of fan contributions. At the end of the first collected volume of *Vox Machina: Origins* is an extra “sketchbook” section showing prototypes of much of the art in the volume, including the cover, character designs, linework, conceptual sketches, and the like. The brief introduction to the section notes that many of the contributing artists were found among the community of Critters, as fans of *Critical Role* are termed, and notes on the

following pages identify well-known artists among the fandom such as Tess Fowler and Ariana Orner.⁸³ These pages highlight *Critical Role's* attempt to include individuals from their audience in the creation of the adaptation to the extent that they could, a nod to the collaborative legacy of their game.

Here There Be Gerblins, meanwhile, also fills its final, post-narrative pages with art, though of a different kind. In a move similar to *Critical Role's* weekly fanart gallery reel, which runs before and after each episode and features on their website, *Gerblin's* last pages are dedicated to a fanart gallery, each page featuring a piece by a different artist from the community. A blurb at the beginning of the gallery offers thanks to “all the writers, artists, creators, and fans of all stripes who have made *The Adventure Zone* what it is.”⁸⁴ While these artists were not involved in the making of the graphic novel in the way the above fan artists for *Critical Role* were, a space was still set aside within the work for fan contributions, suggesting a similar desire to honor the collaborative nature of the original narrative.

Visuals and Anachronies

The three previous sections have primarily focused on what is lost in the process of adapting RPG stories to a new medium: in each, the elements I established as driving forces of the TRPG narrative have been altered, diminished, or erased. However, it's worth noting that the transition to a graphic medium offers other narrative strategies that are not available to RPG narratives as they're being created, including a reliance on a visual narrative and the use of anachronies.

⁸³ Mercer and Colville, *Vox Machina: Origins*, 150.

⁸⁴ McElroy, McElroy, McElroy, and McElroy, 241.

As has been discussed, the RPG is heavily reliant on the DM to provide the narration that builds the storyworld. The DM is a constant narrator whose job is to be an “inexhaustible” source of narratives and information, always ready to answer the questions of the players to provide greater context.⁸⁵ It is the DM who sets up the scene, describes the setting, and in effect creates the diegetic level in which the characters reside. This method of oral storytelling comes from necessity; traditionally, beyond simple battle maps, there are no visuals, nothing to keep each player imagining the same storyworld except the descriptions of the DM. The result of this, necessarily, is that the setting will be imagined slightly differently by all who hear the description, no matter how precise the DM. In a graphic narrative, however, both the reliance on the DM-as-narrator and the somewhat imprecise, individual storyworld are eliminated. The visual medium takes over the narration, showing rather than telling a setting and design that is the same for all readers. Though, as with any adaptation from textual to visual, some audiences might be disappointed to find that the new “canon” visualization is different from what has been in their head, this is ultimately an advantage of the graphic medium—it can convey a great deal of information in a single glance, far more than the DM could realistically describe. Character details in particular can be included in visual design that would be difficult to memorably convey otherwise, and the work the DM puts into creating the setting can be better appreciated once it’s represented on the page.

Adapting the complete story also gives far more freedom to the narrative structure. Because the TRPG generally requires a linear discourse—that is, the story is *told* exactly in the order it *unfolds*, progressing ever forwards—such strategies as foreshadowing and analepsis are very difficult to include in a TRPG-created narrative. A DM who knows future plot points may drop hints and set up context for future events, but the DM cannot reliably foreshadow actions of

⁸⁵ van Velsen, Williams, and Verhulsdonck, “Tabletop Gaming Narratology,” 112.

any of the player characters or anything directly involving those characters because the DM does not have control over them and cannot guarantee how they will act in the story's future. Neither is flashback common, unless the DM begins recounting a PC's memory, but this is unusual. Generally, the DM's narration encompasses only what the characters can experience around them in their present moment, and any explanations of the past are made through dialogue. In short, the RPG narrative's ability to play with time is very limited.

The graphic narrative is not bound by these constraints, and can freely engage in anachronies.⁸⁶ Analepsis becomes simple, as the graphic novel can simply present images or scenes of a character's past. As these graphic adaptations are usually created after the campaign they adapt has ended, foreshadowing also becomes far more possible; these narratives can create or highlight connections to the later plot that would have been impossible to make during gameplay before the rest of the story had been decided. *Vox Machina: Origins* and *Here There Be Gerblins* both employ foreshadowing in this way. At the beginning of each issue of *Vox Machina: Origins*, a panel is shown featuring Vox Machina at the height of their power near the end of the streamed campaign, adorned with armor and magical raiments, with labels listing the full title of each character and a caption that reads, "They will save the world." Below this is a panel showing the same scene, but with the characters as they are at the beginning of their story when the comics take place, dressed in humble clothes without any titles or honors, and the caption reads, "Eventually."⁸⁷ This introduction gives the story an epic scope: seeing this page, a reader will know that these characters will reach great heights, that this is the origin story of heroes.

⁸⁶ I use here Gérard Genette's terms to describe instances of discrepancy between the order of events as they occur in the story and as they are presented in the discourse, though I've tended to the more specific "foreshadowing" in place of "prolepsis." See Genette 1980, p. 35.

⁸⁷ Mercer and Colville, *Vox Machina: Origins*, 5.

In *Here There Be Gerblins*, the ability to foreshadow is even more integral to the plot. The main characters of the *Balance* campaign turned out to have been involved in an ongoing war across many worlds, but their memory was taken from them, leaving them with no knowledge of their true identities at the start of the campaign. As the story unfolded, they discover more and more connections until their memories are finally restored to them. This plotline allowed Griffin to reveal, over time, the true identity of their characters and their place in the wider conflict of the storyworld, but because Griffin had not created this storyline when the campaign first began, signs of this greater plotline did not begin to appear until later in the campaign. The graphic novel, however, with knowledge of the full storyline, took the opportunity to weave foreshadowing early into the narrative. In *Here There Be Gerblins*, when the main characters meet the woman who will become their boss, she looks shocked to see them, faltering over her words, and later addresses one of them by his last name before he has given it to her.⁸⁸ This foreshadows the later reveal that she knows these characters because she was responsible for the memory loss that caused them to forget about her and her mission. The graphic novel also inserted a reference to the character Taako's past, which in the show had not been decided on until several arcs later.⁸⁹

Both adaptations, then, are able to use creative narrative elements in ways unavailable to the original still-unfolding narrative presented in the actual play show. The benefits of adapting a complete work to a visual medium allows the creators not only to give their stories new life in a different form, but to take the opportunity to improve upon them in ways only available through adaptation. In particular, the ability to play with representations of time is one that allows fans of the original shows to experience these narratives in more complex and intentional forms.

⁸⁸ McElroy, McElroy, McElroy, and McElroy, *Here There Be Gerblins*, 233-35.

⁸⁹ McElroy, McElroy, McElroy, and McElroy, 27.

Conclusion

The difference in the way the two texts approach the integration—or obscuring—of the mechanical and framing elements of the RPG narrative is an interesting switch from their way of showcasing the game in their original actual play contexts. *Critical Role* prioritizes displaying natural, unedited gameplay in their show, but opts for a mostly-traditional narrative for their comics, referencing *D&D* only obliquely and through paratextual end-pages. *The Adventure Zone*, on the other hand, more highly edits and streamlines the narrative on their podcast with a focus on keeping their story entertaining and fast-paced, but works hard to maintain a heavy set of references to game mechanics and the role of the DM in their graphic novels. Even so, they continue to offer very different models for how both actual play shows and RPG adaptations can be created. Both are successful in their differing aims for their adaptations, as the works' continued popularity shows. Thus, there exists a range of possibilities when adapting TRPG narratives; these elements can be manipulated and played with in a number of different ways even within a single medium. This shows great promise for the versatility of the TRPG genre should more creators choose to adapt their game narratives, and this versatility is precisely what makes the genre worthy of study by scholars of game studies, adaptation studies, and narratology alike.

The RPG adaptation doesn't end here at graphic narratives. *Critical Role* has a full animated series on the way, and *The Adventure Zone* is also rumored to be in the planning stages for an animated series of their own. Though they are both visual media, animation is a different beast from graphic narrative, and it will be fascinating to see the way that these narratives are altered for representation in a series of 22-minute episodes, a far cry from *Critical Role's* usual

4-hour runtime. While I am unaware of other actual play shows that have adapted their own narratives, the success of *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone*'s ventures into this genre is likely to inspire others. This chapter, then, has constituted only an early examination of the potential of actual play adaptations as they develop as a genre of their own. Future adaptations may build on these initial experimentations with form, pacing, and authorship, pushing our understanding of how these narrative elements can be represented.

Conclusion

The landscape of the TRPG narrative has evolved rapidly within the past decade. Select scholars have long understood the value of the RPG as a game and a social experience, but until now there has been little incentive, and little means, to explore its position as a *narrative* experience. Authors like Jennifer Grouling Cover and Jessica Hammer have made strides in considering narrative aspects of the TRPG, but previously it has been difficult for scholars to observe long-term narrative creation in the RPG. The rise of the actual play show has opened up a world of possibility, not only to examine the narratives that are created by their play but also to help understand the unique narrative elements of the TRPG as a genre.

Critical Role and *The Adventure Zone* showcase some of the ways that these elements push the boundaries of traditional narrative creation. The complex author-webs created in the TRPG, where all participants are both author and audience in their joint narrative creation, are impossible to replicate exactly in any narrative broadcast to a mass audience, but actual play shows are nevertheless expanding the ways in which audience interaction can affect narrative as it is created. The multiple frames present in a TRPG and represented in actual play shows allow for dual modes of audience investment—in the form of emotional connections to both players and characters—and also present opportunities, in adaptation, to experiment with narrative levels and metafictionality. Finally, TRPGs and actual play shows demonstrate a nontraditional relationship between story and discourse time; time in the TRPG progresses linearly, but at a pace very different from traditional narratives, and TRPG adaptations can further experiment with this fluidity of discourse time. Future works in the TRPG genre will continue to explore how these elements can be developed beyond traditional understandings of narrative, and there is much room for future study surrounding the TRPG and its adaptations.

Viewing actual play shows as narrative texts opens them up for literary analysis in the same way as any other text, and there is great potential for further study in this direction. *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone* both engage with a number of literary tropes and techniques, and there is much room for discussion of their use of these techniques, perhaps in relation to similar narratives created in more traditional mediums. Genre theory, queer and gender theory, and postcolonial studies, among others, could all find purchase in the narratives in these actual play shows.

I also chose to focus only on *Dungeons & Dragons*, which is a popular gaming system especially amongst actual play shows but is far from the only TRPG. Other TRPG systems may create narrative in different ways than *D&D*; while they will all be collaborative and multi-framed, their game mechanics may structure narrative differently, and certain systems and settings may favor particular genres of narrative over others. Another worthwhile study would be to compare the features of the narratives created through different TRPG systems to examine the extent to which different systems necessitate different approaches to narrative.

Finally, I have discussed adaptations of TRPG narratives into different media, but this is hardly the only way in which the TRPG is applicable to adaptation studies. TRPGs *themselves* can function as adaptations of other texts. A recently-published collection, *Exit Pursued by Owlbear*, features several adventure modules for *D&D* that are all adaptations of different Shakespeare plays. By adapting well-known stories to a collaborative game format, the TRPG can reinvigorate player engagement with the source text by encouraging them to participate in the act of adaptation itself. This form of interactive adaptation, a different angle to adaptation in the TRPG than the one I have taken in this thesis, merits further study.

It is my prediction that our understanding of narrative is going to change, if it has not already begun to. TRPGs and actual play shows are hardly the only interactive media being produced; the advent of the digital age has led to a number of interactive, entirely-online, real-time stories, such as *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, a 2012-2013 vlog-style adaptation of *Pride & Prejudice* which also made use of blogs, Twitter pages, and side channels so that the “characters” could interact with fans and tell the story through a variety of mediums. Participatory digital narratives will continue to be experimented with, especially with the rise of VR technology, and the TRPG is precursor and backbone to many of the interactive narrative strategies utilized in these narratives. It is important, therefore, that we study the narrative potential of the TRPG not only for its own sake, but to be ready with the tools to understand the evolution of narrative from a form into an experience.

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