

PLAYING WITH POWER:
THE AUTHORIAL CONSEQUENCES OF
ROLEPLAYING GAMES

by

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INTRODUCTION: A GAME OF AUTHORIAL POWER

Authorship has undergone drastic revision in the twentieth century, as the “death of the author” has given rise to the primacy of the reader/audience; boundaries between categories such as author and audience have been blurred, interpretive communities now reinscript texts, and multiple possibilities are inherent in the consumption of texts. The creative issue of these conditions must be influenced by this instability, however. And indeed, these circumstances have effected a fundamental transformation in literature, as evinced in part by the development of the roleplaying hobby over the last thirty years. This study examines roleplaying games (RPGs) as both a literary and cultural phenomenon, in which the text’s producers take the role of an authorial multiplicity.

Roleplaying can be approached as a literary game, argues Chapter Two: *Roleplaying Games and Postmodern Literature*. The fact that roleplaying games are self-enclosed, separable from other activities, and possess identifiable text-specific assumptions marks them as texts with similarities to literature, yet their simultaneous status as game is indisputable. RPGs literally translate literature into the medium of a game, and in modifying the function of the author from a single, autonomous creative entity to an empowered, interactive storytelling among groups of participants, roleplaying games complicate previous distinctions between author and audience in a way inconceivable during the lifetimes of many of the writers whose works inspire the games. For these

reasons, roleplaying must be approached as a literary text that also penetrates into the realm of cultural criticism.

The literary roots of roleplaying games are self-evident, Chapter Three: Literary Beginnings elaborates, as their designers often draw settings, character types, atmosphere, and even plots directly from notable writers such as H. P. Lovecraft and J. R. R. Tolkien, and from modern-day novelists like William Gibson and Anne Rice. However, a consequence of the development of the roleplaying game has been a subsequent departure from these authorial beginnings; RPGs have irrevocably transformed the role of the writers that inspire them, altering the authorial position into that of a transgressive, border-blurring multiplicity that is directly postmodern.

But the authorial multiplicity that can be attributed to roleplaying games goes beyond simple distinctions between the seminal writer and those who play the game. As Chapter Four: Fanning the Flames of Authorship shows, the hobby's fan community also proves to have a pervasive impact on the authorship of RPGs. Roleplaying games have nurtured a subculture considered deviant – outside of institutionalized forms of expression – by the dominant culture; roleplaying is a marginalized venue for a thriving fan culture, and a guiding factor in emergent technologies such as online interactive forums, through which members of this community are able to explore culturally subversive methods of authoring. The roleplaying industry's fan participation includes amateur press

associations, semi-professional periodicals, print and online fanzines, web sites, listserves, online discussion forums, MUDs, and conventions that allow fans to interact with RPG designers and publishers as well as with each other. The origins of this dynamic can be traced to the pulp science fiction magazines of the early twentieth century, which featured letters columns that printed fan opinions and brought readers into contact with published science fiction writers, promoting a significant amount of interaction. Popular writers like H. P. Lovecraft developed a fan following – a circle of admirers and imitators – who communicated through the pulp columns, corresponded directly with him, and even “borrowed” elements of his work in their own published stories. Lovecraft’s Circle continued to produce a multitude of fictions based on his Cthulhu (khu-THOO-loo) Mythos even after Lovecraft’s death. RPG fans have as much, if not more, impact on the roleplaying games that they play as the fans of Lovecraft’s time did on his work, using electronic media much as Lovecraft’s fans did the letters columns of the pulps. In this way, fans dispute the “legitimate” or privileged authorship of roleplaying games, further blurring the boundaries between reader and author, and becoming vigorous producers and manipulators of meaning.

The *Call of Cthulhu* RPG (Chaosium, 1981) is another result of the post-mortem co-authoring seen in regard to H. P. Lovecraft, wherein the original work has been reinterpreted and reinscripted by the game’s designer for

consumption by the writer's fans. Lovecraft's literature acted as a jumping-off place for *Call of Cthulhu*'s designer just as it did for Lovecraft's Circle after his death; as explained in Chapter Five: Roleplaying by Design, RPG designers flesh out the game with a formalized rules system, lending their own creative inspiration to the game, while the literature provides a ready-made context that's already familiar to players. Lovecraft's themes are worked into the *Call of Cthulhu* game, for example, in a complex tapestry of plot, setting, characterization, and atmosphere, while innovations such as the Sanity trait are contributed by the game designer. Designers of other RPGs then "borrow" ground-breaking game elements like the Sanity trait for their own work – just as Lovecraft's Circle did elements of the Cthulhu Mythos – either informally without acknowledging their sources, or as part of the RPG industry's open gaming movement that allows designers free use of certain copyrighted material. This intermingling of creative juices makes the idea of a singular author ridiculous: often many creative individuals have a stake in the design of a roleplaying game.

The goal of the RPG designer is to create rules that break down the experiential barriers inherent in roleplaying. When this is achieved, however, roleplaying games often become subject to the larger culture's judgment that they're a dangerous display of "escapism," which positions the hobby counter to the cultural enlightenment touted by dominant ideology. Chapter Six: Playing with Social Norms examines this phenomenon, looking at how attacks by

elements of the conservative religious establishment tend to marginalize and vilify roleplaying, claiming a direct link between these games and suicide, Satanism, mind control, loss of self-identity, and excessive violence. The roleplaying industry responds with studies citing roleplaying's benefits in regard to cooperation skills, problem-solving, resource management, and as a learning tool, saying that roleplaying promotes emotional, social, and intellectual well-being. But these attacks also cause a division between those publishers who avoid controversial content and those who revel in its subversive reputation as a way to better market their products.

Roleplaying's status as an alternative social community in this way leaves it open to deliberate misinterpretation and attempts at reappropriation from the dominant culture, even as it acts as a site of resistance for fans. But perhaps most significantly, Chapter Seven: Acting the Author discusses how roleplaying games provide a framework for the construction of a shared narrative, wherein players take on the roles of characters navigating a created world. Each player contributes to the communal fantasy by determining and describing the actions of his own character,¹ while one player acts as a mediator, weaving the others' individual experiences of the fictional world into a coherent whole. Though the setting may change between one RPG and another, these games share the commonality of testing the abilities of a group of players/characters by setting them against powerful outside forces. In this way, roleplaying is inherently self-reflective, self-reflexive, metafictional, and narcissistic.

Roleplaying also presents a complex structure of fantasy, addressing Freudian concepts of dreams and transmitting a knowledge of self through the wish-fulfillment inherent in character creation. A player's character acts as a latent aspect of himself, played out publicly, that affirms the player's sense of self-worth and power, and indulges his erotic desires. For this reason, the conflict between the initial, unrestrained desires of the player characters and their moral judgment is an aspect of roleplaying that defines it as an ethical forum for the exploration of the nature of human existence, and that inevitably influences the direction the story's narrative takes. Roleplaying games, in this fashion, are a locus for issues of identity, including questions of performance, spectatorship, and gender construction. By allowing play in regard to identity, roleplaying games are able to navigate expressions of difference with a transgressive effect. This flexibility of boundaries also allows players to subtly work against the traditional split between spectacle and narrative. The reader, in effect, is empowered to do more than just interpret and respond to the work, but actually has a hand in shaping its narrative based on his own experience and desires; players become active readers and interpreters of the text. In this way, socially, culturally, and literarily significant behaviors operate within this formation, despite – or possibly as a consequence of – its trivialized status in mass culture; roleplaying games negotiate the terrain between the dominant culture's conflicted suspicion and fear, and the RPG culture's own subversive resistance to disempowerment.

The field of social psychology has given roleplaying a significant treatment as a medical therapy, and roleplaying has since acquired currency in the fields of sociology, social anthropology, psychodrama and simulation games, and, of course, the entertainment industry. But for the most part, RPGs have been somewhat neglected by the academic and literary communities.ⁱⁱ One larger goal of this study of roleplaying games is to fuse the broader perspectives of literary and cultural criticism regarding issues such as identity, authorship, performance, and game theory with my own experiences as an academic, a participant in the roleplaying fan culture, and a member of the RPG publishing industry.ⁱⁱⁱ Various frameworks of cultural and literary criticism – such as Jacques Derrida’s theory of free play, Frederic Jameson’s conception of the commodification of industrial products, Laura Mulvey’s work on performance and scopophilia, and others – are implemented here to examine roleplaying’s development from the original literary works of individual writers, to the interactive roleplaying games based on them, wherein the hobby’s original creators, game designers, editors and publishers, fans, players, and the cultural environment surrounding them are all invested with a creative power that allows them to contribute meaningfully to the narrative. Roleplaying in this way becomes a literary game – an intersection between the open/non-linear/game and closed/linear/story, in which the producers of the experiential text take the role of authorial amalgam.