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Roleplaying Games and Performance

Benjamin Joseph Munise

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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ROLEPLAYING GAMES AND PERFORMANCE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College

In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The School of Theatre

by

Benjamin Joseph Munise

B.A., Arkansas Tech University, 2011

B.Sc., Arkansas Tech University, 2011

August 2023

For Pepper, Sybil, and River

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Abstract

Roleplaying Games and Performance calls to mind popular appearances of roleplaying games on stage and screen, like *Stranger Things* or Qui Nguyen's popular play, *She Kills Monsters*. However, inquiry into the way roleplaying games appear in these titles reveals the way they have been instrumentalized to serve the ends of their respective mediums. Scholars writing about roleplaying games also tend to leap straight to analyses of video games, with much ink spilled over *World of Warcraft* while a live site of analog performance sits before them. In this work, I address the tabletop roleplaying game as a medium with insights to offer Theatre and Performance Studies as an object of study.

In this dissertation, I explore the way that tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) use speech and performance to guide players through conventional practices that allow them to imagine together, safely and respectfully. Here, I show that TTRPGs are a medium whose performance shares many qualities with Theatre. Through these qualities, I construct a framework through which I unpack the event of play, its participants, and the conventions that shepherd it. Interpreting roleplaying as the performance of a series of speech acts, I draw attention to the conventions that allow us to collaborate and imagine together through play.

Analyzing on the design of these conventions across a wide variety of these games, I show the way the system of rules created by game designers render explicit the implied social conventions that govern conversation and social interaction. These games design their rules to structure the relationships between players and create tools to promote respectful interaction at the table. This underscores the importance of this site not only for scholarship, but also for practice and pedagogy. Safety tools and the distribution of narrative authority do not merely show *that* players collaborate, communicate boundaries, and act respectfully and with consent –

they show us *how*. By unpacking rules about safety and consent, and by putting them into practice, theatre practitioners gain a new understanding of what we make, how we work together, and how to move through a social world with safety and respect.

Introduction

Classroom Inspirations

A title like “Roleplaying Games and Performance” calls to mind popular appearances of roleplaying games on stage and screen. Qui Nguyen’s *She Kills Monsters*, about a woman who grieves for her dead, estranged sister by playing through a *Dungeons & Dragons* adventure she wrote, is one of the most popular plays in the US. A brief appearance of *Dungeons & Dragons* in *E.T.* became the structuring thematic element of *Stranger Things*’s first season. At the time of this writing, *Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves* remains near the top of the box office.¹ In each of these instances, tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) find themselves instrumentalized to serve a different purpose: framing device, set dressing, motif, setting. There is more to this medium than what it can offer to other media as background. Like Theatre, the TTRPG is a medium that finds performance at its heart.

I am writing this dissertation to demonstrate a straightforward claim, that tabletop roleplaying games are a medium whose performance shares many qualities with Theatre. Through the research presented in my dissertation, I will contextualize the TTRPG medium for a Theatre Studies audience that might be unfamiliar with these games beyond its pop culture instrumentality. Like our own, this is a medium of speech and performance. Approaching it with such a framework, I highlight qualities of these games that illuminate the ways we make sense of social interactions and work together to create collaborative art.

First, I want to establish my background in this site and what lead me to this topic. In Fall 2018, I taught a Special Topics in Contemporary Performance seminar for upper division Theatre

¹ “Domestic 2023 Weekend 19.”

undergraduates at Louisiana State University called “Roleplaying Games and Performance.” The seminar had a simple premise: acting and stagecraft takes place when a group of people play a tabletop roleplaying game. Much like an acting game, playing tabletop roleplaying games would benefit our Theatre students by building their skills and confidence. The students would learn how these games grew their theatrical skills and see firsthand how they develop their own skills through play. I will begin my dissertation by explaining how my experience teaching this class informs my perspective on performance and games and how my research is informed by my personal experience, as well as my study of Theatre Studies, Performance Studies, and Game Studies more generally.

I had previously used tabletop roleplaying games in my teaching on a much smaller scale. I had, in the several years prior to this course, assigned small, easy-to-learn roleplaying games to the Freshman non-majors taking my Introduction to Theatre class for their General Education requirements. I used this as a way for these students to experience, in some small way, how it feels to perform as an actor. Tabletop roleplaying games offer a private, safe, and controlled space directed by rules designed to both prompt and challenge their players. There is enough guidance that players should not feel at a loss for what to do or how to behave, and they all participate equally as a group. I found that these games offer a much more engaging experience than the listless decontextualization of the “open” or “A-B scene,” and playing one is a more achievable task when faced with the difficulty of reciting monologues for very large class sizes. While I have had some friction iterating how they translate ephemeral group play into a finished assignment, by and large the students had fun with it and came out of the project feeling positive about the experience.

My “Roleplaying Games and Performance” class was my first time teaching Theatre majors as a graduate student instructor. I was able to design my own course, based on my own pedagogical experiments, and for the first time teaching them to students for whom performance was their craft. Accordingly, my proposal and syllabus were perhaps a bit overenthusiastic. In the proposal I submitted to my professors, I called the course a “critical investigation of the uses that tabletop role-playing methodologies could bring to theatrical practice.” The course I pitched would be a blend of classroom lecture and group practice. I would offer lessons in theories of performance and play while the students went off to practice by playing group sessions of a carefully curated series of tabletop roleplaying games. These sessions would be structured as out-of-class group projects due to the time constraints of the classroom and the three-to-four-hour session length of most tabletop roleplaying games. The series of games they played would gradually build their familiarity with the medium and its conventions, bringing them to a place where they would feel comfortable with improvisation and experimentation in roleplaying. This would culminate in their final project: a roleplaying game session played *as* performance, recorded as a podcast or video stream like those they would be watching and listening to throughout the semester. The proposal was accepted with a great deal of enthusiasm by the School of Theatre faculty, and the students were excited and eager to dig into the course material. I went into the first day armed with a syllabus laden with Schechner and Stanislavski, with Boal and Huizinga, with critical writing on games rubbing shoulders with Victor Turner’s writing on play and ritual. It did not survive the day.

I was confronted by the realities of junior and senior Theatre undergrads whose eagerness to start rolling dice was tempered by busy schedules that tried to balance coursework, a heavy production itinerary, jobs, and social lives. Transparently, and in conversation with my students,

I had to pare down the course schedule to something more manageable and more reasonable that would still accomplish the learning objectives I wanted the students to leave with by the end of the semester. This need to focus and prioritize prompted me to reflect again on what I wanted my students to get out of the course and on my own approach as a teacher, both of which were tied inseparably to the course from its inception.

Practice and Play are the twin elements that sit at the heart of my pedagogy. I believe that the best way to learn a skill is *to do it*. This does not mean that I discount the value of history, theory, analysis, or criticism, which all play important roles. However, the performance of an act informs future performances, and hand-on experience through practice and play builds in the student the restored behavior they use to frame their understanding of the field.² Neither does this mean that the teacher is one of Rancière’s “ignorant schoolmasters,” providing students an accountability structure to the self-directed study of practices they may know nothing about.³ The teacher here is responsible for a great amount of work in designing, constructing, and managing a space that fosters an environment of playful experimentation with material skills. These spaces will always have their material limits. The onus is on the teacher to design them so that these limitations are generative, prompting and challenging the students towards more focused and desirable outcomes while preserving their full agency within those boundaries.

My fascination with tabletop roleplaying games as an object of study is likewise informed by my pedagogical approach. These games too are spaces for practice and play. Players can act as characters in a story they are telling, in a world they create together, whose boundaries are creatively generative, and whose procedures prompt and challenge players in ways they

² To contextualize my metaphor, see Schechner, *Performance Studies*.

³ Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.

would not otherwise arrive at on their own. The resonances I identify between these games and theatre are not just about similarities in action. There is also a structural similarity in the way these mediums create spaces that encourage their practitioners to be playful, and to experiment and create, both in their individual choices and in their collaborative efforts.

After confronting the realities of my students, their schedules, and the amount of time we had together, my priority in redesigning my “Roleplaying Games and Performance” course was to center opportunities for the students to play and create with a broad range of tabletop roleplaying games. This would expose them to different systems and rules that are designed towards varying purposes. I would still be there to provide context, history, analysis, and opportunity for in-class discussion, but the focus was oriented towards getting them into game sessions to play around with them and see firsthand how different designs respond to play and produce different results. For example, a game like Jason Morningstar’s *Fiasco* has them build characters by first creating an intricate and overlapping web of motivations and relationships to each other and the world, all done before they even name their character. This creates the push-and-pull tension of a thriller and allows events to easily spin out of control into the disastrous endings of the Coen Brothers-style dark comedies that serve as the game’s inspiration. Another game the students played, Avery Alder’s *Monsterhearts*, has the players create characters who are teenage monsters who struggling with the pressures of both adolescence and their darker, more monstrous selves. These two games are not different because they have a superficial difference in topic or because the rules and procedures in play are different; rather, they are designed to fulfill different goals, provide different experiences in play, and to produce different narratives through their performance. Both games are designed such that characters will lose control of the situation during play, but each represents their situations differently for different

purposes. *Fiasco* focuses on the chaotic ripple effects of small actions leading to disaster, and the characters are caught up in the cruel whims of fate. In *Monsterhearts*, that struggle for control – both over oneself and others – is the source of drama. Characters are in a state of transition and becoming, and they are always at risk of losing control over their actions to those emerging forces within themselves: the uncertain identity and sexuality of adolescence and the dark source of their monstrosity, with a clear thematic line drawn between the two. This internal struggle is matched by the external social struggle of high school teenage socialization, where characters get what they want by gaining and spending manipulative or persuasive hooks in others, while vulnerable to the same from their counterparts.

What’s important in the above examples is that I did not tell my students, “Go out and tell me a dark comedy using *Fiasco*,” or “use *Monsterhearts* to create a story about the horrors of being a teenager.” The students arrived at these stories – of the security guard and karate dojo owner destroying the strip mall they’re trying to save; of the werewolf trying to date the vampire and navigate high school cliques while being stalked by a werewolf hunter; of the ghost girl longing in isolation for the pretentious teenage goth who sold his soul to a demon in exchange for magical powers – just by playing the game and following the rules. While I did explain to them the sorts of themes and stories the games were designed to create, so too do the rules. Drawing attention to the goals that a design is meant to accomplish is less about pushing the results in a particular direction as it is about getting the players to not fight the direction it will take them. It is not always a frictionless experience, but a well-designed game makes playing in those thematic and narrative spaces the easiest path to take for those playing it.⁴ Our in-class discussions were there to reinforce what they had experienced directly through practice and play.

⁴ The only difficulty in this regard that my students expressed was when we played Jason Morningstar’s *Night Witches*. This game is about Soviet airwomen who flew bombing missions during the Second World War, with

The framing, the guidance, and the prompting of a well-designed, narrative-focused tabletop roleplaying game can provide students with skills through practice and play that they will carry with them elsewhere in their theatrical work and beyond. While it is a different medium, spending time playing a tabletop roleplaying game can make it easier for them to draw on those skills as actors, as designers, as directors, or as writers. After all, practice makes perfect.

The more time my students spent playing these games, the more comfortable they felt knowing how to play them. They learned to work together and build off each other's choices as a collaborative performance. They learned how to create together in a way that challenged each other while preserving their safety and boundaries. TTRPGs are conversations and their rules highlight the conventions by which conversations take place. My students gained more than just practical skills to bring to the stage; they gained insight and perspective that transformed their understanding of their work as theatre artists. In becoming practiced collaborators and conversationalists, my students gained valuable skills in consensus-building and communication. This was not some explicit lesson that I needed to teach them. The tools and procedures of TTRPGs gave my students the ability to navigate consent in their relationships, whether in play, at work, or in everyday life. They learned how to do this by putting design into practice. The

gameplay split between the dangers of the nightly bombing raids and the struggles to rest and repair and maintain relationships during the daytime – which comes with thematic overtones of scarcity, queerness, and political surveillance. We spent time in class talking just about the history: the Second World War, the Soviet Union, the gains and struggles of Soviet women, queerness in the Soviet Union and early 20th century in general, even the popularity and accessibility of aviation as a hobby. All the groups were able to play the game with interesting results, but their unfamiliarity with the topic made them less confident and more restrained in their play. Some groups navigated this by taking fewer risks and running a simple, straightforward session. Others leaned into the fiction and took some big swings. The characters all being women already put some of the men outside of their usual characterization habits and comfort zones. One of these students played a trans woman character with an anxiety around passing and getting in trouble with the Commissar. They ended the session in a supply tent beginning a relationship with a lesbian player character, played by another cis man in their group.

salience of theatre and performance in the TTRPG is found in the way these games changed how they viewed their work in theatre and made them reevaluate how they move through the world.

Tabletop Roleplaying Games: A Primer

In this section, I explain what a tabletop roleplaying game is and discuss some of the related terminology that will be encountered in the chapters to come. *Tabletop roleplaying games*, which will be abbreviated as *TTRPG* in this dissertation, are live, in-person games where a small group of players take on the role of fictional characters, speaking as them and narrating their actions inside a fictional world created collaboratively by the group. A typical *session* of a TTRPG typically lasts around three hours, depending on the game and the number of players, and it can be either a single, self-contained experience or part of a larger sequence of events that run from one session to the next in a continuous *campaign*. The experience of playing a game session can vary widely depending on the interests of the players and the game they choose to play. Some games are very interested in telling a story or creating a narrative collaboratively. Other games (or groups) are more interested in exploring a fictional world, or they focus more on the strategic challenge of the game scenario with little more interest in the fiction than one would bring to a game of Chess.

The tabletop roleplaying game was the first of the many different forms that make up the *roleplaying game* genre today. The modern *roleplaying game* (or RPG) contains such a wide variety of forms that it is no longer sufficient to refer to an RPG without further clarification. This is why the appellation of *tabletop* becomes necessary.⁵ Even within *analog* games, or games that do not require a computer or electronic device to play, there are substantial differences

⁵ The term “pen-and-paper roleplaying game” is another such term for this type of RPG, though it is less common to encounter this today.

between the TTRPG and other forms of games that involve play as individual characters. I will return to these differences and the scholarship analyzing them in my first chapter. For now, it is sufficient that the TTRPG was the first sort of roleplaying game, and that it is now one among many.

Most players who sit down to play a TTRPG are going to be playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, abbreviated *D&D*, in one of its many editions and revisions. *D&D* was the first tabletop roleplaying game, first released in 1974.⁶ It is still published and played today. Sales of *D&D* and its related products and supplements make up most of the commercial TTRPG market share, and over half of game sessions – and more than half of TTRPG players – are playing some edition of *D&D*.⁷ *D&D* is a sword-and-sorcery fantasy game inspired by mid-century genre fiction such as Robert E. Howard’s *Conan the Barbarian*, Fritz Lieber’s *Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser* series, and Michael Moorcock’s *Elric of Melniboné* novellas. *The Lord of the Rings* and Tolkien’s Middle-Earth are the touchstones most visible to modern audiences, but the design and

⁶ In later chapters, I will dig deeper into the history and development of this first release of *Dungeons & Dragons* – which is itself different from the 1st edition of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* played today. This first release did not call itself a “roleplaying game” and such a term was not yet in use. However, the term “roleplaying game” was first used to describe other games as “similar to *Dungeons & Dragons*” without the risk of infringing a copyright or trademark held by *D&D*’s publishers. This means that, while *Dungeons & Dragons* did not itself use the label of “roleplaying game” first, it was in fact the original referent of the term.

⁷ “The Orr Report Q4 2021.” There are several caveats to the methodology of this report. This report focuses solely on Roll20, the largest online Virtual Tabletop platform. There are competing platforms and software programs that similarly facilitate online play of a live analog game, but Roll20 is the largest of these communities, especially among those who play consistently. The company does have a business relationship with Wizards of the Coast, *D&D*’s publisher, and their early access to digital releases of new *D&D* materials would slightly overrepresent the game in these numbers. This is balanced by the unrepresented casual player who would be far more likely turn to *D&D* over any other system for one-time play, both due to its cultural familiarity and its overwhelming market share. Additionally, players using online platforms are also draw away from Roll20 and towards *D&D*’s proprietary, subscription-based online platform, *D&D Beyond*, which offers a degree of access to game materials and community greater than that of Roll20’s. These factors roughly balance each other, and any remaining uncertainty would not significantly impact the *substantial* percentage of games and players that *D&D* holds over its next most-popular competitors. The next highest played game, *Pathfinder*, is itself a variant of *Dungeons & Dragons 3.5 Revised* (called *3.5e*) made by fans who were dissatisfied with the changes *D&D* made in later editions of the game and who wished to preserve and expand upon those earlier game features.

history of *D&D* put it much closer to the former set of writings than the latter.⁸ I will use *D&D* in examples below as the principal model from which the larger form of the TTRPG derived.⁹

In a *D&D* game session, players create and play characters who are adventurers in this fantasy world. Over the course of a single session or a larger campaign, these characters will take on quests, fight monsters, delve through castles and caverns, and find treasure. Players create their *player characters* according to the rules of the game. They do not physically embody their characters as they perform their actions, but a player will shift between the *in-character* speech of their character and the *out-of-character* speech of the player, whether that is in a narrative voice describing their character's actions or simply speaking among other players without taking an action in the game. In *D&D*, players build their characters from a variety of fantasy tropes, such as being from a fantasy race of people like elves, dwarves, halflings,¹⁰ or orcs. They choose their character's *class* – a representation of their profession or way of life that determines their various skills and capabilities in the game – from other familiar fantasy tropes: the warrior, the wizard, the thief, et al. The group of player characters adventuring together, like the Fellowship in *The Lord of the Rings*, is called the *party*.

Players keep track of all the information about their characters on a *Character Sheet*. This can list their name and relationships and the *inventory* of various items they possess, but it also displays all the various elements of that character whose rules will come up in play. Player characters in games like *D&D* have many numerical *statistics* that are recorded on their character

⁸ Peterson, *Playing at the World*, 22.

⁹ I use this only as a convenient shorthand for this brief primer. In Chapter Two, I will dig deeper into the history of the TTRPG to challenge this presumption.

¹⁰ A “halfling” is what *Dungeons & Dragons* calls a “hobbit.” Earlier editions that used the word “hobbit” were threatened with legal action by the Tolkien estate. They similarly got into legal trouble for using “ent,” Tolkien’s race of tree-people. *Dungeons & Dragons* likewise rebranded this fantasy race as “treant.”

sheet. The health and well-being of a character is often tracked through *hit points*, a number that is reduced each time a character takes damage from an enemy or misfortune. Once hit points are reduced to zero, a character may die or be rendered vulnerable and in need of assistance.

Different *attributes*, another type of statistic, reflect a character's innate ability to perform certain actions. Many TTRPGs model these off the conventional set of attributes used by *D&D*:

Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma.¹¹ Character class is often a strong determinant of these abilities. A warrior can possess not only great strength, but a strong constitution allows them to take more blows from enemies. A nimble and agile thief will have a high Dexterity, but their roguish charm may also give them a high Charisma.

These numbers come into play when the rules of the game require the player to roll dice to determine the outcome of an action. Rolling dice acts as a randomizer, a practice that produces a fair random number. Many TTRPGs leave the success or failure of risky actions up to random chance. This introduces an element of uncertainty and provides an additional challenge since players will always face the chance of failure and vulnerability. The player character's statistics exist to amplify that chance of success and mitigate the chance of failure. In *D&D*, for example, a player character who has a sufficiently high score in an attribute can add a 1 or 2 to the result of a die roll. This is called a *modifier*. Modifiers on dice rolls are determined contextually, as guided by the rules, so the chance of success properly reflects the fictional context of the action while still preserving an element of uncertainty in the outcome.

Different games use different sets of dice and sometimes roll in different ways. This produces different probability distributions, so some games may statistically favor certain outcomes while others have an even chance at all outcomes. TTRPGs have developed a common

¹¹ Cook et al., *Player's Handbook*.

notation system to signify how many of what sort of die is to be rolled. This takes the form nDx , where n is the number of dice to be rolled at once and x is the number of sides that die has. Games like *D&D*, for instance, often requires the player to roll a $d20$, since it is common to drop the 1 in this notation. TTRPGs have a wide range of different dice to utilize in their design – the most common are the d4, d6, d8, d10, d12, and d20. A game that has players roll a single die means there is an equally likely chance for the die to land on any result. A game like *Monopoly*, which uses $2d6$, changes that probability distribution, so the player is more likely to roll numbers closer to the middle of the range – like 5, 6, or 7 – than they would a 2 or a 12. Other games use *dice pools*, where the player rolls a number of dice and chooses the best result (or worst, as the case may be) from all the results. In these systems, a high skill or attribute is usually represented by adding more dice to the pool. Different TTRPGs use dice in a multitude of inventive ways that vary from straightforward to complicated, all of which serve various purposes inside their overall design. Several other games besides *D&D* will be explained in later chapters.

In most TTRPGs, one player in the group does not create their own player character and instead acts as *Game Master*, abbreviated GM. This player acts as something like a stage manager, keeping the group on track, overseeing the rules of the game, facilitating the introduction of new players, and responding to the actions of players. While the other players each have their own player character, the Game Master plays as every *Non-Player Character*, or NPC, the party encounters during play. As they react to all the players' actions, the GM works to bring the fictional world of the game to life. Some games give this role different titles, such as the “Dungeon Master” used by *D&D*.

A typical session of a game like *D&D* has the GM guide players through a *dungeon crawl*, where the adventuring party traverses room-by-room through a hostile, maze-like

environment full of threats and treasures. The GM describes the surroundings the player characters find themselves in and plays the various monsters they encounter, seeking a balance between providing a difficult challenge and wanting to see the players succeed. Players gain *experience points* as they slay monsters and overcome challenges. When they have accrued enough of these points, or *XP*, they *level up*. This allows them to improve their various statistics and unlock new abilities, systemically representing their growth as a character. A dungeon crawl will usually end in a climactic *boss fight*, where the party squares off against a particularly powerful enemy with unique abilities. Defeating the boss allows the party to *loot* the treasure at the end of the dungeon. This may be a hoard of wealth, better equipment, some artifact tied to a larger storyline, or anything else the GM might devise. Slaying monsters, levelling up, and finding better loot is a core game loop through which games like *D&D* repeatedly cycle. As always, some TTRPGs use this model while others deviate or reject it.

There are as many perspectives on the roles and responsibilities of the GM as there are ways to fiddle with the rules for dice. Early approaches in TTRPG history saw the GM as a neutral arbiter over player character actions, resolving challenges and dice rolls objectively and allowing players to self-direct the course of events. A later perspective was encouraged by the publication of supplemental pre-written adventure books, wherein the GM was responsible for guiding the players through a specific planned narrative. Even later perspectives saw the GM as an equal partner with the players, serving a different role than the other players while collaborating with them to build an overall experience. TTRPG design uses the term *Narrative Authority* to describe how it divides creative authorship among the players. A game like *D&D* invests almost all of its narrative authority in the GM: they have absolute control over the fictional worlds and its denizens, and final interpretive say over the rules. Even the agency a

player has over their character may be vetoed by any GM who does not find an action to be acceptably plausible. A game with more balanced narrative authority, like *Apocalypse World*, limits the GM to their own set of rules and recasts the responsibility for running the game as a more shared endeavor. Games that remove the GM role altogether are called *GMless* and find different ways of distributing the responsibilities that typically fall to the GM among the group of players.

As I will discuss in later chapters, the publication of D. Vincent Baker's and Meguey Baker's 2010 game *Apocalypse World* marked a significant shift both in the role played by a GM during a game session and the way that rules for that role were designed. Since it represents such a critical shift whose impact was felt by myriad games since its release, it merits a closer examination of its form. Here I will introduce some basic terminology surrounding *Apocalypse World* and games like it. It is part of the independent or "indie" game movement and was self-published apart from any larger corporate owner. This game also belongs to a subgenre of TTRPG called *story games*. These are games that are focused on providing an interesting narrative experience from play, as opposed to focusing more exclusively on an interesting gameplay challenge or the detailed representation of a fictional world. Story games will be especially useful in illustrating the analyses of this dissertation, though its conclusions are not restricted to this subgenre of TTRPG alone.

In *Apocalypse World*, players build their characters from *playbooks*, typically containing character archetypes whose tropes and themes the player would be interested in exploring through play. These *playbooks* contain *moves* which allow the player character to significantly affect the fiction. Instead of the player choosing an action that their character would perform, moves are *fiction-first*. This means that a player narrates what their character does within the

fiction of the game before the rules for the move can affect it. If the narrated fiction satisfies the *trigger* for a move, then the players will follow the rules of the *effect*, resolve any dice rolls the move may call for, and then return play to the fiction with further narration of the move's results. A move thus begins and ends with the fiction rather than beginning with the player making a strategic decision independent of their character.

GMs in *Apocalypse World* have their own set of rules, as stated above. These rules are meant to focus the GM on guiding the game session towards the fulfillment of a specific written *Agenda*. The *Agenda* in *Apocalypse World* and similar games is a short list of three or four goals that a session of that game should fulfill. The rules offer a list of guiding *Principles* that the GM should adhere to in order to deliver that experience. The GM is then given their own separate set of *Moves*, offering them tools that allow for interventions in the fiction that can shape play according to those Principles. This system of rules is designed to produce narrative-centered play experiences focused on particular themes and genres. *Apocalypse World* became a model for other games influenced by this approach to collaborative storytelling. These games took on the appellation *Powered by the Apocalypse*. Many games discussed in this dissertation will be Powered by the Apocalypse (PBTA) games or will be otherwise influenced by *Apocalypse World*.

Beyond TTRPG rules themselves, archival sources used in this dissertation will be drawn from fan publications, roleplaying newsgroups and bulletin boards, forum posts from various TTRPG-focused communities, blogs, podcasts, and video streams. These sources include the thoughts of game designers about their craft, amateur theories about roleplaying, and recollections of diverse experiences of play. More scholarly sources will pull from several influential sources which I will briefly summarize below.

Gary Alan Fine's 1983 *Shared Fantasy* is one of the earliest scholarly works on TTRPGs. Fine is a sociologist whose study is based on one year of fieldwork observing and participating in weekly game sessions at a local community center in Minneapolis, as well as participation in private games with a famous game designer who was a fellow professor at Fine's university. *Shared Fantasy* provides a wealth of observations of TTRPG play and the social organization of players at that particular time and place. Fine also uses Erving Goffman's frame analysis to unpack the multiple, layered modes of perception and communication between the players and the game. Both scholars and the TTRPG fan community use frames as a methodological tool, and Fine offers a clear demonstration of its use in the social situation of a TTRPG game session. In addition to Fine, this dissertation will draw on the work of Jose Zagal and Sebastian Deterding. The editorial essays from their anthology *Role-Playing Game Studies* provide a valuable organizational schema for analyzing the TTRPG form.

Historical scholarship of the pre-digital period is drawn from Jon Peterson's wealth of writing on early TTRPG history, particularly his 2012 book *Playing at the World* and his 2022 book *The Elusive Shift*. Peterson's access to an enormous archive of newsletters, zines, and correspondence – combined with his own interviews – provide a detailed history of the early years of roleplaying games. Peterson also approaches his historical writing as an archeology of the TTRPG, analyzing the many convergent trends and communities that overdetermined its creation and providing detailed archival research on each of them. Shannon Appelcline's four-volume *Designers & Dragons* series, published by the TTRPG publisher Evil Hat Productions, similarly combined archival documents and interviews to assemble portraits of significant game designers and the shape of the TTRPG industry over four decades, from the 1970s through the 2000s. William White's 2021 *Tabletop RPG Design in Theory and Practice at The Forge, 2001-*

2012 is an archival investigation of *The Forge*, a forum-based fan community from the 2000s whose discussions were foundational for the indie game movement, the story game, and the success of *Apocalypse World*.

Speech Act Theory

Throughout this work, I will be invoking the terminology and framework of Speech Act Theory as developed by ordinary language philosopher J.L. Austin in his 1962 book, *How to Do Things with Words*. Austin provides my work a means of understanding the spoken utterance as a performance whose effects depend upon the conventions and context of the moment of speech. This theory is the bedrock upon which I build my analysis, so I will provide here a quick primer on Austin's concepts and terms.

J.L. Austin motivated his analysis in the early sections of *How to Do Things with Words* as a critique of what he called “the descriptive fallacy.”¹² This fallacy is based in the assumption – by the logical positivists and analytical philosophers who preceded Austin¹³ – that all statements are verifiable as either *true* or *false*.¹⁴ He defined these objective statements of fact as “constative” utterances and proposed a different type of speech that did not fit this category: the “performative” utterance, where an action or event is performed in the uttering of the statement in the appropriate circumstances.¹⁵ Rather than the true or false nature of constative utterances, Austin instead described performative statements as *felicitous* or *infelicitous*, or *happy* or

¹² Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 3.

¹³ Loxley, *Performativity*, 7.

¹⁴ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2–3.

¹⁵ Austin, 3–6, 9–10.

unhappy. A performative utterance would be *happy* or *felicitous* by its utterance in “the appropriate conditions.”¹⁶ Austin detailed these conditions as:

- (A.1) There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances, and further,
- (A.2) the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked.
- (B.1) The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and
- (B.2) completely.
- (Γ.1) Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of the participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves, and further,
- (Γ.2) must actually so conduct themselves subsequently.¹⁷

A performative utterance is felicitous so long as it meets these conditions: that it has a conventional procedure that the correct participants follow, that they correctly execute this procedure, and that the participants intend to conduct themselves accordingly. An infelicity arises if one or more of these conditions are not met.¹⁸ Austin’s investigation then turned to tests that could distinguish between constative and performative utterances. In this, he looked for

¹⁶ Austin, 13–14.

¹⁷ Austin, 14–15.

¹⁸ Errors in category A or B are called “misfires” by Austin, where the performance occurs but its effects are void. Category A infelicities, Misinvocations, include a pure Misfire¹⁸ (A.1), sometimes referred to Austin as “non-play,” where the conventions of performance either do not exist or are not commonly accepted. See Austin, 26–34. There is also the Misapplication (A.2) where the participants or circumstances are inappropriate to the act being performed. Within category B, Misexecutions, is the Flaw (B.1) that does not execute the procedure correctly and the Hitch (B.2) that does not see the procedure performed completely due to interruption or other circumstances. See Austin, 17, 35–38. The performance takes place in all these circumstances, but the effects of the performance are void since they do not adhere to the correct conventions. The performance fails. The Γ category, Abuses, has the performance take place and its effects succeed. However, the performance is hollow: the effects and its consequences occur but they are not “implemented” or “consummated,” such as with a broken promise. See Austin, 16. The utterance is Insincere (Γ.1) if there is no intention to be held to its effects, and it is a Breach (Γ.2) if there is a failure to do so despite one’s intentions. See Austin, 39.

verbs that were “explicit performatives,” verbs whose use in an utterance would *always* be performative.¹⁹ However, the difficulties and ambiguities in this search eventually lead Austin to return to first principles and redefine what constitutes an utterance, setting aside the constative-performative dichotomy for a more holistic treatment of the utterance.²⁰

Austin’s reformulation of the speech utterance contained three acts. The *locutionary act* is the communication of meaning (which Austin defines as sense and reference) in the utterance, where a *locution* is “the full unit of speech.”²¹ The *illocutionary act* is the “performance of an act *in* saying something.”²² The illocutionary act derives its *force* from convention and is liable to the same dimension of felicity and infelicity as performative speech. Illocution concerns the immediate effects of the act performed in saying the utterance. But other possible effects of the utterance might fall outside the confines of the illocutionary act, many of which can be described by the *perlocutionary act*, an act that produces an effect through the saying of the utterance.²³

Speech act scholarship after Austin, especially the work of John Searle and Paul Grice, have shifted Austin’s understanding of the speech act to better incorporate the idea of intentionality.²⁴ However, intention is not a required condition of Austin’s schema. Illocution depends on convention and procedure. Perlocution is simply the mass of all effects of speech that

¹⁹ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 61–66.

²⁰ Austin divides what would come to be called the *locutionary act* into three parts. The *phonetic act* is “the utterance of certain noises.” The *phatic act* is the utterance of “certain vocables or words,” which is not to be confused with the *rhetic act*, which is the utterance of words that have “a certain more or less definite ‘sense’ and a more or less definite ‘reference’ (which together are equivalent to ‘meaning’).” Austin, 91–93.

²¹ Austin, 94–95.

²² Austin, 98–99.

²³ Austin, 101.

²⁴ Loxley, *Performativity*, 56–57.

are not illocutions. The attempts by Searle and others to reframe the speech act around intent and pretense drastically changed the effects and implications of the model first described by Austin – and it did so in a way that made it far more restrictive as an interpretive methodology.²⁵

These acts are distinct: the locutionary act is the act *of* saying the utterance, the illocutionary act is the act performed *in* saying the utterance, and the perlocutionary act is the act performed *by* saying the utterance. One can speak of locutionary *meaning*, illocutionary *force*, the perlocutionary *consequences*. The important distinguishing characteristic of Austin’s newly derived speech act is that the three acts are not mutually exclusive: all three acts may occur within the same utterance. So long as the utterance has any linguistic meaning, a locutionary act will be performed in the speaking of it. The performance of a locutionary act will also always be accompanied by an illocutionary act, even if that act is only “I state.”²⁶ Perlocutionary acts are more dependent on the context of speech and one’s approach to analyzing the effects that follow speech, but there are many situations quite likely to produce some perlocutionary consequence of speech.

Since all three aspects occur at once within the utterance of speech, the object of analysis becomes “the total speech act in the total speech situation.”²⁷ It is this “total speech situation” which makes Speech Act Theory so critical to this work. Through their performances and utterances, speech acts allow a framework with which to investigate the arrangement and relations of people in a particular social event and to untangle the web of conventions and

²⁵ For more on intention in Searle and Grice, see Loxley, 56–68.

²⁶ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 98–99, 137–38.

²⁷ Austin, 147.

procedures that guide those social interactions. Investigating the mechanisms of that engine of conventionality drives this project.

Dissertation Outline

As I wrote in the opening of this Introduction, my goal for this project is to show that tabletop roleplaying games have many theatrical qualities – like theatre, but nonetheless distinct. Highlighting these theatrical qualities reveals the junctures in this site which reveal insights into the ways convention structures and binds the medium. The analysis I present in the following three chapters interrogates the function of convention at different scales.

In my first chapter, *Imagining Together*, I unpack the ways convention is used to perform and create through speech. I begin by highlighting the ways TTRPG designers write about their own medium. They describe it as a conversation. Using J.L. Austin’s Speech Act Theory, I build a framework that offers a way of untangling the conventional underpinnings of conversational play and, utterance by utterance, come to understand the structures of the situation in which they are located.

In my second chapter, *Imagining by Design*, I continue this analysis onward to the social situation of TTRPG’s conversational play. I examine the various practices related to the event of play as well as the various constructions and relationships between players and their functional roles during play. I conclude with an interrogation of the various structures used by TTRPGs to moderate and distribute illocutionary force. These different structures highlight different means by which players build consensus during play.

In the third chapter, *Imagining Safely*, I return to my classroom discussion to unpack a lesson my students gained that I did not even realize I was teaching them: consent. Through my own insistence on safe practices during their play sessions, my students learned how to navigate

consent in their relationships by practicing those skills in their game sessions. I discuss a number of those tools and practices used in TTRPG play. I then address the ways these tools and practices are used to create a safe environment for challenging play. I examine two very different games that are nonetheless driven by the tensions of emotionally intimate play.

The final part of this chapter is an analysis of two case studies. This first site is the encounter of a Korean-American TTRPG designer GMing their game – the “No Such Place as Koreatown” adventure setting for *Kids on Bikes* – for a hostile group of white men who signed up to play it at a gaming convention. I begin by explaining the game *Kids on Bikes* and discussing the design intervention that designer Yeonsoo Julian Kim makes in their adventure module, “No Such Place as Koreatown.” I then recount Kim’s experiences at the 2019 Dreamation convention and the various microaggressions and racializing behaviors the group of players aimed at Kim both in- and out-of-character. Using my previously established frameworks of speech acts, convention, and consent, I unpack the situation and highlight the way dominant processes of power are interjected into the game as it is played, subverting and silencing Kim by reshaping the agreed-upon conventions of the social situation in the image of heteronormative white performativity.

The second case study is the ignominious end of the Actual Play show *Far Verona* alongside the career of its Game Master, Adam Koebel. Actual Plays are staged, recorded, or broadcasted productions of TTRPGs played for performance. *Far Verona*, hosted and GMed by Adam Koebel, plays the game, *Stars Without Number*. In the show’s final episode, Koebel narrated a non-player character’s fictional sexual assault of a player character, staged as an out-of-left-field shock ending to an episode. Koebel’s transgressions and failure to account for his actions led to the cast quitting the show. Koebel offered as reason a lack of safety rules at the

table. As many did, I rebut this assertion: for safety tools to be effective, one must want to find ways to build consensus and understanding among the group. Koebel wanted to perform his gag instead.

The route I take through these chapters raises issues, concepts, and sites for further study that I did not have the time or space to approach with this project. The roads not taken that spring up along the path I take in my research are as much the point as my insights and conclusions. The tabletop roleplaying game is a rich and promising medium, and I intend this dissertation to be a foundation for its further exploration. By formalizing assumed or unnoticed practices through convention and performance, TTRPG play is itself an analytical and pedagogical tool worthy of further investigation and experimentation.

Chapter 1. Imagining Together

A tabletop roleplaying game, abbreviated TTRPG,¹ is a type of game played live by a small group of players over the course of several hours. In accordance with the structures and procedures of each game's various rules, these players act as characters in a fictional world created extemporaneously through spoken narration and dialogue. In this chapter, I approach the play of TTRPGs as a site of speech and performance. This is not simply because speech figures so heavily in the way these games are played, but because the analysis of speech helps untangle otherwise complicated and overlapping conventions of collaborative play. By approaching this site from the perspective of speech and performance, I offer a set of tools to understand social convention and creative procedure – tools that show how to build consensus.

TTRPGs are a medium of communication and representation. Through them, a group of players find ways of playing together and imagining together, establishing through play a shared fictional world and narrative. TTRPGs share many formal and conventional characteristics, but they also share a rich diversity of perspectives and approaches, and I will highlight these differences in this analysis. Here, I share the approach of roleplaying game scholars Jose Zagal and Sebastian Deterding.

In their anthology *Role-Playing Game Studies: A Transmedial Approach*, editors Zagal and Deterding forego attempts at the more formal or ontological constructions of the TTRPG and adopt what they call “a pluralist dialogue of human concerns and disciplinary perspectives.”²

¹ As noted in the Introduction, tabletop roleplaying games may be abbreviated TTRPG or TRPG. Likewise, writing about them utilizes both the hyphenated “role-playing” and non-hyphenated “roleplaying.” These differences vary by context, region, and social group. My choices here – “TTRPG” and “roleplaying,” respectively – reflect common conversational use by the subset of the online English-language TTRPG fan and designer communities visible to me at the present place and time of my writing. These choices are largely arbitrary and there is no correct or incorrect standard, so long as usage is clear and consistent.

² Zagal and Deterding, “Definitions of ‘Role-Playing Games,’” 26.

Their method acknowledges the social construction of the roleplaying game as a series of artifacts, discourses, and conventions. This allows them to approach RPGs, in their varied forms, from multiple perspectives and disciplines to see what questions arise and what observations can be made.³ Principally, they are interested in the ways scholars, designers, and consumers of roleplaying games have defined and described them. This allows them to identify common characteristics of the genre and its descendants and analyze their historical developments over time.⁴ I carry this perspective into my own treatment of the TTRPG's formal aspects. I do not approach with a sense of an ideal or canonical design structure, but instead I approach the site as a collection of common formal practices which contain their own breadth and variety. As I approach a category or structure of TTRPG convention, I emphasize the variations found in common practice within these forms.

I begin this chapter with the words of TTRPG designers themselves as they center their games around players conversing with one another. Then, I unpack these descriptions as collections of speech acts, in the sense used by J.L. Austin, and use this analysis of speech as a framework to understand the ways in which TTRPGs navigate convention and the building of consensus among the participants. This basis in speech acts then allows me to interrogate the relationship between speaker and listener, the distinction between different kinds of players, and the way a variety of games structure play functions around those distinctions.

TTRPG play can appear very complicated or obscure. However, play would not be able to proceed without reliable means of building consensus among the group of players. Viewed as the performance of a collection of speech acts, the complex fictional product of play can be

³ Zagal and Deterding, 26–27.

⁴ Zagal and Deterding, 21.

understood in terms of the procedural machinery that produces it. Speech act analysis allows for the illumination of these procedures of play, showing common conventional pathways towards establishing consensus and forming a stable, shared imaginative space in whose creation all may participate. More than just the playing of a game or the creation of a fiction, this framework allows insight into the ways in which conversation facilitates collaboration itself.

The Conversation

In this section, I recount the ways that TTRPG designers describe their own games. They, too, see these games operating through a particular form of speech: conversation. Though conversation carries with it all its messy qualities, the rules of a TTRPG are designed to provide structure to that conversation. By offering a subject of common agreement and providing procedures by which disagreements may be resolved, TTRPGs are a means of navigating consensus and convention so that a group might better imagine together.

Speech, uttered in conversation among the players around the tabletop, is an essential driving force within TTRPGs. It is speech that brings the fictional world, its characters, and its narrative into being. It is through speech that one plays the game. To highlight its importance, I discuss the various ways that TTRPG designers discuss speech in their rulebooks and use it to describe how their games are played.

Many rulebooks for tabletop roleplaying games have a section near the beginning that briefly explains what a TTRPG is and how it is played. Many rulebooks describe it as talking back and forth between players. In D. Vincent Baker and Meguey Baker's *Apocalypse World*, this is called "The Conversation:"

You probably know this already: roleplaying is a conversation. You and the other players go back and forth, talking about these fictional characters in their fictional circumstances doing whatever it is that they do. Like any conversation, you take turns, but it's not like taking turns, right? Sometimes you talk over each other, interrupt, build on each other's ideas, monopolize and hold forth. All fine.

These rules mediate the conversation. They kick in when someone says some particular things, and they impose constraints on what everyone should say after. Makes sense, right?⁵

Right from the start, the Bakers say that “roleplaying is a conversation.” Not *like* or *similar to* a conversation; it *is* a conversation, with all the messiness that entails. The rules “mediate” the conversation, but they do not impose an order that would negate its dynamic. When the rules of *Apocalypse World* “kick in,” as Baker describes them taking effect, they direct the conversation towards some end by constraining possible responses. Thus, at least for *Apocalypse World*, to play is to participate in the conversation and to subject one's participation to rules that serve to steer that conversation in particular ways and towards particular outcomes.

The specific term, “The Conversation,” comes from *Apocalypse World*, but this view on roleplaying long predates it.⁶ D. Vincent Baker's first post on *The Forge* in 2001 was about the function of rules to mediate the conversation, resolve disagreement, and establish a consensus on what happens: “The point of every game mechanic is to create consensus among the players.

⁵ Baker and Baker, *Apocalypse World*, 9.

⁶ Lest it be said that such a perspective is limited to one particular type of indie TTRPG that emerged in the 2010s, this was not a new way of framing the way one played these games. *Apocalypse World* itself began with “you probably know this already.” In *Sorcerer*, Ron Edwards refers to rules like dice rolls only coming in response to conversation between player and GM. Marc Miller's *Traveller*, a space opera TTRPG published in 1977, was one of the earliest hit games in the medium. The second paragraph of the rulebook began, “Traveller is basically a conversation game.” I am not suggesting here that this view of TTRPGs is universal or hegemonic, nor that it is a permanent transhistorical fixture in the discourse around these games. What this does illustrate, I propose, is that this approach to TTRPGs has been returned to by different groups in different times, and that this view has been a part of the milieu of ways people see these games since its earliest years. The prominence that this view has held since the 2010s has grown and waned in the past among different groups of players, and we can point to one of the earliest major successes in the medium as one of its adherents. See Baker and Baker, 9; Edwards, *Sorcerer*, 13, 17, 19; Miller, *Traveller Book 1*, 5.

Consensus is the underlying mechanism of roleplaying, right? If the players don't agree that something happens, it doesn't happen.”⁷ This idea gained traction among *The Forge*'s community, becoming known there as “the lumpley principle,” after his forum username.⁸ Baker wrote that this principle developed out of conversations with scholar-practitioner Emily Care Boss extending back into the 1990s, leading to its commonly-used name, the Baker-Boss Principle.⁹ Baker's “2nd construction” of this principle – which he wrote “distinguishes a roleplaying game from other kinds of games” – is simply, “Roleplaying is a social act.”¹⁰

As mentioned in the Introduction, *Apocalypse World* was greatly influential following its 2010 release, and many games that took the Powered by the Apocalypse moniker similarly framed themselves in this manner. Avery Alder's *Monsterhearts* quoted the above passage from *Apocalypse World* and continued:

Monsterhearts is also a conversation. It meanders sometimes, but it goes somewhere. You build off the things that other people say. Each player is in charge of one main character: what they think, say and do. As those main characters live their lives, the players interact with rules that help to sculpt the story as well as shake it up at key moments. The exception to all this is the MC, a player who fills a different role in the conversation. The MC is in charge of all the side characters, as well as framing scenes and managing the setting. The MC has a different role, but it's not you against the MC. It's a conversation, and you're in it together.¹¹

Alder's writing emphasized the informality of conversation in play. Each player has a certain role within the conversation, but it is not guided by strict rules regarding flow. Alder

⁷ Baker, “An Approach for Mechanics and Innovation.”

⁸ “lumpley” is kept intentionally lower-case when referring to this principle.

⁹ Baker, “Positioning: Some Looly-Pooly Groundwork.”

¹⁰ Baker, “Positioning: My Premature Conclusion.”

¹¹ Alder, *Monsterhearts* 2, 8.

wrote that the conversation had purpose, that “it goes somewhere,” but it is the interactions between the players and the rules that “help to sculpt the story” – to keep that conversation on track. There are two classes of role in the conversation – the player and the MC, *Monsterhearts*’s term for Game Master – but Alder stresses that the relationship between these two types of role are not adversarial but are instead collaborative. To underscore this, Alder did not make the Agenda of *Monsterhearts* the sole responsibility of the GM, as in *Apocalypse World*, but instead made it a shared responsibility between all players in a section that immediately follows the passage quoted above.¹²

Alder also wrote in the passage above that the rules intercede into the conversation to “shake things up at key moments.”¹³ This is echoed in *Apocalypse World*’s mediations and are explained in detail in John Harper’s *Blades in the Dark*. *Blades in the Dark* is a game where the players are a group of rogues and thieves in a steampunk-themed Industrial Age city shrouded in perpetual darkness. While it shares design inspiration from *Apocalypse World*, it was one of the first breakthrough indie TTRPG hits that was not a Powered by the Apocalypse game.¹⁴ Like these others, it too has an introductory section that introduces the rules as a conversation (the last such passage that I will quote at length):

¹² Alder, 9.

¹³ Alder, 8.

¹⁴ Just as *Apocalypse World* allowed games taking inspiration from it to use the “Powered by the Apocalypse” label, *Blades in the Dark* has its own “Forged in the Dark” label.

A roleplaying game is a conversation between the GM and the players, punctuated by dice rolls to inject uncertainty and surprising turns.

The GM presents the fictional situation in which the player characters find themselves. The players determine the actions of their characters in response to the situation. The GM and the players together judge how the game systems are engaged. The outcomes of the mechanics then change the situation, leading into a new phase of the conversation – new situations, new actions, new judgments, new rolls – creating an ongoing fiction and building “the story” of the game, organically, from a series of discrete moments.

No one is in charge of the story. The story is what happens as a result of the situation presented by the GM, the actions the characters take, the outcome of the mechanics, and the consequences that result. The story emerges from the unpredictable collision of all of these elements. You **play to find out** what the story will be.¹⁵

Harper placed less emphasis on the free-flowing form of the conversation, instead he offered as example a generalized back-and-forth of play between GM and players. *Blades in the Dark* does not use the Move structure of PBTA games, where fictional actions are triggered from the conversation. Instead, the players take specific actions with their characters whose success is evaluated based on the fictional conditions of the circumstances.¹⁶ Harper’s passage above accounts for the role of game aids and supplementary objects, such as dice, in the playing of the game. What is not removed is the centrality of the conversation itself: while it describes a certain structure to the flow of conversation, and while it brings up implements that intervene into it, the game is still played by a group of people talking to each other.

¹⁵ Harper, *Blades in the Dark*, 6. Emphasis in the original text.

¹⁶ Harper, 18–20. Actions are evaluated according to two criteria: Position and Effect. Both are determined from the fictional circumstances of the character taking the action and the way they are going about this action. Position can be Controlled, Risky, or Desperate, depending on how safe and in-control they are of the situation, and Effect similarly varies between Limited, Standard, and Great. Notions of the *vector* of a player character’s actions were present in earlier games as well, where a character can only act in a way that makes sense given the fiction. This notion is built into the rules of PBTA games, where Moves must necessarily be initiated by the fiction itself.

This central site of the Conversation places an emphasis on the full context of the social situation in which it occurs and the conventions that inform the flow of talk. J.L. Austin's speech acts offer a productive framework through which to unpack these sites in terms of the effects of speech and those conventions that give utterances their force. Erving Goffman's work on talk likewise offers a means of framing conversations within their social and material contexts, allowing one to examine the functions of speech in both the production and reception of utterances. These frameworks will carry my analysis through this chapter and into the next.

How to Play Games with Words

This section lays the groundwork for the analysis of TTRPG play as a series of speech acts. In the Introduction, I introduced J.L. Austin's speech act theory and explained the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts found within an utterance.¹⁷ In this section, I argue that the conversational speech by which TTRPGs are played is the performance of a series of illocutionary acts. These utterances can take many forms, but they are enacted with the illocutionary force of play.

In this section, I interrogate the play-speech of the TTRPG session as a speech act. I frame play here to be driven by illocutionary speech, affected by – but not produced by – the perlocutionary consequences produced by those illocutions. Then, I continue to unpack those implications in play's illocutionary effects and consider some of the infelicities that might arise during play. This analysis is intended to provide a foundation by locating how speech carries with it the force of play. From this foundation, I can then turn to common conventions used by TTRPGs and explain how they are the products of the performance of speech acts.

¹⁷ See p. 19.

Within the speech situation of the TTRPG – for instance, the group gathered around a table – there is a distinction to be drawn between in-frame speech and out-of-frame speech. Out-of-frame speech is that speech which does not contribute towards playing the game, such as someone asking to open a window. In-frame speech is any utterance oriented towards the game. It is these utterances, when performed among the right participants and adhering to the proper conventions, that perform an act of play.

However, there is a pressing concern over whether speech that engages in play does so in the instance that it is uttered, an illocutionary act, or whether play is a consequence of speech, a perlocutionary act. Were it purely a locutionary act, the locution would need to reference an act that had been completed, i.e., the performance of play would need to be enacted before speech. However, since play is tied to speech, it cannot occur before the utterance. If play-speech is illocutionary, the act of play would be performed in the utterance and find itself bound to the conditions of felicity. But, if play-speech is instead perlocutionary, the performance of play would follow speech as a separate act that is nonetheless bound to the it as a natural consequence of the utterance. This distinction might seem inconsequential, and it may seem like I’m getting too lost in the theory to effectively analyze TTRPGs and performance. However, as a foundational exercise, the nature of play in speech determines how we will be able to use speech as an analytical tool and its ultimate usefulness towards an analysis of these games.

One initial way to determine whether play-speech is illocutionary or perlocutionary is to use the formula from which Austin derived the name of the perlocutionary act: “by saying X, I do Y.”¹⁸ As an example, take the player who says, “I push him off the ledge.” This is said on

¹⁸ “Illocution” is constructed from the Latin-derived prefix *il-*, synonymous with *in-* and meaning “in locution” or “within locution.” The Latin-derived prefix *per-* likewise means “through locution” or “by means of locution.” I will

behalf of their player character in accordance with the rules and is accepted as an action performed in the game and its fiction. This act of play-speech may then be rendered as, “by saying ‘I push him off the ledge,’ I play the game.” This makes grammatical sense and there is no superficial objection. Austin notes that there are cases where illocutionary utterances may also take this form. One important case is when illocutionary formulations refer to the relationship as criteria rather than the means-to-an-end instrumentality of perlocution.¹⁹ The criterion has a synecdochic part-of-a-whole relationship where the former verb is a part of the latter verb, or one is a way that one might perform the latter verb. In this case, saying “I push him off the ledge” constitutes play, so by saying “I push him off the ledge,” the player was playing the game. The former clause “enables [their] action to be classified as” part of the latter.²⁰ This may appear to be the correct usage case for the act of play. Crucially, however, play is not the end result carried out by the means of the performance of speech; *play is the action itself*. The individual performance of a play-act contributes towards the overall strip of behavior that emerges from the game session, which is made up of many such performances of play.

Since this fact lends more credence to play being illocutionary, I will now investigate the three characteristic effects that Austin attributed to the illocutionary act. The first is that a felicitous illocutionary act secures *uptake*.²¹ This is to say, the illocutionary act has its effects because of the social agreement that says it has those effects. What matters to the performance of

not be using “in saying X, I do Y” since Austin notes cases where it is used by all three acts, and their differences are not productive towards the distinction I am making here. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 121.

¹⁹ Austin also has several exceptions of when instrumental uses of the formula may be used by illocutionary verbs, but these will not be necessary in this instance. Austin, 129–30.

²⁰ Austin, 128.

²¹ Austin, 115–16.

an illocutionary act is that the relevant participants in the social situation recognize that the utterance has the force of its effect, which they are bound by. We in the social situation understand that an utterance has the force of a promise, of a warning, of a bet because *we understand that it does*. The felicitous illocutionary utterance has a certain way that it is done between certain people, and if those people do that then they have accomplished the act. There are certain acts which require formality or official procedure, but there are many others that are loose and conversational and shift more of its force from language or social code to the externalized context of the social situation.²² If the participants in the game session agree that a player saying, “I push him off the ledge,” conforms to their understanding of how the game is to be played – that it makes sense given the situation, that this player is allowed to do this, that they have done so in the right way or in the right moment – then it is a statement that *has the force of play*. The utterance performs the illocutionary act of play.

The second illocutionary effect is that it *takes effect*.²³ This binds the participants to the changes that the act produced in the world. One who promises is bound by that promise, one who christens a ship binds others to acknowledge that name, and one who warns has *accomplished* the warning so that the listener’s action that follows is now their own responsibility, having been so warned. In the performance of play by the player saying, “I push him off the ledge,” the

²² An explicit performative defers to language as the source of its social convention – though Derrida shows why this is a risky proposition. This risk is maintained even outside of the explicit case as language is still the means of communication in all cases and thus always carries with it the risk of failure. See Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context.” Ultimately, Austin is not in search of Magic Words. He focuses on the explicit performative because it is a case where the conventional force of the utterance falls back on the mode of communication as a way of establishing a common understanding among participants. Since much of convention in these cases is internalized into the locution itself, the context in which it is uttered only needs to consider the appropriateness of the utterance given the place, time, participants, etc. “I order you to...” is less reliant on the situational context for its illocutionary force than “three cream, two sugars,” even though both utterances carry the force of an order. The latter is simply more dependent on the total speech situation external to the locution in order to be heard and understood as an order.

²³ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 116.

illocution takes effect. The state of play is changed, and the players are bound by those changes. Games which allow a player or a group to change their mind or “take back” a move they have made in the game would appear to contradict this, or at the very least produce unhappy utterances that could disrupt play. However, a closer look reveals otherwise. Consider the following exchange:

Player: I push my way past the bouncer and enter the club.

GM: The bouncer isn't going to let you just walk in, so you'll have to roll for it. You're threatening or attacking someone when they aren't expected it, so roll 2d6 plus your Hard score.

Player: Oh, no, I don't want to start anything with him, so if he won't let me breeze past him then I'll find another way around.²⁴

A game that allows a move to be undone has a convention of play that allows it to be undone. In the above example from *Apocalypse World*, players are allowed to revise their actions “if [the player] really didn't mean to make the move.”²⁵ A player who intends to do that action but doesn't want to risk a dice roll must still roll, or else abandon the action and do something else. In the example, the player does not intend to start a fight with the bouncer, so they revise their actions in the way allowed by the rules. While this allows them to wind back time in the fiction to a state before the action took place, it does not wind back reality to a time before the utterance. The illocutionary act still took place and, importantly, it is *not* invalidated, made void, or otherwise infelicitous. The GM's response prompted *another, separate act* from the player which changed the state of play such that they reversed the fiction of their first act. Both of the player's acts were performed and both remain felicitous; the second act took effect such that the fiction was revised in how it was bound by the effects of the first. Moreover, the player has still acted in play to clarify the conventional response to the effect of the first utterance even though

²⁴ Example adapted from Baker and Baker, *Apocalypse World*, 10.

²⁵ Baker and Baker, 10.

the fictional action it described was not executed. This is not an infelicitous misfire or misapplication in play, but a series of illocutionary acts and their responses.

The third illocutionary effect, one which Austin describes as optional, is that an illocutionary act invites response.²⁶ This would be, for example, the person who says, “I bet you...” and the other who says, “You’re on.” In securing uptake for the bet, the response of another, separate speech act was invited. This is not required of all illocutionary acts, but it is seen in the GM’s response to the player’s first illocutionary act in the example sequence above. The rules and conventions of play are such that this utterance invited a response from the GM. Another play statement, such as, “This is my character, Melinda Roundtree, and she is using the Ranger playbook,” does not invite a specific sort of conventional response.

The illocutionary act, its force, and its effects are all derived from the conventions of the speech situation. TTRPG game sessions are likewise bound by the conventions of play and social interaction. The participants of the game have a common understanding of how the game is to be played, informed by the rules but not dictated or limited by them. This is especially noticeable in responses to the 1974 version of *Dungeons & Dragons*, which assumed a prior knowledge of wargaming that its players did not necessarily have and allowed its groups to fill in empty spaces

²⁶ These three illocutionary effects are Austin’s renewed expression of performative speech’s felicity conditions. Securing uptake, and the possible inviting of a response as part of it, correspond to Classes A and B. To secure uptake, there must be a conventional procedure which produces a conventional effect that involves a certain kind of speaker saying certain kinds of words in a certain context, all of which are met by the utterance, and the procedure is executed correctly and completely. The adherence to the correct conventions in the context of the utterance’s speech situation grants the utterance its illocutionary force. On the other hand, taking effect binds participants to the resulting changes caused by the performance in a manner similar to Class F. In Austin’s example, just as referring to the *Queen Elizabeth* as the *Generalissimo Stalin* does not render the act of naming void, neither does the intentional or accidental breach of that effect undo the performance, it is the subsequent actions that will be “out of order.” See Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 116.

and adapt the rules to their purposes.²⁷ This is also what Ron Edwards meant by “system” in his essay “System Does Matter”: that it is easier and more productive for the group to play a game whose design accomplishes the goals they want than to bend and twist another game to fit that same shape.²⁸ This accepted conventional procedure has a conventional effect – to play the game. This includes the uttering of certain words (the play-speech of *The Conversation*) by certain persons (the players and GM) in certain circumstances (during a place and time agreed upon for playing the game). The appropriate speakers, listeners, and contextual circumstances of any given speech act vary according to varied rules and conventions of the game and the limitless possible circumstances that the state of play and its fiction might find themselves in. The proper and complete execution of those procedures – whether formal or informal, simple or complicated – and the agreement to be bound by their results as they take effect create a felicitous state of play that passes from one speech act to the next.²⁹ The game is not played as a “normal” consequence of the “natural course of events.” Rather, its conversation is regulated by the adoption of convention.

It is worth considering some representative cases around issues such as the role of perlocution or the function of infelicity. I have already offered some examples where perlocutionary acts have come up, such as with the response invited by certain illocutionary acts.

²⁷ The complications that arose through this lack of common conventions of play suggest a distinction between archive and repertoire that, regrettably, I do not have the time or space here to pursue. For this use of “repertoire,” see Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*.

²⁸ See Edwards, “System Does Matter.”

²⁹ I regret that I do not have the time or space in this project to fully unpack the idea that not all participants may understand the conventions in which they participate. As Theatre teachers, we often tell students about the conventional dimming of lights which signals both that the performance is beginning and that the audience should remain quiet. There are often students who do not understand this, and there are still more who take it for granted. It is, after all, a convention: we do not frequently question the air we breathe if there is not something unconventional or out of order to draw our attention. Thus, the same may be true for

This is not the only circumstance in which perlocutionary acts can take place, and indeed perlocutionary acts are not themselves bound to the performance of an illocutionary act. Austin states several times that perlocution can result from little more than a locutionary utterance.³⁰ Austin offers two types of perlocutions: the perlocutionary *object* and the perlocutionary *sequel*. The perlocutionary object results from the expectation created by the conventions that grant the illocutionary act its force.³¹ The perlocutionary sequel is any perlocutionary consequence that is not expected or suggested as the natural outcome of the illocutionary act – if such an expectation even exists. The range of perlocutionary consequences spans the range of human behavior for any given social situation.

It is interesting to consider the perlocutionary object of a play utterance. The illocutionary act that takes effect is to play the game, but it is also to play the game *in such and such way*, given the content of the speech act's locution. This is why one utterance may be happy while another misfires and is void – for example, if it does not follow the rules. One possible perlocutionary object is a response based on a conventional expectation derived from the rules or the fiction. Consider my previous example, the player saying, “I push him off the ledge.” The illocutionary force of this statement is a performance of play such that this happens within the fiction of the game session. As part of securing uptake, this action navigates the rules. TTRPGs may differ on how to resolve this action within the game, but most generally allow the fiction up to a certain point. Sometimes the rules may simply allow this to occur, whether it is because the

³⁰ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 116–17.

³¹ This is separate from the illocutionary act and its uptake. The perlocutionary object is related to the illocution, but a fundamentally separate act. It is possible for a successful, consummated, felicitous illocution where the perlocutionary object fails (i.e., it does not occur). For instance, I may succeed in warning you, but my perlocutionary object in warding you off may fail as you brush my warning aside and proceed towards the wasp nest unhindered. I have been understood, but I have been disregarded.

action is dramatically interesting, the character being pushed is surprised or vulnerable or offers no resistance, or for some other reason. Other games commit the player character to the *attempt* to push the other off the ledge. This invites the response of a dice roll to resolve whether the player character succeeds, fails, succeeds with complications, etc. This initiates a longer sequence or interchange of dialogue within the conversation that includes other such illocutionary acts. Thus, while the initial utterance has the illocutionary force of making that move within the game, the perlocutionary object of play is to accomplish the desired outcome of that act: pushing the character off the ledge. This may succeed or fail, depending on the response of the way the rules demand resolution to the conflict.³² No matter the outcome of the resolution, the illocution itself is intact and felicitous. A failure of the dice roll does not render the illocution void and the players are still bound by its effects; the failure simply steers the fiction in one direction instead of another. At all times, the player has still successfully made the move, just as the above example of revised action in *Apocalypse World* maintains the felicity of the first illocution even though the second rewrites its fictional effects.

Though the illocutionary revision maintains a diegetic continuity in keeping with the game's conventions, this also carries with it perlocutionary effects. While the state of the game reflects a revised state, the players do not themselves un-ring the bell that marked its occurrence. Ripple effects of this could just be a better or more front-of-mind awareness of how these rules are being interpreted. They may also be more socially or culturally situated. For instance, if the revision is initiated by a player who deploys a consent tool such as an X-Card or Lines and Veils,

³² If this seems too broadly encompassing of the way the rules respond to the move the player makes in the game, then perhaps the reaction to the illocutionary act can be considered more granularly: the perlocutionary object that results as consequence of the player's illocutionary act is to initiate a conflict resolution that will resolve the player character's attempt to push the character off the ledge. This leaves the steps of the resolution, the outcome, the interpretation, et al to be determined by future speech acts in the chain of events being initiated by the illocution.

they signal that they personally do not wish play to proceed in the current direction and ask that it be revised in a way that does not engage with that topic or situation. This is a similarly illocutionary revision, providing that it has conventional uptake with the players, and may produce a broad spectrum of perlocutionary reactions to its use. This is doubly true when a player or players disregards the illocutionary force invested in the safety tool, as I shall recount later in this chapter.

It is also worth looking at circumstances where an illocutionary act of play might be void. These will most commonly be Class B errors, Misexecutions. Whether a Flaw or a Hitch, this infelicity occurs when the utterance does not execute the procedure correctly or it gets interrupted. For example, a player character speaks in a scene, but the GM reminds the player that this character is not present in the scene, or that their character doesn't have the information that the player themselves knows. This is disallowed by the fictional situation itself. An action that would normally be permitted by the rules of the game but that contradicts the fiction in which the illocution is uttered is nonetheless still disallowed. Not all games place priority on narrative and story as the outcome of play, but that narrative still reflects the state of play and tracks where the game's constituent elements are throughout play. A player can no more contradict the fictional state of the game than they could score a goal when the soccer ball has not yet come to them.

Flaws and Hitches may also derive from the rules themselves, under certain circumstances. For instance, a player might misunderstand the meaning of a rule regarding one of their player character's abilities and tries to use that ability in a way the rules do not actually allow. Importantly, there is only an infelicity that renders the illocution void if the participants at the table recognize it as such and acknowledge that the player is making a mistake. If nobody at

the table realizes, or if nobody cares, then the player's utterance is still spoken with the force of play since it has secured uptake among the participants. However, if there is pushback from the others that the player is not allowed to use their ability in their way, the act is void and their mistake recognized.

It is not difficult to see how misexecutions arise in play, especially in TTRPGs that have complicated rules. On the other hand, misfires can signal deeper problems among the social group than mere flaws in play. A misfire occurs in the absence of convention. This can only occur in the game if there is no conventional basis for play. This is not the same as there not being a rule for something since TTRPGs would otherwise permit open roleplaying – the absence of rules about driving cars does not prohibit player characters from ever driving a car should it come up in the fiction. Instead, it is a failure for convention to form around how this game is to be played.

There are conventions to TTRPG play that exist outside of the individual instance of the game session. The existence of “forms” of TTRPG like *Powered by the Apocalypse* or the *D&D*-like *d20 System* are built upon such game design conventions. However, a rulebook is ultimately a persuasive document. It is only effective at accomplishing its design if that design is communicated to the players in the group. This is often easy enough when it comes to issues like “when and how do you roll dice.” A more intangible aspect like “what are you trying to get out of playing this game” may not be as clear. *Powered by the Apocalypse* games spell this out directly in their Agenda: when you sit down to play a game of *The Sprawl* or *Thirsty Sword Lesbians*, you should experience what is on this short list. The existence of the Agenda as a structure within the game design is itself a convention built on the legacy of *The Forge* and its discourses. The Agenda of *PBTA* is in many ways a response to the Creative Agenda of *Forge*

Theory, where Ron Edwards situated his earlier GNS Theory inside his Big Model.³³ Despite Edwards's often judgmental pathologizing of issues that arise during play, there is a similar issue at heart in the misfire. A convention cannot arise in the social situation of play if there is no agreement on the issue at hand. Conventions of play are broadly based on the consensus of how a game is to be played, and if no such convention is agreed upon by the group, then there is a failure to secure that consensus on how to play the game, or what sort of game they wish to play in the first place. This suggests deeper issues at hand with the group than the execution of the rules. There is a failure to secure uptake not because of procedure, but because the group cannot agree on what they are doing. Play under these circumstances is difficult, not least because of the constant potential for misfire and void statements of play, and it is unlikely the group will wish to soldier on for very long.

These are only a handful of implications that arise through the analysis of speech acts in TTRPG play. However, I have shown a basis by which the conversational speech of TTRPGs carries the illocutionary force of play. From this foundation, I can further unpack the structural conventions of TTRPGs parsed through a lens of speech acts and a speech situation that is likewise subject to convention. In the next chapter, I build upon this analysis to broach the speech situation of TTRPG play. The speech act framework I develop here, guided by Erving Goffman's analysis of conversation, will allow the means by which speech acts are produced and received to reveal the social conventions that structure them.

³³ GNS stands for Gamism, Narrativism, Simulationism. Broadly, Gamism focuses on players overcoming challenges in play, Narrativism focuses on storytelling, and Simulationism focuses on bringing the fictional world to life and exploring it. See Edwards, "System Does Matter."

Chapter 2. Imagining by Design

To imagine together is to imagine collaboratively and consensually. Sharing in the creative process requires collaborators to make space for each other, incorporate each other's creations, and find a means of building consensus and reaching agreement. In the previous chapter, I showed how tabletop roleplaying games may be read as the performance of speech acts. This performative lens offers a means by which the many formal and social conventions operate within the site of that performance. Here, I continue that analysis and expand its focus to what Austin called the "total speech situation."¹ Using Erving Goffman's work on talk as a guiding principle in my investigation, I examine common design conventions and practices that involve the participants in the speech situation and the event in which they find themselves. Through this analysis, I unpack the various conventions used by TTRPGs to structure the relationships between participants themselves and the functions they serve to reach a common agreement on play and the fiction.

The Game Session

In this section, I approach the conventions of TTRPG play by focusing on the social situation of play itself, the game session. I begin by framing the social situation in terms used by Erving Goffman in the analysis of talk and footing. Through this lens, I examine common conventions games and designers take towards the site and event of play. In keeping with my approach to the medium as a set of common practices, these will include some broader formal diversions from the usual TTRPG form.

¹ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 147.

In the last chapter, I referenced the connection between J.L. Austin’s Speech Act Theory and Goffman’s analysis of the social situation of speech, found in his 1981 book *Forms of Talk*. Goffman defines the social situation as “the full physical arena in which persons present are in sight and sound of one another.”² The collection of people within a social situation, including its non-participant bystanders, he calls a *gathering*. For TTRPGs, the social situation of play is called a *game session*. This occurs when a group of players gather in the same place at the same time to play a TTRPG. There is often not a strict limit to the number of players, though a group of four to six is often the most manageable to ensure everyone gets a chance to play. Some games are played between two people. The game sessions of *Dungeons & Dragons* co-designer Gary Gygax grew up to an unwieldy two dozen players shortly after its release.³

The time it takes to play through a single game session can vary greatly from game to game and from group to group. Typically, a single session will require three to four hours. Some games are simple and short, and some groups are fast – John Harper, designer of *Blades in the Dark*, says he can run a heist in his game, normally taking several hours, in thirty minutes.⁴ Stephen Dewey’s *Ten Candles* is a horror game that begins with the players lighting ten tea candles placed in a ring in the center of the group. The game is played from start to finish in the amount of time those candles stay lit. Players save themselves from failed rolls during play by literally burning a notecard containing one of their character’s traits. When a player runs out of

² Goffman, *Forms of Talk*, 136.

³ Appelcline, *Designers & Dragons ’70-’79*, 28.

⁴ Harper, *Blades in the Dark*.

cards to burn, their character dies. Play continues until all but one candle is extinguished, at which point the remaining characters die and the game ends.⁵

Zagal and Deterding call these sessions “co-located and synchronous.”⁶ This is the characteristic liveness of the TTRPG game session: everyone occupies the same space at the same time, all are within the same social situation. The players here occupy the role of *ratified participants*: everyone participating in the game session agrees that they are the group of participants, allowing them the right to speak in the conversation and to play the game. Other roles within the gathering depend on the context of the game session’s setting. Played in private, there might be no other people within the social situation than the players themselves. However, if a group plays a TTRPG in a public location, such as a board game café or comic shop, the social situation contains non-participatory bystanders who may or may not listen to the proceedings. These non-ratified bystanders would be eavesdroppers and overhearers, in Goffman’s terminology, as opposed to a ratified *audience*.⁷

Lastly, there is the case of the explicit audience. Usually, there is nothing in the play session that we would readily identify as a separate, non-participatory audience. A notable exception here is the case of the Actual Play. Sometimes performed in-person but often recorded as a video or podcast production, the Actual Play is an emerging and rapidly growing media genre where participants play a TTRPG for an explicitly recognized and non-participatory audience.

⁵ Dewey, *Ten Candles*.

⁶ Zagal and Deterding, “Definitions of ‘Role-Playing Games,’” 31.

⁷ Goffman, *Forms of Talk*, 136.

Critical Role is perhaps the most prominent such show. Hosted by its Game Master, Matthew Mercer, *Critical Role* is a weekly show streamed on Twitch and Youtube since 2015. Like Mercer, its cast is made up of prominent voice actors. Now playing through its third “campaign,” or episode arc, *Critical Role* uses *D&D 5th Edition* to perform adventure narratives in Mercer’s own unique fantasy setting, “Exandria.” *Critical Role*’s early popularity – along with a production already involving professional actors and distribution on Wil Wheaton’s media network, *Geek & Sundry* – saw the show expand into a larger media franchise. It now includes an animated TV series produced by Amazon, and it publishes *D&D*-compatible setting and adventure books through its own in-house TTRPG publishing imprint.

Some Actual Play shows are performed live for an audience at TTRPG conferences, meaning audience members are live, ratified participants of the social situation occupying a specific listener role within the participation framework. More often, however, there is the implied audience of the camera or microphone. In both cases, the alignment and footing of the players will change in response to the presence of this audience. They are no longer playing solely for each other; they are instead acting in a way that makes for an interesting experience for that audience. The myriad ways that an external audience change the nature of play warrant significant enough consideration as their own object of study, but I do not have the space to properly address them here.⁸ However, this instance of Actual Play media is an unusual outlier and not the norm for TTRPG play. Likewise, it is unnecessary to turn to Actual Play to find theatre and performance when it already exists in the TTRPG itself.

⁸ Popular Actual Plays include the streaming shows *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20*, as well as the podcasts *The Adventure Zone* and *Friends at the Table*. Actual Play’s relationship to the TTRPG in many ways echoes, if not reproduces, the relationship between video games and livestreaming. For more on livestreamed games, see Taylor, *Watch Me Play*. For more on Actual Play, see Jones, *Watch Us Roll*; Chalk, “Producing Play.”

Modern TTRPG play also complicates the social situation by challenging its characteristic liveness. Easier access to quality communications technology has mitigated the necessity to be physically present in the same location. It is enough now that the group has a means of communicating live with each other. A TTRPG can easily be played on a Zoom call, and there are lots of software alternatives that help track dice and other play aids, whether it involves recording notes in a shared Google Doc or using a purpose-built web platform like Roll20. While these mediations are not “co-present,” in Zagal and Deterding’s phrasing, they are still “synchronous.” Goffman’s definition of the social situation extended to space based on sensory perception, which is still true of a game played over Zoom.

More complicated are those forms which challenge the game session’s synchronicity. Most TTRPGs are still played live at the same time, but there are asynchronous forms, such as text-based play-by-post for web forums, that are digital descendants of the sort of play-by-mail roleplaying one could find in the earliest years of TTRPGs.⁹ The extended written form of play in these games looks radically different from the back-and-forth flow of live conversation, and play involves a broader authorial approach to crafting scenes than a strict limitation to the role of one character. The idea of a single game session in play-by-post TTRPG games is stretched over such a long timeframe to be rendered irrelevant. More useful is the moment of performance itself – when the player creates their addition to the shared fiction. While these games can stretch for months or years, they consist of small, sporadic moments of play with long stretches of time between them.¹⁰

⁹ For more on Play-By-Post and TTRPGs on web forums, see Zalka, *Forum-Based Role Playing Games as Digital Storytelling*.

¹⁰ Similar to this are games that stretch the time of a single session out over long spans of time, such as games that span the course of a day. Such games use the rules and mechanics to draw attention to the often-overlooked experiences of everyday life. Jeeyon Shim’s *Have I Been Good?* is an epistolary game played by one human player and their dog. The rules guide the player through a day spent with their dog, feeding them, giving them treats, going

This playing with intervals of time and duration is similarly found in another common convention of TTRPGs: the campaign. The idea of the *campaign* is present in the very title of *Dungeons & Dragons*'s first 1974 release: "Dungeons & Dragons: Rules for Fantastic Medieval Wargames Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures." Instead of a single *D&D* session playing out a dungeon delve in isolation, a campaign offered a way for players to connect one game session to another as part of an overall structure. This practice, like so many others in *D&D*'s first release,¹¹ came from mid-century wargaming communities. Many wargaming hobby groups strung together their battles in a broader campaign structure by using the convention of a broader *metagame*, linking their smaller conflicts together using a different game that allowed for strategic play at a higher level.¹² Rather than reverting to a different game, *D&D* and its immediate antecedents represented its campaign through continuity. The progress, relationships, and titles gained by players carried over from one game session to the next. This

on a trip, and considering how they would like to spend their time – so much more fleeting for the dog than the human, who must seem like an ageless immortal. The game asks the player to see themselves through the dog's eyes, to consider what they would say to the player, to observe how they communicate as if a spell was cast on them that works its magic throughout the day. When the dog falls asleep, the player imagines themselves as a conduit for the dog's feelings towards the player and writes a letter to themselves from the perspective of the dog. Once the letter is complete, the player watches the dog dream before falling asleep themselves. The next day, they greet their dog, feed them, and write a letter back to the dog from their own perspective. The rules ask the player to conclude it with, "I will carry you with me wherever I go. You are loved, and you are good." See Shim, *Have I Been Good?*

¹¹ Many aspects of the contemporary tabletop roleplaying game are inherited from *Dungeons & Dragons* and its collision of mid-century wargaming trends, sword and sorcery fantasy literature, and speculative fiction fandom. A great deal about the form, its conventions, and its discourses has grown beyond *D&D* in the decades since its first printing. But other elements, whether characteristics of the form or arguments among designers and fans, have remained or repeated themselves throughout its history.

¹² The game frequently used during this period was Allan Calhammer's 1959 strategy game, *Diplomacy*. Players in *Diplomacy* acted as nations vying for territorial control. Players would negotiate and bargain for secret deals with other players. They would then issue secret orders to the armies under their control, after which a neutral referee would execute all orders simultaneously. Instead of using *Diplomacy*'s own rules to resolve battles – which often resulted in stalemate if players did not have decisive support – the groups would turn to their other, more tactical games. Callahan's *Diplomacy* was itself inspired by governmental and diplomatic simulation exercises run by the RAND corporation from the mid-50s through the mid-60s. They sometimes called these "roleplaying games." Peterson, *Playing at the World*, 228–29.

notion of campaign as continuity, whether that led through a narrative arc from beginning to conclusion, or simply meant a world that was marked by the consequences of its player characters' actions, has descended from *Dungeons & Dragons* to many TTRPGs today. These approaches vary according to the game being played and the group playing it. Some players are interested in a simulated sandbox, where they get to interact with a fictional world in any manner they please and see how it responds. Others are interested in a narrative, which could mean playing their part in a roughly pre-planned narrative or improvising that narrative at the table.

These different purposes for continuing play beyond a single session factor into the design of a TTRPG. More often than not, games are geared towards play across multiple game sessions. Such games take different approaches towards campaign design. For instance, *Twilight 2000*, a 1984 military TTRPG about soldiers in World War III caught in the apocalyptic dissolution of society after a nuclear war, gives the players free range and a vast toolkit, but sets them up with a clear scenario: their unit is stranded on the frontlines in Poland, they are on their own, and they need to find a way back home. Games like Sage LaTorra and Adam Koebel's 2011 *Dungeon World* offer a more directed campaign structure: the various villains and antagonistic forces of the campaign plan to destroy the world if the player characters do not intervene to stop them, and the situation of the world grows increasingly dire as those antagonists get closer to their goals.

Despite its strong narrative focus, D. Vincent Baker's *Apocalypse World* has a relatively light touch when structuring the campaign. The players live in a settlement in a world of scarcity, and the campaign is structured around the various internal and external pressures on that community from warlords, diseases, their own people, and the world itself. The design assumes

that pressuring the player characters from a threat left unchecked will be enough of a prompt for them to respond, initiating the rising action of an improvisational narrative arc.

The adherence to the shared fiction's continuity across multiple sessions – multiple conversations – reveals the conventional basis by which speech addresses the fiction. The conventions of speech derived from the rules are adhered to by group consensus. These rules-based conventions exist to help the group establish consensus about their shared, imagined fiction. Just as the speech acts of the conversation carry the illocutionary force of play, so too do they enact the illocutionary force of authorship. The players speak their contribution to the fiction into existence, it secures uptake among the other participants, and it takes effect – it enters into the fiction as it has been constructed, and further speech acts within the game session will be bound by it. Thus, the shared fiction produced through speech becomes a convention that determines future speech. In this way, that fiction may be carried from session to session as a convention of play, alongside the rules and whatever other social and societal conventions that constrain speech during play.

Moreover, since it exists as a convention agreed upon by consensus, this shared fiction is only as infallible as the group allows it to be. As the time between the authorial utterance and the current moment of play grows longer, the details of the event and its context fade from memory and the products of numerous utterances blur together into a more indistinct impression. Note-taking or some other sort of written record may sustain this memory, but writing can only be an imperfect translation of a non-reproducible performance. Peggy Phelan writes in *Unmarked* that “the document of a performance then is only a spur to memory, an encouragement of memory to become present.”¹³ The fiction, then, does not exist as some external entity with which the

¹³ Phelan, *Unmarked*, 146.

players interact. The fiction created through play is located within the players themselves as convention, the product of utterances that inform future utterances.

The Players

The ratified participants of the TTRPG conversation are its players. In this section, I approach the various ways these players are distinguished from each other and the way they function within the conversation of the TTRPG session. I will discuss the relationship between players and their Player Characters, how players act through them, and how they are represented within the game design. I will also introduce the Game Master, the one player who operates differently. I will discuss their various functions within the game session, how they developed over time, and the effect the GM role has on illocutionary force.

During a game session, most players act as a single *Player Character*, speaking for them and governing their actions inside the fictional world of the game. These characters have various attributes, skills, abilities, and numerical statistics that are integrated into the rules and game mechanics, such as the character's agility or their skill at persuasion. These characteristics vary according to each game. The way a game formulates such characteristics establishes the sort of game and play experience it offers, while the player's decisions in creating their character signal to the others the sorts of situations they want to engage in. In TTRPG terms, these signals of player interest are called *flags*.

While TTRPGs generally permit the freedom to attempt any action, the way a game categorizes its skills, attributes, statistics, *et al* reflects the way it guides the players towards certain actions. These actions are executed according to certain rules-based procedures, such as dice rolls, that determine whether an action succeeds or the presence of complications. In *D&D*, for instance, the numbers on a player character's Ability scores come into play when a player

character takes an action that would utilize that attribute. A player who wishes their character to attack a monster must roll a 20-sided die whose result needs to exceed whatever numeric value represents the monster's defenses in order to land their hit successfully. A character with very high Strength may then add a *modifier* of one or two to that die roll's result, making success more likely. A character with very low Strength, on the other hand, must subtract from that die roll, making success more difficult.

These formal characteristics of a player character – the aforementioned skills, attributes, et al – are the way the game design represents the character within the conventional procedures of play. For instance, the Ability Scores of *Dungeons & Dragons*, mentioned in the paragraph above, are meant to reflect the innate, in-born talents of the character, which grow stronger with experience – itself another numerical calculation that has been quantified and is acquired primarily through the various kinds of monsters the character kills. Numbers-heavy TTRPGs – especially popular in the 80s and in the “d20” supplement boom following the release of *Dungeons & Dragons* Third Edition in early 2000s – favor stacking complicating factor on top of complicating factor. Interpreted from a certain design perspective, making a calculation *complicated* by adding lots of variables corresponds to making it more nuanced, detailed, and verisimilar. What a game chooses to categorize as a character attribute, how it analyzes that collection of attributes, and what it says about quantifying those characteristics reflects both the designer's ideology and their intention for the play experience.

Significantly, the indie TTRPG movement of the last twenty years has done a great deal of work to interrogate the underlying assumptions of these categorizations and the way they reflect how the game design views the fictional world its rules create. Consider, for instance, Paul Czege's 2003 game *My Life with Master*, in which players act as the henchman of an evil

villain who preys on a nearby town. The Master, played by the Game Master, is represented by two values: Fear and Reason. These are not attributes *of* the Master but rather a characteristic of the player's characters' relationship *to* the Master. The former represents the Master's ability to control the henchmen and townsfolk, and the latter represents the ability of the minions and townsfolk to resist that control. Player characters, in turn, have three values: Weariness, Self-Loathing, and a separate Love value directed towards any number of individual characters. *My Life with Master* won acclaim and awards as a prominent early indie TTRPG that represented its strong theme and mood through the design of the game's rules and formal systems.

Many games follow suit in designing their character attributes to suit their theme. In Brendan Conway's *Masks*, a narrative-based teenage superhero TTRPG, the primary numerical statistics are "Labels." These Labels represent how the characters see themselves and their place in society: Danger, Freak, Savior, Superior, Mundane. Any gain in one label is generally accompanied by a reduction in another.¹⁴ In Mark Plemmons's *MASHED*, a game about Korean War field hospitals inspired by the film and TV show, the attributes are Luck, Nerve, Skill, and Tough, as well as a per-character History attribute representing the strength of their relationship with another character. Other games choose to keep it simple. In Grant S. Howitt's *Honey Heist*, a game about bears pulling off the crime of the century, there are only two attributes: Bear and Criminal. In John Harper's *Lasers and Feelings*, a sci-fi comedy space adventure, players have one attribute – a high value means they're better at Lasers and a lower value means they're better at Feelings. This rules-light game leaves the meaning and interpretation of those attributes deliberately vague and evocative.¹⁵

¹⁴ Czege, *My Life with Master*.

¹⁵ Harper, *Lasers and Feelings*.

In many games, the players and their characters collaborate, forming a *party* not dissimilar to Tolkien's Fellowship. The trope of the group of adventurers working together has its origins, like many others, in the initial release of *Dungeons & Dragons*. In its initial release, *D&D* gave little reason as to *why* the player characters were aligned together, or what they were doing in a dungeon at all. Games archivist Jon Peterson recalled a Dungeon Master writing into the *Ann Arbor Wargamer* zine complaining that players so often asked why they would be on this adventure that he created a table that allowed them to randomly generate their character motivation and long-term goals.¹⁶

Many games try to complicate the nature of relationships between player characters. In *My Life with Master*, as mentioned above, players are all bound in service to the Master. In *Apocalypse World* and the *Powered by the Apocalypse* games that share its form, hereafter abbreviated *PBTA*, character creation is followed by an initial phase where players introduce their characters and establish their history with each other, with specific rules about how to determine the numeric History value of that character based on what type of character they play. For example, the "Hocus," a religious figure with psychic abilities and a cult following, gains an additional point of History with other player characters "because [they] are a good judge of character" – except for the character "whose soul [they]'ve seen," who automatically gains the strongest bond with the Hocus.¹⁷ Games like *Dungeon World* take this a step farther. Players define their Bonds by a belief one character has about another, and if they determine whether such a belief is true or false they gain a point in their Bond and create a new in-character belief

¹⁶ Peterson, *The Elusive Shift*, 53–54.

¹⁷ Baker and Baker, *Apocalypse World*, 66.

about them.¹⁸ Takuma Okada's *Stewpot: Tales from a Fantasy Tavern* flips the script on the traditional trope of the adventurer party. The characters have not adventured together; instead, they come together when they *retire* from adventuring to help build up a tavern and its surrounding community.

Some games complicate the relationship between player characters by making them conspiratorial and adversarial from the outset. Jason Morningstar's *Fiasco* begins by defining the web of relations and connections between the player characters – this is done even before naming the character or creating any details about them as an individual. *Fiasco* tells Coen Brothers-esque black comedies of circumstances spinning wildly and violently out of control. Player characters are linked together by shared goals, envious desire, and relationships with often-unequal power imbalances. Characters pursuing their goals in a scene will pull on these connections, generate tension and obstacles, and cause failure to snowball into catastrophe. There is no guarantee that player characters will ever work together or be aligned as a group, but the relationships, goals, locations, and objects that link them are explicitly clear from the very beginning of the game.

The Game Master

The player with the most distinct relationship from the others is the one who takes on the role of Game Master. This player does not have their own player character. Instead, they act as a referee for the actions of the player characters and represent the fiction, its world, and its non-player character denizens who respond to player actions. Most games call this person the Game Master. *D&D* and similar fantasy games call them the Dungeon Master. Different games will

¹⁸ LaTorre and Koebel, *Dungeon World*, 30–32.

often rename the title to better suit the theme: the *World of Darkness* games call them the Storyteller, *Apocalypse World* calls them the Master of Ceremonies or M.C., while media-themed games like *Primetime Adventures* and *Action Movie World* call them the Producer and Director, respectively. Whatever moniker the role goes by in play, this player describes the locations, speaks as the people, and fights as the monsters encountered.

In early TTRPGs, the Game Master usually acted as the impartial referee expected of its wargame forebearers. It was this referee's job to allow the players to attempt any action, adjudicate that action through the game's rules, and narrate a reasonable outcome.¹⁹ As the TTRPG market grew and publishers began to support their games with supplements and pre-written, pre-designed adventures, the Game Master became a stage manager guiding the players through the content and executing the cues according to the group's direction and progress. During the 90s, as story began to take priority over rules-heavy combat, it became the Game Master's job to deliver a compelling narrative – even if at times this meant limiting player agency. As the late 90s and 2000s indie scene shifted the focus again from delivered narrative to collaborative storytelling, the Game Master acted as referee and facilitator – not necessarily for tactical combat this time, but for incorporating and weaving together player input into the coherent fiction the rules were designed to produce. Each game finds different functions for their Game Masters to fulfill, even if some may be clearer about those purposes than others.

The original function of a Game Master as referee establishes the Game Master as an infallible judge over all matters in the game. This can sometimes lead to conflict, when the players feel that an incorrect decision was made, that the rules are not followed to their liking, or

¹⁹ Though this attitude towards player agency derived from the Open Kriegsspiel movement, it arrived in the mid-century wargaming community through Dave Wesely's rediscovery of Charles Totten's 1880 game *Strategos* in the University of Minnesota library. See Chapter Two for more.

if the Game Master is “railroading” or forcing the players in a direction in which they do not wish to proceed. The assumed rule that the Game Master has “final say” stretches back to the earliest days of *D&D* when the Game Master was meant to be a neutral referee. When TSR released their first edition of the revised *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, Gary Gygax left the following advice in an Afterword to the *Dungeon Master’s Guide* (1979):

It is the spirit of the game, not the letter of the rules, which is important. Never hold to the letter written, nor allow some barracks room lawyer to force quotations from the rule book upon you, if it goes against the obvious intent of the game. As you hew the line with respect to conformity to major systems and uniformity to play in general, also be certain the game is mastered by you and not by your players. Within the broad parameters given in the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* Volumes, you are creator and final arbiter. By ordering things as they should be, the game as a whole first, your campaign next, and your participants thereafter, you will be playing *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* as it was meant to be. May you find as much pleasure in doing so as the rest of us do.²⁰

Gygax makes his priorities clear in his reasoning for this version of the Game Master. Holding the integrity of the game together, both in the moment and across multiple sessions, was integral to the experience, over and above the schemes of players who may try to exploit some rule as written to gain an unfair advantage that violates the “spirit of the game.” This reflects the Game Master position at the time as impartial arbiter; they could no more root for the characters than the goblins in their obligation to keep the game functioning. But as the role of Game Master shifted from neutral referee to adventure book stage manager, to storytelling narrator, and to collaborator, this unchanged convention created friction for some.

Dungeons & Dragons still retains this rule, colloquially known as “GM fiat,” today. It is even reiterated in the FAQ for *Dungeons & Dragons* 5th Edition rules on the *Dungeons &*

²⁰ Gygax, *Dungeon Master’s Guide*, 230.

Dragons Support website. Many games still adopt this rule as a convention of play, even if the rulebook does not explicitly mention it. “GM fiat” exists as a conventional practice and as a directive, and thus it is present as an expectation of play for those games and groups who use it. However, this is a convention whose mandate looms over all others. As a convention of play, a GM who exercises this rule speaks with illocutionary force to undo, override, correct, or intervene in all other acts. When the GM is a neutral arbiter acting on behalf of the “spirit of the game,” this can act as a useful tool to rein things in when the game begins to lose its grounding. However, the role and functions of the GM have grown and shifted over time. When acting as collaborator or storyteller, the GM exercising this rule can often draw criticism. Since the rule allows the GM to unilaterally approve, deny, or change any aspect of the game, some feel that this convention overreaches without consent of the group and limits the agency of players within the game.

Thus, this convention is often challenged in modern TTRPGs, a legacy of both the 2000s indie TTRPG community and the popularity of the *Powered by the Apocalypse* genre of the 2010s. In *PBTA* games like *Apocalypse World*, the authority of the Game Master is limited by the parameters the rulebook says they must follow if the desired outcome of playing the game is to be achieved. This authority is often still generous, but the rules are designed to direct the Game Master towards decisions that uphold the written experience goals of the game.

The role of a Game Master in *PBTA* games is to make sure each session completes a specific *Agenda*. This is often written as a list of three or four bullet points, each with a brief sentence describing some experience the players are to have during play. These are statements

such as “portray a fantastic world,”²¹ “make Halcyon City feel like a comic book,”²² and “convey the fictional world honestly.”²³ The Agenda that is repeated most often throughout PBTA games comes from the original Agenda found in *Apocalypse World*: “Play to find out what happens.”²⁴ *Apocalypse World* and *PBTA* games represent a clear break from the earlier TTRPG tradition of pre-plotted campaigns and pre-written adventure modules. These games are “prep-light” and are built around improvisation that is guided by the rules designed to generate interesting stories. This is why binding the Game Master to a set of rules they must follow is a crucial part of the experience. The games are designed to compel collaborative storytelling from the back-and-forth milieu of gameplay – so long as the rules are followed. A player with unilateral free reign to do as they wish undermines the processes that produce specific narrative outcomes. Baker reiterates a paragraph later, “DO NOT pre-plan a storyline, and I’m not fucking around.”²⁵

Apocalypse World’s rules provide a list of *Principles* that guide the Game Master towards fulfilling this Agenda – reminders, for instance, that they should want to see the characters overcome the obstacles they face, or that they should not get too attached to their antagonists, or that they should say the name of the character when addressing someone and not the player.²⁶ In order to adhere to these Principles, the Game Master is provided with a list of *Moves*. These are

²¹ LaTorre and Koebel, *Dungeon World*, 161.

²² Conway, *Masks*, 126.

²³ Harper, *Blades in the Dark*, 187.

²⁴ Baker and Baker, *Apocalypse World*, 80.

²⁵ Baker and Baker, 80.

²⁶ Baker and Baker, 82.

actions that impact the world, and the players have similar sets of Moves tailored to their own roles in play. This provides a clear procedure for the Game Master to follow: here are your desires outcome, here are your strategies for accomplishing them, and here are the actions you can take to enact those strategies. *Apocalypse World* designer D. Vincent Baker offers a clear warning for straying outside of this structure in the very first lines of the Game Master's rules, "There are a million ways to GM games; *Apocalypse World* calls for one way in particular. This chapter is it. Follow these as rules. The whole rest of the game is built upon this."²⁷

A GM who acts by these conventions finds themselves more grounded than the unilateral shot-calling of "GM fiat." These GMs are bound by their own collection of rules-based conventions instead of being given a broad mandate to course-correct as they see fit. Additionally, the "spirit of the game" that they act to safeguard is instead rendered as an explicit and transparent set of experience goals, rather than an indistinct code of conduct. This is not to suggest that "GM fiat" does not work within the broader set of rules of its game; if it was entirely without merit then it would not have proven itself to be such a lasting convention. However, *PBTA* game designers have worked towards addressing their specific criticisms of this convention. Thus, some GMs find themselves bound by a set of rules and procedures just like the other players while at the same time preserving the other functions of the role.

Conventions of Collaborative Authorship

Among the most important conventions of TTRPG play, especially from a performance perspective, is those related to the authorship of an imagined fiction. TTRPGs are games of collaborative improvisation. They have a diverse approach to conventions that mediate those

²⁷ Baker and Baker, 80.

improvisations, smoothing conflicts and contradictions towards productive collaboration. What TTRPGs call the division of narrative authority and the Baker-Boss Principle offer us ways of thinking through how we imagine together. This not only offers insight into the play of TTRPGs, but it can also be of value in analyzing our own structures and procedures of collaboration in theatre.

Introduced in the previous chapter,²⁸ the Baker-Boss Principle, also called the lumpley Principle, states that “the point of every game mechanic is to create consensus among the players. Consensus is the underlying mechanism of roleplaying, right? If the players don't agree that something happens, it doesn't happen.”²⁹ TTRPG rulebooks are systems of conventions designed to produce specific outcomes through performance, but they are ultimately persuasive documents aimed at the players. It must convince the players that the rules, without substitution or modification, should be followed to arrive at their desired experience. The rules of the game – as conventions of play that guide the conversation – exist among the players themselves because they have collectively decided to follow them. The players have agreed, by consensus, to adhere to the rules of the game as they understand them, and these rules in turn offer conventional procedures to create consensus within play.

The Baker-Boss Principle tracks appropriately with my own construction of TTRPG play as speech acts. An utterance gains illocutionary force because of its conventional underpinning, and these conventions are based in consensus. While some of these conventions may be the product of socialization or subject formation, there is nonetheless a conscious or unconscious understanding or expectation among the group that they will be followed. When an illocutionary

²⁸ See p. 30.

²⁹ Baker, “An Approach for Mechanics and Innovation.”

act secures uptake, it does not simply appeal to convention. Instead, it appeals to the participants to recognize it as adhering to convention. When an illocutionary act takes effect, it binds the participants to respect the product of that act because there is consensus among those participants that it had the force to do so. If there is no consensus, there is no convention. If there is no convention, there is no illocution. “If the players don't agree that something happens, it doesn't happen.” Through the Baker-Boss Principle, the rules agreed to by consensus are themselves procedures to create consensus in play. Convention creates consensus creates illocutionary force.

Since the rules of TTRPGs and their systemic mechanics are aimed at producing consensus at the table, game design places special importance in the structure of utterance production among the participants. I have shown expressions of this structure above; it may be prominently found in the distinction between the Game Master and the other players. It was in wrestling with the role and function of the Game Master that indie game designers of the 2000s arrived at this structure, which often called the “Distribution (or Division) of Narrative Authority.”

Narrative authority, sometimes called narration or narrational authority, refers to a participant's right to author the shared fiction of the TTRPG session.³⁰ While the distribution of narrative authority evokes rigidity and hierarchy, the concept developed as a means of complicating the hegemonic reach of “GM fiat,” described above as the right of a GM to undo or override anything in the game at any time. Within this more traditional schema, best represented by *D&D*, players are restricted even when it comes to their own player character. For instance, a player may choose to have their character negotiate the surrender of a castle's defenders. They

³⁰ Like many other theories of TTRPG design, Ron Edwards and other community members of *The Forge* further complicate and catalog what is meant by “authority,” in which narrative authority is only one aspect. See Edwards, “Authority.”

roll their dice and succeed. From this point, their control of their character and the action ceases. They are in control of the action and their dialogue in the setup of the action, but the interpretation of the results and the narration of the outcome falls to the GM – even when it involves narrating the actions of a player character.

As counter-example, consider this same scenario in a *PBTA* game like *Dungeon World*. The player character negotiates with the Captain of the Guard for the garrison’s surrender. Given the leverage the party has over the defenders, this triggers the “Parley” move and the player rolls their dice as described by the rules of the Move.³¹ The roll succeeds. Here, the GM plays a role in adjudicating the procedure and in playing the world and its inhabitants, but they do not take control over the entire scene. Instead, the spotlight remains with the character and their player. While the GM may detail the consequences and reaction of the world, depending on the circumstances, they are nonetheless guided by Principles such as “Ask questions and use the answers” and their Agenda of “Play to find out what happens.”³² Rather than telling the player what their character does, the GM is pressed to hand that control off to the player themselves by asking, “what does that look like?”

While both of these scenarios still exhibit asymmetrical distributions of narrative authority – even in the latter, for instance, the GM retains control over the world of the fiction – *Dungeon World* worked to ameliorate this asymmetry by limiting the auspices of the GM and shifting the agency back to the player whose character had the spotlight. These two scenarios highlight the often-significant differences between even minor shifts in the distribution of narrative authority. What shifts in the above examples is the way the right to narrate the fiction

³¹ LaTorre and Koebel, *Dungeon World*, 70–71.

³² LaTorre and Koebel, 161–64.

passes from player to player. This is similar to the way Goffman described the “floor” of a conversation: one who “holds the floor” has the opportunity to talk as the current ratified speaker.³³ As TTRPG designers distribute this authority differently, the rules and procedures of how this authorial “floor” moves between players change accordingly – and so, too, do the conventions of play held by the participants at the table. A change in the distribution of narrative authority corresponds to a structural change in the production and reception of utterances within the social situation of TTRPG play.

As the indie designer community grew from the mid-90s onward, so too did their experimentation with distributions of narrative authority. These experiments ranged from modest shifts in the distinction between player and GM to the radical levelling of equal narrative authority. One such early example is found in James V. West’s 2001 game, *The Pool*. This game was a short, 4-page TTRPG whose simple rules provided clarifying insight into the way these procedures operate. It is an extremely minimalist game: player characters are defined by a brief sentence or two that summarizes their story, a handful of traits written by the player that define important character qualities related to that story, and an eponymous pool of 15 d6 dice. Whenever a character encounters a conflict, they stake a number of dice on its outcome (in addition to one free die) and roll. Any result of 1 means the conflict ends in success. Not rolling a 1 on any of the dice results in failure and the dice staked are removed from the pool. The interesting design complication comes in the outcome of a successful roll: the player must choose to add one die to their pool or make a “Monologue of Victory.” The “MOV,” as it is abbreviated by the rules, grants the player full authorship to narrate the scene that follows with

³³ Goffman, *Forms of Talk*, 22–23, 28.

very few limitations.³⁴ If they choose to add a die to their pool, however, they surrender authorship of the outcome in exchange for managing the game’s mechanical currency. The game’s minimalist approach does not detail further structuring relationships between the GM and players, nor does it even proscribe how the players arrive at a conflict in the first place, but West’s design intervenes the moment a conflict is to be resolved. Here, West strictly clarifies the relationship and limitations of each player with respect to the “authorial floor” following conflict resolution.

In *Apocalypse World*, D. Vincent Baker and Meguey Baker made the intervention against “GM fiat” that I recounted above. This game, and the common design conventions of *PBTA* games that followed, preserve the role of the Game Master and in this sense there remains an asynchronous distribution of narrative authority. However, from another perspective, the Game Master is now bound by a set of rules, the same as any other player. The myriad *PBTA* games that have followed *Apocalypse World*’s release continue these design experimentations.

Vel Mini’s *Fellowship* is the *PBTA* game that makes the biggest experimental leap in distributing narrative authority. *Fellowship* is a fantasy adventure game based around a disparate party – or fellowship – of heroes fighting “the heart of evil itself.”³⁵ The game thematically evokes *The Lord of the Rings*, but also similar genre tales of heroic quests such as *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Like other *PBTA* games, *Fellowship* retains the GM-Player Character distinction, but further equates their structures. The GM is called “The Overlord” and has a player character of their own, similar to *Lord of the Rings*’s Sauron. Likewise, the players act within an explicit Agenda-Principle-Move structure just like the GM. One entry in the players’

³⁴ West, *The Pool*.

³⁵ Mini, *Fellowship*, 0.

Agenda is “Tell Us of Your People.”³⁶ While the GM still retains their traditional role in resolving procedural conventions, they no longer have free authority to create, populate, and perform as the world and its inhabitants. Instead, each player character is a representative from the people of a particular part of the fictional world that is created alongside the character. Worldbuilding becomes a fully collaborative experience where each player gets to define their corner of the world and its relationship to others and to the Overlord. It also establishes the conventional authorship of all matters related to that region and those people, and play defers to that player in matters related to them.³⁷ Though not fully equal – the GM Overlord plays an antagonistic force embodied in an individual, their lieutenants, and their agents – the distribution of narrative authority in *Fellowship* radically extends the structural symmetry between player roles.

TTRPGs that take this symmetry to its natural conclusion are those that do away with the Game Master entirely and seek consensus by other means. These GM-less games, as they are called, find other ways to distribute the functions served by a Game Master. Sometimes one of the players, usually the one most familiar with the game, can act as facilitator to explain the rules and procedures of play. In other games, the explanatory role is shared among players and the rules are encouraged to be read aloud during play. For instance, *Belonging Outside Belonging* games such as *Dream Askew* or *Going Rogue* divide the functions of Game Master according to setting elements that reflect the game’s themes. Players create and play as their own characters, but also play various Pillars of the game world. In *Dream Askew*, for instance, a player would play their character but would also be in control of all world elements and non-player characters

³⁶ Mini, 14.

³⁷ Mini, 41.

representing the “Psychic Maelstrom,” or the intact remnants of society, among others. Unlike their own characters, the rules encourage players to pick up new elements and trade elements away to other players, circulating and sharing the different aspects of the world among all.³⁸

In *Fiasco*, discussed earlier in this chapter, each player is defined by their connections to other characters, shared desires, shared locations, and shared objects. In each of the game’s two acts, players take turns as their player character becomes the focus of a particular scene, and that focal player may decide up front to either set the scene themselves or decide whether the outcome is a positive or negative one for their character. Whichever they choose, the rest of the group decides the other by consensus. Final resolutions are determined by the rules and the outcomes of their scenes, while any non-player character roles are taken up by whichever players are not in that scene.³⁹

GM-less games offer ever-shifting experiments in the way collaborators navigate social conventions to create a shared work. Some assign specific conventions or functions to players or establish procedures by which those functions are unambiguously transferred from one player to another. Other times, GM-less games rely on group discussion to arrive at consensus, often about a scene, outcome, or setting in which all participants have a stake. Some games offer structures and processes that allow the players to offload that responsibility entirely, leaving such matters to the roll of the dice. In all of these cases, the design of GM-less games pay close attention to the conventional procedures of play and the circulation of illocutionary force among the game’s participants.

³⁸ Alder, *Dream Askew*, 70–75.

³⁹ Morningstar, *Fiasco*.

TTRPGs are played through speech, taking the form of a conversation between players. As I have shown throughout this chapter, the rules and dictates of this conversation can at times become very complicated. However, the entire social interaction of a TTRPG game session is guided by convention built through the consensus established between the players. The rules of the game, as they are acknowledged and understood by the group, become conventions of play. Utterances that carry the illocutionary force of play also carry the illocutionary force of authorship, and the consensual agreement on the shared fiction produced by the game becomes yet another conventional underpinning of speech in play. Consensus feeds into convention feeds into illocution.

The framework I offer here interprets conversational play as speech acts uttered within a Goffmanian social situation, which contain dynamic structures of utterance production and reception. This allows the flexibility to zoom in on the minutiae of an individual utterance or step back and consider the social dynamics of what Austin referred to as “the total speech situation.”⁴⁰ This framework gives us the means to make explicit the conventions and procedures of collaboration and improvisation. This allows us to design and utilize tools which allow us to better imagine together.

In the next chapter, I continue the theme of consensual imagining, shifting the focus from imagination by consensus to imagination by consent. A valuable attribute of conventional performance in TTRPGs is found in the ways procedure and convention are designed to render the implicit explicit. Reckoning with the care needed to engage in intense, cathartic, and emotionally intimate play, designers have created tools to manage emotional vulnerability and

⁴⁰ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 147.

interpersonal boundaries. By illuminating the social conventions underpinning these safety tools, TTRPGs offer all a way to move through the world with care and respect.

Chapter 3. Imagining Safely

Lesson Plan

In the Introduction, I discussed the “Roleplaying Games and Performance” course that I taught to a group of Theatre major undergraduates. Students in this course played a range of tabletop roleplaying games, learning the medium through first-hand experience while at the same time bolstering their own theatrical skills. This course changed the way they viewed the relationship between theatre and games, and it reframed the way they viewed their own work as theatre practitioners.

In this chapter, I discuss one lesson they took from this course that I had not realized they were learning: consent. Since they design conventional best practices of socialization directly into their rules, I came to appreciate this as one of the most important practices that TTRPGs have to offer. TTRPGs illuminate consent and boundary-respecting social skills through their safety rules and show their players how to put these skills into practice.

I begin with the retrospective lessons that I took away from this course as an instructor, reevaluating the ways that my course materials taught my students more than practical theatrical skills. Then I shift to the lessons learned by the students, discussing the various safety tools developed within the TTRPG community. I recount how indie TTRPG designers grew to address intimacy more directly, and then discuss prominent games that focus on emotional intimacy in play. Lastly, I highlight the importance of these safety tools by unpacking sites of TTRPG play that failed to navigate boundaries and consent.

As I mention above, my students leaving my course with an understanding of and respect for consent came as a surprise. My own pedagogical efforts were focused on the more practical parallels between the two mediums of theatre and TTRPGs, building better actors by having

them spend time improvising and better designers by having them create fictional worlds together collaboratively. It was not until a year after the course had ended that I heard from my own professors, teaching these same students, that I was the only person in their college experience to teach them about consent.

True to my pedagogical principles, the students learned by doing – even when it involved materials I had not planned or expected. Throughout the course, I taught them about the practices and safety tools used within the TTRPG community and repeatedly insisted to my students that this was to be the starting point of their game sessions. This was an assumed convention for my own practice, and I did not realize at the time the effects this would have on them. My own views at the time were more pragmatic: I was responsible for my students’ safety as they practiced and played with the course material. Since the time constraints of a three-hour course conflicted with the three-hour average length of a game session, I would not be physically present during their game sessions – especially since five or six groups would otherwise be playing simultaneously. Instead, I had to give my students the tools they needed to keep themselves safe during play. They required tools that would explicitly state boundaries and show them ways of negotiating them as a group. The safety tools commonly used by TTRPGs were certainly able to provide that for them.

I was focused on not putting my students into situations where they could get hurt, but my students took the lessons these tools offered to heart. They learned ways of thinking through where their boundaries lie and the different degrees of comfort they may have with certain subjects. They learned different ways of communicating these boundaries to others, which could be explicit statement or a low-pressure, unintrusive way of making one’s boundaries and comfort known to others. They likewise learned ways of reading the group, how to pick up on those signs

and signals, and how to collectively share in the upkeep and management of the group's comfort instead of offloading it onto one person.

Before I taught this course, I had known that these tools were useful and that their continued development was important for the maturity of TTRPGs as a medium. By 2018, practices of safety and consent in play were frequently stressed inside the TTRPG community, and this sort of touching base with the group had informed my own assumed practices in TTRPG play. However, this course gave me an appreciation for the pedagogical depth they contain. By utilizing rules, conventions, and procedures, these safety tools are designed to guide participants towards safe and healthy practice in socialization and collaboration. They offer themselves as ready tools to instruct people in how these practices are performed.

Safety Tools

In TTRPGs, a safety tool is a rule, procedure, or conventional practice meant to aid players in a game session in communicating and acknowledging each other's boundaries throughout play.¹ By instrumentalizing the rules systems of TTRPGs, safety tools integrate the safe and respectful navigation of consent into the collected rules of the game. In this section, I explain these tools and how they are used in play. I begin with more common safety tools, such as Lines and Veils and the X-Card, then touch on some lesser-known tools and variations. Lastly, I discuss aftercare practices meant to take place after the end of a game session.

Safety tools were first developed by the indie TTRPG and LARP communities during the 2000s and 2010s. As designers experimented with forms and expanded their narrative sophistication, the thematic horizons of play grew towards more mature and emotionally intense

¹ For further reading about TTRPG safety tools and resources on how to use them in play, see Germain and Reynolds, *Consent in Gaming*; Bryant-Monk and Shaw, *TTRPG Safety Toolkit*.

topics. Both communities sought to find ways that play could allow the game session to remain safe and productive as the fiction veered into more challenging territory. The first safety tool, Lines and Veils, came from Ron Edwards, the founder of indie TTRPG designer *The Forge*. He independently published his TTRPG, *Sorcerer*, in 2001 and continued to support the title with several supplementary publications. His third supplement, *Sex and Sorcery*, was published in 2004 and contained his rules for Lines and Veils. Edwards's rules for Lines and Veils are among the most commonly used safety tools today.

Lines and Veils are explicitly stated boundaries established between players at the start of each game session. A player sets a *line* when they have a hard limit that should not be crossed. For instance, a player who draws a line on violence against children makes it known to all other players that this content is not to arise during play under any circumstances. *Veils* offer players a more negotiated limit. Instead of deliberate exclusion, *veils* are boundaries that communicate a player's willingness to encounter the subject matter in play, but that they wish to "draw a veil" when it is encountered and shield it from the imagined gaze of the fiction.² For instance, a player with a phobia of snakes may find their general and non-specific presence permissible but does not wish to engage or interact with them in a more detailed manner. Another player may be comfortable with flirting and romance but may wish to "fade to black" for more physical intimacy, allowing the implied scene to exist in the fiction without demanding uncomfortable performances from the players.³ Lines and Veils are commonly established at the start of a session or campaign, each player adding their lines and veils to a written document that may be revisited and revised in play and during other game sessions.

² Bryant-Monk and Shaw, *TTRPG Safety Toolkit*, 1.

³ Alder, *Monsterhearts 2*, 79.

The X-Card is a dynamic complement to Lines and Veils that is also common to most TTRPG safety practices. Created by TTRPG convention organizer John Stavropoulos in 2013, the X-Card is a physical card created at the start of play whose rules are introduced at the beginning of the session. Stavropoulos's documentation even offers a script for ease of use:

I'd like your help. Your help to make this game fun for everyone. If anything makes anyone uncomfortable in any way... [**draw X on an index card**] ...just lift this card up, or simply tap it [**place card at the center of the table**]. You don't have to explain why. It doesn't matter why. When we lift or tap this card, we simply edit out anything X-Carded. And if there is ever an issue, anyone can call for a break and we can talk privately. I know it sounds funny but it will help us play amazing games together and usually I'm the one who uses the X-card to help take care of myself. [**pause**] Does everyone consent to using the X-Card? [**pause**] Or is there another tool you would rather use? [**pause**] Either way, the people playing here are more important than the game we're playing. Thank you for helping make this game fun for everyone!⁴

A potential pitfall of Lines and Veils is the friction necessarily created when trying to address a matter that arises during play. Play must be interrupted, and the matter must be broached socially among the players. This adds pressure to an uncomfortable player who might not want to be disruptive by bringing up their concerns. The X-Card is meant to address those issues. It may be played unobtrusively without interrupting the conversation but still be recognized in a way that would allow players to walk back their statements while maintaining their conversational flow. Additionally, the X-Card does not demand explanation. One may be offered if the player is comfortable in doing so, but it may also be used as a simple signal that play is going in an uncomfortable direction. These characteristics allay the pressure a player may feel not to interfere with others' play, making it more likely that a player will utilize them more easily.

⁴ Stavropoulos, *X-Card*, 2. Boldface formatting from original.

The Palette is a safety tool not encountered quite as frequently as the previous two, but it is one that has an established history in indie TTRPGs. The Palette did not originate as a supplemental safety tool but was created as an integral design element of Ben Robbins's 2011 game, *Microscope*. This is a GM-less game where players construct a fictional timeline by taking turns focusing on a particular period, entity, or theme within it. Play in this game largely depends on discussion and consensus, and the Palette is the first step these players take towards reaching it. Players take turns adding to a list of things that they would like to see come up during play. If any player is uncomfortable with an element added to the list, or simply unsure or unexcited by it, they can discuss it with the group or simply cross it out.⁵ This tool effectively acts as the inverse of Lines and Veils: instead of stating boundaries and excluding topics from play, the Palette allows players to express their enthusiastic consent for that topic.

Other practices are not so explicitly systematized as rules of the game. These tend to be more focused on the overall process of play instead of providing a specific procedure to be introduced. Safety rules in TTRPGs frequently remind their players to take breaks, for instance. Playing out an intense scene or having the characters face a critical decision can often be a valuable time to step away for five minutes. However, this does not even require emotionally involving play. Game sessions can run long, often three hours or longer; it is important to stand up, stretch, and walk away for a few minutes throughout the process.

Likewise, even if the group is not going to break from play, it is also important for the players to periodically check in with each other and make sure they're comfortable with the way the session is going. This is an easy matter to overlook when the entire group is absorbed in play. The Check-In Card is a variant of the X-Card that functions similarly: anyone may play it at any

⁵ Walsh, *Thirsty Sword Lesbians*, 12.

time, signaling that the group should check-in with each other at the next opportunity.⁶ Practices like these are accessible to the entire table and encourage the players to be communicative and supportive. It also distributes the reproductive labor of play and performance across the group instead of placing this responsibility upon a single player, like the Game Master.

Safety practices also pay attention to the after-effects of a game session. This attention to aftercare is all the more important in play that involves intimacy or emotional intensity. *Bleed* is a concept that emerged from the Nordic LARP community in the mid-2010s. This term describes the “emotional or psychological consequences” felt by the players themselves in response to the fictional events of the game.⁷ The Nordic LARP community of this era sought out these experiences and viewed Bleed as a desirable outcome of play. While they had, at that time, an unhealthy tendency to disregard safety and boundaries in pursuit of immersion, it has been reclaimed as a term within the design of safe play practices in TTRPGs. Safety tool designers acknowledge the satisfaction that Nordic LARP found in Bleed, but these designers also emphasize care practices that help the group untangle which feelings belong to the player themselves and which were feelings they embodied as performance during play.⁸ The post-session “debriefing,” another term carried over from Nordic LARP,⁹ encourages players to check in with each other, talk through the feelings they had during and after the session, and work through a light post-mortem grounded in their own experiences of the session.¹⁰ Aftercare can

⁶ Walsh, 12.

⁷ White, “The Discourse of Player Safety in the Forge Diaspora, 2003-2013,” 36.

⁸ Bryant-Monk and Shaw, *TTRPG Safety Toolkit*, 3.

⁹ White, “The Discourse of Player Safety in the Forge Diaspora, 2003-2013,” 36–37.

¹⁰ Bryant-Monk and Shaw, *TTRPG Safety Toolkit*, 3; Germain and Reynolds, *Consent in Gaming*, 8–9.

adopt many different shapes, but it is always a process of making space for each other and helping each other work through their feelings after an emotional experience.

As I discovered through my class, there are numerous ways that safety tools and best practices are valuable to play. It is not just *that* they work to keep the group safe, it shows the group *how* to stay safe. Safety tools train those who use them in the methods and procedures of boundary communication, active listening, and the respectful navigation of consent. By using these tools in the safe consensual environment of the game session, players are thus prepared to carry these skills with them to other social situations.

This does not mean that they begin business meetings by drawing up their Lines and Veils, nor does it mean they carry an X-Card with them to Thanksgiving dinner. It means that someone practiced in these skills will know ways of addressing and navigating their and others' boundaries; it means they will know to watch for signs of discomfort in others and check in with them; and it means they will know to signal their enthusiasm and interest through enthusiastic consent. These are all important and often-undervalued skills to carry through life, and one can develop these skills just by playing some games with other people and showing them a little care. The rules will show them how.

Intimacy in Play

TTRPG designer Emily Care Boss created a set of three romance games in the mid-to-late 2000s. *Breaking the Ice*, published in 2005, is “a game about a couple going on their first three dates”;¹¹ *Shooting the Moon*, published in 2006, is about “a love triangle in which two

¹¹ Boss, *Romance Trilogy*, xvi.

Suitors vie for the attentions of a shared –and exceptional—Beloved”;¹² and lastly, *Under My Skin*, published in 2008, is about “a circle of friends find romance arising outside of existing relationships.”¹³ These games were unique not just in their genre focus on romance, but they began discourse and design practices that engaged with emotional intimacy as a narrative tool at the players’ disposal. D. Vincent Baker, one of Boss’s long-time collaborators, recounted a 2004 playtest of *Shooting the Moon* that the two played while they shared a long car ride. He described the characters the pair of interesting and troubled characters the two arrived at:

So picture us, me and Emily, driving out on 2 East toward Worcester, thinking about these characters. Two human beings caught up in their own personal struggles with love and loneliness and insecurity, hoping somehow to connect. We’re rooting for them. She’s a virgin with a broken leg, he’s got power tools and a restraining order against him. They date!¹⁴

Baker and Boss were playing cross-gender, so he would be playing the “virgin with a broken leg.” However, having created these characters, Baker now faced his anxiety over how to begin to play this character. “Just imagine me there in the car,” Baker wrote, “turning over and over in my mind this woman's anxiety about sex and love and loneliness and dating. I don't even say anything, it seems so intense to me.”¹⁵ Boss respected Baker’s line and did not press him further but was nonetheless fascinated by his reaction: “Vincent's strong reaction to just imagining the character he created feels very rewarding to me. It will be interesting to see if I can convey this to other folk, not so inclined [to play other genders] normally.”¹⁶

¹² Boss, xvii.

¹³ Boss, xviii.

¹⁴ Boss, xiv.

¹⁵ Baker and Boss, “Lines, Veils, Breaking the Ice.”

¹⁶ Baker and Boss.

Baker's anecdote illustrates the tension between excitement and vulnerability that lies at the heart of emotionally intimate play. In this section, I explore the way a select handful of TTRPGs explore this tension, utilize it towards the game's thematic and narrative ends, and do so safely. I begin with Alex Roberts's *Star Crossed*, a game of star-crossed lovers torn between their attraction and the fate that awaits them if they give in to that temptation. Then, I turn to Avery Alder's 2014 microgame, *A Place to Fuck Each Other*, a game about queer women navigating space and their relationship as they either hook up or move in together. These games have disparate approaches to emotional intimacy and their subject matter, but they share within them the productive tension of intimacy in play.

Alex Roberts's 2019 game, *Star Crossed*, is a two-player TTRPG played with a *Jenga* tower. In this game, the player characters are the eponymous star-crossed lovers torn between their attraction for each other and their own reasons why they cannot act on their feelings. Players act out these scenes where characters encounter each other. Since this is a *PBTA* game, each character triggers Moves which must be resolved to determine success or failure. In *Star Crossed*, each brief touch, each revelation, each moment of attraction demands that a block be pulled from the tower. If the pull succeeds, so too does the character resist temptation. When the tower inevitably falls, the characters act on their feelings – consequences be damned.¹⁷

Star Crossed is not the first TTRPG to use a *Jenga* tower in play. They were first used in Epidiah Ravachol's 2005 horror game, *Dread*. Other games that have used them likewise tend to be horror games, since a *Jenga* tower is an excellent device to produce tension in play. It is for precisely this reason that *Star Crossed* uses one. The tension and anticipation inherent in the

¹⁷ Roberts, *Star Crossed*.

game are literalized in each block pull. This is further underscored by the brief line of dialogue one character utters towards the other when the player touches the tower.¹⁸

Within the fiction, the characters are caught in the tension between their feelings and their knowledge that they must not act on them – between heartbreak and a temptation that courts disaster. The players likewise find themselves caught up in the tension between excitement and vulnerability characteristic of emotional intimacy in play. With each block pull, these tensions are intensified and increasingly subject to the anticipation of an inevitable outcome.

Avery Alder’s 2014 microgame, *A Place to Fuck Each Other*, approaches intimacy with a melancholy tone. This is a game for three players. In each scene, two players play as the Lovers while the other acts as the Third. Each Lover is created as a queer woman with a basic appearance, a personality trait, a personal situation they are coping with, and a Zodiac sign.¹⁹ Players decide whether each scene will be about the Lovers hooking up or moving in together. The scene is about finding and negotiating a space to fit their needs, such as privacy, a comfortable bed, or physical security. Each Lover decides on two things they need from that space, and they write those needs down. The Third then crosses out two – the space cannot provide those needs.²⁰

When performing the scene, the Lovers make earnest attempts to make do with an imperfect space. Alder stresses full communication between the Lovers during the scene: “Talk about what your character says and what your character does, but also tell us what she almost says, what she almost does. Be transparent. Talk about your character’s emotions, and whether

¹⁸ Roberts.

¹⁹ Alder, *A Place to Fuck Each Other*, 3–5.

²⁰ Alder, 6.

she's trying to hide them."²¹ The Third acts as a representative of the world outside the two Lovers. This could take the form of a specific character, a group, or aspects of the world around them. The role of the Third isn't explicitly antagonistic; they are a collaborator who helps bring the scenes to life. Alder's guidance for playing the Third reads something like a *PBTA* Agenda: "Play to bring the Lovers together. Play to drive them apart. Ask questions. Ask provocative questions."²² Play in each scene continues until one of the Lovers realizes, "I shouldn't be here."²³ Each scene ends the moment it arrives at its climax, leaving the players dangling in the uncertainty of each scene's resolution as time jumps forward and the imagined gaze of the players loses sight of one of the characters.

After each scene, the roles rotate and player who acted as the Third swaps roles with one of the players who acted as a Lover. The remaining Lover retains their previous character as the new Lover picks theirs. This could be the same character from the previous scene, a different main or side character seen in previous scenes, or a new Lover altogether. As play proceeds from scene to scene, characters return in new settings, new relationships, and new complications. Over time, this procedure grows and follows a small community of queer women through their most intimate and vulnerable moments.

These two games approach emotional intimacy with different tones. While the characters of *Star Crossed* are wracked by an anxious uncertainty, the players themselves approach their flirtations with a sense of joy and excitement and anticipation of the inevitable. The characters – and even players – of *A Place to Fuck Each Other* share that range of excitement and

²¹ Alder, 8.

²² Alder, 8.

²³ Alder, 9.

anticipation and joy as they work to make do, but they are tinged by disappointment and frustration at the inevitability of an end. Both games explore intimacy by hurtling their characters towards the inevitable – whether it is union or separation.

However games choose to explore emotional intimacy in play, they must do so through clear and constant communication. Both games focus not just on the character’s speech or actions, as many TTRPGs do, but also on their thoughts, feelings, and what a character deliberately *doesn’t* do or say. This cannot be left to the chance interpretation of the other players but must be made explicit, as with safety tools and many other conventional practices of play. The risk, tension, and vulnerability of emotionally intimate play is engaging and rewarding, but only when it is handled by trustworthy scene partners. If a player cannot be certain that their vulnerability won’t be mishandled or abused, it becomes instead a source of anxiety and discomfort.

Crossing Boundaries²⁴

Taking a risk with play is exciting and engaging. This is the tension of intimate play that suspends players between excitement and vulnerability. However, that very risk demands the care and respect necessary to approach it safely. With risk and vulnerability come the possible exposure to failure and its consequence. In this multi-part section, I address that regrettable other side of safety and intimacy in play: the violation of consent. Examining these sites of failure underscores the importance of safety in play, but it also allows the use of performance, speech, and convention to better understand these events, their structural and procedural effects on play and the social situation, and the culpability of those who enter into play in bad faith.

²⁴ Content warning: This section relates scenes of racism, fictional elder abuse, fictional sexual violence, and gaslighting.

This section addresses two short case studies. The first is a game session of the TTRPG *Kids on Bikes* using the “No Such Place as Koreatown” adventure supplement. This session was GMed by the adventure’s designer, Yeonsoo Julian Kim, for walk-up participants at the Dreamation roleplaying gaming convention in 2019. This site relates Kim’s experiences with racism coming from the very group for whom they facilitated the game. The second site is *Far Verona*, a space opera Actual Play show that met its sudden end when a fictional sexual assault led the cast to quit the show in protest.

No Such Place as Koreatown

“No Such Place as Koreatown” is an adventure for the TTRPG *Kids on Bikes* as part of *Strange Adventures! Volume Two* supplement. This adventure module involves characters in a growing Korean-American immigrant community amid the tensions and hostilities of 1990s northern Virginia. It was designed to directly address themes of assimilation, racism, cultural memory, and loss. The site I will be investigating is the encounter between the game designer GMing a session of “No Such Place as Koreatown” and a group of hostile players not interested in any of these themes. In this section, I will unpack both *Kids on Bikes* and “No Such Place as Koreatown” to show how they are designed to engage with these themes. I will then relate the designer’s encounter with these players and analyze the effects – and the cause – of their unwillingness to engage with a game they have chosen to play.

Kids on Bikes is a 2018 TTRPG by Jonathan Gilmour and Doug Levandowski. It is a science fiction horror game inspired by youth-focused horror and mystery media of the last four decades, such as *Stranger Things*, *Twin Peaks*, *Stand by Me*, or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Set in a small town “at any point in history before everyone had a video camera in their pocket at all times,” the game focuses on characters who engage with common tropes of this genre as they

investigate the mysterious happenings taking place in and around town.²⁵ It was positively received and continued sales funded two derivative games using the same system in different genres – the space-themed *Teens in Space* and the magical school-themed *Kids on Brooms* – in addition to two supplements, anthologies of pre-written adventure settings called *Strange Adventures!*

The second volume of *Strange Adventures!* contains “No Such Place as Koreatown,” written by TTRPG designer Yeonsoo Julian Kim. Kim is a Korean-American TTRPG designer whose work “focuses on grief, existential dread, and/or Asian and Asian-American experiences.”²⁶ The adventure is set in Fairdale, VA, a fictional Virginia suburb of Washington D.C. based on the actual Virginia towns of Annandale and Centreville. Like its real-life inspirations, Fairdale’s “once declining downtown” is revitalized by an emerging community of Korean immigrants. Despite the thriving business district reversing the town’s economic woes, the residents of the “‘normal,’ predominantly white Fairdale” push back against their town’s growing identification with the successful Korean-American community. True to the conventions of its genre, there is a military base outside town with rumors of strange goings-on and new urban legends that seemed to migrate to the town alongside its immigrant community.²⁷

The adventure module provides setting information like prominent local businesses and interesting non-player characters that the players might encounter during their session, but it also provides setting-specific prompts to add to *Kids on Bikes*’s collaborative World Creation rules, allowing each group to work together to flesh out their own version of Fairdale. These prompts

²⁵ Gilmour and Levandowski, *Kids on Bikes*.

²⁶ Mendez Hodes, “Interview: Yeonsoo Julian Kim and RPG Convention Racism.”

²⁷ Kim, “No Such Place as Koreatown,” 47–48.

include questions about which business marks the border between Koreatown and white Fairdale, what a character thinks of the hostility to the growing immigrant community, and which business has the supposedly haunted bathroom.²⁸ The potential mysteries and monsters offered by the adventure module are as marked by transculturation as the rest of the immigrant community. For instance, the strip mall photo booth takes photos of “how the subjects of the pictures will die” if “taken between 4 and 4:44pm, as four is the number that represents death in the Korean language.”²⁹ Likewise, “the gwishin, or ghost,” that haunts the residents of the town is seen wearing modern American clothing instead of “the traditional funereal whites of the legends.”³⁰

The module also contains additions and modifications to the rules for *Kids on Bikes*'s character creation. Characters in *Kids on Bikes* are created by starting from a common genre trope, such as the Popular Kid, the Loner Weirdo, or the Brilliant Mathlete.³¹ This is the equivalent of a character's class in *D&D*, or their Playbook in a *PBTA* game. Each trope guides the choices players make about their character's age range and stats.³² Each character also selects two Strengths, which carry mechanical bonuses in play, and two Flaws, which do not have mechanical disadvantages but frame character development and fictional complications.³³ “No

²⁸ Kim, 48.

²⁹ Kim, 50.

³⁰ Kim, 51.

³¹ Gilmour and Levandowski, *Kids on Bikes*, 66–71.

³² Characters in *Kids on Bikes* may be classified as Children, Teens, or Adults. There are no special restrictions on age ranges beyond positioning within the fiction, but each Age Range has its own unique mechanical bonus. The stats for player characters in *Kids on Bikes* are Brains, Brawn, Fight, Flight, Charm, and Grit. Gilmour and Levandowski, 10–12.

³³ Gilmour and Levandowski, 12.

Such Place as Koreatown” offers three Strengths and Flaws for both Korean and non-Korean player characters, stipulating that at least half of the player characters must be Korean so that the community is saved by those who are a part of it.³⁴ These rules shift the design in such a way as to guide stories towards engaging with the setting’s themes through the procedures of play and not just the fiction alone.

An interesting thematic resonance deals with Strengths and Flaws about language. Korean characters may pick the trait “Bilingual” to speak fluent Korean, or the Flaw “Barely a Word” to only understand “a few basic words of Koreans” despite what others might expect out of that character.³⁵ The default state, then, is of Korean player characters who only know enough Korean to “hold the most basic conversations.”³⁶ Kim specifically highlights the non-Korean player character Flaw “Picky Eater” as a way the rules reflect the setting’s thematic engagement with experiences common to Korean-Americans and Asian-Americans more generally. “Picky Eater” isn’t really about the dietary preferences of that character; revulsion to even the presence of unfamiliar food reflects a common Western microaggression surrounding traditional East Asian food.³⁷

³⁴ Kim, “No Such Place as Koreatown,” 52.

³⁵ Kim, 52.

³⁶ Kim, 53.

³⁷ Mendez Hodes, “Interview: Yeonsoo Julian Kim and RPG Convention Racism.”

“So, What Are You?”

Kim had signed up to run a session of “No Such Place as Koreatown” at the 2019 Dreamation gaming convention in Morristown, New Jersey.³⁸ Though this was their third time attending the convention and second time running a game there, Kim was only familiar with the LARP players of that convention and hadn’t had much experience with the convention’s much larger segment of TTRPG players. The pitch for the game was that the player characters were a group of teens who witnessed a supernatural event linked to power outages caused by the local military base. The group of white men who signed up to play the session never managed to engage with that plot.³⁹

Initial difficulties arose with one “problem player” as Kim explained the setting, the rules, and how the players were under no compulsion to try to “prov[e] their characters are Korean” since their identities would emerge through their relationships with the town and its characters.⁴⁰ As Kim introduced these relationships and the rules for player characters, this player, whom I will call Player A, pushed back on Kim’s framing non-Koreans in terms of prejudice and rudeness. Player A began making criticisms of reverse racism, arguing that he experienced rudeness from Asians within his own community too. None of Kim’s rebuttals

³⁸ Game sessions run at conventions are a popular, if infrequent, way to play TTRPGs. These games tend to be more streamlined than a more conventional private game session, with the details of the plot more-or-less sketched out in advance, the details of the setting already established, and often with players choosing from a set of pre-made characters. Since convention games are often pressed for time, this helps players quickly get into the experience of the game at the expense of player agency and control over the fiction.

³⁹ Mendez Hodes, “Interview: Yeonsoo Julian Kim and RPG Convention Racism.”

⁴⁰ Mendez Hodes.

convinced Player A, but they were enough to get him to quiet down so the group could get on with the game.⁴¹

The central issue of the play session involved a non-player character, Mrs. Rhee. After her daughter Beth went missing ten years ago, Mrs. Rhee had spent her days wandering the town and putting up missing person posters. Then, recently, she stopped. The community members taking care of her noticed an improvement in her mood, that she stayed home more often, and that she bought more groceries than normal.⁴² The party of player characters followed her home and saw a young woman in the house whom Mrs. Rhee claimed to be her niece, but who resembled what her daughter looked like a decade earlier. Another player, whom I will call Player B, had his character “steal this woman's car keys from out of her hand and force his way inside her house under the guise of helping her.”⁴³

Kim had already been wary of Player B's decision to play a teenage girl given their experience with cis men playing women in bad faith and using their player character's identity as a cover for misbehavior. This suspicion had proved to be well-founded, with Player B also citing their character's multiracial heritage to excuse their actions. Player B's character, having forced her way into the house, ignored Mrs. Rhee's demands to leave and tried to shove her way past her to go upstairs. As this was taking place, Player A proposed slashing Mrs. Rhee's tires, deciding instead to deflate them. Player A argued with Kim, insisting that deflation would not count as vandalism. As the police arrived in the scene, Player B's character stole Mrs. Rhee's keys with the intent to break in later. On the group's way out, Player A and B convinced one of

⁴¹ Mendez Hodes.

⁴² Kim, “No Such Place as Koreatown,” 50.

⁴³ Mendez Hodes, “Interview: Yeonsoo Julian Kim and RPG Convention Racism.”

the other players, who up to that point had not behaved aggressively towards Kim not the characters in the fiction, to have their player character throw a rock through Mrs. Rhee's window. The group took a break after this frustrating scene.⁴⁴

When Kim pitched this brief, single session of "No Such Place as Koreatown," they were clear in framing the antagonistic force of the fiction as the military base. Mrs. Rhee's behavior raised the question of a mystery, but it was not a malevolent or antagonistic one. Per the adventure module, had the group investigated Mrs. Rhee's behavior instead of immediately assaulting an elderly woman, they would have met her daughter. Beth Rhee had recently woken up outside the military base with no memory of the previous ten years and having not aged a day. This character would provide a connection to the unexplained power outages and lead them back to the military base for the climax of the short adventure.⁴⁵ Structurally, the encounter with Mrs. Rhee was intended to quickly push players towards the military base at the heart of the story while granting them their "Powered" character. A Powered character in *Kids on Bikes* is a special character with psychic abilities who joins the players' party early in the campaign. Such a character would easily become a natural protagonist of the story. This would present problems if this character was only played by one player but would still be an issue if they were only a non-player character. *Kids on Bikes* resolves this by having all the players share control over the character and by limiting how frequently they are able to use their psychic powers without rest.⁴⁶

Played in good faith, the players should have quickly met Beth, gained a powerful ally, and received motivation that would speed their actions towards the adventure's conclusion. This

⁴⁴ Mendez Hodes.

⁴⁵ Kim, "No Such Place as Koreatown," 50–51.

⁴⁶ Gilmour and Levandowski, *Kids on Bikes*, 41–44.

never happened. Instead, after the break, Kim hurried the group along to the military base by some other contrivance. Now that they were surrounded by white non-player characters, Korean identity could be safely dropped from the game for the two hours that remained in the session.⁴⁷

In terms of the game and fiction, there was a clear mismatch between what each player wanted to get out of the game and how they would go about getting it. From the outset, Player A rejected the premise of the critique made by the game's design. Neither Player A nor Player B could be convinced that they should not attack a traumatized elderly woman. This division in the group meant that there was not a clear agreement by the participants on how to play the game. This lack of consensus meant different players were playing and performing based on differing conventions. This meant that their speech acts could not secure uptake. They misfired.

These misfires were unevenly distributed inside the strip of performances that made up the game session. While there were disagreements, that the session managed to be completed at all signaled agreement on basic matters, such as how dice rolls are resolved, or how the floor is passed among players in the flow of conversation. The misfires were located mostly around subject matter that involved Korean identity or emotional situations such as addressing the sudden shift in Mrs. Rhee's grief.

Moreover, these misfires were doubly uneven in that they concentrated around Kim far more than Player A or Player B. Kim's illocutionary attempts at shifting the players' behavior or deescalating the situation were ignored. Meanwhile, the misbehavior of Player A and Player B was recognized as valid and secured uptake among the others. That it did not secure uptake with Kim no longer mattered; the problem players had won the consensus of the table. The other two players apologized for the behavior of the others after the game, but they remained in silent

⁴⁷ Mendez Hodes, "Interview: Yeonsoo Julian Kim and RPG Convention Racism."

assent during play. Players A and B even managed to win the participation of a player who found their behavior distasteful when they persuaded his character to break Mrs. Rhee's window. Player A and Player B's rapport with the other players, their shared identity as cis white men, was substantial enough to overcome the other players' dislike of them and enacted *an illocutionary silencing* of Kim.

Ritu Sharma explains illocutionary silencing as the "systemic interference with people's ability to perform an illocutionary act."⁴⁸ This silencing produces misfires even in utterances that would ordinarily have a clear illocutionary force, because the power and position of the listener in the context of the utterance permits them to disarm and ignore such illocutions. This silencing has the effect of disabling the speech of the speaker, preventing them from speaking with illocutionary force and thus shaping their behavior in the context of speech.⁴⁹ In response to this silencing, and feeling too guilty to simply abandon the other two players who were not directly causing them problems, Kim chose instead to remove Korean-related content from the remainder of the game.

During their break, it was Kim themselves who was met by the interpellating question, "So, what are you?"⁵⁰ Under the guise of small talk, Kim was reduced to the object of the racialized Other, interrogated for the satisfaction of the player's own curiosity with no notice given to the terseness or brevity of Kim's replies. As play resumed, Kim's first act of play was met by immediate misconstrual. The group had established at the beginning that they would be using Lines and Veils, a TTRPG safety tool that allows players to set boundaries. Players are

⁴⁸ Sharma, "Is Uptake Essential to Perlocution?," 87.

⁴⁹ Sharma, 88.

⁵⁰ Mendez Hodes, "Interview: Yeonsoo Julian Kim and RPG Convention Racism."

able to specify content they do not wish to bring up in play as a Line not to be crossed, as well as other topics they are more comfortable mentioning but do not wish to see or engage with directly, drawing a Veil over the scene. While some Veils had been in place from the start, Kim resumed play after the break by adding a new one: elder abuse.⁵¹

In many ways, the act of stating a Line is a self-ascription. It is a statement that “I do not wish to experience this in play.” It is a statement that the player has a boundary and that it has been made known. However, the act of self-ascription uttered by the marginalized in the presence of the powerful is often misconstrued as attack. Judith Butler described in *Excitable Speech* how the utterance, “I am homosexual,” is misconstrued and reinterpreted as a statement of seductive intent. This misconstrual does not arise through the failure to secure uptake, where misunderstanding leads to misfire. Instead, the illocutionary force of the utterance is displaced by the overdetermined paranoid fantasy of powerful institutions and an ideology of compulsory heterosexuality.⁵² In this sense, the misconstrual does not occur through the listener’s misunderstanding of the utterance, it is the speaker’s misconstrual of the effects being enacted by their speech. Shannon Jackson similarly extends this analysis to race in her analysis of Adrian Piper’s “calling card.” In this case, a “declaration of racial identity” is displaced by the illocutionary force of the paranoid fantasy and is transformed into an accusation.⁵³

This displacement is found in Kim’s convention game as well. When Kim draws their Line, it is met with the affronted denial of Player A and B. This reflexive statement loses the force of drawing a boundary to be respected, instead becoming an accusation. Even though Kim

⁵¹ Mendez Hodes.

⁵² Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 113.

⁵³ Jackson, *Professing Performance*, 187.

moved on from the situation, Player A spent the remainder of the session litigating the legalistic force of this rule – that Mrs. Rhee *technically* wouldn't count as elderly, so elder abuse clearly did not occur anyway – while Player B denied that any of their actions – harassment, physical assault, theft, destruction of property – would count as elder abuse, and that no matter what it looked like they'd never *really* follow through with it.⁵⁴ Rather than struggle for recognition with participants they knew would rather argue defensively than listen, Kim concludes the session by bringing their performance in line with their expectations: they dropped all Korean-related rules and fiction and essentially converted the game to normative whiteness and a regular, unmodified game of *Kids on Bikes*. Kim's performance-based critique of racialization and transculturation was met by the gaze of the cis white male player and, since it did not like what it saw, it disarmed Kim and that performance.

This is ultimately a site with limitations since it offers only one perspective on the events. It is nonetheless valuable in framing the way Kim saw themselves in the situation as play grew increasingly unsafe and disrespectful. Kim attempted to use safety tools before and during play and was rebuffed by their “problem players.” Kim's repeated withdrawals of consent were ignored. Kim found themselves frustratingly shut out of consensus-building in a game they were running and were nonetheless expected to continue facilitating play, allowed illocution when permitted by the group that excluded them.

This site ultimately rests on the unilateral experience of Kim's harm caused by others transgressing their boundaries. This harm expresses itself through many vectors. The failure to respect Kim's communicated boundaries creates valences that echo through the failures of the social situation, the failures of convention, the failures of speech utterances, the failures of the

⁵⁴ Mendez Hodes, “Interview: Yeonsoo Julian Kim and RPG Convention Racism.”

game and its fiction, and the failures of the safety tools. These valences are all means by which this harm may be unpacked to locate and contextualize the transgression, regardless of intent.

Far Verona

Far Verona was an Actual Play show livestreamed on Youtube from 2018 to 2020. It was hosted by its Game Master, Adam Koebel, a TTRPG streamer and co-designer of the hit *PBTA* game *Dungeon World*. Each week, Adam Koebel and a cast of fellow streamers played the science fiction space opera game, *Stars Without Number*, broadcast live to their audience. The show met its unceremonious end when the cast quit following Koebel violating the boundaries of a player by unilaterally subjecting their player character to a fictional sexual assault.⁵⁵

The second season of *Far Verona* began a new adventure campaign with a new cast. The arc of the season began with a crew of renegade androids, declared illegal by the galaxy-spanning space empire in which they live, fled persecution with the aid of an aristocratic human psychic, Countess Autumn Vaska, played by Mark Hulmes. The android cast included Haley Sky, played by Havana Mahoney, an android ex-media star with the body of a young girl; Jasnah Solari, played by Marcus Graham, an android created to hunt other androids *a la Blade Runner* who had grown disillusioned with their role in society; and Johnny Collins, played by Elspeth Eastman, an ancient and run-down bartending robot who predated the human-like bio-synthetic appearance of the others.

The final episode of *Far Verona* ended in a scene with the crew visiting the workshop of non-player character Rocket, a mechanic, to repair Johnny Collins after they suffered some

⁵⁵ The archived video remains on the Youtube channel for the RollPlay network, which hosted Koebel's show. See *Far Verona S. 2, Ep. 18 Pt. 2*. The incident in question begins around the one hour mark. The show's cancellation was announced in another Youtube video days later, see *Far Verona S2 Cancellation*. Actor Elspeth Eastman's response to this video was likewise posted a few days later, see *Why I Quit Far Verona*.

damage earlier in the episode. This scene introduced Rocket to the audience for the first time, but Rocket fictionally had a history of such dealings with the character. As Vaska patched up the others, Rocket offered to take Johnny into a separate room for privacy. Mahoney's face fell as Haley Sky uncovered the stakes of the scene, telling the group, "I don't want Johnny to go alone with a stranger."⁵⁶ Johnny offered to let Haley come along, but a glance from Rocket convinced Johnny otherwise.

Koebel asked Eastman to roll against Johnny's Perception score in order to interpret this look from Rocket. Johnny, a clunky and outdated bartending robot, was comically inept and did not understand social cues well enough to pick up on the meaning of this look. Eastman failed the roll. Koebel said that Johnny interpreted the look as Rocket communicating that he was trustworthy, but Koebel also noted that there was an aspect of this look that Johnny did not understand. He did not communicate what this was to the players, but the players picked up on the subtext of the moment. Johnny asked Haley to remain outside, but to allay her fears Johnny suggested Haley wait outside the door. In a comic bit, they decided on a safeword: "Help."⁵⁷

While all cast members were seated on camera in their different offices and studios, Eastman nonetheless embodied Johnny gesturally as well as vocally. Throughout the scene, Eastman's body language responded in-character in reaction to her scene partner's performance. The others were still visible as they witnessed the scene and were still subject to the gaze of the camera's live broadcast. Mahoney often played up her reactions in response to events with theatrically broad facial expressions and gestures. It is here, however, that the audience, reading

⁵⁶ *Far Verona S. 2, Ep. 18 Pt. 2.*

⁵⁷ *Far Verona S. 2, Ep. 18 Pt. 2.*

the scene and its actors' responses, may lose the sense of whether Mahoney is acting shocked for the camera or expressing genuine discomfort.

Once isolated, Rocket transparently asked Johnny to remove his tattered shirt to better examine his chassis. Rocket groped at Johnny's robotic chassis while complimenting its rare and ancient construction. As the scene dragged on, Rocket flirts with Johnny and made a pass at him. Johnny rebuffed Rocket's advances, and Rocket withdrew in embarrassment. Out of character, Eastman explained that, while Johnny had received such advances before as a bartender, he did not have the programming to understand romantic situations or respond in kind. As Johnny talked through this with Rocket, there was a chance for the scene to recover from its earlier awkwardness and move on.

However, Koebel then narrated Rocket pulling out a large plug that would fit into an unknown, untouched socket on the back of Johnny's head. As Eastman continued to reiterate that Johnny did not understand what was going on, Koebel, playing Rocket, made trite "I'll go slow" and "just the tip" jokes. Rocket forcibly induced Johnny's first experience of robotic orgasm. The others shifted in discomfort. Mahoney's sat mouth agape in disbelief throughout the exchange. As the rest of the cast sat in stunned silence, Koebel immediately drew the episode to a close.

In the limited post-show time, Koebel continued to joke amidst the nervous laughter and visible discomfort of the cast, saying "robots need love too." Eastman immediately exclaimed, "But he didn't even... he thought he was going to fix him, not give him an orgasm!" Koebel moved the show along to its final segment, where Koebel usually worked with players to determine the experience points gained by their character during the session. When it was

Mahoney's turn, he asked, "Vana, have you recovered enough to tell me your motivations?" She shook her head and responded with only, "No."

Koebel said later that the entire cast felt uncomfortable with the results of the episode and met to discuss it. The show's audience – it was broadcast live on Youtube – likewise began to process the ending of the episode. Cast and audience alike concluded that what happened in the story was a sexual assault. The cast, apart from Koebel, decided to quit the show, which Koebel put on indefinite hiatus.⁵⁸ In this same announcement, broadcast on Youtube a few days after the episode aired, Koebel offered his reasoning on the failure:

We're no stranger to difficult situations. Sometimes role-playing gets intense or difficult or someone narrates something that didn't land the way they anticipated. We've seen it plenty of times throughout the years, and usually when something like that happens we have the opportunity to discuss it on a break, or we take some time between episodes, and that sometimes means we need to correct or re-do a scene. We've done this before, usually that's enough to ensure that the cast continues to move forward and feels comfortable and safe exploring the stories that we're telling. But, unfortunately, for whatever reason, we didn't put any safety measures in place to prevent that discomfort while it was occurring.⁵⁹

Koebel's reasoning that safety tools like an X-Card could have helped avoid the situation rang hollow to many given the depth of a failure that took place over twenty minutes of play. Koebel was a prolific streamer who ran Actual Plays and GM Advice shows, but he was also had a call-in show around sexual and relationship health education called *Hot for Teacher*.⁶⁰ He was more than capable of checking in on the comfort and boundaries of the players, especially when they bring up their discomfort at every opportunity during the event.

⁵⁸ Hall, "Role-Playing YouTube Series Canceled after Livestreaming Sexual Assault Scenario."

⁵⁹ *Far Verona S2 Cancellation*.

⁶⁰ *Hot for Teacher Ep. 1*.

Among those critical of Koebel's announcement was Eastman herself. She made her own statement a few days after Koebel's broadcast. In it, she stated, "Adam continues to say that the game mechanics were not properly in place and that as a group we should have discussed this prior to starting the show. Sure, that's a good idea in hindsight. But if you need to have a talk with your cast beforehand that you're planning on introducing a sexual predator NPC to one of their characters I guarantee you not one person would be OK with that. Especially not in front of hundreds of people. This isn't a question about what could have prevented it when Adam's literally the one in charge."⁶¹

This incident reveals the limitations of safety tools alone. Few people in the TTRPG community were more knowledgeable and experienced about both running game sessions and managing interpersonal relationships than Adam Koebel. The fault would not lie in which specific procedures and conventions of safe play were in effect. These safety rules are predicated on maintaining consensus at the table and respecting the agency imbued by the distribution of narrative authority. The scene described above showed Koebel railroading his players towards an outcome despite their vocal reluctance and attempts to bring the scene to a halt. Safety tools cannot intervene when one player – especially one vested with disproportionate narrative authority – has already disengaged with the processes of consensus-building and securing uptake.

When every single cast member, at some point or another, tried to bring the scene to a stop, Koebel proceeded anyway. Eastman interjected throughout that Johnny was not interested, not capable of being interested, and not even capable of really understanding what was going on. At the critical moment, when it finally appears that Eastman found a way to deescalate the scene,

⁶¹ *Why I Quit Far Verona.*

Koebel acted unilaterally and crossed the boundary that Eastman kept trying to set. Rocket assaulted Johnny. If it were possible for safety tools to intervene in that moment, Koebel would have already been a receptive partner in the collaboration. Koebel was not, he acted in bad faith and railroaded the scene towards its outcome. For safety tools to be of use, the conventions of play themselves must first be respected and observed.

Now is the Time

The tools and conventions of tabletop roleplaying games show their players how to share, collaborate, and imagine with consent. These are valued skills desperately needed both in Theatre and elsewhere. Intimacy coordinators are an increasingly necessary role within performance as productions approach with renewed maturity the collaborative creation of emotionally and physically intimate art. The practices found in these games offer clear and effective tools to implement this in our own theatrical work. Moreover, like Theatre Games, TTRPGs place at our disposal an engaging means of teaching these skills to the next generation of Theatre practitioners. These skills stay with them as they exit the theatre, too. Well-executed TTRPG play is not expressed through dice rolls or strategic thinking, it is expressed through active listening, respect for others' boundaries, and enthusiastic consent.

Conclusion

I knew going into this project that its best possible outcome would be the stone skipping across the surface of the pond and not the shape of the water in its wake. My purposes in writing this dissertation were to orient an unfamiliar audience towards an enticing site of performance about which Theatre and Performance scholars do not frequently write. When scholars do write about TTRPGs, it is usually as an instrumentalized element of a different media object. For instance, when many scholars write about games, they are usually video games and not the sites of live performance that TTRPGs present to them. As part of this new orientation towards the TTRPG, I established the foundation of a framework based in performance and TTRPG's conversational quality. Yet this is only a foundation for the structure and not its full construction.

There is much scholarly work left to be done. The logistics of academic production required cuts to this dissertation which, while they did not cohesively fit in this monograph, would be worth pursuing as a follow-up expansion to this project. A great deal of material related to this project sits on the cutting room floor, ready for intervention in Theatre Studies and Game Studies alike. That there is much work left to be done is itself a mark of accomplishment in a dissertation meant to survey possible applications of a methodology. It was always my goal to leave this project with more work to be done than when I started. A truer test, however, lays with whether these foundations offer Theatre Studies a useful methodology and the necessary context of the TTRPG as a site.

While I tended towards speech acts and conversation analysis as frameworks, Theatre Studies has other valid approaches to the medium. A natural next step is direct ethnographic fieldwork, in a similar vein to Gary Alan Fine's work in *Shared Fantasy*. The related forms within the RPG likewise offer promising sites, such as the study of the body and agency within

LARPs or the position of spectatorship in the Actual Play. “No Such Place as Koreatown” is by no means the only TTRPG that invokes cultural memory and surrogation – in that regard, Julia Ellingboe’s 2007 neo-slave narrative game, *Steal Away Jordan: Stories from America’s Peculiar Institution*, is an extremely promising site. Augusto Boal’s spect-actor is another promising avenue of inquiry. I make several allusions to communication and the circulation of culture that invites a Cultural Studies perspective on the role of performance and spectatorship within these games. My own analysis is only one dimension of this dissertation. My hope with this project is that the others find value in the context that I provide to the TTRPG as an object of study.

There is a wide breadth of theatrical practices and poststructuralist theories that readily map onto the design and play of TTRPGs. It is an interesting exercise to think through these isomorphisms between game and theatre, chasing their implications down so many rabbit holes. However, this exercise is not always fruitful. This project led me to let go of hyper-fixations on theory and instead appreciate sites of play for what they offer their participants. As I have demonstrated, there is already a core of performance that drives this medium. Wherever interesting material is found within TTRPGs, it will find its way back to theatre.

TTRPGs make explicit the assumed practices of everyday social life. Indeed, these are games played by having a conversation. The rules and procedures that facilitate play and storytelling are themselves conventions that keep the conversation moving forward. A player who practices and grows familiar with the rules of the game are likewise building their familiarity with the conventions of social interaction. Possibly without even realizing it, players built an understanding of convention, consensus, and collaboration just by practicing these skills in play. This means that when important social conventions are made explicit through devices like safety tools, players know how to comfortably practice crucially important socialization

skills, such as the active communication of boundaries and the respectful navigation of those boundaries through consent.

Tabletop roleplaying games are a medium whose performance shares many qualities with Theatre. Like theatre, these games are based in performance for others, enacted predominantly through speech. Like theatre, these games have the power to render explicit that which is implicit by drawing attention to the conventions that structure the social situation. Through cycles of performance and reperformance, players draw upon convention to build consensus and establish new conventions. This all depends on consensus and collaboration. Without good faith efforts to work together, both of these practices lose the force with which they enact change.

The performance practices that lie at the heart of TTRPGs are necessarily driven towards treating each other equitably and respectfully. Without this, the structure of play itself will unravel and be pulled apart. By adhering to best practices and approached with this spirit of respectful consent, tabletop roleplaying games allow us to safely and consensually imagine together. To learn how to do this, one need only pick up the dice and play.

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Vita

Benjamin Munise is a scholar from northwest Arkansas working in the fields of Theatre Studies, Performance Studies, and Game Studies. They hold a Bachelor of Arts in Speech with a concentration in Theatre and a Bachelor of Science in Mathematics, both from Arkansas Tech University in Russellville, Arkansas. They are a doctoral candidate from Louisiana State University's School of Theatre graduating in August 2023.

While at Louisiana State University, Ben taught Introduction to Theatre as instructor of record and taught a self-designed course, "Role-Playing Games and Performance," for upper division Theatre undergraduates. Ben has presented research at the American Society for Theatre Research and the Mid-America Theatre Conference. Ben's research interests in Game Studies includes tabletop roleplaying games, procedural generation in narrative design, and post-structuralism in Game Studies. In Theatre and Performance Studies, Ben does interdisciplinary work with games in addition to historical research on socialist, anti-colonial, and anti-capitalist performance. They are an independent tabletop roleplaying game designer, and they are a professional game developer whose work includes *Apex Legends* and *DC Universe Online*.