

Noli Timere Draconem - How TRPGs Create Space to Play with Fear and Collaborative Storytelling

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Abstract

In the digital era, and the fourth industrial age, agency and ownership of storytelling has been shifting. How might we deal with the fears that bubble in these stories? The hypothesis of this doctoral research is that imagination is ‘eventified’ within roleplaying gameplay and can be shaped like a theatre performance, and therefore studied as performance. This study experiments with concepts of authorship and liveness, in an information age where engagement with entertainment and narrative is located more often within digital (or analog) games. This paper is an exploration of how dramatisation in the future of globalised society has moved from the proscenium-stage to the immersive stage-space. Key theorists in roleplaying-as-performance are Sarah Lynn Bowman and Jane McGonigal. The former claims that role playing games, “impose limitations on imagination and enactment through rules, norms of the play culture, and genre considerations... role-players enact their characters mainly for their own edification and in order to engage with one another... Therefore the expectations of performativity are different in role-playing” (2015: 5-6). This study therefore argues that the space of the ‘theatre of the mind’s eye’, the imaginative playground of collaborative storytelling – more often than not, around a simple table - can engage player identities in such a way as to practice/‘rehearse’ roles/stereotypes; or alternate solutions to problems. This particular presentation of the research focuses on one core question: How does improvisation contribute to a sense of imagined embodiment in creating alternate realities and alternate selves?

Keywords: Theatre studies; performance practice; role playing; games

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Introduction - Don't fear the dragon

In preparation for ECAH 2018 I first considered what 'fearful futures' means to me. Singularity comes to mind immediately, especially with the fourth industrial revolution escalating as fast as it is in a technology-obsessed society. A similar fearful future might be an unlivable planet - where scarcity of air and water replaces our current status quo. Further still, a future where a breakdown of communication occurs between structures of power, nations etc; These are all states of the future that given current research, is rather likely. More personally, a fearful future with myself as the centre point of experience, is not knowing who I am, or what I can do (to contribute to the bigger, more public/global problem-solving). The conclusion I thus reached, in preparation for this paper, is that a future I fear is being confined and limited by my own fears.

The field of study of my research is the use of role playing games and play (as performance) to engage with the imagined future and self, and perceived fear. The journey of this paper begins with outlining for an academic readership what Tabletop Roleplaying Games (TRPGs) are, through the performance lens I am working with. Thereby unpacking the relationship of imagination with social/shared play. Collaborative storytelling - as the state of play - is then compared to perception and imagination (inclusive of fear). And the paper concludes with a proposition for understanding TRPGs performatively as Imagin-acting. My background is in theatre, particularly my previous masters research into contemporary performance.

Where anecdotal evidence features in this paper, I am referring to myself as the researcher/practitioner-gamer. The performative aspect of tabletop roleplaying games interests me most because I believe in play, and (in conjunction with the theme of this year's ECAH conference in Brighton) I believe in the future of our imaginations.

1. Tabletop Role Playing Games

As the name itself suggests, a TRPG is a game about playing roles, on/around the top of a table.

“Growing interest in fantasy genre fiction combined with the principles of wargaming to create the new category of role-playing games, which began with the hugely popular *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974). In these games, players managed individual characters more so than the vast armies common in wargames, and the scope of agency of these characters encompassed far more than just conflict. Although role-playing games still relied heavily on the systems of wargames, they are distinguished by the many innovations present in the flagship title *Dungeons & Dragons*” (Peterson, 2012: 1).

This paper will focus primarily on *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) as an example of TRPG, but there is mention of some of the other games in circulation at present. However, unlike Jon Peterson above (who is more interested in role playing games as simulation) specific to this research is the observation that TRPGs can be analysed through a performance-studies lens.

In order to enter into a discussion about tabletop gaming as performance, it might be useful to locate it from within the world of games and play. Games edit the site of play. In a similar fashion, Miwon Kwon (1997) examines site specific performance with regards to sensorial immediacy. She unpacks the idea that the space of art is no longer perceived as a blank slate, a tabula rasa, but rather as a real place with its own unique history. From Kwon's perspective, the space demands the physical presence of the viewer in order for a work to even be perceived, to be present, to become complete. Much of the modern day Immersive Theatre movement echoes these sentiments. And not just in the live performance sphere, but games that permeate daily lives (such as ARGs - most notably *Pokemon GO*¹) engage with a nomadic narrative. Here the real-world space is augmented by a virtual (fictional) world. The former is overlaid by the latter and as such the story world bleeds into the player's own reality; ie: in order to catch that Pokemon, the player has to physically walk over to the geographical spot where it is located.

In a discussion around the site of performance, and the site of play, tabletop roleplaying occupies a slightly different perspective. These kinds of games require the physical gathering of people around a table, who then imagine themselves to be elsewhere. Their story exists in a liminal (imagined) space. The similarities to Kwon's interpretation of space, holding its own memory for an audience to activate, lies within the understanding of where the tabletop roleplaying performance occurs. At the core of any site-specific performance is the capacity to re-imagine the space. And so, the idea of imagination as space as well as tool-of-play is what lures this research into its provocation. For the most part, it is concerned with one particular TRPG. However, in offering a brief description and history of it, the paper will also consider similar performance environments in other game systems.

a) The world's greatest roleplaying game²

Dave Ewalt gives a comprehensive origin story of *D&D* in his book *Of Dice and Men* (2013). In summary, as the father of TRPGs, the game essentially developed out of the miniature wargaming scene in America in the 1970s. Since then the genre of role playing games had been reserved to the basements of the male gamer stereotype. However, in recent years, following the board game renaissance, the tabletop roleplaying genre has seen a massive increase in popularity. Jak Hutchcraft (2016) explores this rising popularity of board games (especially into the mainstream) in his *VICE* article about the increased sales of board games in an age of video games. In part this may be due to the internet, and the ability not only to connect in real time with players across the globe but to find out how to play more complicated games (before spending money to buy them); and in part due to the increasingly developed video game industry. The reasoning for the rise (and success) is beyond the scope of this paper.

It is also worth noting that in 2017 Wizards of the Coast and Hasbro (the companies that own *D&D*) beat the record for the fastest selling book they had ever printed. Especially in an age where book sales are predominantly in competition with ebooks. This may have been due to the fact that 2017 was the year of "influencer" marketing.

¹ Developed and published by Niantic, for iOS and Android devices in 2016.

² This subtitle is located on the cover of every 5th edition book/manual.

Wizards and Hasbro caught on to various groups of players from around the world who were streaming their games (to large internet audiences) - and essentially acknowledged them, partnered with some, and reaped the marketing benefits. Thereby growing the audience, which is no longer confined to the nerd stereotype from the late nineties.

Some role playing games offer unique experiences of gameplay mechanics that do not involve dice, but the majority of TRPGs require rolling a set of dice to discover whether one's character proceeds to achieve what the player says they do in the story. Within *D&D* the dice used are polyhedral dice, the most famous of which is the twenty-sided one (or d20). In order to succeed the DM sets a (secret) target that the player needs to roll. A "15" for example, in order to jump the chasm within a dark cave and proceed along the trail. The player rolls the d20 in hopes of rolling a 15 or higher. If they do not, the DM narrates how the player's character fails (falls into the chasm, say). Either way, the story continues.

Another system worth mentioning at this point is the Narrative Dice by Fantasy Flight Games (see figure 1). What does this do? There are no numbers on these dice (similar to other mechanics like those used in the Fate system³). Instead, various symbols have a positive and a negative version. They cancel each other out, in the moment of the roll, to determine the outcome of an action.



Figure 1 - Narrative Dice

Those symbols that remain after all cancellations tally up to give a majority call in favour of positive or negative. This system involves the whole table of players in the roll. Deciphering the outcome is more complex, there are no clear answers as with a simple number being reached. The player may achieve the task they set out to do, but there may be some sort of disadvantage (or unforeseen effect). This complication is decided-upon narratively and collectively, including every player at the table to develop the story - much like a theatrical performance. A character on stage will always need to speak a line to another character.

There are myriad TRPGs that exist in the genre today, other than *D&D* and games using Fantasy Flight's narrative dice (*Star Wars* and *Genesys*). The game most aligned to the particular theme of the ECAH conference is Fantasy Flight Games' series called *The End of the World* (2014). These games are in favour of roleplay over gameplay, in the sense that players play characters that are fictionalized versions of themselves, in an apocalyptic version of their own world. The latter here is a reminder that even though, "role playing games impose limitations on imagination and enactment through rules, norms of the play culture, and genre considerations... role-

³ A generic roleplaying system, more freeform, more adaptable to a groups' gaming desires. The system uses Fudge dice, which are unique dice with plus and minus signs on them - which reflect modifiers to certain skills being 'checked' with the dice roll.

players enact their characters mainly for their own edification and in order to engage with one another... Therefore the expectations of performativity are different in role-playing” (Bowman, 2015: 5-6).

Out of the scope of this research paper is my proposal to play three different TRPG systems with trained performers and collect the qualitative data from the players’ experience over an extended period of time. However, the hypotheses going into that extended research are the two moments of inquiry of this presentation. First, that collaborative storytelling is an imaginative practice(ing) for real social encounters; and second, that the performativity of TRPGs can be considered an embodied sitting, which one might go so far as to call Imagin-acting.

The reason for this nomenclature is that TRPGs have slightly different expectations when it comes to performance. When one opts in to play a game of *Dungeons and Dragons* with a friend, one is not expected to buy a ticket or read reviews of the adventure before they arrive at said friend’s home - as they would with a play or a trip to the cinema. Which alludes to the following breakdown of types of TRPG play: Private Play and Public Play. The first is the kind of TRPG played in the privacy of one’s own home, with one’s own friends, creating (and sharing) their own story. In common parlance, this is referred to as a home-game. The second kind of play has two constituents. One kind of public play simply refers to playing a TRPG in a more public space than one’s own home; known as ‘organised play’. This might be a game store that coordinates community events, and the like. In most cases this is still with one’s own friends (or perhaps extending to acquaintances). The other kind of public play is the ‘actual-play’ (or streamed game). This is when a group of players share their game with an outside audience. In the current internet age this is how a lot of newer, younger, audiences are learning about TRPGs. Essentially this kind of play includes a group of strangers at one’s table - in the form of a live internet feed. Thanks to the internet, and platforms like Twitch/Youtube, it is possible to become an external audience to a group of people playing TRPGs.



Figure 2 - Force Grey in play

One such example is a short web series produced by Geek & Sundry (and endorsed by Hasbro and Wizards of the Coast) named *Force Grey*. See figure 2. This live actual play had an assortment of actors play *D&D*. Not dissimilarly, the same production company has a show called *CelebriD&D* where Hollywood stars like Vin Diesel, Troy Baker or Terry Crews play the game. Once again, this highlights how much out of the shadows the game has come. And as it should. Games are unmistakably a part of human nature. “Humanity has created games deep into its prehistory; from physical contests we created sports, from observations of random behaviour we created luck games and the casting of lots; from these we created the earliest board games.” (Costikyan, 2013: 7)

2. Shared fear and collaborative storytelling

“Playing *D&D* is an exercise in collaboration creation... there’s a special alchemy that takes place around a *D&D* table that nothing else can match” (Carter et al, 2014: 4). This claim, from the preface of the *Players Handbook for D&D 5th edition*, released in 2014, establishes the idea of a shared storytelling practice. South African academic Stephen Cloete further explains that “whereas a traditional narrative (such as a play) represents the voice of one author whose story is then interpreted by an audience of some sort, possibly through the auspices of actor/s or a text, TRPG narrative is a reciprocal performance” (2010: 9). It is the argument of this paper that two corollaries develop from this kind of performance. First, the idea that one’s perception of self is written, and invited to be rewritten in the TRPG space. Second, the process of doing so in that space can be called *Imagin-acting*.

a) Writing Self

“Players are both audience and author in *D&D*; they consume the DM’s [dungeon-master’s] fiction but rewrite the story with their actions.” (Ewalt, 2013: 7). There is an overlap here with a popular theatre theorist, the late Augusto Boal, who expounded on the ‘spect-actor’. This was the combined actor and spectator within his Forum Theatre - used to empower people, both trained actors and not.

The collaborative storytelling act in TRPG performance is a joint writing event. Writing in the performative sense: the ability to create through a language system. In the case of TRPG, this is straightforward spoken language. “Language is a way of modelling reality” (Rastall, 2018: 41). A counterpoint to this collaborative writing event is writing oneself. Here I refer to the act of voicing the very character that is our own protagonist. This has multiple benefits. “Role-play allows for the exploration of identity, not in order to essentialise it, but in order to investigate relations between self and the world, self and other selves, humanity and our world” (Morris, 2005: 65).

The understanding of TRPGs as dramatic performance is not a new proposition. Edward Choy first proposed the term *Theatre of the Mind’s Eye* in a 2004 publication. The premise of which is that the performance exists in an imagined, third, space in the collective mind of the players. It is from this provocation that my own research considers the act of doing so as ‘*Imagin-acting*’.

b) Imagin-acting

Essentially, my research culminates in a proposition for this concept. It is an acknowledgement of what is happening within the ‘happening’⁴ that is TRPG play. Players are in essence actors, but only in the realm of the imagination. And in TRPGs the imaginative story-space is shared. Onstage or on screen an actor is engaging in a false reality - that is, the world of the story. Social analog games, particularly TRPGs like *D&D* allow players to engage in jointly constructed realities.

“Language plays a key role in our construction of, and orientation in, reality as we know and experience it” (Rastall, 2018: 39). Rastall points out that the verbally constructed nature of reality is limited by language and communication. For the purposes of this research, it is worth pointing out that by playing in an imaginary game that demands the player to verbalise the characters and actions of a make-believe world, language is the tool and the plaything that drives the story in a shared imagination space. And it is surmisable that this pretense, and play, is practice for real world social interaction. And as such has real benefits to the player.

c) Embodied sitting

Rastall goes on to say that “language is a means to extend our experience of reality” (2018: 40). Even though verbiage is the only engagement to which any type of ‘performance’ is enacted within TRPGs, the body is still explorable as the locus of action. Various theorists in the world of performance studies discuss how, “the body itself can experience a dynamic range of aesthetic-cultural processes” (Morris, 2005: 64). One of the most well-known, and widely practiced, of them is Stanislavski. Whose method (in various permutations) drives much of American cinema. He spoke of memory as a tool for awakening emotion on stage. In this way, simply remembering a moment in the actor’s personal life could bring about a real, physical and emotional reaction to a scene. If this is acceptable as a theory, then included in this thinking is the experience of tabletop roleplaying performance. A player is able to embody a character purely by imagining them, recalling an imaginary sequence of actions that lead to a story being told. All while never leaving the chair in which they sit.

But is it performance? Throughout this paper I have assumed that reading TRPG play as performance is unanimously accepted to be the case. More puritanical performance studies experts might relinquish only enough to dub it disembodied performance. This comes from the understanding that traditional acting is a total theatre experience. The actor should be using every faculty provided by the body to play their part. Voice acting, that most closely associated with performance in TRPGs, is but one factor.

This may be true. Yet for the purposes of my study - as it continues - it is most important to focus on the use of imagination in acting. And to do so specifically with the limitation of a passive (seated) body, so as to narrow the investigation. Even so, the imagination initiates physiological responses in either realm (theatre and tabletop

⁴ See Michael Kirby’s *A Formalist Theatre* (2011) for more details on this genre/style’s development and legacy. Also see the company that made the movement most known, the Living Theatre.

role playing). An example of this is McGonigal's notion of Fiero⁵.

It is Sarah Bowman that says, "both role-players and actors speak of inhabiting a dual consciousness when performing a role in which the player passively observes the actions of the character to greater and lesser degrees" (2015: 7). As spectator to the story we are a seated audience (depending on your level of fiero); as actor you are actively engaged with your character (and embodying them in order to play their motivations clearly). It is also McGonigal who claims that, "gameplay isn't just a pastime. It's a twenty-first century way of working together to accomplish real change" (2011: 13)

McGonigal specializes in video games and ARGs but her statement is equally applicable to analogue/social games (given their recent rise in popularity). Whether games can be considered performance or not does not alter their usefulness for society. It is merely one point of view to take, especially when applying a theatrically-academic lens to the playing of TRPGs. The benefits that are resultant from it are due to the fact that growth and change are manifested through playing these types of games together. "Countless writers, artists, and other creators can trace their beginnings to a few pages of *D&D* notes, a handful of dice, and a kitchen table" (Carter et al, 2014: 4)

Conclusion

In resolving the discussion of this paper, there are three associations with TRPG that have been drawn. They are 'TRPG as PROCESS', in that concepts of fear and future are in flux in the play space; 'TRPG as PLAY', in that the game is a tool for the above process; and 'TRPG as SPACE', which is something defined by the players, sometimes solely in the imagination but always something that can be shared.

If Imagin-acting in TRPGs is processional, then a game like *D&D* is never complete. It is never over (players win by continuing to go on adventures together). This echoes the transitory nature of performance generally. Where characters and scenarios exist only in the live moment of a story being told, and/or experienced. If the improvisatory writing is simultaneously an act of playfulness then someone from a theatre background knows that power. It is the perspective of this paper that improvising a story as it is being written is more engaging than simply receiving a written/complete text. If the space of TRPGs is accessible, and analysable because of it, then as there are no limitations in constructed (creative/fictionalised) space this means that there are no limitations to who a person can be, and how they can behave.

⁵ "Fiero is what we feel when we triumph over adversity. You know it when you feel it - and when you see it. That's because we almost always express fiero in exactly the same way: we throw our arms over our head and yell" (2011:33)

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Images

Figure 1. *FFG Narrative Dice for the Genesys Roleplaying system*. Accessed online on 13 August 2018, at <https://www.fantasyflightgames.com/en/products/genesys/products/genesys-dice-pack/>

Figure 2. *Force Grey, season 2*. Accessed online on 13 August 2018, at <http://www.mandatory.com/culture/1305731-dungeons-dragons-force-grey-twitchs-next-big-exclusive-show>