'The Only Limitation Is Your Imagination': Quantifying the Medieval and Other Fantasies in *Dungeons and Dragons*

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> Every society always manifests somewhere the formal rules which its practices obey. […] First of all, in the specific *games* of each society.[1]

Fantasy role-playing games (FRPGs) like *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*) are fascinating late twentieth-century cultural products that re-create and perform medieval and other cultural and historical materials in simulated and quantified fantastic worlds.[2] Preceding the video of the recent *D&D* movie is an advertisement for the role-playing game itself that bears the following slogan: 'The only limitation is your imagination'. As an exercise in cultural studies, this essay will focus on the distinctive mode in which FRPGs recreate the Middle Ages and other times and cultures, interrogating the particular historical form of imagination that occasions these objects of popular subculture. Starting with this motto, I will examine the ways in which FRPGs actually delimit and constrain the supposedly unbounded imaginative resources of their players.

Examining *Dungeons and Dragons* yields a powerful understanding of the systematic, tabular and iconographic forms in which medieval and other cultural fantasies are simulated in these games, in interactive tension with their performative nature as practices aspiring to active play. I will argue that FRPGs appropriate a

[1] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 21–22.

[2] Thanks to Dave Cake, Andrew Lynch, and Stephanie Trigg for their help with this essay.

multitude of images to populate constructed fantastic worlds into which players 'escape', and that they select, translate and codify those images into data according to the ideological imperatives of a capitalism that is postmodern, consumerist, and disciplinary.

Limited Imaginations

FRPGs are group games in which players enact character roles in a fictional world, under the guidance of a gamemaster.[3] They are a type of interactive storytelling, or psychodrama, with the events determined not only (or perhaps not even) by an external plot but also by the interactions between the players. In what are commonly called 'tabletop role-playing games', players create characters defined by quantified statistics and shared fantastic images and tropes, who take shape in their imaginations and verbal interplay. They must negotiate with each other, and the fictional world, within the context of an extensive quantified rule system applied by the gamemaster, which determines the outcomes of these negotiations.[4] FRPGs have no simple correspondence, however, to the normal competitive mode found in most games. Despite this strongly rule-driven aspect — or perhaps because of it — they are in many other ways quite flexible.

Gaming is very much a subcultural phenomenon, strongly linked to science fiction fandom and to gothic subcultures. Members share distinctive interests, particularly common popular culture influences. Participation may require specialized knowledge, not only of the game rules, but also in areas such as military history, science fiction, fantasy, mythology, history, science, mysticism, and sociology. However, some participation is possible with even the most general exposure to the tropes and patterns of 'fantasy' in Western popular culture, and to bureaucratic forms of definition and organization. Typical adventures involve the exploration of dungeons, forests, or other sites, where the characters face challenges both from monsters and the natural and built environment. Typical tasks include solving puzzles, travelling, interacting with non-player characters, and fighting. The

[3] The gamemaster — called the Dungeon Master in *D&D* — has the job of controlling the game. Before the game they organize the adventure; many go so far as to create the whole campaign setting themselves. During the scenario, they narrate what the characters see, and mediate their interactions with each other and the game-world environment through adjudication of the rules.

[4] For a more detailed exposition, see Daniel Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), pp. 4–5. He defines the FRPG as 'an *episodic* and *participatory* story-creation *system* that includes a set of quantified *rules* that assist a group of *players* and a *gamemaster* in determining how their fictional *characters'* spontaneous interactions are resolved.' (Italics in original.)

tropes of fantasy — dungeons, dragons, magic, treasure, quests, traps, and maps — are highly conspicuous. If players are lucky and play well, their characters return home with treasure and experience. If not, they won't make it out alive.

Their multi-sided nature makes FRPGs complex and rewarding texts to scrutinize. In addition to sociological examination of the social contexts of role-playing,[5] they can be approached through rulebooks, dungeon modules, and various other associated textual products; but the performative variation of actual gameplay serves to complicate such approaches. FRPGs stand in an uneasy relation to normal fictive modes, differing from stock textual narratives in many respects: their closest cousins include computer-driven hypertexts, spontaneous performance, and wargames. FRPGs are highly intertextual; they exist largely in the imaginations of the players; they are collectively negotiated, requiring the contributions of a group of people; and they consist of spontaneous and largely oral storytelling. Like the art of conversation, these are 'verbal productions in which the interlacing of speaking positions weaves an oral fabric without individual owners'.[6] This is certainly a site where the 'death of the author' obtains: FRPGs break down conventional categories of genre and textuality, increasing the roles of readers and fans, who creatively participate in either established fantasy settings or worlds of their own devising.[7]

These aspects of interstitiality, performance, and — as we shall see — pastiche, tempt us to describe FRPGs as subversively 'postmodern' texts. As the ad said, 'The only limitation is your imagination'. But imagination, of course, is limited — and shaped — in many important ways by powerful cultural forces which determine the nature of gaming itself. These influences provide both the tropes and narratives used, and the manner in which they are combined, archived and manipulated. In fact, these forces are very much part of postmodernism seen as the counterpart of late capitalism: consumeristic, commodifying, disciplinary and governmental.

Simulating the Middle Ages (and More)

The medievalism in which the Australian authors and players of FRPGs participate is not so much a heritage of British colonialism, driven by a nostalgia focussed on an idealized chivalric past: rather, it is part of Australia's larger participation in a global semiosphere driven by the American culture industry, where nostalgia tends on the whole to be more eclectic. Here medievalism re-creates fantasy as substitute history,

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[5] The exemplary text of such study is Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

[6] Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. xxii.

[7] Players and Dungeon Masters are encouraged to modify published rules and modules for their own games.

a surrogate site gratifying the unscrupulous desire for the past. The various settings and tropes of FRPGs are contrasted with the present as *other* — as the site of fantasy — but despite their content, judgement of their value is generally suspended; rather, they are *performed*.

The form and content of FRPGs varies widely. Game types range from freeform Live Action Role Playing, to miniaturized wargaming, to computer games; however, I am particularly concerned here with the tabletop models described above. Settings extend from fantasy and science fiction to war, Western, superhero, and more, and the inner coherence of these genres is also variable. Many FRPGs attempt to simulate historical or fictional settings with a high degree of accuracy and internal consistency. However, a general eclecticism is evident in the proliferation of many such individually accurate games, each based on a different setting. Meanwhile, other FRPGs (like *D&D* and *Shadowrun*) include a much wider range of historical and cultural material *within* the one setting. In order to focus the discussion, I will comment on these pastiche models; but some of these remarks might easily be extended to the general field of FRPGs.

Dungeons and Dragons was the original FRPG, developed from simulation war games, and originally published commercially by Dave Arneson and E. Gary Gygax in 1974. Despite (and perhaps also feeding off) some negative public reactions, it became highly popular, and is once again a focus of interest with the recent publication of the third edition of its rules. *D&D* is more general in outlook than many other FRPGs, and tends more towards adventure gaming than sociological simulation. Highly particular game-worlds are of course used — the *Forgotten Realms*, *Dragonlance*, and other campaign settings have been published in conjunction with various novels and other products — but the *D&D* rule system is intended to suit a wide variety of possible fantastic worlds. However, these generally flow from a generic setting: a broad medieval fantasy framework, parasitic not only on fantasy literature, particularly Tolkien,[8] but also modern conceptions of the Middle Ages, and an abundance of New Age, occult and Eastern material.

D&D is extremely broad in its scope: as an exemplary rule-system designed to be compatible with any number of different settings, it provides the matrix in which these diverse worlds meet. As Mackay puts it:

> *Dungeons & Dragons* fantasy is characterized by a certain ahistorical, piecemeal conflation of courtly romance literature, supernatural and gothic literature, folklore,

[8] See Matthew Chrulew, 'Sub-Created Earths, Middle- or Otherwise: Tolkien as Archetypal Dungeon Master', *Masquerade Swancon 2001: Academic Proceedings*, ed. by Cathy Cupitt (Perth: Western Australian Science Fiction Foundation, 2002), pp. 27–37, for a discussion of Tolkien's relationship to FRPGs.

> mythology, contemporary politics, social mores, morals, and ethics, and as Eurasian history, all within the popular imagination of Americans.[9]

The new third edition of the rules represents the culmination of this constant growth to include even more elements, some from non-Western cultures.

One way to frame this characteristic pastiche, distilled from the mechanical aspects particular to FRPGs, is via the *Dungeons and Dragons* movie.[10] Although science fiction and sword and sorcery films have been common Hollywood outputs since *Star Wars*, around the time of the inception of FRPGs, a movie version of *D&D* has only recently been released. The film has been tellingly compared in popular and critical reviews to the imaginary entertainment-environment of *Star Wars*.[11] There are in fact some very specific similarities: the visual characteristics of the mythical creatures; the young but wise princess ruling the kingdom (who must oppose the corrupt council, and who knows deep in her soul that all people should live freely and equally); the special effects of the fantastic cities; even aspects of the music. More broadly, though, the quest narrative, the characters' party or fellowship formation, the ontological certainty of good and evil, and the Romantic universe exemplify the familiar nostalgic genre that we can recognize as dominating contemporary fantasy.

However, the iconic surface of role-playing *D&D* today overflows from the generic fantasy of the *D&D* film. While Tolkien combined influences from Norse mythology, Old English, and other roots into an aesthetically consistent world, and movies like *Star Wars* likewise combined a number of elements into its own particular brand of romantic science fiction, one rather finds in pastiche FRPGs like *D&D* and *Shadowrun* a loose conglomeration of cultures, geographies, professions, and images culled from a variety of inconsistent sources. Umberto Eco suggests that this element is itself a very medieval one:

> An art not systematic but additive and compositive, ours and that of the Middle Ages: Today as then the sophisticated elitist experiment coexists with the great enterprise of popularization […] with interchanges and borrowings, reciprocal and continuous; and the evident Byzantinism, the mad taste for collecting, lists, assemblage, amassing of disparate things is due to the need to dismantle and reconsider the flotsam of a previous world, harmonious perhaps, but by now obsolete.[12]

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[9] Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, p. 22.

[10] *Dungeons and Dragons*, dir. by Courtney Solomon (Sweetpea Entertainment/Silver Pictures, 2000).

[11] See Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, pp. 26–33, for his introduction of the term 'imaginary entertainment-environment', and a discussion of other ideas related to world-creation.

[12] Umberto Eco, 'The Return of the Middle Ages,' *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*, trans. by William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1986), pp. 59–85 (p. 83).

For those who lived in medieval times this 'previous world' may have been the culture of classical Greece, but for contemporary Westerners it is commonly the medieval history of Europe, and, increasingly, other non-Western cultures also encoded as 'previous'. Although still descending from the nostalgic tradition of the medieval imaginary, continuing the fascination with the customs, values and practices of the Middle Ages, FRPGs are also driven by an imperative for encompassing imaginative play, and extract 'cultural resources' from variegated periods, places, and cultures, which are then slotted into a broadly 'medieval' template. Starting with a general medieval structure, diverse mythologies, legends, creatures and other elements are added to form a heterogeneous setting.[13] For this postmodern pastiche, the past is an imaginary museum, a source of possible styles to be raided at will.

The dominant filter for these images is the American popular culture that dominates the West. As Mackay shows, game players reassemble an internalized score of popular culture memes imprinted from a shared mass media, film and literary culture.[14] In the contemporary semiosphere, multiple ways of portraying the medieval coexist, and none are ignored in the recreative processes of FRPGs, whose performed experiments in medievalism are unashamedly broad. If we ask with Umberto Eco 'what kind of Middle Ages are we talking about?'[15] when we consider *D&D*, one answer would seem to be: *all of them, and more*.

The main character-types (or 'classes') available in *D&D* illustrate this eclectic mix of the tropes of medieval representation. In keeping with the positive image of the Middle Ages as the 'Age of Chivalry', one can choose to play a Paladin, a forceful yet honourable crusader for good. Alternatively, one might wish, in keeping with the negative image of the medieval as the 'Dark Ages' and 'Gothic', to play a Barbarian, illiterate, brutal, and prone to rage. FRPG worlds can be both realms of high adventure and *at the same time* crude and dangerous domains. Other character options include the Fighter, Bard, Wizard and Rogue. Our ideas of the Middle Ages have fluctuated, ever since the period ended, between 'dark' and 'golden' images, along with every conceivable composite between; and it sometimes seems as if pastiche FRPGs attempt to include all of these combinations.

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[13] Interestingly, although *Shadowrun* is set in the twenty-first century, and juxtaposes a wide variety of 'authentic' native cultures to the West's megacorporate capitalism, the general setting is somewhat fantastic and neomedieval. Magic abounds since the 'Awakening', fantastic races merge with the human population, resources are scarce, and life is on the whole more perilous and insecure.

[14] Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, pp. 73–82. However, beyond the restoration of popular culture 'fictive blocks' through performance, Mackay gives limited consideration to the cultural sources and content of medieval and other images as they are constructed in this field.

[15] Eco, 'The Return of the Middle Ages', p. 72.

However, the FRPG assortment of images does not cease with the limits of conceivable Middle Ages. The third edition of *D&D* includes amongst its choices of available character-types the Druid, a geomancer with an essential link with nature, and the Monk — not a pacifist transcriber of texts, but a contemplative warrior using only her bare hands or exotic weapons resembling those of the Orient. These Monks tap into an energy called *ki*. A similar phenomenon occurs in games like *Magic: The Gathering*, with the concept of 'mana' taken from Polynesian and Melanesian cultures (through the intermediary of primitivist anthropology) to refer to magical power. Often mythological or symbolic notions are given literal interpretations, such as when totemic animals or mythical beasts are taken to assume physical forms. Many 'Other' cultures — Eastern, Native American, Aztec and so on — are subject to this treatment, with images selected, removed and slotted into a generic (originally European medieval) fantasy world.

It seems perhaps surprising then that *D&D* has thus far failed to include material derived from traditional Australian Aboriginal culture. However, the images of totemism and shamanism which pervade popular conceptions of African and Australian 'primitive' cultures are commonly encountered, a sign that in a sense, a detailed engagement is not needed. The idealized conceptions and structures that all but predetermine the way the culture will be portrayed have already been systematized.

However, one *Shadowrun* supplement does take Australia as its main focus. *Target: Awakened Lands* is a sourcebook designed to provide background material on an Australian setting for *Shadowrun* games.[16] It describes a neo-medieval twenty-first century Australia that, like the rest of the world, has been altered by the advent of various technologies, along with the rise of almost unrestricted multinational corporations, and the 'Awakening', whereby magic has become a force in the world. The game generally plays off the juxtaposition of 'authentic' native or traditional cultures with the technological and capitalist West; in the Australian context the tribal and magical Aborigines of the 'Outback' are set against the multicultural population inhabiting the urban sprawls.

The book utilizes Australian stereotypes and slang as guides narrate local information to prospective 'down-under' shadowrunners. Although it is recognized that there are multiple and various Aboriginal cultures,[17] a somewhat typical literal presentation of a mostly homogeneous culture is still given. Powerful shamanistic magic is accepted as real, as are many aspects of mythological tradition.

This is typical in the general context of the *Shadowrun* game. A pastiche FRPG like *D&D*, it also incorporates many non-Western cultures, particularly Native

[16] Rob Boyle and others, *Target: Awakened Lands: A Shadowrun Sourcebook* (Milwaukee: FanPro LLC, 2001).

[17] Boyle and others, *Target*, p. 46.

American. The various traditions are subject to comparative inquisition: the types of magic are interrelatable, as various paths (of the Shaman, the Adept, the Voodoo priest, the Quabbalist, etc.) with similar patterns, which all associate with similar types of 'metaplanes' and spirits. Consider 'things in the Outback called "song lines" or "dreaming tracks" [… some] say they're similar in most respects to what are called "manalines" elsewhere, or "dragon lines" in the Far East.'[18] Although providing description and data on particular (magical) Australian locations — including Uluru, the Great Barrier Reef, the Kakadu Rainforest, and a Tasmania that has 'truly gone wild'[19] — the next section of the same book deals with various other 'Awakened Sites' from around the world, including Anasazi Ruins, the Bermuda Triangle, the Nazca plateau and Teotihuacan.[20]

Through this eclecticism, the Middle Ages are also constructed according to the same colonial procedures as all of the other 'Others' to the postmodern West — whether primitive, oriental or occult — and consumed as part of this pastiche imaginary entertainment-environment. As with the notion of chivalry, the essentialisms of shamanism or monasticism, for example, are only self-referentially 'played' as part of a fantasy. One important effect of this proliferation of images is to efface the difference between various cultural sources: both 'Other' cultures, and Western (medieval) history when constructed as 'Other', become decontextualized resources for imaginative play. These games simplify and idealize what are of course contested and complex periods and cultures. They provide an alluring point of difference: the fantastic instead of the mundane; the authentic instead of the alienated; the exciting and adventurous instead of the monotonous. To fulfill the desire for a more authentic and meaningful world, this plethora of landscapes, identities, and adventures are made available to the postcolonial market in commodity form as historically and culturally displaced experience. The irony is that this usage in fact empties the tropes of meaning, creating a vacuum which in turn feeds the desire even more. The end product is a simulacrum of free-floating signifiers, stripped of meaning, all inhabiting the same pre-defined fantastic space.

The best model by which to understand the 'creation' of these pastiche worlds seems then to be that of the 'simulacrum' as theorized by Jean Baudrillard. Today '[s]imulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.'[21] In this process what Eco describes as 'the need to dismantle and reconsider the flotsam of a

[18] Boyle and others, *Target*, p. 55.

[19] Boyle and others, *Target*, p. 118.

[20] In fact, the colonialist practice of cartography is a central technique by which FRPGs subdue and synthesize their multiple geographies.

[21] Jean Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Simulations', *Selected Writings*, ed. by Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp. 166–84 (p. 166).

previous world'[22] is taken to its extreme; cultural images and structures are subjected to fragmentation, patterning and then re-assemblage, not as imitative representations of a past reality, but rather as a recreated model by which the past can be understood, made real: a hyperreal simulation.

Quantifying the Medieval and Other Fantasies

One of the most surprisingly distinctive features of *fantasy* role-playing games is the degree of quantification involved. The different cultural images of the simulacrum, originally distinct and contradictory, do not merely co-inhabit the same imaginative space ('fantasy') enjoying accidental, approximate equality. These images are remade through simulation in the role-playing system, but only through a very particular set of foundational definitions and structures that govern these worlds, the images they can contain, and players' interactions with those worlds. This wealth of material is recorded and accessed in a manner that fetishizes control, statistics, and data.

The shared, interactionist nature of gameplay requires that very weak, very strong, or plot-based characters are generally non-player characters, that is, characters controlled by the Dungeon Master.[23] The Gandalf-type figure remains conspicuous in FRPGs as the organizer of quests; but unfortunately, when characters are being decided, you generally cannot stick your hand up first and say 'I'll be Gandalf thanks', unless others also play a character of this strength. This also goes for the likes of poor Bilbo; gamers generally would prefer to play a thief with some skills. These skills, importantly, must be qualities which can give a comparative, quantifiable advantage in relation to other character-types, in place of forgone magical and combative prowess; thus one is ranked according to levels of proficiency in abilities such as hiding, moving silently, picking locks, disarming traps, searching and so on.[24] Other, non-quantifiable aspects are not mentioned in the rules; they may be described, but they are not regulated, and thus give no disadvantage or advantage in terms of game mechanics.

Thus democratization figures heavily in the transformation of medieval fantasy worlds for the purposes of role-playing, particularly to facilitate fairness and variety. In addition to character class, the different races are balanced, so there is no domination — each have their own distinctive advantages and limitations. Despite

[22] Eco, 'The Return of the Middle Ages', p. 83.

[23] These types are still required despite the narrative control given to Player Characters.

[24] Importantly, this equality *serves* difference — character types each have distinctive niches they fill in the gaming activity. In restricted situations such as combat, some character types are manifestly superior; but other situations make up for this.

the extreme variety of images available, intense effort is put into ensuring all characters are created equal. Maintaining balance is the most important rule for Dungeon Masters to remember.[25] However, this multicultural democratization is heavily regulated.

The game rules, or 'mechanics', entwine detailed descriptions of game aspects, full of strongly defined jargon and procedures for situation resolution, with statistical charts by which many aspects of the fantasy worlds are quantified. Character attributes[26] and skills are given integer values in a manner reflecting the practice of IQ testing. The medieval and postmodern 'mad taste for collecting, lists, assemblage, amassing of disparate things',[27] bordering on an obsession with accumulation and categorization, is controlled by the provision of extensive rules for determining outcomes and possibilities, fixing 'medieval' verisimilitude, and ensuring mathematical equality and fairness. Although encouraged to make their own 'house-rule' modifications, Dungeon Masters are also strongly warned against breaking the important gaming balance. Dungeon Masters interested in rule adjustments, such as altering character races, are warned to 'handle this radical change to the campaign with care'.[28] The class (that is, occupation) boundaries are similarly balanced to cooperate or conflict 'well' in society or adventuring parties, and any changes to these highly defined categories are made by strictly monitoring the quantification of attributes. Fairness, and the possibility of fantasy and freedom, flow forth only from this firm regulatory control.

Magic is broadly accessible in *D&D*, beyond the domain of a cloister of wizards in order to allow access for lower-level characters. But magic is not only democratized to place wizards and warriors on more equal standing; it is highly rule-bound to facilitate its usage within all possible games. Magic spells are defined in terms of components, casting time, range, duration and so on, to the extent that nothing distinguishes them from mundane weapons and effects in terms of comprehensibility and the application of their effects at the most basic level of the game. In one sense, magic is no longer magical.

In fact, the relative character abilities of fighters, magic-users, and wielders of *ki* are all quantified, defined in terms of particular integers, to place them all on similar — and comparable — levels. The various magical paths of *Shadowrun*, although providing a choice of cultural images, are comparable through similarly defined mechanics: a voodoo priest can duel an Aboriginal shaman, and the results would be

[25] Monte Cook and others, *Dungeons and Dragons: Dungeon Master's Guide*, 3rd edn (Renton: Wizards of the Coast, 2000), pp. 10–11.

[26] These include the numerical definition of not only 'strength' and 'dexterity', but aspects closer to character personality such as 'wisdom' and 'charisma'.

[27] Eco, 'The Return of the Middle Ages', p. 83.

[28] Cook, *Dungeon Master's Guide*, p. 22.

determined as an interaction largely of numerical attributes and dice rolls. The particularly Australian totems are often merely iconographically different from their Native American or other counterparts: the Dingo is the 'Australian version of Jackal',[29] while the Wombat is the 'Australian version of Badger'.[30] Page references are given to the corresponding sections of another rulebook. The problems of inter-cultural communication — the difficulties of broaching (let alone understanding) unfamiliar language-games — are solved through the application of numerical methods, with logical and mathematical simulations given ontological primacy. Rules are vital for systematizing the contradictory material that makes up the cultural and iconographic element of FRPGs.

This quantifying aspect does not only apply to the *D&D* or *Shadowrun* style pastiche of medieval and/or non-Western images. Even in the numerous FRPGs where the gaming world is closely based on a particular source — whether it be 'actual' twelfth-century Britain or Tolkien's Middle-Earth — the world is still commonly defined in these very strict terms. Nor does the historical precision of many FRPGs avoid this desire to define and assign numbers; rather, the FRPG impulse to quantify and control reflects and intensifies the contemporary emphasis on historical accuracy. This is the ideology of gaming: the historical 'ethos' of the very structure of the games is that of a bureaucratic and disciplinary society that orders knowledge and administers social control through an obsession with statistical definition and archiving. The performance of FRPGs is entangled with the articulation of the historical forms of knowledge of contemporary culture into which the disciplines of history, sociology and medievalism are entwined.

These games do not translate and quantify a formerly un-defined 'reality'; rather they reflect and perform the manner in which 'reality' is seen — i.e. organized and simulated — by the culture that produced them. These forms of description and definition are typical of the society in which these games are created and played, and its methods of defining and controlling its own populace. In FRPGs, these strategies constitute a version of Foucault's 'governmentality', whereby the production of knowledge about their fictional constituencies is coextensive with the operation of power.[31] Mackay describes the creation of 'doubles' through archiving details of both people and characters,[32] and the gamemaster's position of panoptic

[29] Boyle and others, *Target*, p. 105.

[30] Boyle and others, *Target*, p. 106.

[31] See Michel Foucault, 'Governmentality', *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, ed. by James D. Faubion, trans. by Robert Hurley and others, vol. 3 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002), pp. 201–22.

[32] He compares character attributes and other aspects of what he calls the 'drama sphere' to 'credit ratings, income tax returns, IQ tests, student exams, job evaluations, consumer habits, and so forth'. Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, p. 68.

surveillance,[33] considering the possibility that the FRPG 'form replicates the structures of power operating within society'[34] as described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. Most prominent is the painstaking discrimination of game-world characteristics: like the human sciences, FRPGs descend from the procedure of the examination 'that places individuals in a field of surveillance [and] also situates them in a network of writing; it engages them in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them.'[35] But FRPGs reflect more than just this disciplinary bureaucratization; they also exemplify the biopolitical aspect of Foucauldian governmentality whereby the concept of population is treated as an object for definition. The *Dungeon Master's Guide* and *Monster Manual* are full of tables documenting the frequency of different races and monsters and their social composition, as well as their combat properties.

This quantification extends in the simulated possible worlds of FRPGs beyond the numerical definition of individuals and populations. The extensive *freedom* of FRPGs simultaneously (and ironically) necessitates comprehensive *rules*, extending to every possibility they may be required to adjudicate: the direction a missed arrow flies, the degree of drunkenness a character feels,[36] and so on. The endless possibilities of fantasy takes quantification — as the dominant organization model available for understanding the 'world' — to its extreme, requiring its applicability to every situation and action.[37] The game rules even incorporate their own 'physics' based on tables and dice.

Of course, performance, interpretation and narrative are also important elements of FRPGs; the tension between these facets and quantification is pivotal to role-playing. The *Dungeon Master's Guide* distinguishes two extremes between which most gameplay falls: the 'kick in the door' and 'deep-immersion storytelling' styles of play. In the former, action-oriented style, 'character motivation need be no more developed than a desire to kill monsters and acquire treasure. Rules and game

[33] Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, pp. 95–96.

[34] Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, p. 93.

[35] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991 [1977]), p. 189. Indeed, as Foucault himself writes, 'if from the early Middle Ages to the present day the "adventure" is an account of individuality, […] it is also inscribed in the formation of a disciplinary society' (p. 193).

[36] The assigned strength of drinks is compared with the character's numerical 'constitution' value.

[37] See Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, pp. 103–04, for an interesting consideration of how those elements of life *not* quantified — sex, emotions etc. — penetrate the nondiegetic situation in a carnivalesque overflow.

balance are very important in this style of play',[38] whereas the latter style places less importance on game mechanics and more on story and performance.

There are, of course, varieties of FRPGs (or their relatives such as Live Action Role-Playing) that avoid the imperative to quantify their world-setting. Experienced gamers commonly report that eventually the focus turns away from competition and statistical character improvement, until the games become more about role-playing and the development of character motivation and persona. Mackay argues that in an 'ongoing role-playing game narrative',[39] where players have a greater chance to interact and reach mutual understanding, the quantified, competitive and manipulative elements decline in importance;[40] thus he proposes the FRPG as *A New Performing Art*, engaging its aesthetic dimensions against the grain of much contemporary criticism.[41] Certainly, the worlds and characters imagined by the players are not entirely reducible to their mechanized form. Quantified attributes can be interpreted to mean a variety of things in terms of personality;[42] Mackay describes how the 'dissected units of the game are assembled into a character concept',[43] and Role Playing Game rulebooks are emphatic that character survival depends more on role-play than numerical advantage, as they are that their rules are neither exhaustive nor adamantine.

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[38] Cook, *Dungeon Master's Guide*, p. 8.

[39] Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, p. 100.

[40] In Mackay's terms, the 'script sphere, theater sphere, and performance sphere begin to assume a more important structural role in the role-playing game performance' (p. 100) over the mechanized elements of the 'drama sphere'.

[41] He even claims that '[t]hese imaginary events are then rarefied into an aesthetic object, the creation of which subverts the structures of power […] the performance's participation in disciplinary power structures and the exclusionary aspect of the quantified character recordsheet' (Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, p. 108). It is partly to counterweight his emphasis on aesthetics that I accentuate quantification.

[42] In fact, role-play and theme have been made part of game structure in order to motivate players towards more 'sophisticated' engagement. For example, Dungeon Masters give 'story awards' consisting of experience points for dramatic skill in role-play. Some role-playing games avoid quantified structural elements as much as possible, such as *Everway*, whose 'brand of fantasy is the generic, piecemeal approach with American Indian and African shamanistic tribal culture added to *D&D's* European emphasis', and which has an 'abstract and vague' rules system. In seeking to focus on theme and the 'aesthetic elements of story creation and character development', *Everway*'s creators have quantified thematic elements within the formal rules (Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, pp. 46–47). Mackay, however, rejects this on artistic grounds, arguing that this control over narrative and theme can actually debilitate it.

[43] Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, p. 67.

But quantification is not an accidental aspect of FRPGs, which must be shed if they are to reach their true performative potential; it is a defining characteristic which, although perhaps a remainder from wargames,[44] is one which is still enormously influential today with little sign of disappearing. More sophisticated gaming is not, at present, representative; moreover, Mackay, who is eager to legitimate FRPGs despite their involvement in quantification, argues that it is only within a quantified system that performative freedom is achieved.[45] It is still the quantified mechanics that determine the outcomes of conflicting game-world activity. Many aspects of game content are in fact determined by the game mechanics, and only retrospectively rationalized in terms of some game-world explanation. For example, the nature of magic spells, and how characters memorize and cast them, is in *D&D* a result of the necessity of spellcasting being a temporally viable option in combat.[46]

In fact, FRPGs often do not simply reflect disciplinary quantification, but actually fetishize its methods. Commonly, the players' enjoyment of FRPGs lies in the strategic manipulation of rules; games can become such that the fantastic icons are merely an overlay of the strategy, while gaming is largely a competition (or demonstration) of skill in interpretation and control of rules and information. An example of this gaming style is the 'rort', a tournament of combat encounters with characters specifically created — within limits to ensure fairness — to maximize the advantages that could possibly be interpreted from the rules. Mechanization is always at least a defining factor with which narrative and performance must contend, marking gaming as at best a highly ambiguous activity.

Entrepreneurial Adventurers

The striking prominence of both aspects of fantasy and control in FRPGs may seem puzzlingly anachronistic at first, but both sides of this apparent contradiction in fact stem from the same source. The regulatory control of disparate, simulated images in FRPGs is best illuminated as encoding the consumer capitalism of the late twentieth century.

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[44] A paraphrasing of what Mackay thinks is the case with both combat (pp. 102–03) and the dice-based system (p. 7).

[45] For Mackay, it is the quantification of the world (and not story — see n. 37 above) in *D&D* that allows the freedom to create art (Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, pp. 43–48). This sits uneasily, however, with his rejection elsewhere of the efficacy of quantification.

[46] In Mackay's terms (although more than he recognizes), the nature of the different FRPG 'spheres' interacts and interferes with the others to a large degree; most notably, the quantification of the 'drama sphere' determines many elements of the other aspects of gaming.

The intense fervour of late capitalism sustains both the governmental techniques of societal definition and control, and the cultural cannibalism of multiple images in an encompassing simulacrum. In Eco's words, the Middle Ages and other cultures are 'messed up in order to meet the vital requirements'[47] of our period: the consuming subject of Western capitalism takes on these fantastic mantles for entertainment, while controlling them according to its own methods of definition. The postmodern proliferation of images is itself a product of a hyperconsumptive capitalism. Little attempt is made to understand the cultures raided for these tropes in their own terms. Rather, they are chosen, accumulated and then defined according to a system of rules that accentuates definition and strategy.[48] Although quite willing to take on many different new identities and lives, these games are highly structured at the core by the modes of definition of contemporary society, while also motivated by the incessant desire of consumer capitalism.

In the medieval social system as imagined in FRPGs, no one has to be a peasant at all, due to the abundance of travelling adventurers. These enterprising questers are self-consciously above average, possessing not only money, but also most importantly the skills and capabilities to contend in these competitive worlds. Role-playing scenarios are structured according to a system of challenge and reward: in turn for successfully overcoming obstacles, characters receive items, experience points, treasure and fame. Looking beyond the quest narratives within each scenario, a greater narrative spans and joins these together into 'campaigns'. What we find in FRPGs is not a Tolkienesque *bildungsroman* — a story of the moral education and development of the characters towards a time of testing — but a different model of character development that is largely determined by the capitalistic ethos. The formative period comprises not moral but skillful improvement, with the entrepreneurial advancement of the adventurers through experience, levels, skills, statistics, money, and equipment. Facing greater challenges as they themselves become greater, and receiving rewards (treasure, magical items, etc.) for their efforts and abilities, they are constantly improving statistics on the character sheet. This narrative of improvement can be a large part of what drives the desire to gameplay.[49]

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[47] Eco, 'The Return of the Middle Ages', p. 68.

[48] Susan Stewart can help us understand the form of fetishism involved in these collections of cultural icons: she follows Baudrillard's argument 'that the desire and *jouissance* characterizing fetishism result from the systematic quality of objects rather than from the objects themselves […]. In the collection such systematicity results in the quantification of desire. Desire is ordered, arranged, and manipulated'. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 163.

[49] Single-player fantasy computer games commonly intensify this narrative, submerging much of the game mechanics, simplifying the presentations of plot and quest devices, and focusing on combat with monsters and character improvement ('level-ups'). The monsters

One aspect of the implicit ideology that Fine recognizes as written into FRPG worlds is the myth of infinite availability: 'The structure of dungeons and fantasy worlds reflects the American image of a potentially unlimited supply of treasure.'[50] These fascinating, meticulously expounded worlds are to a large degree constructed and defined in terms of challenges to be overcome by the characters, and what they can gain in return. Many of the rules and statistical tables function to ensure everyone gets what they deserve,[51] and no more, no less; sometimes, it seems that FRPGs are fantasizing a perfect capitalist system. One can see these games as models of ideal competition: everyone starts different but equal, and if they try hard and overcome the challenges, they will be successful.

The versions of medieval bestiaries that appear in FRPGs are reconstructed according to the same imperatives. The third core rulebook of *D&D* is an extensive list of monsters that can be encountered within gaming sessions.[52] This pastiche of monstrosity is sourced from the fantastic denizens that filled medieval bestiaries, as well as fantasy literature, many mythologies, records of real animals and dinosaurs, and new chimeras created particularly for the game. The *Shadowrun* Australian sourcebook provides information on bunyips, drop bears, and many other native Australian fauna altered by the magical Awakening (including dingoes, kangaroos, redback spiders, and cloned thylacines).[53] But whereas the medieval bestiaries were obsessed with providing a Christian moral message derived from the animals' characteristic behaviour, those in FRPGs describe the animals in terms of the challenge they pose to the adventurers. Simultaneously, they present a fantastic, alluring image, and delimit the creature in terms of the characters' (mostly combative) encounters. Many are defined according to aspects of governmental 'population' definition: in terms of climate/terrain, frequency of appearance, social structure and so on. But they are further circumscribed according to the attributes that facilitate hostile confrontations, such as their 'hit points', damage, speed and skills.

The activities of the players (as opposed to the characters they play) are very much concerned with the control of information. The skills required for success in FRPGs include interpreting cultural images and tropes, making decisions according to rules, and manipulating and interpreting information — definitively middle class

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here are displayed on screen according to fantastic iconography, but exist in computer code and game-world effects as digitally defined entities for strategic encounters.

[50] Fine, *Shared Fantasy*, p. 76.

[51] Success is often determined by effort and ingenuity, and less commonly by luck. See Fine, *Shared Fantasy,* pp. 90–106, on the efficacy of the dice.

[52] Monte Cook and others, *Dungeons and Dragons*: *Monster Manual*, 3rd edn (Renton: Wizards of the Coast, 2000).

[53] Boyle, *Target*, pp. 66–73.

and entrepreneurial activities. This 'heroic' adventure is actually highly involved in skills important for success in contemporary capitalistic culture: the very world from which the gameplayers are (supposedly) trying to escape. The desire to escape from a mundane, alienated economic existence, in search of fantasy, becomes controlled by consumer capitalism in its cannibalistic search for images of authenticity. As an attempt to escape from contemporary technological society, this retreat into a fantastic world is compromised by its own drives to control and quantify that world, drives that reveal a deeper underlying allegiance to capitalist modes of governance.

The Danger of Performance

Mackay believes that the creation of a traditional narrative structure distilled from the spontaneous performance is the predominant cultural and social value of FRPGs.[54] However, let me propose for the moment that the interstitial, spontaneous and performative elements themselves, unappropriated by retelling structured by memory and conventional narrative, are more particular and central to the experience and value of gaming. We might then better follow de Certeau in understanding anecdotal '*accounts* of particular games' as '*repertories of schemas of action* between partners […] these mementos teach the tactics [of resistance] possible within a given (social) system'.[55]

From early in their history, FRPGs have been constructed as 'dangerous' in a manner that has long been associated with the Gothic: 'Such terrors, emerging from the gloom of a castle or lurking in the dark features of the villain […] critics feared, encouraging readers' decline into depravity and corruption.'[56] Although this dubious yet oft-heard accusation, largely from the religious and cultural right, is no doubt fueled by the occult elements included in many FRPGs, the force behind the accusation that they are 'dangerous' seems also to be a response to their creative and performative aspects.[57] In contrast to the relatively passive entertainment of media such as film, FRPGs' particular 'engrossment [in alternate worlds] that transcends mere reading or viewing'[58] involves active participation in the performance of cultural scripts in an act of self-conscious play. Built into role-playing is an unavoidable awareness of the scripted nature of the contained performances.

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[54] Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, pp. 121–31.

[55] Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, pp. 22–23.

[56] Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 6–7. See also Kurt Lancaster, 'Do Role-Playing Games Promote Crime, Satanism and Suicide among Players as Critics Claim?' *Journal of Popular Culture*, 28 (1994), 67–79.

[57] Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, p. 68.

[58] Fine, *Shared Fantasy*, p. 124.

The subversive possibilities of FRPGs are certainly best located in this consciousness: the awareness of the arbitrariness and mutability of these modes of defining people and the world; the recognition of the manner in which we construct classifications of things, and perform parts according to culturally defined scripts. FRPGs unavoidably betray their own vagaries; beyond masking 'the *absence* of a basic reality [… they] dissimulate that there is nothing'.[59] For FRPGs do not merely reflect these power-filled aspects of contemporary society — they play with them. As little is sacred, and all can be performed, and thus mocked and subverted, FRPGs avoid the danger of reifying the forms of knowledge they use. They thus open up room for the collective negotiation of different ways of imagining our past and ourselves, challenging and interrogating the methods of construction and the habits of viewing involved in our power-filled social structures, and resisting the naturalisation and restriction of the cultural 'world'. The *possibility* of creating different ways of being, the imaginative exploration and critique of ourselves and/through others, lies in the playful and fantastic. According to one attentive, if slightly optimistic gamer:

> What do people do in life, other than play roles? […] Apart from the fact that RPGs can be just plain fun, they can help us survive in our shifting cultural environment by restoring our childish ability to vary the number of roles we can play in 'real' life, and by allowing us to explore the nature of that 'reality' through engaging in fantasy.[60]

FRPGs are (as Blonsky paraphrases Mackay) 'a (perhaps futile) way of mastering that other gaming, the game playing we all do in everyday life'.[61]

This subversive dream perhaps seems at best naïve in the context of the reading of *D&D* I have presented above. It is, however, precisely FRPGs' resistance to the necessity of their objects that provokes their simultaneous fetishization. Gaming's self-consciousness of simulation is itself reflective of contemporary postmodern culture and theory, whose subversive possibilities present their own obstacles to vision and change. The legacy of the simulacrum is the awareness of arbitrariness, which betrays the difficulty of imagining or justifying a different or better model; thus FRPGs accept and repeat cannibalizing tropes and disciplinary systems. In this FRPGs are truly postmodern texts: unalterably aware of their own circumstantiality, they are debilitated by this all-encompassing simulation. Unable to escape the endless circulation of images and numbers, and locked into their repetition by an insatiable desire, FRPGs become frustratingly trapped in the endless simulation that is the predicament of postmodernism.

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[59] Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Simulations', p. 170.

[60] Fine, *Shared Fantasy*, p. 54, quoting Stephen L. Lortz, 'My Life and RPGs', *Different Worlds*, 1 (1979), 26–27 (p. 27).

[61] Mackay, p. 162.