

# Storytelling in the Modern Board Game

Narrative Trends  
from the Late  
1960s to Today

MARCO  
ARNAUDO



Studies in Gaming

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# Storytelling in the Modern Board Game

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MARCO ARNAUDO

**STUDIES IN GAMING**

*Series Editor* Matthew Wilhelm Kapell



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# Preface

The topic of this book is board games that tell stories. This immediately places the work at the intersection of two apparently very distant disciplines: game studies, and narratology. Game studies provides this book with its object of inquiry and a good portion of the methodology, as it is one of my intentions to investigate games according to their own unique characteristics. Narratology, on the other hand, supplies the perspective from which we are going to examine our topic. If board games can tell stories, after all, the best way to make sense of the narratives in such designs must be to apply analytical tools mediated from the study of traditional narrative forms like novels and movies. In moving in this direction, the pull from the other focus of the research (game studies) becomes essential. Analog games may have developed a narrative potential comparable to that of film and literature, but they achieved this result through a series of innovations across a very specific medium, and it would be a disservice to dissolve the personality of this medium into a mold from a different context. A book has written pages, and a movie moving images, but a game is an intrinsically heterogeneous artifact. Boards, cards, pawns, dice, spinners, miniatures, tokens, beads, play money, tiles, are only some of the elements that a design can employ to create a narrative content in the mind of its players. If these are the blocks of the story in a game, then they must be analyzed in their own semantic characteristics, and not as replacements for words or moving images. An analog game, moreover, is a complex, fragile, and lazy machine—one that performs no work by itself, and that must be constantly solicited by the players through the active manipulation of its physical components. In this sense, if a story emerges from the gameplay of an analog game, it will be in extremely specialized and highly interactive manners. Literature- and film-based narratology can tell us what kind of story a game can tell, but only game studies can tell us how that result is achieved, and how the ludic and material elements of a design contribute to the construction and perception of the message.

The bifocal methodology of this study is also mirrored by the overall structure of the book. The first two chapters are grounded more directly on narratology, and discuss how, exactly, an analog game can create a narrative experience for its players. The following chapters trace a sort of history of how games have learned to generate increasingly more sophisticated and rewarding narratives over the years. In this section the history and theory of gaming come to the fore, but not to the point of obscuring the narratological foundations laid before. Rather, this part of the book presents a series of case studies that constitute the application of narratological concepts to a large variety of designs. The purpose is not to recount the history of modern hobby gaming in general, but to reconstruct the evolution of narrative techniques in recent gaming.

Attempts to describe whether and how games can tell stories have been made many times in video game studies. In the field of analog game studies, the discussion has been much more sporadic, and lacking a systematic approach. And why study stories in games in the first place? And why limit the research to approximately the last four decades (the temporal frame of this work)? One reason is that it is becoming increasingly obvious that we live in a Renaissance era of board gaming, and the presence of storytelling in recent games can contribute to partially explain this sudden and vast expansion of the hobby. Games that have a strong story element rank among the most highly appreciated in today's world of analog gaming, and by studying how that element manifests itself, and how it appeals to its players, we may be able to improve our understanding of the reasons behind this Renaissance. As for the second question above, it is mainly in the last four decades that games have learned to tell stories, that is, that designers have been exploring the idea of creating a narrative through a synergy of game rules, material components, and players' action. The impulse came undoubtedly from the role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974)—itself a narrative game deeply informed by board game conventions—and from there it has propelled game design in highly creative directions. Games inspired by *Dungeons & Dragons*, versions of *Dungeons & Dragons* that are *bona fide* board games, character-driven tactical wargames, paragraph-based games that come with large textual apparatus, hybrids between board games and app games, and even “perishable” board games that can be played only a limited number of times, are some of the types of games that attempted to convey a sense of

story in the last decades. This book provides a general profile of each category or trend, and offers detailed examples based on key representative games.

The purpose of this inquiry is to offer insights to different types of readers. The theorist of gaming should be able to derive analytical tools that can also be applied to other types of playable entertainment. The historian will be offered a picture of modern analog gaming in which some well-known landmarks in the hobby will be connected in unusual ways, revealing a vibrant galaxy of commonly held ideas and inspirations. The game designer will find a plethora of very practical considerations on what works and what doesn't when trying to infuse a game design with the functions and properties of storytelling. Suggestions and cautionary tales will abound, and they might contribute to sharpen one's future design decisions. The narratologist will find reasons to expand the range of activities that can be considered to have a storytelling element to include board games—a field that has not been systematically understood in such terms. As for the hobby player (arguably the most important category of them all), the book presents a vast landscape of games that one may be interested in exploring (or, equally important, avoiding). Appreciation for stories in games is a major force in today's hobby, and the many cases analyzed in this book may help players interact with designs they may not have known before, or whose narrative potential they had overlooked.

The result is a journey across dozens of designs, ideas, innovations, bold experiments, and the occasional blunder; a journey that I hope will give you a portion of the intellectual pleasure I have derived from tracing its map, and from suggesting some potentially insightful paths in it.

# Introduction

Life at a Renaissance court wasn't always as lively as many imagine. For all the magnificent entertainments we associate with that age, by and large the days of a Renaissance courtier were plagued by long empty hours and to counteract the boredom, courtiers often gathered to play games. One such game, which became available in the early 15th century, was the Tarot. Beautifully crafted decks started spreading from court to court like wildfire, their popularity boosted by the visual appeal of their art and by the variety of activities they could mediate. The Tarot deck could be used to play trick-taking games; alternately, courtiers could use it for social, content-oriented games.<sup>1</sup> In this version, players would draw cards and take inspiration from the illustrations to produce witty remarks, elegant metaphors, and perhaps improvise a short poem. A conversation would follow in which the participants could choose to speak in their own voice or play a fictional role, pretending to be a character related to the contents of the cards.

This style of play seems to anticipate several traits of modern role-playing games, and we have plenty of evidence that its original players tended to perceive it as a form of playable storytelling. Matteo Maria Boiardo, one of the most respected poets of the 15th century, wrote a series of tercets to be transcribed on Tarot cards, expanding the symbolic and narrative potential of the deck. These were not poems about the game but poems for a game, and they were intended as components of a social and creative activity.<sup>2</sup> In the 16th century, Teofilo Folengo described a gathering in which some friends drew cards from a Tarot deck, and a poet in the group created sonnets about the images on the cards.<sup>3</sup> Around the same time, the famous satirist Pietro Aretino composed a philosophical dialogue in which the speakers are a card maker and a mysteriously sentient deck of cards. Appropriately titled *The Talking Cards*, the text illustrates how Tarot decks had come to be seen as effective tools to create meaning, to the point that they could be imagined as partners in a conversation!<sup>4</sup>

If one was around the same courts in the 16th century, one could also play other games that involved creating narratives and playing a role. In one of these activities the players would pretend to be wizards, and would describe the palaces that they could create with their spells; in another, a participant would pretend to be Charon, while the other players would be souls of dead lovers and would explain to him how they met their fate.<sup>5</sup> Castiglione wrote in his *Book of the Courtier* (1528) that games of this kind took place almost every evening at court.<sup>6</sup> Such games were still going strong in the following century, when Emanuele Tesauro, the leading European authority on Baroque literature, wrote extensively to praise “games to be played in the evening, in which gentlemen and dames pretend to be some characters: one will be a king, another an Amazon, a wandering knight, or a servant. Picking up a story from one another, as if retelling a novel, each player will say words that are appropriate to the situation being described, and players who deviate from the story will suffer a penalty” (54, author’s translation).

Tesauro also described a board game that was played throughout the courts of Europe, *Ariosto’s Maze*. Based on Ludovico Ariosto’s epic poem *The Frenzy of Orlando* (an international bestseller at the time), the game was played on a board displaying a single track of spaces, each of which represented a famous location in the poem and included some verses from the text. Players would take the role of the major agents in the story, and mark their position in the game with a figurine representing that character. Players would then alternate rolling a die and moving their character along the track, like in *Snakes & Ladders* or *Goose*,<sup>7</sup> and would imagine different fictional events depending on the space their character landed on. In fact, the illustrations on the board were meant to stimulate the players in unexpected and entertaining ways:

In some locations, according to the subject and the verse on the board, characters may become prisoners, have to move backward or forwards, free some prisoners, assign or suffer a penalty, receive a homage, do penance, pray, or meditate.... This way, each player comes to symbolize a hero, each die roll an event caused by Fortune, each event a serious or amusing allegory with a verse as caption. *Each caption provides the lively imagination of the players with an opportunity to come up with*

witty remarks. For this reason the board is a poem, and each game is a study session [Tesauro, 54–55, author’s translation, emphasis added].

Mechanically speaking *Ariosto’s Maze* is a simple roll-and-move game, whose straightforward nature left the players free to focus on the creation of fictional scenes. The mechanics of the game furnished the tools to develop a cooperative story based on the organization of the game pieces on the board and the contributions made by the participants.

These activities of the Renaissance and the Baroque eras demonstrate that there was a time in which it wasn’t controversial to enjoy games for their story value, while still experiencing such activities entirely as games, and not theatre or literature. And yet, to talk about games as story engines became somewhat problematic in the last two decades. Discussions about narratives in games have been characterized by such divisiveness that it has become common to think of two almost separate schools of thought, with the narratological school on one side, and the ludologist one on the other. Fortunately most of the bitterness surrounding the subject in the early days of game studies has now dissipated, but the polarization around these two trends is still significant enough to fill the pages of a 2015 volume edited by Matthew Wilhelm Kapell (*The Play Versus Story Divide in Game Studies*).

The ludologists have long insisted that what matters in a game is mainly the interplay of rules and mechanics within the system, with theme and potential storytelling elements representing little more than window dressing. This position can already be found in some of the pioneers of game studies. In 1958 Roger Caillois’ influential book *Man, Play, and Games* denied the existence of any meaningful synergy between mechanics and content of a game. In Caillois’ opinion, game rules are completely arbitrary, and therefore games have “no other but an intrinsic meaning” (7). Suits echoed this idea in 1978, when he attributed storytelling elements only to unstructured quasi-games of make-believe played by children (102). Several decades later Koster, in his influential *A Theory of Fun*, took the position that a narrative is unnecessary in a game, and concluded that “most games melded with stories tend to be Frankenstein monsters. Players tend to either skip the story or skip the game” (130).

Such thinking has several strong points to its credit. First, this approach has had the merit of emancipating the field of game studies from the potentially burdensome influence of older disciplines, while attempting to develop interpretive tools uniquely tailored to its object of inquiry. Next, there is the even obvious fact that rules and mechanics are indeed a vital element of games, and that it is precisely the presence of a mutually agreed-upon set of rules that distinguishes games from other types of leisurely activities. This is so true that in abstract games, the rules are indeed all that is needed for the functioning of the design.<sup>8</sup> How can content and story matter, then, when so many games don't have either?

On the other hand, an approach intending to give emphasis to the story element in games certainly faces an uphill battle. For starters, throughout the 20th century narratology has focused mainly on literature and film, and only in recent years the rise of post-classical narratology has provided the tools for the investigation of narrative functions outside of those forms of storytelling. Another problem resides in the fact that some proponents of narratological readings of games have taken the hardly defensible position that storytelling is an important element of *every* game, and have come up with Byzantine interpretations of semi- or fully abstract games. A famous example is in the book *Hamlet on the Holodeck* by Janet Murray, in which she read *Monopoly* as “a structured drama,” and stated that even *Tetris* “has clear dramatic content” (143–144). Along the same lines, Pearce wrote that a good game “will tend to follow something that resembles the emotional curve of a dramatic arc” (“Towards,” 145), and found examples of such arcs in basketball, Tic-Tac-Toe, and *Battleship*.<sup>9</sup> Bartle proposed a different justification for a pan-narratological approach to games, and he too, like Murray, chose *Tetris* as the hill on which game narratology would take its stand: “Games have a story, even abstract ones like *Tetris* (1985): tell someone about how you were close to filling up the box, how only one tile shape and color would do, and how wow, it came.... It’s the story of how you played the game, and it may not be all that compelling, but it’s still a story” (105–106).

The objection, of course, is that none of these readings sound very persuasive. It is true that “any game can potentially be read as an allegory of something else,” but still “some readings will be more convincing than

others” (Juul, *Half-Real*, 133). And while any game may produce an “implicit arc of progress and accomplishment” (Upton, 108), the similarities between a narrative arc and ludic one are simply too general to justify a mechanical equation of the two. It is also uncertain that being able to tell a story about a game session indicates that a game contains intrinsic narrative potential (like Bartle offered), because human beings are capable of telling stories about practically anything.

The issue is easily settled by looking outside of the realm of specialized scholarship, and turning to players who are committed to the hobby and play games regularly. Since theory must always adjust itself to fit reality, and not vice versa, our scholarship must yield to the community of players if such a community decides to embrace or reject the idea of stories in games. If we go this way, we only need to spend some time in the forums of the website BoardGameGeek (BGG) to find plenty of contributions about the qualities of the story in a game. We may agree or disagree with the content of some of these readings, but we cannot deny that story-oriented interpretations are common among players. An example among the hundreds or thousands of possible ones: BGG user Amnese, in his 2012 review of the board game *Middle-Earth Quest*, wrote:

But for me, the satisfaction in a game doesn't lie in "winning or losing." The satisfaction lies in the enjoyment of the gameplay and the narrative of the game that develops in playing with friends. ... When I set out to play an adventure game, I want to travel around, I want to explore, I want to take on quests, I want to fight, and I want to see a nice, deep adventure story develop in my game. In essence, I want to be immersed in the role of the adventurer. I don't want to be bored by the simplicity of a game (and the lack of a narrative), but I also don't want to be side-tracked by dense and confusing rules.

Witnesses of this type of appreciation include casual players, committed hobbyists, and professionals like Vlaada Chvatal, a highly respected designer of board games: “I love it when a board game tells a strong story.... If I play the game well, my actions help him [my character] to achieve his goals in the game world. Interesting game situations may translate into important decisions in the game world, brilliant gameplay actions into unexpected plot

twists, and generally, the progress of my character is a nice reward for my good game play” (253). When examples such as these are taken into account, one can see that outside of academia the idea that some board games can tell stories is mere common sense. It is equally interesting to note that such readings tend to heavily concentrate around certain games, and to be sparse or completely missing for others. Hobby players, in fact, have virtually never embraced the notion that all games should be seen as story engines, or that a representational and narrative element is always necessary in a game.

My personal position on the matter echoes that of the player community, and has also been articulated by Calleja as follows: “Arguing that narratives are not particularly important to the gaming experience is a nontenable, normative assumption that predetermines how players experience game environments. On the other hand, attributing every aspect of the gaming experience to narrative is equally unproductive” (113). In more detail, my approach is grounded on the belief that

- all games have rules, and for some games such rules are all that matters in the play experience. Completely abstract games like Checkers or *Connect Four* are examples of this category.
- some games have a minimal representational component, with a thin theme that remains irrelevant to gameplay. These games are technically not abstract, and yet they play exactly like abstracts because rules and procedures drive the players’ engagement with the design entirely. Hangman, for example, has a theme (the execution of a character), but the lines that are used to record the misses could form any other subject without affecting gameplay in the least.
- some games have a moderate representational component, meaning that there is an identifiable theme some of the mechanics point at, and that affects the way players perceive gameplay. A good example would be *Catan*, in which players care about collecting resources to build settlements and roads, but in which the theme is not represented in detail. Most so-called eurogames fall in this category.
- some games have a prominent representational component, and the mechanics have patently been devised to fit the theme in a mimetic

fashion. An obvious example is the historical wargame. When we pick up a realistic game about the Battle of Gettysburg or Operation Barbarossa, we can see that reproducing the salient elements of the subject was the imperative that shaped the design process.<sup>10</sup>

- some games with a strong theme, finally, also develop a story through the dynamic interaction of rules, components, and players' input. By story here I mean not every type of narration, but precisely what we experience when reading a novel or watching a movie, rather than (say) reading a history book. As one of the distinguishing features of this kind of story is a focus on individual characters, in order to construct a narrative a game too will have to revolve primarily around such agents. Strategic and operational wargames are therefore excluded from this category due to their emphasis on collective organizations like military units and governments. Tactical wargames of man-to-man combat, on the other hand, can be included if the main actors in the design are individual figures.

Such categorization should be thought of as a modulation of nuances rather than a rigid system of compartments. While some games fit comfortably within a certain group, others may have a much more ambiguous position. Most players would probably agree that Tic-Tac-Toe is a purely abstract game, but different observers may come to different conclusions when weighing on the role of theme in *Stratego* or *Risk*, without either assessment being completely right or wrong.

This being said, the purpose of this book is not to explore all layers of the subdivision presented above, but only to discuss the last category, concerning narrative-oriented games. Following a methodological proposal elaborated by Tringham, I define these designs as “games in which the emergence of story is encouraged by design. Typically, this requires the existence of a clear goal which the player is attempting to achieve, considerable freedom of choice as to how that end might be accomplished, and personalities which the player can identify with and be opposed by” (12). The resulting narrative is “a cyclical process afforded by the representational, mechanical, and medium-specific qualities of a game, and actuated in the mind of the player” (Calleja, 124).

The reasons to devote a book to storytelling in board games are many, and of some consequence. First and foremost, analog games in the last decade have become a much more exciting subject than they were in the early days of game studies. Today we are experiencing a true Renaissance of board gaming, fuelled in part by video game players who are returning to this style of play after a decade or two of screen-based gaming. More board games are being published now than ever before, and their sales have been steadily increasing every year.<sup>11</sup> More and more people are attending board game conventions, with attendance at GenCon reaching over 60,000 visitors in 2016,<sup>12</sup> and the Essen Game Fair totaling over 170,000.<sup>13</sup> Board games are leading the crowdfunding platform Kickstarter, attracting six times more money than video games,<sup>14</sup> while large retail stores like Target and Barnes & Noble are expanding their board game sections, producing board game exclusives, and adding specialized hobby games to their traditional offer of mass-market and children games. Meanwhile, the “nerd” stigma associated with adult board gaming is dissipating, leading to an acceptance of the board game hobby in the mainstream.<sup>15</sup> These days we even have a market for storage systems specifically designed for large board game collections, and Teri Litorco’s *Civilized Guide to Tabletop Gaming* includes an entire section on the subject. Discussions about the management of collections of hundreds or thousands of board games would not have had an audience worth the name until one or two decades ago—and this, too, is a sign of change.

The internet, while furnishing endless opportunities to download video games and play online, has also turned out to be a great boon for the board game industry. Online stores like Amazon, eBay, the specialized NobleKnight, or the Market section of BoardGameGeek, have made it easier for players to purchase hobby games local stores may not carry, facilitating the circulation of independent and “auteur” board games. The internet has also put large numbers of enthusiasts in contact with one another, strengthening the community and expanding interest in the hobby enormously. The website BoardGameGeek has been steadily growing in popularity since its inception in 2000,<sup>16</sup> and it offers not just the most complete database of board games in existence, but also a space for players to exchange ideas and develop a sense of shared identity. Meanwhile the web series *TableTop*, dedicated to board games and hosted by Wil Wheaton, gathers about half a

million views around the time a new episode is released, and several times that number in the months or years after that.

Another way in which the internet has fostered the diffusion of the hobby is through the release of digital versions of analog games and the publication of game rules and component templates in PDF. Today, someone who is curious about a board game may often purchase its app version or download all the necessary files to craft their own physical copy (a process known as print-and-play).<sup>17</sup> One may imagine that these practices would put a serious dent in the board game industry, but the exact opposite has proven to be true. “Sales of physical board games actually increase significantly after an app or PC version has been posted online” (Dee, 15), and the same has been observed after a group has played a homemade copy of an analog game based on downloaded materials.<sup>18</sup> This phenomenon is so beneficial to the market that many publishers release digital versions of their board games for free or for a small fraction of a unit’s price. Clearly the experience of playing a beautifully crafted game in a physical social space must retain some quality that video and homemade games do not match (Calleja, 14). These digital materials have therefore acted not as competitors to analog games, but as samples that have successfully encouraged the players to purchase the real thing.

For all that the gaming industry and culture are evolving, game studies focusing on analog hobby gaming are still less common than one would expect. Regarding our specific topic, there has been only limited discussion of the narrative potential of board games. The most important works on this topic are Lancaster’s *Interacting with Babylon 5* and Paul Booth’s *Game Play*, which discuss paratextuality in board games inspired by contemporary media franchises. These books do an excellent job at demonstrating how thematic games can be used by fans to “slow down, cut up, stop, recreate, reform, recuperate, restore, and otherwise play with” materials from their favorite fictional universes (Lancaster, 104). In the process, the content of a game can form a fictional setting that the players can mentally inhabit, and employ as a stage to create their own variations of the original story. Bethan Jones’ paper about board games based on *Discworld* moves along the same lines, and constitutes a valuable contribution too.

While retaining many ideas from the foundations laid in these works, here I have expanded the field of investigation past the confines of paratextuality, in an attempt to define how analog games can tell stories independently from their possible connection with well-known materials. Franchise-based games are a great place to start thinking about stories and games because in these designs the fictional content is so prominent. However, unless we also extend our investigation to games based on original settings, we may form the incorrect impression that analog games can only rehash stories from elsewhere, which may lead us to underestimate the unique generative power of the medium. My study does encompass paratextual games, but also transcends them to provide an account of how analog games can tell stories in a broader, more general sense. An advantage of this approach is to extend the pleasure of story-oriented gaming to a potentially larger audience. The story in a paratextual game can be fully appreciated only by players who already have an understanding of the source material, whereas to enjoy the narrative in a game that comes with its own storyworld, all one needs to do is to play it.

In other cases, essays on board games and stories have focused on examples that do not fully fit the parameters of my research. Martin and Tyler discussed the role-playing element of board games like *Descent* and *Castle Ravenloft*, but the inclusion of a light, loosely thematic game like *Munchkin* in the same category appears at least surprising. The same can be said for Bateman, who pointed out that role-playing games and board games are “concerned with conceiving of a fictional world and taking actions within it” (137), but then named an abstract game like *Jenga* among the examples of immersive games. I prefer to focus on games that have a considerable level of representational detail, as I believe that the presence of a clear and consistent setting is a necessary requisite for a narrative to emerge. This approach has directed my research mainly toward hobby games, which tend to be characterized by more complex rule systems and more vivid themes than most mass-market games (like *Monopoly* or *Clue*), traditional games (like Go and Chess), and children games.<sup>19</sup> Enough hobby games with richly depicted settings and immersive properties exist, to allow us to focus on those only when making the case for the storytelling power of the medium. Proceeding this way we will be able to fully devote our energies to

understanding how games can tell stories, rather than worrying about whether or not a certain borderline design belongs to our study.

A couple of last caveats and disclaimers are in order before we start our main discussion. First, I want to clarify that the object of my inquiry is games-that-tell-stories rather storytelling games. When using the expression “storytelling games,” hobby gamers usually refer to games like *The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen* by James Wallis (Hogshead, 1998), in which players challenge each other to come up with the most inventive and improbable stories,<sup>20</sup> or *Once Upon a Time* by Richard Lambert et al. (Atlas, 1993), whose players take turns creating a narrative that must include the subjects on the cards they have been dealt.<sup>21</sup> These games have in common with their Renaissance and Baroque ancestors the fact that their components give the players the inspiration to craft their own original stories. In these kind of games most of the content that ends up in the narrative is not located in the game itself, but provided by the players’ imagination. These are games that stimulate storytelling, but in which the storytelling is performed almost entirely by the players.

Precisely for this reason, however, I find this type of game a little less interesting to investigate, and prefer to focus on games-that-tell-stories, that is, games that already contain every element that will form the final narrative. These are games that come with a productive syntax (the rules) and a full lexicon of possible contents already recorded in the game components.<sup>22</sup> A storytelling game gives a player a card that shows an elf and another that shows a treasure, and lets the player come up with the adventure that leads the elf to the treasure. In a game-that-tells-stories, maybe a player moves a miniature representing an elf on a board showing the land of the adventure, rolls on an encounter table and resolves the events that have been triggered, discards energy tokens to cast spells represented by scroll cards, uses combat procedures to remove the miniature of the monster guarding the treasure, and finally moves the elf to the space containing the game piece of the treasure. A game-that-tells-stories constrains the players much more than a storytelling game, but still gives the players the crucial role of soliciting the narrative by manipulating the components, rearranging the blocks of the story, interpreting the content, and mentally filling in the gaps between the various thematic units.<sup>23</sup> Think of this as the difference between a loose script for

improv theatre, which the actors can flesh out with great freedom, and a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book, in which the reader can pick many possible paths, but is not supposed to add new words to the ones that are already in the story.

Another caveat is that while my discussion is extensive, my intention is not to draw an exhaustive map of the phenomena under examination. The first reason is that the field is simply too vast. Even if it was possible to study all of the over 90,000 board games and expansions listed on BoardGameGeek, talking about every design that fits the bill would inescapably result into an encyclopedic list, and one whose very length would dilute any interpretive line. My intention, rather, is to establish a methodological foundation for the investigation of storytelling functions in analog gaming, and to trace a general profile of some major trends that have characterized games-that-tell-stories between the 1960s and today. In so doing, I will mention the games I consider most useful to exemplify how game designs have encouraged players to experience gameplay in a narrative perspective. The selection includes a mix of well-known classics and other, more obscure, games. The result will be a series of maps of different modalities of intersections between gameplay and storytelling. The reader who is not particularly familiar with the subject should find in these maps sufficient coordinates to continue the exploration on their own. The seasoned player, who knows hundreds or thousands of games, should be able to mentally add nuance and detail to the discourse with the designs that they find most pertinent, and that I left out either because I have not played them, or for the sake of space in the book. My intent is to sketch a minimalistic outline of a large vista of story-centered gaming by pointing out some of its landmarks. My hope is that even if we disagree on which are the most representative landmarks that should be included, we can still agree that this vista exists, and is worth looking at.

The first chapter establishes a frame of reference for a theoretical reading of story-oriented games. Here I borrow from post-classical narratology a set of parameters that an activity or an artifact must possess to be considered a narrative, and I apply these parameters to analog gaming. Showing the overlap between the characteristics of traditional stories and modern hobby games should provide us with solid evidence that games can, in fact, become engines to tell stories. I also show how the intersection of narrative functions

with the specific affordances of analog gaming presents unique challenges and opportunities, and I discuss how game designers have attempted to minimize the former and magnify the latter.

While Chapter 1 demonstrates that games can tell stories, Chapter 2 deals more closely with the kind of stories that games tend to tell. The chapter applies concepts from narratology such as point of view, genre, world building, and construction of time, to some of the main trends in modern hobby gaming. The rest of the book covers the evolution of narrativity in hobby gaming from the late 1960s to the present. This discussion is organized for the most part in chronological order, because such is the way in which ideas have traveled across the hobby and evolved into new versions of themselves. This arrangement should not create the impression that I am simply retelling the history of the hobby in the last decades, although naturally the history of analog gaming and the history of narrative functions in analog gaming have to overlap in many points. Booth stated correctly that “contemporary games are more narratively driven than ever before” (14), and my goal is to show when, where, and how this tendency toward narrative originated, how it was refined in different stages through trial and error, and how it reached the levels of sophistication we have seen in the last years.

Chapters 3 and 4, therefore, deal with two of the earliest sources of inspiration for story-oriented board games: *Dungeons & Dragons* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Centering on the 1970s, these chapters show how the desire to play *D&D* in a more casual way, in one case, and to mentally inhabit Tolkien’s world in the other, gave impulse to the design of board games that emulated the experience provided by their source materials. As these sources were a story-oriented RPG and a trilogy of novels, it followed quite naturally that the result would include techniques to construct stories.

Chapters 5 and 6 demonstrate the success this new trend in board gaming had in the hobby community. Chapter 5 focuses on the years immediately successive to the first edition of *D&D*, while Chapter 6 covers the late ’70s and early ’80s. These sections show how receptive the gaming community was to innovation, and how such warm reception in turn energized game designers and publishers. Covering a large number of titles in these chapters

is something of a necessity, because the currency of an idea in this field can only be measured by the number of game designs that incorporated it.

Chapters 7 and 8 analyze the trends that most clearly defined narrativity in analog games of the 1980s. Chapter 7 covers the multiple ways in which narrative techniques from the 1970s evolved to new levels of complexity and managed to reach a much larger audience in the 1980s. Chapter 8 explores paragraph-based games, which generated an experience that felt quite different from that of the tactical games that had dominated narrative gaming up to that point. These two chapters explore the variety of approaches game designers explored in this decade, some innovating along a line of continuity (Chapter 7) and some moving in more innovative directions (Chapter 8).

In Chapters 9 and 10 we traverse the 1990s and reach the early 21st century. In both cases, we see how designers of board games have coped with the enormous expansion of the video game industry, and how this has influenced their approach to storytelling. Chapter 9 focuses on physically imposing, massively produced games which attempted to counteract the competition from digital games by emphasizing the irreplaceable material aspect of board gaming. Narrative considerations remained a goal for many game designers, but the physical shape their games took played directly against this objective. In many cases, the story ended up buried under a heap of unnecessary and dysfunctional components.

While Chapters 5 and 6 discussed many cases in which *Dungeons & Dragons* inspired board gaming, Chapter 10 analyzes a trend that became prominent in the 1990s, which saw *Dungeons & Dragons* simply become a board game. This section covers several introductory sets for *D&D* that were structured as board games rather than tabletop role-playing games. The intention behind these sets was to ease players of traditional games into the complexities of role-playing, inviting them to move from a board-based *D&D* to the full RPG. A secondary result was the creation of the most significant line of games-that-tell-stories of the decade. These board-based versions of *D&D* helped the idea of storytelling in games reach the 21st century, and planted the first seeds for an important return of the form.

Chapter 11 and Chapter 12 discuss the new thresholds of creativity and depth narrative functions have reached in the last decade. Games-that-tell-stories

have not just made a comeback, they have actually learned unprecedented ways to immerse players in a fictional situation, and have become a major force in the hobby. In fact, designs of this type are now some of the most popular and highly ranked games among regular players.

Chapter 11 shows how this comeback started in the early 2000s, and how it took hold thanks to the efforts of many different publishers. New forms of synergy between theme and mechanics were found, and the narratives that emerged became more compelling and immersive than ever. The refinement of character-centered, scenario-based gaming gave the players powerful reasons to become committed to the setting of the games, and encouraged them to read the events taking place in those worlds as blocks of a sustained narrative. Praising the story value of a board game became common among players, and designers met the demand for this style of play by finding constant new ways to inject narrative elements into their creations.

Chapter 12 shows how the appreciation for story in board games has now reached the point of breaking one of the cardinal rules of the hobby—that is, that a good game should be highly replayable. In the last couple of years we have witnessed the publication of games and expansions designed to have a very limited lifespan, sometimes to the point of being playable only a couple of times. While this idea would have been met with harsh criticism in the past, many of these games have been immensely successful, and it is in fact a design of this type (*Gloomhaven*) that is currently *the* highest ranked title among the over 90,000 games on BoardGameGeek. In all cases when a game with built-in obsolescence has been well received, the justification from players has been that, yes, one won't be able to play the game very often, but the story it tells is still well worth the effort and the cost. To me, this type of game is the best possible demonstration of the primary role story has come to play in modern hobby gaming. Story, today, is not just an added value to a design, but an objective to be pursued even at the expense of some of gaming's most established tenets.

It is also through the success of scarcely replayable but intensely narrative games that one can attempt to glean the future of hobby gaming. After a moment of decline in the late 1990s, games-that-tell-stories have become a major force in the gaming hobby and industry of the early 21st century.

Through the lens of the innovations that have enriched the hobby in the last decade, we can look with the excitement at the new directions games—that-tell-stories may be able to discover in the coming years.

• • •

Before we begin our main discussion, I want to express my gratitude to the Department of French and Italian and the New Frontiers Program at Indiana University, whose support has allowed me to access many of the materials discussed in this book. Many conversations with Ted Castronova, Raiford Guins, Eric Robinson, and Andrea Ciccarelli have given me motivation and helped me stay focused in my work. Colin Speirs, Shannon Lewis, and Roberto Di Meglio have brought to my attention several games that I had not considered, and that now have an important role in my book. The competent staff of the Game Preserve and the Common Room, the two game stores in my town, have provided me with many useful discoveries and unexpected insights. I would also like to thank the two anonymous readers for their feedback on the preliminary draft.

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# 1

## How Tabletop Games Can Tell Stories

We saw in the Introduction that some games can tell stories, and that these stories matter to the players that devote their energy to them. It is now time to see more in detail how this process works; that is, how a set of physical components manipulated according to a set of rules can bring a sense of story to the consciousness of the players. In order to do so, we will start by defining what storytelling is and what its most important traits are. If we can then identify games that clearly possess the same properties of a story, we can more convincingly make the case that those games can produce narrative experiences.

Among the many definitions proposed by scholars, one that is useful and applicable to our discourse is of story as “the semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way” (Onega and Landa, 3). This definition is narrow enough to separate storytelling from other human activities, and stories from other types of organized content like a phone book or a menu. Yet, this definition is also sufficiently flexible to be applied to vastly different forms of storytelling such as literature, comics, film, theatre, and even board games. After all, if “the semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way” can be seen as a story, then a board game that represents imaginary events within these same parameters is likely to be perceived as a story (or a story-oriented activity) by its players.

The next step is to articulate the characteristics of this type of representation, and then see how the elements of the articulation may apply to tabletop games. I have therefore compiled a list of traits derived from narratology that can offer a sort of identikit of the object of our investigation. Just like an identikit, the following list glosses over many details and describes a certain type rather than a specific individual. Still, like an identikit, a general profile of the games we are interested in has at the very least the function of

excluding many non-pertinent artifacts, and to give a general sense of the direction in which we should look. The point is not to establish an inalterable system of characteristics that covers all games-that-tell-stories and excludes all games-that-do-not. A game, to be perceived as story-oriented by its players, will only need to meet a number of the requirements below, with some being more or less negotiable than others. For the reader's convenience and future reference, I am listing in one place all the traits that I consider relevant to establish the storytelling potential of a game. This done, I will proceed to examine each point individually, offering insights about their specific applications to analog gaming.

To set a frame of reference for our investigation, we can stipulate that a game can be said to tell a story when all or most of the following apply:

- A content is present; the game represents *something*.
- The content is depicted in the components consistently and in some level of detail.
- The rules and mechanics of the game mirror the underlying dynamics of the content they represent.
- Content and mechanics converge in the creation of a consistent imaginary world that acts as the setting of the game experience.
- The events represented in the game are related to one another through a sense of causation.
- The players control individual characters (the traditional focus of storytelling) rather than groups or abstract entities.
- The players' characters are unique, and differ from one another in some significant way.
- An element of identification promotes the formation of an emotional bond between players and characters.
- The players' characters have goals and objectives.

- The players' characters undergo some form of change during gameplay.
- The changing state of the players' characters is a major source of interest.
- The strategies employed by the players mirror the strategies the characters would use in the world of the game.
- The design leaves a degree of uncertainty as to the contents and options that will be available in each game session. A board game would therefore need to mimic some of the sense of progressive revelation that is typical of storytelling.

Let us now have a closer look at each point of our identikit and apply a more detailed analysis. The focus, in particular, will be on how an analog game may exhibit certain traits rather than others, and to what extent, and with what impact on the experience of gameplay.

### **A content is present; the game represents *something*.**

This point should be rather self-explanatory. To show the potential to tell a story, at least some of the components of a game must exhibit a representational quality,<sup>1</sup> and indicate something other than their ludic function in the game.<sup>2</sup> Such a function is not replaced by the representational meaning, and in most cases it is actually enhanced by the presence of a content which may act as a reminder of what a piece can do and how it interacts with the other parts of the design. Not all components obviously need to have a representational quality for this requirement to be fulfilled, as even in the most heavily thematic games we may find dice and tokens whose functions are strictly ludic rather than semantic. And yet, even in these cases, makers of games still often rely on the visual design and color palette of the non-representational components to enhance the general tone of the game—which explains, for example, the preference for black and red tokens in horror games.

### **The content is depicted in the components consistently and in some level of detail.**

This point is less obvious and much more slippery than the previous, as demonstrated by several scholars' attempts to read meaning in games of various degrees of representational granularity. *The Hobbit HeroClix: The Desolation of Smaug*<sup>3</sup> and *Yahtzee Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* undoubtedly fulfill the requirement of representing something. The former game, however, emulates its theme through a range of painted miniatures, evocative playmats, and theme-appropriate rules and procedures that can create an endless series of fictional events. The latter is a plastic goblet that comes with a set of dice showing symbols such as a sword, a ring, and a key. Clearly, *Yahtzee Hobbit* engages with its materials only in the most generic terms, in a sort of extreme synecdoche, without giving us any possibility to combine those elements into a mental representation. The treatment of theme in these two games goes a long way to show that generic references to content are not enough to turn a set of game components into tools to tell a story.

Between the extremes of these two examples, one can find many games in which different players may or may not see sufficient detail to make them care about the content. And if it's true that we cannot quantify how much detail is necessary to turn the content of a game into the potential for a story, we can point out that the material nature of analog board games can contribute to make their content particularly vivid, facilitating our immersion in the fictional reality of the game. In this sense, considerable advantages come from the tactile component of analog gaming and from the unmediated, actual presence of the props of the representation in the space shared by the players.<sup>4</sup> It may be worth noting in passing that while the word "immersion" is often employed to describe something engrossing and compelling, my use of the term specifically indicates "the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality" (Murray, 98), the illusion "to play for a time within an alternate world" (Booth, 27),<sup>5</sup> the "feeling that you're really there" (Pulsipher, *Game Design*, 106).<sup>6</sup> It certainly helps if an intermediary of that "there" is physically present in the room with the players, and these players can connect with it through the senses of sight and touch.

The impression of reality in analog gaming can be fostered in a variety of ways. Board games for example share some of the worldbuilding possibilities that Wolf attributes to audiovisual media "insofar as they can

depict things in the background without calling attention to them, letting viewers find them during subsequent viewings after the narrative has been exhausted” (Wolf 58–59). Thematic board games can obtain this effect by including small but significant details in their components. Visual elements that are not apparent at first sight may increase the degree of realism of the game when they are finally noticed, creating the impression that, if we could just keep zooming in, we would discover further layers of increasingly minute details. When this occurs, the setting of the game can create the illusion of a tightly woven fabric without gaps.

Cards are also an excellent tool to expand the fictional reality of the world of the game. A board can only present so much practical information and thematic art before it starts losing intelligibility, and a deck of cards filled with thematic art, game-relevant information, and flavor texts, can act as a powerful generator of supplemental content.<sup>7</sup> Once put into motion through the syntax of the rules, thematic cards can prompt the emergence of compelling chains of imaginary events in the mind of the players. Add 100 encounter cards to a game, and now there are many more things that can happen in the storyworld of the game. Add 100 more, and the storyworld is expanded again. With the introduction of thematically rich cards the amount of information conveyed during gameplay (and, consequently, the level of detail of the represented world) can grow virtually without limit.

Many more ways to turn game components into intermediaries of a detailed fictional world will be seen in this book. We must remember, however, that too much of a good thing is also possible. An inflated number of components and a needless level of granularity in the procedures may easily hinder gameplay and dampen the immersive potential of a design. Imagine a fantasy game in which, when a hero acquires a new weapon, one must attach a toy weapon to the right hand of the miniature. Imagine also that the miniature has mobile junctures, and that the player must lift the weapon arm or the shield arm for the character to attack or defend. All of these elements would certainly add detail, but gameplay would be constantly interrupted by the need to find, store, and reposition the many bits of the game. When the production of a game becomes excessively elaborate, the mechanics of the game become cumbersome and attract too much attention on themselves,

preventing us from making a significant connection with the setting and the characters.

### **The rules and mechanics of the game mirror the underlying dynamics of the content they represent.**

In the previous section we saw that game components play a role in giving a game a representational quality, but mimetic resemblance alone is insufficient to trigger a feeling of commitment to the theme in the players. Replacing the pieces of a Checkers set with miniatures of Napoleonic soldiers will not turn the game into a study of the battle of Austerlitz. As Abt wrote, “a game’s realism can be assessed in terms of the degree to which it reproduces the interaction of choices involved in the simulated process” (115).<sup>8</sup> For something like this to occur, the design must capture the inner dynamics of the represented event, and this can only occur when the game pieces behave to an extent like they would in the fictional reality they represent.

Good examples of how mechanics may or may not mirror a theme come from the way different designs handle movement of the pieces on the board. Roll-and-move games like *Monopoly* and *Snakes & Ladders* are popular among non-hobbyists and children, but their unmitigated randomness fails to capture the way most sentient beings move.<sup>9</sup> A more representational approach is to give each piece a movement allowance indicating the maximum distance it can cover in a movement action, leaving it to the player to decide if the piece will actually move by that distance, or part of it, or not at all.

There are obviously also cases in which it is wise to include a random element in the situation. Combat procedures are one such case, because in a fight the possibility of an error or an interfering external factor should always be taken into account. Even here, though, it is possible to obtain a realistic representation by modeling the chances of success of a certain action after the chances that that action would have within the setting. The character of a skilled warrior should have better chances to hit an opponent than a less proficient character would, for example. When the randomized resolution of a fight feels like the statistically appropriate expression of in-game

circumstances, even a random procedure can acquire a representational quality.

The level of detail that rules and procedures bring to a design also affects how convincing the representation of the world of the game will be. Abstract and highly linear mechanics don't have much representational power, but long and complicated lists of procedures may just as easily prevent gameplay from turning into a sequence of fictional events. Excessive concern with detailed mechanics may lead the players to pay disproportionate attention to the artificial nature of the system rather than the setting it is supposed to bring to life. If creating an engaging parallel reality is a goal of a board game, then the selection of mechanics will have to strike a delicate balance between ease of play and complexity of the representation.

Finally, since in a board game the material components allow the players to interface with the design, the inclusion of certain game pieces rather than others is far from neutral, and may allow the mechanics of the game to depict their subject matter more or less clearly. The components have the task of "tangibly manifesting the world [of the game] to the players" (Klug, 42), and not all components do an equally good job in this regard. To resolve the attack of a hero who has a 45 percent chance of success, we could toss 45 white marbles in a bag together with 55 black marbles, and say that the attack succeeds if the player randomly draws a white marble. Statistically speaking this randomizing method works just fine, but it would be very inconvenient to have to form an appropriate pool of marbles each time a random outcome must be generated. Dice would work better for this task,<sup>10</sup> and to generate a number between 1 and 100 we would only need to roll two ten-sided dice and read a result as the tens and the other as the units. To determine the outcome of an action with 45 percent chance of success we would then say that a result between 1 and 45 is a success, and 46 or above a failure. This example also shows how the result of a die roll can possess "a make-believe implication (a representational consequence)" (Bateman, 163), because the numerical value it produces generates one of several possible events in the world of the game. In this sense, the application of die rolling to combat can even be described as a form of kinesthetic mimicry (Bateman, 130).<sup>11</sup>

When speaking about a similar kind of representation in video games, Bogost has introduced the concept of “procedural representation”—that is, a technique for simulating processes with other processes (*Persuasive*, 9). The concept applies to analog games even more, because in these games all actions must be physically performed by the players according to the rules, without the support of an automated system. Simply put: in an analog game nothing happens unless the players make it happen. This situation forces the players to develop a keen awareness of how the procedures of the game work, because if they don’t, no procedure at all would be performed (Sabin, 26; Gonzalo, 149)! Generally speaking, we can therefore say that in a board game that is perceived as the depiction of a fictional reality, the job of the components is to portray content in a mimetic way, while the job of rules and procedures is to capture interrelationships and processes through procedural rhetoric.

### **Content and mechanics converge in the creation of a consistent imaginary world that acts as the setting of the game experience.**

As Mieke Bal explained, it is a key feature of a narrative to use the means of the representation to create fictional locations (8, 220),<sup>12</sup> and we can certainly agree that stories always have a spatial component, even if only implicitly. For an analog game to tell a story it is therefore necessary that the contents represented by rules and physical components can be visualized as belonging to a coherent fictional space. This usually occurs in the physical space of the play area, which comes to be mentally reconfigured as the fictional stage on which the events in the game take place.

Because the players interact with a play area within the confines of its predefined partitions, the play area is not a neutral setting but rather a “relational space” (Hillis, 76), a system of spatial interrelations that connect the game pieces to the area and to one another. In this we can see a strong affinity between the use of space in a game and the construction of space in fiction. In literature and film, there is “a strategic relation that associates space with movement, and values places not on the basis of how they speak to the heart but on the basis of what actions they allow, and of how important their control is to one’s particular goals” (Ryan, Foote, and Azaryahu, 9).<sup>13</sup> Everyone who has ever enjoyed a thematic board game can apply these

words to a play area in which a section must be crossed to acquire a certain object, another negotiated to defeat a monster, and another visited to purchase equipment.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, the process of moving a game piece across a fictional, playable setting, “stands out as a spatially defined pointer to possible dramatic structures” (58).

Creating a sense of spatiality and presence comes particularly easy for board games and miniature wargames, which both revolve around a clearly defined space.<sup>15</sup> Card games, on the contrary, have very limited worldbuilding capabilities. The randomness of a shuffled deck, the sequential way in which cards enter play, and the self-contained nature of each card’s content, tend to give these games a temporal rather than spatial structure. When given the task to create a fictional reality without the aid of a board or a similarly structured play area, most card games will generate a very spotty and disjointed landscape. This representational limit, incidentally, is the main reason why my research includes only few “pure” card games.

For a play area to work as a stage for a fictional representation, the space of the game must also be appropriately populated with multiple actants and furnished with environmental elements.<sup>16</sup> “The believability of a [role-playing] world is enhanced when the players know some details about the climate, geography, and society around them” (Plamondon, 138), and the same is true for the fictional world evoked by a board game.<sup>17</sup> Consistency and believability of the setting remain absolute requirements even in games belonging to fantastic genres such as horror, fantasy, and sci-fi. American game designer Steve Jackson (hereinafter U.S. Jackson to distinguish him from the British designer of the same name) wrote that “with magic and dragons you can do pretty much as you like—but swords and clubs perform in known ways” (9).<sup>18</sup> Creating a compelling setting in a fantastic genre therefore still requires research, collation, comparison, and selection of source materials.<sup>19</sup> There are even cases in which the designer of a fantastic game may enjoy less freedom than the designer of a historical game. In creating a fantastic setting for a game, “the demand for internal consistency is much greater. We can explain away the improbability of a Stalingrad because it really happened; in the self-contained environment of a fantasy design, the explanations come a bit harder. There is a demand that the inconsistencies be

consistent. In short, because fantasy is a completely artificial thing, we want it to be neater—less messy—than reality” (Schuessler and Jackson, 8–9).<sup>20</sup>

Also, while video games are rightfully praised for their ability to create fictional spaces, we must not forget that analog games’s potential in this department is far from negligible. Miniature wargamers have been crafting impressive tridimensional landscapes for decades, and there is a thriving market for terrain features which can be combined in an infinite variety of settings. Players that don’t have the time to build and paint terrain can play games like *Heroclix* or *Star Wars Miniatures*, that include attractive, ready-made components representing different locations. Websites like RPGnow or WargameVault sell an immense range of PDFs of printable maps and terrain features. Thanks to these affordable and easy to use materials, players of analog games can explore an immense variety of settings and tailor each game space to their personal needs and preferences.

Even board games proper can still create a vast multiplicity of settings to explore. A board may be formed by the juxtaposition of different terrain tiles that can change in each session. Or, in games like *Commands & Colors*, individual terrain features may be added to a neutral board in many combinations. A similar variety of landscapes can and has be included in video games, but oftentimes for this to occur the video game has been forced to bind the experience to a unicursal structure, with few or no branching possibilities (Orlando and Schwager, 104). Terrain tiles for modular board games and terrain for miniature wargames cost considerably less to produce than their digital counterparts in a video game. This means that analog games can afford to include more environmental materials than are needed in any single session, allowing the players to explore some options, neglect others, and recombine the available elements into a large number of configurations each time the game is played.

### **The events represented in the game are related to one another through a sense of causation.**

As Keen wrote, “narrative fictions have plots; this differentiates them from chronicles of events, or mere lists” (3).<sup>21</sup> In fact, “without causality, narrative is lost. The way that events are connected by causality may change

greatly, but causality must be present for actions to have foreseeable consequences and for the events to cohere into a narrative form” (Wolf, 37). If this is true, a game that intends to tell a story must also connect the events it depicts through meaningful causal relationships. This means that the actions performed by the players must visibly result in fictional events, and these events in turn must affect the state of the setting in ways that make sense contextually.

When in-game events are organized in a causal way, this interconnection becomes particularly strong in the mind of the players. In analog gaming, as we saw previously, nothing happens unless a player materially does something. Also, moves are not usually performed without a reason, but in an attempt to attain certain in-game goals, and only after careful consideration of the changes that each action may enact in the game. These aspects of analog gaming raise the players’ awareness of the role and value of causation within the game. In turn, in thematic games this important element of storytelling almost naturally comes to have a central place.

### **The players control individual characters (the traditional focus of storytelling) rather than groups.**

Narratives in general may be about large groups with only occasional references to this or that individual, like in a history of the Pleistocene that describes the actions of our ancestors without focusing on any of them in particular. Still there is little doubt that most narratives we enjoy for their storytelling value, like novels and movies, are heavily centered on individuals.<sup>22</sup>

When we transport this idea to games, we can see that games that tell stories usually allow each player to control only one in-game entity. Such entity in turn acts as a highly centralized focus of personal agency, as an access point to the storyworld of the game, and as a surrogate of the player within that very world (Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 4). This type of entity in video games has long been defined as the avatar,<sup>23</sup> and it has the property of casting the player “as a character situated in both the time and space of the virtual world. His actions determine the fate of the avatar, and by extension, the fate of the virtual world” (Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, 116). The advantage is that

through the use of avatars that represent the players in the storyworld, a “narrative is created dramatically, by being enacted, rather than diegetically, by being narrated” (116).<sup>24</sup>

When it comes to board games, we can legitimately talk about avatars whenever a representational design assigns a player a fictional character that is physically and conceptually situated in the depicted setting. Once again, detail and thematic consistency are necessary for a game piece to act not just as a marker of ludic functions, but as a narrative agent and fictional representative of the player in the story.

**The players’ characters are unique, and differ from one another in some significant way.**

Stories are usually about sentient individual agents, and these agents tend to be different from one another.<sup>25</sup> The obvious reason is that most stories feature people, and each person is unique in one way or another. Fiction not only mirrors this element of reality, but it exploits it productively by turning differences between characters into a driving element of many plots. Board game designers that intend to tell stories through their works must take this element of fiction into account, and emancipate themselves from conventions of traditional gaming that define many pieces as functionally equivalent. For example, both black bishops in Chess could be switched on the chessboard at any point without any consequence, while switching two characters in a story will always have some sort of effect. In board games that tell stories, the players control unique individuals that can be customized in a variety of ways, usually through a series of specifications about their profession, origins, physical and mental abilities, belongings, and so on. This approach extends the desirable level of detail we mentioned about the setting to the characters, and reproduces the narrative alchemy of interpersonal exchange that is at the core of most fiction.

**An element of identification promotes the formation of an emotional bond between players and characters.**

Narratology teaches us that “since narrative appeals through the emotions and moral sense, it requires the audience to share interests and antagonisms with

the characters” (Chatman, 111). Characters from fiction possess an almost magical ability to make us experience their emotions vicariously (Bal, 113), and while this is true for characters that have been created by others and presented to us in an unalterable form, we can experience an even stronger sense of identification with characters that we co-create interactively and that mirror our own aspirations and desires.<sup>26</sup> Digital games have long learned this lesson, as their players “get a chance to actually be someone more exciting, to control a pulp-fiction adventurer, daring swordman, or space-opera hero” (Rouse III, 7).<sup>27</sup> We find the same idea in tabletop role-playing games, in which the emotional attachment of a player to her character is often a requirement for the enjoyment of the game.<sup>28</sup> The same applies to hobby board games, as we will soon see.

The main reason why identification adds to our topic is that identification makes us care about our character, and that attachment encourages us to take the events that involve her more seriously. In the process, we start paying greater attention to the very storyworld that may threaten our avatar or offer opportunities for success. Identification therefore prepares the ground for the perception of in-game actions as thematic blocks of a fictional narrative. This is true especially of characters that can be used in successive game sessions, and that can in essence simulate the type of sustained existence one finds in serial fiction, tabletop role-playing games, and video games. If the existence of our character starts looking like a biography, then the character’s interactions with the storyworld become part of the chronicle of a persistent, evolving world.

For identification to be possible, a design must give its characters goals that the players also find desirable, and/or personality traits that they can relate with (Abt, 113). In her story-driven adventure game *Legacy of Dragonholt* (Fantasy Flight Games, 2017), Nikki Valens explains that in creating one’s own character a player should pay great attention to the character’s personality and inner life, because “details such as your beliefs, world outlook, mannerisms, and fears will add narrative depth to the stories you tell” (character creation booklet, 14). Psychological details of this kind are of great importance because they easily translate into specific styles of gameplay, and have an influence on the future and past of the character’s fictional biography. If for example one designs a character that “believes the

only rule in life is to take what you can,” then “a hero with these beliefs has likely had many run-ins with the authorities, either due to his way or as a source for his outlook on life. Such a hero might rely on thievery, deception, and streetwise to go by” (14).

Identification through shared goals is also common in digital and analog games, because in most designs both players and characters attempt to prevail against the same obstacles. Simply put, I want my hero to defeat the same dragon that my hero wants to defeat. The identification will be all the more intense if such goals are associated with values that the player also shares. These considerations are not as obvious as they may sound because the idea that a game should match the players’ goals and values is far from universal. In *Redshirts* (Jonathan Schwarz, WeaselPants, 2012), for example, the players’ goal is to kill characters that they themselves control, while these characters would probably prefer to live; in *Go for Broke* (Dan Glimne, Selchow & Righter, 1965), the players control businessmen who are actively trying to squander a large capital, while most players would probably prefer to acquire that wealth rather than to lose it. If a game fosters identification through shared goals and values, therefore, it is only because the designer has made the conscious decision to set things up that way.

Another type of identification occurs when a character can do things that the player would like to be able to do. This is especially true when “the player is more powerful in the game world than they are in the real world” (Schell, 306), and can use the game to experience unusual and dangerous situations within the safe confines of a fiction.<sup>29</sup> Richly thematic games in which the players can choose among unique characters are extremely effective in this regard.<sup>30</sup> This is the case when the player who wants to smash enemies gets to be the mighty barbarian, and the player that favors subtlety can play the role of the stealthy assassin.<sup>31</sup> In other cases, the players may decide to use their avatar to examine social and psychological areas outside of their usual comfort zone.<sup>32</sup> As a female player of *D&D* explained already in 1980, controlling a female character allowed her to do things that she “would never try to do in real life—like wearing a low-cut dress and bending down to brush some dirt off her ankle while watching the reactions of the men around her” (Wells et al., 16). Exploring the fictional reality of the game in a different body or with a different gender identity or sexual orientation

become options too,<sup>33</sup> and may lead the players to gain new insights about society and themselves.

When talking about analog games we must also consider how the material element affects the dynamics of identification between players and characters. The avatar we control in a board game will always have a tangible presence, and will usually be represented by a piece that shows the character's appearance and marks its position in the game world. This physical marker plays a huge role in fostering identification, especially when it is constituted by a miniature rather than a cardboard token. After all, in analog games like in fiction, "visual presentation of physical traits, dress, facial expressions, and posture contribute significantly to characterization" (Keen, 66). Publishers of hobby board games in the last decades have invested considerable resources in producing high-quality, detailed miniatures of playable heroes, making it easier for the players to identify with this or that character. Players of role-playing games and miniature wargames have also been known for devoting a great deal of effort to painting and customizing the miniatures of their favorite characters, even if ludically speaking such operation does not influence the game in any way. Still, "a miniature that you paint yourself, used for a single player character, helps establish the character's individuality" (Plamondon, 32) and promotes identification with that character. The recent explosion of PDF materials for gaming has also made it possible for players who are not inclined to paint miniatures to play with avatars that suit the image they want to project in a game. Companies like Arion, Darkmook, Avalon, Dark City, or Steve Jackson Games, have produced thousands of templates of colorful paper miniatures that can be printed out and assembled by the players. With hordes of paper figures already available for any setting imaginable, and more coming out every day, any player of analog games can find an avatar that captures the mental image they have of their character, and this will facilitate the type of identification that we find most desirable in story-driven games.

### **The players' characters have goals and objectives.**

In narratives the story "springs from character, and is expressed through the actions that the protagonists undertake in furtherance of their goals" (Laws, 62). Fictional characters in most cases aspire to achieve a favorable

objective, and/or to avoid an unpleasant one (Bal, 202). For consumers of fiction, in turn, understanding these goals is a fundamental element in the enjoyment of a story, as “ascriptions of intention” to characters “enable textual patterns to be read as prompts for engaging with storyworlds” (Herman, *Storytelling*, 51). We find the same idea at the core of the role-playing (Simkins, 13)<sup>34</sup> and video games that aspire to tell a story (Ryan, *Avatars*, 193; Sellers, 109–111). For an analog game to be seen as narratively oriented, its characters too will have to be motivated by clear goals.

We already examined the importance of such goals for the process of identification of the players with their characters. When looking at the overall architecture of a game, we can now add that clear goals ensure that the sequence of actions taken by the players will result in a meaningful and consistent chain of fictional events in the storyworld. No matter how episodic gameplay may be, the presence of goals that motivate the characters from beginning to end will generate an overarching structure, a sense of purpose and progression connecting the events generated during the game session. The players will then find it easier to interpret the experience of playing the game through the same parameters of causality and intentionality that we apply routinely to fiction.

### **The players’ characters undergo some form of change during gameplay.**

In fiction, “characters change. The changes or transformations which a character undergoes sometimes alter the entire configuration of character as it looked during the analysis of mutual relations” (Bal, 127). In many traditional games the pieces have inalterable attributes from beginning to end, and chances for upgrading weak pieces like in Chess or Checkers remain very abstract and schematic.

In virtually every story-centered game, however, the characters are defined by attributes that can change during gameplay: abilities and equipment may be acquired or lost; personal traits may improve or worsen, and so on. Such variability opens the possibility to follow the same type of character development we find in narratives. Character evolution is actually so important, in thematic games, that sometimes it is the main driving factor of a

design. In some cases, most of gameplay may consist of leading one's characters through a series of ordeals in the pursuit of the items and skills that are required to confront a final challenge. When this occurs, gameplay may acquire the structure of a *Bildungsroman* of sorts.<sup>35</sup>

This idea is even more important in board games which allow the players to "save" their character from game to game and retain any alteration that took place in previous sessions. Enthusiasts that farm their board game characters this way, by engaging with a design over the span of weeks or months, are the best witnesses to the fact that board games can depict character development, and that fostering such a development can be a major reason of interest for the players.

### **The changing state of the players' characters is a major source of interest.**

Ryan noted that in every form of storytelling, "dramatic tension is usually correlated to the readers' interest in the hero's fate" (*Avatars*, 8), and "the prototypical suspense situation occurs when a character is in danger and the reader hopes for a favorable outcome" (*Narrative*, 101).<sup>36</sup> These points are easily applicable to story-driven and thematically rich analog games.

Actually, they may even be more crucial in this type of gaming than in many other forms of expression.

Once I start watching a movie, the story can continue to unfold independently from my degree of interest in it. Even if I leave the room and come back later, Darth Vader would still rebel against Palpatine to save his son. The same applies if I take a nap during a cutscene of a video game, or choose to skip it entirely: the game would still move to the game state that follows that cutscene.<sup>37</sup> Analog games, as we know by now, don't have this type of independent momentum, and nothing happens in them unless someone cares enough to make it happen. If a game with a representational element generates a fictional event, then, it must be because the players have enough interest to continue the game until the point in which that event occurred. And if the game is one in which players control individual characters, that point can only be reached if the players are sufficiently invested in the destiny of said characters.

## **The strategies employed by the players mirror the strategies the characters would use in the world of the game.**

Consistent game mechanics and evocative components may be very effective in creating the illusion of a fictional world and in depicting processes that supposedly occur within it.<sup>38</sup> But since games must always give the players the possibility to choose among different options and perform significant actions, what is to prevent us from making our in-game characters behave in ways that are contrary to the assumptions of the depicted situation? What if a player of a horror game decides to send a vampire to a tanning salon, just to see him burst into flames? The freedom of action bestowed on the players may be exploited by spoliers to go against the spirit of the game, and when the characters act in ways that are incompatible with their description, all other means of representation in the game fall apart, the illusion of reality completely obliterated.

When the problem is in a player's behavior, social selection usually takes care of it. Hobby board gamers are a self-selected community brought together by a common passion, and chances that a spolier will play with a group more than once are low. We have a bigger problem when it is a game design to encourage antirepresentational behavior, which is the case when the objectives and strategies that the players must pursue are not the same ones that their in-game characters would find desirable.<sup>39</sup> Cases of this phenomenon are fairly common in mass-market games. In *Monopoly*, for example, if a player goes to jail late in the game, when most areas have been developed, it is in the interest of that player to remain in jail.<sup>40</sup> This way the player avoids paying rent to other players, and may still collect revenue from her properties. As far as I know, this is not a strategy that most businessmen employ to maximize their profits. Similarly absurd situations arise in *Clue*. As Wallis noted, "not only can you win by proving that you committed the crime, you can accuse yourself and be wrong, and will lose the game as a result. As a game mechanic this works, but in story and genre terms it is a tale told by an idiot" (70). This problem is also pronounced in licensed games based on popular franchises, where the job of turning a lucrative theme into a game often falls in the hands of employees who care little about the original story or solid game design.

Dissonances between the strategies of the players and those that would make sense for their avatars are a good reminder of how important it is to ensure that the players behave in ways that are consistent with the represented situation. This result can be obtained by excluding antirepresentational actions from the players' options altogether, and by making thematically appropriate strategies necessary to achieve victory. When such an approach is taken, sequences of in-game actions develop compatibly with the setting and with one another, while still allowing for an interesting space of decision.

**The design leaves a degree of uncertainty as to the contents and options that will be available in each game session. A board game would therefore need to mimic some of the sense of progressive revelation that is typical of storytelling.**

This requirement indicates that games that tell stories must reproduce some of the progressive nature of storytelling. Fiction, in fact, does not present all the elements of a narrative at once, but discloses them gradually during the act of narrating.<sup>41</sup> A story-based analog game would therefore need to leave a degree of uncertainty as to the exact contents and options that will be available in a game session.<sup>42</sup>

Obviously, we cannot ask traditional games to provide this type of experience, because in them the number, identity, and function of the pieces are fixed and known. It would take a massive redesign of Chess to represent the unexpected arrival of a third party, or the revelation that the White Queen plans to betray her husband for a Black Knight! Hobby games of the last decades, however, have developed several techniques to mimic precisely this fundamental element of storytelling by introducing events, characters, and other elements, during gameplay itself. Games based on the *Legacy* system, as we will see later, take the idea of progressive revelation very seriously, to the point that they come with many game parts sealed in marked envelopes and boxes, and the players are expected to open each container and add the new components only when instructed by the game. With this system, concepts that we believed pertained only to storytelling (like the unexpected arrival of an enemy, or the revelation that an ally is a traitor) can

find a place in analog gaming, and can provide the players with the same sense of progressive revelation that one can find in literature or film.

Even without going this far, analog games know many ways to add unexpected elements to the initial situation in a design. Some games include random event tables, and the players roll on them to generate new content during gameplay. In other games, the playable surface is made of cardboard tiles that are shuffled together and added to the play area as the game progresses, simulating the players' gradual discovery of new locations. Games may also include decks of thematic cards that are drawn during gameplay to generate events, show newly available resources, add new characters, and alter previous elements in some way.<sup>43</sup> Through the use of such cards the players, just like the audience of a story, will be kept in the dark as to what is going to happen next in the storyworld of the game.<sup>44</sup>

In games that aim at creating a sense of progressive revelation, the effect of surprise is further magnified when the game set includes more of such components than will be used in any session—say, 100 event cards when only 20 will be revealed in a single game. The impact of these supernumerary elements is significant, as it will conceal from the players not just the order in which the contents of the game will be activated, but also the nature of what will be experienced in a given session.

It must also be noted that the randomness at the core of progressive revelation in many games may result in chaotic gameplay, but that doesn't necessarily have to be. In fact, story-driven games can strike a remarkable balance between randomness and structure. A game using event cards may have different decks for different situations, for example with tougher challenges and more valuable rewards to be drawn for stronger characters. In a deck of enemies, the big boss may be shuffled in the bottom 10 cards, preventing the players from entering the final showdown too early. The variations on these ideas are innumerable, and when well implemented they may act as a generator of fictional sequences that will be fully surprising at the level of the individual events, while also retaining a meaningful overarching structure.

# 2

## Other Narratological Considerations

We have now, I believe, a usable tool to make some distinctions within the vast and shapeless ocean of analog gaming. It seems safe to say that if a game meets all or most of the requirements outlined in the previous chapter, then its players will have reasons to expect the emergence of narrative elements from its gameplay. A game of this type will provide its players with relatable and malleable characters, and will supply a structure of rules and incentives that will shape the interaction with the setting into a chain of fictional events. The result will be an experience of playable interactive storytelling.

Once we have established that at least some analog games can tell stories, a series of further questions arises. What kind of stories do these games tell? Can we apply traditional concepts related to storytelling (like point of view, story time, and genre) to them? Before moving on, it may be worth to examine these questions in some detail, adding to our general frame for the understanding of story functions in games.

Let's start with genre. Is there a genre, or some genres, that games that tell stories seem to belong to? To answer this question, we must remember that the genre of a cultural artifact is usually inferred through a variety of clues, which may include structure, content, style, form, and effect on the audience (Frow, *Genre*). Structurally, many games that tell stories organize the sequence of represented events as a series of tasks through which the protagonists expand their agency in the storyworld, and this structure, as we already mentioned, may make such games resemble a playable *Bildungsroman*. Content-wise, a game could tell a story in any genre, just like other forms of fiction can, but historically analog games have attempted to tell stories mainly in the realms of fantasy and sci-fi, with relatively rare incursions in mystery and even rarer explorations in other fields. The origins of story-rich games lie in the early days of *Dungeons & Dragons*, as we will

see, and the influence of this game has most certainly determined a massive predilection for fantastic settings in our games.

As for the effect on the audience as one of the possible indicators of genre, we can say that playing a game is intrinsically exciting, as the uncertainties we encounter during gameplay generate a sense of suspense and expectation. The dynamic structure of gameplay can therefore trigger emotions that resonate with the reactions we associate with certain genres rather than others. The adventure genre is in this sense particularly well suited to be captured in game form precisely because adventures, like games, are all about performing significant actions in a context of uncertainty (Bryant Denton and Giglio, 25–26). Such affinity can help explain why most games discussed in this book express their theme in the form of an adventure in which the survival of the protagonists and/or other important elements of the setting are under some threat. Conversely, the emotions elicited by contemplative genres are less suited to be summoned through gameplay, and while they may not be impossible to render in game format, they have simply not proven to be a very fruitful source of inspiration for designers.

Point of view is another element of storytelling that can be examined in our context. Video games most commonly employ the first and third person perspective,<sup>1</sup> with the second person having a presence mainly in conversations in which a non-playing character addresses the avatar of the player. In tabletop role-playing games the players usually announce the actions of their characters in the first or third person, and the game master describes environmental details and outcomes of actions from a large variety of perspectives.<sup>2</sup> In analog games the construction of the point of view appears to have considerably less variety. The second person is seen mainly in games that include utterances by non-playing character directed to the players' characters, or in scenario instructions such as: "You have reached the entrance of the tomb." Even in these cases this presence is not a major element of the experience. The first person is also rarely seen in analog games, although it would be far from impossible to show the setting of an analog game from the point of view of a playing character, like in a first-person shooter.<sup>3</sup> This is what happens in Stephen Hand's solitaire game *Chainsaw Warrior* (Games Workshop, 1987), in which the hero explores a building swarming with zombies, and the space of the story is constructed

through illustrated cards that show each area from the perspective of the protagonist. Enemies are also depicted as the playing character sees them, often through the crosshair that he is ideally placing on them.<sup>4</sup> This use of a first-person approach remains nevertheless a rare exception to the norm.

In practice, most board games put the player in a position that is functionally similar to the third person of most literature and film, and to what in video games is known as the overhead view (Nitsche, 99–102). Our avatar stands fully externalized in front of us, in a clear system of relations with the surrounding space. This perspective can be further described as belonging to one of two variants, depending on the extension of the gap of knowledge between avatar and player. In one case we can talk of omniscient third person that provides us with a perfect view over the entire field of play and complete knowledge of each game state. The other variant is the limited third person, which restricts our understanding of the play area to the sections that the characters have actually visited. A good example comes from modular games with terrain tiles that are added to the play area only when a character moves through an unexplored edge.

As for the construction of in-story time, a difference between most board games and literature, film, tabletop RPGs, and many modern video games, is that in board games time is clearly compartmentalized in discrete temporal cells, usually identified as turns or rounds, each with a strictly defined range of allotted actions.<sup>5</sup> In video games like the ones in the *Pokémon* or *Fire Emblem* series a lot of the action also occurs turn-by-turn, and in most role-playing games sequences of combat are resolved in a series of clearly defined segments.<sup>6</sup> In most video games and in most sequences of an RPG, however, time is much more fluid than that, and players can budget it more freely.

Construction of time in board games is also more limiting in regard to the chronological order in which the events are presented. In analog games that tell stories time tends to move forward in a straight line, from the beginning of the affair to its end, with little room for flashbacks and flashforwards. A partial exception occurs in mystery games, where one may have a late revelation concerning events that have occurred earlier in the storyworld. Even in these cases, the reversal of story time usually takes the form of a

synthetic description of earlier events rather than a fully playable sequence in which those events are rendered in detail.

Another element of literature, film, and even video games that seems to have no role in story-centered board games is the idea of the unreliable narration. In video games the use of dreams, visions, and hallucinations, is common, resulting in unreliable sequences that may or may not be taking place in the mind of the protagonist only. In board games, the events created by the configuration of material components on the board is usually reliable, including in cases when the game does not disclose all of the relevant information. In board games significant pieces of information may be unknown, but when they are revealed they are to be taken as 100 percent accurate. I may not know the exact location and armor value of my opponent's tanks in a wargame, but when I do sight those tanks, I don't usually have any reason to wonder if my spotter is dreaming, hallucinating, fantasizing, or peering into a parallel universe.

Other insights can be drawn from discussions that have taken place in video game studies. A distinction that these studies have posited, and that applies to all forms of interactive fiction, is the one between embedded and emergent narratives.<sup>7</sup> Board games that tell stories do not have to choose one against the other, and in fact in most cases they productively combine both modes.

For example, story-driven board games often include embedded elements in the form of “pre-generated narrative content that exists prior to a player’s interaction with the game,” and that is “fixed and predetermined” (Salen and Zimmerman, 383).<sup>8</sup> Board games organized around scenarios include this idea with their reliance on short embedded narratives that introduce the goals of each mission and describe the possible outcomes. Illustrations, representational game pieces, and flavor texts on cards, are other sources of embedded materials, whose content was already inscribed in the game before the players started interacting with it.

However, a narrative in a game can also be emergent, “which means that it arises from the set of rules governing interaction with the game system” (Salen and Zimmerman, 383).<sup>9</sup> Calleja offers an effective example of this mechanism by showing how simple numerical stats in a role-playing game

may translate into fictional elements: “In an RPG system that expresses attributes as ranging between the values of 1 and 21, a character with an appearance value of 4 will be considered rather unpleasant-looking. Although the mental image generated by these numbers will vary among players, their imaginings are grounded in the numerical value and the rules system that gives it meaning” (129). These quantitative definitions are not window-dressing or mere background information. Rather, by facilitating certain actions and disincentivizing others, they channel the players’ behavior in specific directions, and play a pivotal role in the shaping of the overall experience.<sup>10</sup> The process also works in the opposite direction: if ludic functions like numerical stats can translate into thematic elements, purely representational content can influence the way a character acts within the ludic affordances of a game. This point is made by Nikki Valens in the game *Legacy of Dragonholt*, in which she insists on the importance of imagining the physical appearance of one’s character, and underlines the effects that that representation will have on gameplay:

Details such as your age, height and weight, skin, hair, and eye color, sex and gender identity, clothing style, basic equipment, and additional features such as scars or tattoos can all shape who you are. ... The appearance you choose can even inform later decisions about your personality, ideals, and background. For example, if you choose to look and dress in ways that people might expect from someone of your race and class, this might be because you put value in tradition and the general expectations put on you by others. But if you choose to look otherwise, this could be because you value independence and personal expression [character creation booklet, 13].

Calleja also noted that in role-playing games the overlapping of ludic functions and thematic representation is greatly enhanced by the use of physical props like maps and miniatures, which can help the players connect with the imaginary world depicted through the mechanics (129). This idea is central to our investigation, because it shows the narrative power that can be generated by the synergy of representational game mechanics and tangible components. Such synergy may be desirable in some RPGs, but it is absolutely foundational in story-driven board games, whose only way to express content is through the manipulation of material objects.<sup>11</sup> We can

therefore say that successful story-driven board games achieve their goals by combining embedded and emergent elements, with the embedded ones to be found in the inalterable components of the game (illustrations, texts, boards), which act like a lexicon, and the emergent ones resulting from the application of the rules and the execution of the mechanics, which have the function of a syntax.

The fact that a board game owes its existence to a set of tangible components also gives the players a lot of latitude in the way they can choose to customize the props of the design. While it is possible to modify video games too, user-driven alterations are easier and more intuitive to execute with physical games, and open even to the least technically savvy of players. A good example is in the fairly common tendency to replace the original components of a game with others that are functionally equivalent but more aesthetically pleasing—a practice known as “pimping” a game. Generic tokens and markers can be replaced by nicer ones made by the players, borrowed from other games, or purchased from companies that specialize in game upgrades (like Meeple Source). Flat cardboard pieces may be replaced with tridimensional models; unpainted miniatures may be added color and visual detail; toy cars may become vehicles for race games or landscape features in wargames; the graphics of cards and boards can be remade, sometimes with a complete retheming of the game. While such pimping is essentially cosmetic, it may considerably enhance the atmosphere and flavor of a game, adapting the tangible aspects of the design to the specific needs of a group, and in so doing increasing the players’ interest. If in story-driven board games the components tell a story, then components that closely match the players’ preferences will make that story all the more vivid and engaging.

This is particularly true when the pimping involves the avatars of the players, because tailoring them to one’s personal preferences greatly facilitates the process of identification. Many players love to see their characters represented in miniatures that they have carefully selected, purchased, assembled, based, painted, and maybe finished with touches that give depth to the background of the character (like a scar that was inflicted in a duel, or a tattoo that indicates loyalty to a cult). What used to be a store-bought game piece can become a portrait of the player as a young elf, and as such it can function as a bridge between the world of the player and that of the character.

Good rules are obviously also crucial for a board game to be effective at all levels. Not all games require the same type of approach to and respect for the rules though. In RPGs “there are more important things than rules, especially role playing, a good story line, a realistic campaign world, and a skillful Game Master, not necessarily in that order (Plamondon, 7).<sup>12</sup> This hierarchy of priorities usually justifies some fudging with rules and procedures in RPGs, especially when a ludic element of the design would affect a pleasurable narrative. In this mentality, the rules of an RPG become just “another prop that can be targeted by the transformative capacities of play” (Sicart, 8).

In the board games that interest us the focus, too, is on story, but the handling of the rules is considerably less carefree than in RPGs. Because story-driven games may be competitive, the rules must be religiously implemented to ensure that everyone has a fair chance to win. In cooperative games the rules must also be adhered to for the satisfaction of overcoming the challenge to be meaningful. Differently from RPGs, the best story-driven board games come to life through smooth and organic systems of rules that do not require deviations from the system to express a pleasurable narrative. When this occurs, the mechanics of the game start feeling like second nature and easily fade into a distant background in the players’ mind, making it possible to establish a deep connection with the theme and the characters in the game.

This idea is not contradicted by the fact that players often choose to partially redesign the procedures of the games they play.<sup>13</sup> Maybe the game gives an unfair advantage to one of the sides, and must be recalibrated accordingly; or maybe some players dislike randomness, and decide to tweak a design to reduce or even eliminate that element. The malleable nature of analog games can facilitate the formation of a syntonic connection with the players because a design can be easily altered to fit a range of different purposes. And if the game has strong thematic elements and meets our requirements for storytelling, then the ability of a group to modify that game according to their needs can stimulate the expression of the narrative potential of the design.

# 3

## The Board Games of *Dungeons & Dragons*

The point of origin for the development of intensely narrative analog games can be seen in the birth of role-playing games in the early 1970s. This should come as no surprise since tabletop role-playing games are an undeniably narrative style of games. In RPGs the mechanics have intense representational value even when they are constituted by mere numerical values (as we saw in Calleja's example of a character with an appearance of 4). Most importantly, during gameplay the players make utterances that describe the fictional actions their characters are attempting, and these utterances result in both ludic and narrative developments. This type of in-game action makes any hard separation between story and mechanics lose its credibility, because the main mechanic here *is* to add fictional content to the progression of the adventure. For this style of game to emerge, however, game mechanics needed to learn how to acquire representational power in the first place. This innovation originated from the productive combination of two already existing but separate activities: wargaming, and worldbuilding.

Games have been around for a long time, but throughout history most games have been characterized by self-referential rules, and if a theme was present at all, little attention was paid to ensure that the rules portrayed it accurately. Meanwhile, playable fiction remained the almost absolute purview of children's games of make-believe, and, in the last two centuries, of toys.<sup>1</sup> These are powerful intermediaries to create imaginary situations, but they are also traditionally unconcerned with formal system of rules. The Renaissance and the Baroque narrative games we saw in introduction are worthy exceptions to this tendency, and represent early synergies between rules and content. Their influence, however, did not extend past their age, and they don't seem to have had any influence on the game practices of the following centuries.

Theme and game mechanics started to converge again only in the early 19th century, and they did so through the medium of military wargames. Such games originated in the Prussian army as a tool to train officers and analyze military situations. From there, they spread to the armies of other countries, especially after the Franco-Prussian War created an opportunity to showcase the effectiveness of the Prussian training to other European governments. By the early 20th century wargaming had become a standard tool in most Western armies. Starting from 1954, with the foundation of the game company Avalon Hill and the publication of the game *Tactics* by Charles S. Roberts, wargaming began to expand its reach outside of the military circles, and quickly became a pastime for civilian hobbyists.

At the core of these wargames we find not self-referential systems like those of Mancala or Backgammon, but a serious representational imperative whose purpose is to bring realism to gameplay. If a rule is added to a military wargame, it must be because it is thematically linked to some aspect of the subject that the designer finds necessary to include. In official military wargaming, representational accuracy must always prevail over other demands of the game system. It would indeed be highly irresponsible if military and political leaders allocated human lives and national resources based on models that value pleasurable gameplay over realism. In recreational wargaming the players and the designers have more leeway, and playability becomes much more of a factor. While being less technical than its military progenitor, recreational wargaming remains nevertheless highly representational. Starting from the 1950s, it was mainly recreational wargaming that boosted the diffusion of the idea that games could function as a window to a represented reality. The fictional reality created by these simulations, however, had the limitation of feeling somewhat spotty and precarious, as if the borders of the play area defined a small world that was summoned into existence at the beginning of the session and magically returned to nothingness at the end. For wargaming to become a means to create immersive settings for storytelling, its representational philosophy needed to enter in synergy with a different practice: worldbuilding.

MMORPGs have popularized “the notion of shared persistent world environments full of both instrumental and free action” (T.L. Taylor, 28), to the point that when we talk about worldbuilding we tend to think of video

games and role-playing games first. In truth, the practice of creating imaginary realities that a user is invited to inhabit predates the practices of modern gaming, and originates in non-playable, non-interactive fiction of the 19th and 20th centuries. In 1973 fantasy writer Lin Carter had already touched upon the subject in his classic study *Imaginary Worlds*, in which he emphasized how good fiction can transport the reader into fantastic, yet consistent and believable lands. Burroughs' cycle of Barsoom, Tolkien's Middle-earth, and Leiber's land of Nehwon received particular praise in this regard. In more recent years Peterson and Saler have produced excellent investigations of early virtual realities, and, like Carter, have located the origins of worldbuilding several decades before the diffusion of video games and tabletop role-playing games.

Fiction always needs to provide some spatial coordinates to frame its plot, and for this reason the potential to turn a fictional space into an object of interest has always been present in the medium. Only, that potential had not been fully exploited until the late 19th century, when American and European authors started creating “fantasy realms presented in a realist mode, cohesively structured, empirically detailed, and logically based, often accompanied by scholarly apparatus such as footnotes, glossaries, appendices, maps, and tables” (Saler, 25).<sup>2</sup> The innovation was that while traditional settings did not seem to extend much past the confines of the explicitly described scenes, the works of modern authors like Conan Doyle, Lovecraft, and Tolkien, managed to create the illusion that what we see in the text is only a small portion of a vast, consistent, and persistent world.<sup>3</sup> Anyone who is familiar with the intensity and level of detail of fan discussions about the universes of *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, or the *Song of Ice and Fire* series, will find further confirmation of this idea, and will feel comfortable adding these worlds to the previous examples. What we have, then, is a highly appreciated tradition of writers and directors who have presented their audiences with fascinating universes to explore, complete with distinctive landscapes, civilizations, and customs.

Once this tendency to mentally inhabit parallel realities became common among consumers of fiction, it couldn't be long before someone felt the desire to participate more actively in the world of the story; to interact with its characters, or better, to *be* one of them.<sup>4</sup> Precisely because of their

partially contradictory nature, which welcomes observers but rejects activists, non-interactive imaginary worlds introduced their audiences to the pleasure of inhabiting a parallel reality while still leaving them longing for more. Knowing that behind every hill in Tolkien's world there are more places to see won't be satiate us forever, and sooner or later we will want to actually go over that hill.<sup>5</sup>

A partial solution to this problem presented itself through the affordances of wargaming. Wargames had already developed a sophisticated set of tools to create simulated realities; all that was needed was to pair the mimetic techniques of wargaming with the taste for storytelling and worldbuilding that literature, film, and TV had fostered. If wargames could portray a playable version of the battle of Waterloo, couldn't they do the same with the Battle of Five Armies? If they could represent a duel between two medieval warriors, couldn't they also capture the fight between Gandalf and the Balrog? Wargaming practices reached their full narrative potential when they met with the worldbuilding attitude of modern fantasy, and started providing their players with the means to enter fictional realities that would respond to actions taken in them. The result was the creation of *Dungeons & Dragons*, originally published by TSR in 1974, from which the entire genre of role-playing gaming spawned. This having been established, our purpose is to investigate how a story-based game like *D&D* may have given impulse to a narrative approach in board gaming, and also, since tabletop wargames inspired *D&D*, to see more in detail what narrative seeds may have been transferred from board gaming of the 1960s and early 1970s to the original role-playing game.

Thanks to many remarkable studies published in the last decade, we now know a lot about the origins of *Dungeons & Dragons* and its influence on role-playing.<sup>6</sup> Such a rich bibliography frees me from the need to launch into a minute retelling of the events that surrounded the creation of *D&D*, and allows me to focus on the factors that most directly contribute to our discourse. *D&D* came to be as the result of a series of experimentations pioneered in the community of wargaming enthusiasts centered in the Twin Cities in Minnesota between the late 1960s and early 1970s. Almost none of these innovations was unprecedented, but their original combination resulted in something truly groundbreaking.

For starters, these gamers adopted the idea of the umpire that had been common in military wargames, but was usually seen as optional in recreational wargaming.<sup>7</sup> The advantage of having an umpire was initially merely practical, given that it prevented endless squabbles around minor points of the rules. The umpire would have the final say in all disagreements among players, allowing the game to flow more smoothly. In practice, because the umpire's decisions generated fictional occurrences happening in the storyworld of the game, this also meant that the umpire started gradually taking on the functions of a narrator. Michael J. Korns' *Modern War in Miniature* (self-published, 1966) offers a perfect example of the porosity between the role of the referee and that of the narrator in the person of the umpire. In *Modern War in Miniature* the referee would ask the players to describe the actions attempted by their soldiers, and would then relate the resulting outcome. The verbal acts performed by the participants became fictional events occurring in the setting of the game, and these events, spawning sequentially from one another, ended up forming an identifiable narrative—as in this example of gameplay from the rules<sup>8</sup>:

Player: I'm picking up my sub-machine gun and my grenades and running over the ditch beside the bridge. I want to keep looking for the American in the houses while I'm running.

Judge: There he is again! He just stuck his head around the corner of that white building about 30 meters in front of you. Here, he's looking around again.

Player: Am I in the ditch now?

Judge: Yes, you've been here about 2 seconds now.

Player: All right, then I'm firing my Schmeisser at him in a long burst.

Judge: There is a sub-machine gun firing on the board. Your Schmeisser is kicking chunks out of the edge of the building all around him... it's hard to say whether you hit him or whether he pulled his head back [9].

Our wargamers of the Twin Cities also started playing games of man-to-man combat, which were still a relative rarity at the time. This scale for

wargaming started gaining traction during the late '60s and early '70s, precisely at the same time as *D&D* was being developed. For example, between 1966 and 1972 Michael Carr produced three editions of *Fight in the Skies*, a board game of individual aircraft combat in World War I. Around the same time, several designers started developing wargame rules for gunfights in the Old West, which also took into account the individual traits of each character (Gush-Finch, 164). In 1972, wargame guru Tony Bath organized in Southampton a game in which "each player represents a hero, sometimes operating alone and sometimes with a couple or so henchmen, peasants, churls, or whatever, the object of the exercise being the seeking out and acquisition of some rare treasure." The characters that the players controlled were drawn from literary tradition, and included John Carter, Gandalf, Beowulf, and Robin Hood.<sup>9</sup> In his 1973 book *Setting up a Wargame Campaign*, Tony Bath insisted on the importance of supplying each commander in a wargame with a mental and physical characterization, which will later provide direction to the events in the game. In a world populated by psychologically defined characters, in fact, the game system will generate its own narrative by suggesting scenarios through the interaction of each agent's individual traits. In the same year SPI published *Sniper!*, one of the first boxed wargames to feature man-to-man combat, and in 1975 Bill Lamming released a set of wargame rules that allowed "to fight battles in the medieval period using figures with their own individual personality, which enables a player to be a character on the battlefield" (136). In 1976 the tactical game *Swordplay* (Tom Cleaver, Cleaver Games) brings concern for individual representation to a whole new level by overlaying the body of the duelling protagonists with a hex grid that is used to determine the exact position of each combat move and wound.

Throughout the Seventies, small-scale encounters that gave prominence to highly defined characters clearly became a considerable presence in wargames, and the rise of individual-based role-playing games in the same period can be seen simultaneously as an effect of this transition and one of the impulses behind it.<sup>10</sup> The application of the representational mechanics of wargaming to individual characters was also an important step toward the creation of story-driven board games, because it meant that the game experience could now include the type of character that we most commonly see as the backbone of fiction.

Next, the wargamers of the Twin Cities started stringing several battles together into a larger, sustained campaign to be played over several sessions. Campaign systems that gave structure to this style of play had already been circulating among wargamers, and had been recently discussed in the books *How to Play War Games in Miniature* by Joseph Morschauser III, and *War Games* by Donald F. Featherstone.<sup>11</sup> Both works were published in 1962, and we can assume that they described practices that were still common in the years in which role-playing started to emerge from recreational wargaming.

Morschauser in his work describes several ways of linking multiple wargame battles together into a larger campaign. The simplest way to do so is to choose a campaign from history and play a series of games about the battles that formed that campaign—say, Second Bull Run, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, etc. In this case the historical background furnishes all the information the players need, establishing forces in play, terrain, schedule of reinforcements, and so on. Unfortunately following the historical progression of a campaign also reduces the agency of the players, because “there is never any question of deciding where armies would enter the battlefield, or how many units will be involved. These things are all set down by history itself” (101–102). To add a strategic and cohesive dimension to a wargaming campaign, Morschauser proposes to adopt what he calls “the imaginary system” (102). To prepare for an imaginary campaign, the players select a map of a large region like Eastern Europe or the United States, and draw a grid of one-inch squares on it. The players then divide this grid in two main areas, assign one to each player, and name an equal number of cities in their region as their bases. Next, the players build their forces and mark the position of each army with a wooden cube on the map. Players then alternate moving army cubes from area to area in an attempt to conquer the opponent’s bases. When opposing armies meet in the same square, the strategic map is temporarily put aside, and the engagement is resolved as a normal miniature battle “set up with terrain which approximates the terrain found in the squares on the map occupied by the armies in contact” (105). After the battle the losses suffered by each side are recorded, and they will affect the players’ future availability of troops. Freed from the imperative of following fixed historical guidelines, the imaginary system can be used to create consistent, overarching narratives that “can be made to last several actual months” (106). The interaction of tactical areas

with the strategic map turns each encounter into an element of a larger experience, giving it more meaning than a one-shot battle. With each session building upon the previous, the imaginary world of the game also starts developing its own history, and the players increasingly tend to think of this setting as a parallel, independent reality.

Featherstone, in his 1962 book, stressed most of the same points about campaigning made by Morschauser.<sup>12</sup> For example, he explained that after playing wargames for a while, “the players discover a urge to relate this victory or defeat to the conditions applying in the next battle, the casualties incurred having some effect on the conflict in which that army fought” (*War Games*, 45). Featherstone, too, responded to this need by employing concepts from historical wargaming to construct imaginary campaigns. The core idea is the same as the one described by Morschauser, and it allows to create sequences of imaginary events that can form a whole parallel history:

A completely mythical campaign is often conducted, using fancifully uniformed troops of imaginary countries and with highly coloured reasons for fighting the war. This can be fascinating, as ruling houses, petty dukedoms, jealous heirs and dashing princes provide unlimited excuses for one state declaring war on another adjacent dukedom, or for those gaily coloured Hussars to be sent to the distant frontier where they will die gallantly fighting off hordes of savage tribesmen threatening their country [*War Games*, 46].

In 1969 John Tunstill confirmed the narrative potential of the campaign system when he included a section on the topic in his *Discovering Wargames*, and wrote that “campaigns are to warfare as chapters are to books” (59). In 1971 Charles Grant stated that creating a fictional setting for a campaign is preferable to employing an historical one, “as one can decide exactly on the sort of campaign desired and can organise the political background to personal taste” (147–148).<sup>13</sup>

Around the same time Tony Bath advocated employing real-world maps as imaginary settings for fantastic campaigns. The advantage of turning a real place into a “mythical continent is that, if your original creation is properly done, it will last you for not just one campaign but for as many as you like,

and in the course of these the continent will develop a certain life of its own” (6). Another suggested option is to mix together materials from fantasy literature and history, for example treating a “map of Middle-earth from Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* series as a sort of undiscovered continent, still in ancient/medieval stage,” and use it as the setting for an invasion by “an American expedition of Civil War vintage” (65). In general, Bath follows the idea of maneuvering armies on a strategic map and resolving encounters of enemy forces on a tactical table. At the moment of the encounter, however, an important innovation is introduced. For each type of terrain on the strategic map, Bath recommends to create a series of cards showing multiple landscape configurations, divided by type—with different groups of hills, lakes of different shapes, and so on. When a battle must be resolved, the players randomly select one of the cards with the terrain of the encounter, and use it as a template to set up the tactical table (13).<sup>14</sup> Preparing the area of the confrontation now reveals new and unexpected details of the imaginary setting, and in so doing strengthens the illusion that the campaign takes place in a detailed fictional world. In 1975 Lin Carter added to this trend when, together with Scott Bizar, he released a set of wargame rules by the title *Royal Armies of the Hyborian Age*, set in the world of Conan. That setting “is supposed to be our own planet during an imaginary historical period Howard called the ‘Hyborian Age’” (ii). The designers made sure that the players had a chance to explore the setting in some detail, and they did so by adapting the rules for campaigns described by Featherstone, Morschauser, and Bath. Similarly to what Bath suggested, Carter and Bizar recommended to determine the terrain of the confrontation by using “one hundred possible terrain situations on index cards” (29).

There can be little doubt that the widespread wargaming habit of using maps as access points to imaginary worlds was a relevant source for modern RPGs. This is in fact the technique that seasoned wargamer and *D&D* co-creator Gary Gygax used to come up with the setting for his first RPG adventures. As Appelcline explains, Gygax created a parallel Earth called Oerth, which “looked much like our own Earth, but filled with imaginary cities and countries” (’70–’79, 39). This idea followed the traditional wargaming technique to use a real place as if it was an imaginary one, and shows how easily players could repurpose the tools of wargaming to fit the necessities of story-driven gameplay.

In the early 1970s, clearly, the times were ripe for the emergence of role-playing games from a rib of traditional wargaming. The wargamers of the Twin Cities had already adopted many of the conventions we now associate with role-playing, such as the use of a game master, the representation of individual characters, and the reliance on the worldbuilding possibilities of the campaign system. To turn this cloud of ideas into *Dungeons & Dragons* only two elements were still missing: one, a shift from the bird-eye view of wargaming to the limited perspective of what each character could perceive in the story, and the other, a fantasy setting. Both of these elements were provided by Dave Arneson, to whom we owe the creation of the first, larval version of *D&D*.

Arneson was the one who had this revolutionary idea of taking the players' characters out of the sunny landscape of the battlefield and throw them into a deadly maze full of monsters and traps. This setting was virtually unexplored in wargaming,<sup>15</sup> and it cleverly deprived the players of a general understanding of the play area. The innovation in turn made the game much more tense and exciting. "The result little resembled a traditional wargame: it was more a game of exploration, negotiated verbally with the referee, punctuated by bursts of combat" (Peterson, *Playing*, 68).<sup>16</sup> This new positioning of the character had the effect of furthering the sense of emotional connection between players and characters, as players were now forced to rely strictly on the information available to their characters. Moreover, while traditional wargamers only needed to worry about the interactions that the game pieces could establish during gameplay, the players trapped in Arneson's dungeons also had to wonder what content exactly was going to be included in the game. By concealing most of the information about the adventure and by doling it out only in small installments, Arneson imbued his new style of gaming with the sense of progressive revelation that we know to be a key trait of fiction.

The other innovation that Arneson brought was the adoption of a fantasy setting. Wargaming up to that point had remained mainly historical, with rare experimentations in the direction of fantasy and sci-fi. However, one of the main reasons why players play wargames is the desire to experience not just what happened, but also what could have happened in a given situation. Wargames that simulate the material factors of their portrayed events

fascinate their players precisely because actions taken in them seem to generate credible what-if scenarios.<sup>17</sup> As Phil Barker argued in a 1976 article for the *Battle* magazine, wargames are all about exploring hypothetical situations, and if wargamers can appreciate a game that shows what could have happened if Nazi Germany had invaded Britain, they should also be equipped to ask what could have happened if Nazi Germany had acquired alien technologies, or what effect the discovery of magic could have had on Medieval warfare. In other words, the potential for non-historical play was always implicit in the intrinsically counterfactual nature of wargaming. Relying precisely on this potential, Arneson decided to set his stories in an original fantasy world.

The result was a game that played like no other, and that was appreciated by the players for its narrative, evocative, and immersive elements. In the same period another wargamer, Gary Gygax, was independently experimenting with remarkably similar ideas, especially when it came to the use of an umpire as a narrator, the reliance on individual characters, and the inclusion of a fantasy element in wargaming. Gygax had even published a set of rules for Medieval wargames called *Chainmail* (Guidon, 1971) which contained a section on how to add fantastic elements to a tactical wargame.<sup>18</sup> From the cooperation between Gygax and Arneson, and from the combination of their independent ideas, *Dungeons & Dragons* would come to be. Published for the first time in 1974, the game quickly became a major hit, and revolutionized the world of hobby gaming by providing the players with immersive stories set in a persistent world that could be experienced through fictional avatars. All of the traits we listed in chapter 1 were finally present in a single design, and it became immediately clear to anyone who tried *D&D* that a game could, indeed, tell a story. The connections between *D&D* and the tabletop games that gave it its impulse remained nevertheless very strong.

After all, we already saw that all the most allegedly original elements of *D&D* already existed in wargaming. The novelty of *D&D* was not in breaking up with that tradition, but in the integration of a storytelling element within a combination of well-established wargaming principles.<sup>19</sup> The result still looked very much like a conventional board game, to the point that “a modern role-player might actually classify that original rule set as a wargame

rather than an RPG” (Appelcline, ’70–’79, 347). TSR for sure marketed *D&D* as a wargame when it released it with the subtitle *Rules for Fantastic Medieval Wargames Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures*. The following year *D&D* was advertised as “swords and sorcery wargaming with paper and pencil and miniatures” in the rulebook of TSR’s *War of Wizards*. In 1975 Oden wrote that *D&D* was outselling virtually every other set of wargame rules, and in 1979 Eric Goldberg estimated that “role-playing is perhaps the fastest growing genre within the wargaming hobby” (*Commando* RPG rulebook, 17). In the same years, *D&D* and other early RPGs would routinely be reviewed as wargames in specialized magazines.

Not only was the original *D&D* a clever mix of known wargaming conventions rather than a true departure from wargaming; the game also required (or made it desirable) to integrate two preexisting tabletop games in its gameplay. The first was Gygax’s set of wargame rules *Chainmail*, which were to be used to resolve combat in *D&D*.<sup>20</sup> The original *D&D*, in fact, did not come with a fully developed set of combat rules—an omission that by our contemporary standards makes the first *D&D* more of a supplement for *Chainmail* than a game in its own right. The other game that players were supposed to use in conjunction with the original *D&D* was *Outdoor Survival* by Jim Dunnigan (Avalon Hill, 1972), whose board was to become the strategic map of *D&D* (Peterson, *Playing*, 133–134).<sup>21</sup> In *Underworld & Wilderness Adventures*, the third booklet of the original *D&D* set, Gygax and Arneson explained that “*Outdoor Survival* has a playing board perfect for general adventures. Catch basins are castles, buildings are towns, and the balance of the terrain is as indicated” (15). This meant that when the players left the dungeon to travel long distances, the action would transfer to the board of *Outdoor Survival*, while the players mentally adapted the generic landscape features of that board to those of the new fantasy setting. *D&D* was therefore following the well established practice of combining a strategic map with a tactical display, as it was typical of wargame campaigns. In a period when fantasy maps were not readily available, Gygax and Arneson were also following Morschauser’s, Featherstone’s and Bath’s idea of repurposing previously existing maps. While intended to be realistic to a degree, the board of *Outdoor Survival* worked well for this task due to the large variety of landscapes it included, with deserts, swamps, plains,

mountains, and forests all stitched next to each other. And if this patchwork appearance makes the board look geologically suspicious, it certainly opened the possibility for a great range of fictional encounters and events.

Other elements of *Outdoor Survival* seem to have played a role in the creative process that led to *D&D*. When the characters of *OS* get lost, they must move in a random direction determined by comparing the result of a die roll with a diagram printed on the board. The original *D&D* set borrowed this idea in toto: “There is a chance of being lost, the chance depending on the type of terrain the party begins its turn upon. A lost party must move in the direction indicated by the die roll (1–6, as shown in the *Outdoor Survival* rules and on that board) and may make only one direction change from that direction” (17). Another interesting connection is in the fact that *Outdoor Survival* features individual characters whose level of vitality could increase or decrease throughout the game, in an early intuition of the idea of “health points” that would be key in so many board games and RPGs. Next, *Outdoor Survival* included several event tables, which could be used to add thematic depth to gameplay by randomly generating a range of unpredictable obstacles.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the first edition of *D&D* provided a system to generate random encounters, which differed from its precedent in *OS* only for the higher level of detail.<sup>23</sup> In addition, *Outdoor Survival* was designed to accommodate multiple styles of play through the use of scenarios—a well known element in wargame campaigns at the time, but a rare occurrence in other types of board game. *Outdoor Survival* allowed the players to select different challenges, which in turn would create different sets of virtual events in the world of the game. In one scenario the characters may be simply required to get to safety by exiting the board; in another, they may attempt to rescue fictional characters or retrieve valuable items. All of these are goals that have been of great importance in the history of role-playing, where time and time again players have sent their avatars to explore hostile lands, search for people to rescue, and look for treasures and special items.

This is not to say that *OS* is the missing link between wargames and *D&D*. Rather, we should see *OS*, campaign wargaming, and *D&D*, as parts of a continuous spectrum of nuances that emanated from a desire to generate compelling settings and experience engaging narratives. The creation of *D&D* certainly allows us to identify the point in time when games reached

their full narrative potential, and players, in turn, learned to enjoy the experience of co-creating a story through the affordances of a game. Role-playing games came into existence as a development of wargaming, and turned out to be an excellent tool for the creation of stories. These two facts, however, while both correct, may create a misleading perception. Scholars that have written about the narrative elements of role-playing games have often discussed the origin of RPGing from wargaming, but have paid little attention to what happened to tabletop gaming after RPGs came into existence. The resulting impression is that in order to tell stories role-playing games completely jettisoned their board-based origins, and that board games in turn lost the very narrative potential that had propelled *D&D*. It almost looks as though *D&D* walked away from board gaming carrying all the storytelling with itself, leaving board games stuck with abstract mechanics and flimsy themes.

The historical reconstruction in my study goes in a very different direction. My contention is that the evolution of storytelling techniques in board games and role-playing games did not start to diverge at all with the publication of *D&D*. It is true that *D&D* demonstrated that games can tell stories, but that discovery did not lead designers of board games to throw their arms in the air and lament that they could never hope to do the same. Rather, game designers immediately capitalized on the possibilities offered by the new style of play, and plugged it back into the very field of board gaming from which RPGs had just emerged. We could say that wargames led to RPGs, and RPGs led to story-driven board games, but the massive overlapping between the two styles makes even this genealogical description inadequate. What happened is that between the 1960s and 1970s hobby players started combining wargaming practices with storytelling and worldbuilding, and the result of these experiments was the virtually simultaneous birth of RPGs *and* story-driven board games. These two types of game were not parent and child, but fraternal twins born out of a shared desire to tell stories in playable form. Such being the nature of our subject, our treatment of storytelling in analog gaming emphasizes the continuity between role-playing games and board games from the 1970s to the 1990s, and, after a brief hiatus, again in the 21st century. We know that RPGs can tell stories, and showing that historically there has been a strong connection between board games and

RPGs is evidence that the former could be employed for the same storytelling purposes of the latter.

Between the late '60s and the early '90s, in fact, RPGs remained constrained by strictly defined spatial and temporal parameters, just like board games have always been, while board games appropriated so many of the qualities and functions of RPGs that they often came to be seen as RPGs that could be played without a master. As long as this alliance between role-playing games and board games persisted, and as long as ideas kept flowing freely from one type of game to the other, many board games retained the narrative qualities of their fraternal twin. These qualities were the very same ones that tabletop wargames had lent to RPGs in the first place, but somehow in the new context they now felt *different*. The original ideas behind campaign gaming, playable settings, and individual-based action were rejuvenated by their association with RPGs. Once the narrative potential of board gaming went through the filter of role-playing, it suddenly gained more visibility, a keener focus, and a deeper resonance. It is at that point that those old ideas became new again, and started stimulating a massive interest for narrative design in both board gaming and role-playing gaming.

# 4

## Tolkien's Legacy

We saw in the previous chapter how hobby players experimented with well known rules and conventions of wargaming to inject vivid storytelling elements into their games. Starting from 1975, the year after the original release of *D&D*, an impressive number of fantasy games was released, and the temptation may be to see this flourish solely as a direct effect of *D&D*. In truth, the seeds for a turn toward narratively rich and non-historical games were being planted in several places, often independently from one another. In the U.S., this was done by the Midwestern wargamers that started exploring fantasy dungeons; in Britain, by wargamers that designed adventures taking place either in the fantasy world of Hyboria created by Tony Bath,<sup>1</sup> or in a series of patchwork worlds that could include John Carter, Robin Hood, and Beowulf.<sup>2</sup>

To this already multifocal landscape we must add a third factor that contributed to the diffusion of role-playing games as well as to the fortune of story-rich board games. This factor was the growing international popularity of Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The first novel of Tolkien's saga was released in the 1930s, and the opus maior in the 1950s, but neither work achieved large recognition in the U.S. until the 1960s, when affordable paperback editions started circulating in America and college students became passionate about the story, the characters, and the setting. At the same time when wargame campaigns showed that a game could be adapted into an inhabitable storyworld, the gentle obsession that readers of Tolkien were developing for Middle-earth determined an almost mirror-like situation, with a fixed storyworld that fans were desperate to visit and interact with. These two impulses did not conflict with one another, and in fact often coexisted in the same group of enthusiasts, sometimes in the same person, as many hobbyists were (and still are) both fans of Tolkien and players of thematic games. This being the case, applying the representational

mechanics of campaign wargaming to Tolkien's material must have come particularly natural to players who wanted to turn Middle-earth into an interactive setting for immersive gameplay.

Arneson and Gygax themselves demonstrated to belong to this trend when they inserted ents, hobbits, and balrogs in the first edition of *D&D* (only to be forced to thinly disguise them in later editions to avoid copyright infringement). The same did Charles Grant and Tony Bath in Britain when they added Legolas and Gandalf to their fantasy wargames.<sup>3</sup> A few years later Jeffrey C. Dillow featured obvious Tolkien knockoffs such as the "thrent" and the "balro" in the RPG *High Fantasy*, and Arnold Hendrick followed suit in the wargame *Knights & Magick*, which included "entish treemen" and "balrons." In the process, wargames, role-playing games, and Tolkien's books, ended up boosting each other's popularity. Players that loved Tolkien's stories were likely to be drawn toward games that employed them as a source; meanwhile, role-players started borrowing ideas from Tolkien's world to enhance the settings of their adventures, and historical wargamers came across Tolkien's saga by playing wargames inspired by *The Lord of the Rings* with their friends. This way, an unexpected alliance between Tolkien's works and various styles of play came to be formed.

As we saw in chapter 1, when a game is inspired by a popular work of fiction one tends to worry that the publisher would simply paste vague thematic references onto a perfectly generic design, and market it as if the game was a playable retelling of the original source. Games like *Monopoly: Lord of the Rings* and *Scrabble: The Hobbit* are examples of such tendency, as well as demonstrations that Tolkien's work is far from immune to hollow remakes. The oldest board game inspired by *The Lord of the Rings* that I am aware of belongs to this trend. The game is called *Conquest of the Ring*, was published by Hobbit Toys and Games in 1970, and created by uncredited designer(s) and artist(s). *Conquest of the Ring* claims to be inspired by Tolkien's saga, but it is in practice an almost abstract design, with barely a veneer of Tolkienian theme to be found in the art, the title, and the labels attached to some of the components. Players of *Conquest of the Ring* control generic plastic pawns said to represent hobbits, and take turns rolling a die and moving the corresponding number of spaces. The purpose is to reach the central space of the board, grab the ring that is placed there during set up,

and carry it to the Shire. Other players can steal the ring from the player who is carrying it, and the first to return to the Shire with the ring wins the game. Obviously the victory conditions push gameplay in directions that do not align with *The Hobbit*, and that also run opposite to the plot of *The Lord of the Rings* (in which the ring must be removed from the Shire). The disregard for the original story appears even more profound when we consider that *The Lord of the Rings*' admonishes against the temptations of greed and power, while *Conquest of the Ring* celebrates the acquisition of that supreme symbol of moral corruption! When we add the abstract organization of the board, the lack of environmental and psychological detail, and the non-representational nature of the roll-and-move mechanic that controls the game, we see that *Conquest of the Ring* fails to give the players even a glimpse of the original story, or to tell any kind of story for the matter.

Luckily enough, the idea of making games inspired by Tolkien would soon dawn on the mind of committed designers, many of whom had learned from wargaming the tools to engage with a theme at a significant level. In the years to follow, a plethora of designers embarked on the task of rendering Tolkien's material in analog game form. A list of the resulting creations include Wendell Hill's *The Live Ring Game* (self-published, 1973), Richard Jordison's *The Battle of Helm's Deep* (Fact and Fantasy, 1974), Wendell Hill's *Quest of the Magic Ring* (Land of Legend, 1975), Dan Bress and Ed Konstant's *The Ringbearer* (Little Soldier, 1975), Larry Smith's *The Battle of the Five Armies* (Lore, 1975), Richard Jordison's *The Siege of Minas Tirith* (Fact and Fantasy, 1975), Scott Rusch's *The Siege of Barad-Dur* (Jagdpanther, 1975), G. Highley et al's *Middle-Earth Wargame Rules* (Skytrex, 1976), Thomas Drake's *War of the Ring* (Fantasy Games Unlimited, 1976), Tim and Lee Harvey's *Dragons: An Adventure into Middle-Earth* (self-published, 1976), John Williams' *There and Back Again* (West Coast, 1977), Martin Edwardes' *Battle of the Ring* (UKW, 1977), and a set of three games by Howard Barasch and Richard Berg released by SPI in 1977: *Gondor*, *Sauron*, and *War of the Ring*.<sup>4</sup> To the list we should also add several Tolkien-inspired scenarios for wargaming published in specialized magazines, such as *Rules for Middle-Earth* by L. Patt (*The Courier* #7, 7, 1970), *Fantasy Wargaming a la Tolkien* by Gary Gygax (*Panzerfaust* #60, 1973), John Van Devender's *Siege of Gondor* (*Panzerfaust* #66, 1975), and *Helm's Deep* by Wallace Gable (*The Courier*

#7, 2, 1975). We can also mention the publication in magazines of optional rules meant to supplement published boxed games about Tolkien, like Steve Kane's "The Nazgul" (*Panzerfaust* #72, 1976), which adds Sauron's dark lieutenants to *The Siege of Minas Tirith*; or Larry Smith's "The Battle of Five Armies in Miniature" (*The Dragon* #1, 1976), which explains how to convert the board wargame *The Battle of Five Armies* into a miniature game. Such rapid diffusion of games about Tolkien's work among hobby players demonstrates more than a passing interest for the subject matter. While the number of titles alone tells us something about the gaming culture of the 1970s, a closer look at at least some of these games may bring us further insights about the challenges presented by making games that reworked Tolkien's materials in playable form.

Wendell Hill's *The Live Ring Game* (self-published, 1973) is a rulebook for a live-action game based on *The Lord of the Rings*, and it may be the oldest game that truly attempted to capture the spirit of Tolkien's sweeping saga. Depending on how much weight we want to give to the element of identification between players and characters it contains, *The Live Ring Game* may also turn out to be the first role-playing manual released to the general public, preceding the publication of *Dungeons & Dragons* by one year. The game can be played by 6 to 300 (!) players who gather in a possibly isolated area outdoors. A party of two or more players impersonates key members of the Fellowship, and attempts to carry a ring through one or more miles of real space representing the regions between the Shire and Mount Doom. A second group, formed by Sauron and a number of minions and henchmen, is given the task of retrieving the ring before it is destroyed. The evil team can also include a smaller faction led by a Saruman player, which may split from the main evil group to pursue victory independently. This option "allows the variable of actual personality, character, and ego to enter the game" (11), intensifying the role-play component and story value of the experience.

Before the game may start, the organizers must survey the intended play area. During this survey the organizers assign ludic functions to clearly recognizable areas, and mark them appropriately for identification. A certain grove may be designated as Lorien and act as a safe area for the Fellowship, while a different grove becomes the Old Forest and functions as a danger

area. Next, a space of approximately 200 feet in diameter is designated as Mordor, and its boundaries are marked with a string. A bowl or a similar object is placed somewhere in Mordor to represent the Crack of Doom, and the Fellowship team wins the game if the Ring Bearer drops the ring in this container. At the beginning of the game, the leaders of the two sides issue orders to their comrades, and everyone reaches their assigned position accordingly. Once the game starts, players can act within the main play area following restrictions based on the terrain, the specifications of their role, and their position in the chain of command of their side. Frodo for example starts in the Shire, can issue orders to the Fellowship when Gandalf is not present, and carries the ring at the game's start. Orcs must follow Sauron's orders, can take prisoners to deliver to Sauron, but cannot search them or ask them if they have the ring.

When members of opposing teams meet, a battle is resolved by taking into account several numerical values defining the power of each character and the special abilities that can be used in combat. For example, a Black Rider counts as two people for combat purposes, each Orc counts as one, Frodo as one, and Gandalf as two. Gandalf can also choose to be captured by the enemies for ten minutes of real time, blocking the group of captors and allowing the Fellowship to go on. Evil characters capturing a group of enemies can send up to half of their captives to be interrogated by Sauron, while the other half escapes after suffering a time penalty. A captured group of players can also be rescued while on its way to Sauron, as long as the numerical value of prisoners and rescuers exceeds the value of the captors.

Like in a role-playing game and a thematic tabletop game, different roles here imply different strategies and sets of possible actions, organically leading the players to perform in character. That is, the rules encourage the in-game actions of the players to develop along the main plotlines of the literary source, because simply by taking the most logical steps toward their victory conditions the players will find themselves acting in a thematically appropriate fashion. Despite its simplicity, the game represents a remarkable early attempt to retell Tolkien's saga in playable form.

In 1974 Fact and Fantasy Games published *The Battle of Helm's Deep* by Richard Jordison, which was possibly the first wargame inspired by *The*

*Lord of the Rings*. The game portrays the assault of Saruman's forces against the army of Theoden. The map is divided in hexes, the pieces represent military formations with assigned combat and movement factors, and fights are resolved using a fairly standard combat result table. As innovative as the theme was in an era when most wargaming was still historically based, *The Battle of Helm's Deep* is a straightforward adaptation of conventional wargame mechanics to the locations, forces, and actions described in *The Lord of the Rings*. For those who do appreciate the original source, *The Battle of Helm's Deep* may act as an interactive recasting of a cherished literary episode. This narrative potential is however rather weak, as it is usually the case with games that show a predilection for collective formations rather than individuals.

Virtually the same argument can be made for the Tolkien-based hex-and-counter wargames that came out in the following years, such as Richard Jordison's *The Siege of Minas Tirith* (Fact and Fantasy, 1975), Larry Smith's *The Battle of the Five Armies* (Lore, 1975), or Howard Barasch and Richard Berg's *Gondor* (SPI, 1977) and *Sauron* (SPI, 1977). The systems behind these designs rely on well-known medieval wargame mechanics for movement, charges, melee, and ranged combat, and truly express their individuality only through the inclusion of fantasy creatures, magic, and maps that reproduce familiar locations from the books. A partial variation of this wargame-oriented approach to Tolkien is *War of the Ring* (1976). Designed by Thomas Drake and published by Fantasy Games Unlimited, the game translates the thematic core of *The Lord of the Rings* into a conflict game that combines elements of operational wargames with ideas from the game *Diplomacy*. Players of the game secretly assign orders to their armies, and armies are represented by cardboard counters with no art of them, simply showing a strength number between 1 and 3. Combat is resolved deterministically, with little resemblance to an actual battle. In general, the Spartan game pieces and dry game mechanics keep gameplay at a very high degree of abstraction, making the game feel like a rethemed version of *Diplomacy* attempting to capitalize on the recent trend of fantasy board games. Because of their emphasis on army maneuvers and limited focus on individuals, the games above possess limited storytelling potential. They still deserve some attention as one of the contributing forces to the dissemination of Tolkien's materials among hobbyists. These games may not have presented

much of a story, but may have fueled the imagination of designers of later individual-based, story-driven games about Tolkien's work.

Far more interesting to understand the role of *The Lord of the Rings* in the establishment of a tradition of story-centered games are *The Ringbearer* by Ed Konstant, and *Quest of the Magic Ring* by Wendell Hill, both released in 1975. *The Ringbearer* is a simple booklet of rules, and requires that the players provide all other components such as dice, terrain features, and a number of miniatures that can be anywhere between 70 and 700, depending on the desired scale. These factors seem to point toward a fairly typical miniature wargame, but in actuality *The Ringbearer* is much more of a hybrid between a board game and a role-playing game. What links the design to board games is the fact that the resolution of all actions takes place in a single play area representing Middle-earth, not in a combination of tactical battlefields and strategic map. As for the role-playing element, players of *The Ringbearer* are assigned roles that represent members of the Fellowship and Sauron's forces, with the possibility of also including a third party controlled by Saruman. As in *The Live Ring Game*, gameplay is deeply asymmetrical, and revolves around a thematically accurate range of special powers, limitations, and victory conditions, which vary for each type of character. Hobbits are of little value in combat, but one of them has the pivotal task of carrying the ring; the Black Riders seek to retrieve the ring, and are bound to follow certain paths until the ring is actually worn by its bearer. Meanwhile, Aragorn seeks to destroy Saruman and Sauron, while Gandalf attempts to protect the heroes, and so on.

Each turn the players maneuver their pieces on the board, and a fight is resolved when an active piece moves in proximity of an enemy. Also, when moving outside of the main roads, the Fellowship characters must roll on event tables to determine if they encounter wandering monsters, just like they would in campaign wargaming or in the newly introduced style of role-playing games. Speaking of RPGs, by far the most intriguing element of the design is that the rules require the presence of a referee who *role-plays the ring*. To reproduce the psychological effect that the ring has on the Ringbearer in *The Lord of the Rings*, "a good referee will try to induce the Ringbearer (privately) to use the Ring in all situations of danger. He might do this by suggesting 'you can use the Ring' when the Ringbearer is confronted

by a roving monster. Or he might say ‘If you put on the Ring you can get past the Orcs and sneak into Mordor’” (7). The result is a design that clearly uses the format of a board game, while also being infused with thematic elements from wargames and role-playing games which are meant to provide a playable correlative of the original source.

*Quest of the Magic Ring* was designed by the same author of *The Live Ring Game*, and shares several similarities with it. In the game, players control individuals or groups of characters from *The Lord of the Rings* such as Saruman, Frodo, Aragorn, or Gandalf, and just like in the live-action version each character has unique abilities, restrictions, and victory conditions. The mechanics of movement on the board are based on roll-and-move procedures, reminiscent of *Snakes & Ladders*. Such mechanic is usually disliked by serious players, and has little mimetic power. *Quest of the Ring* adopts this mechanic possibly in a concession to conventions best known among the general population, but in so doing also introduces mitigating elements. First, the board does not present a single track of spaces but a net of roads which allow considerable freedom of movement, giving the Fellowship the opportunity to dodge the enemies’ pursuit, and the Evil players a chance to surround their prey. Also, before rolling, the active player must announce the intended direction of movement, which gives her the choice to commit to a high-risk path that may lead to a great reward, or to a safer path that may be less advantageous in the long run. With some exceptions, the active player may also move fewer spaces than the number indicated by the die if this would allow her to stop at a destination that was announced before rolling.<sup>5</sup> The universally known roll-and-move mechanic is therefore adapted to incorporate an element of decision and to avoid thematically awkward situations (such as a hero inexplicably moving past an intended destination without being able to stop in it). At the same time, the linear nature of this mechanic forms an unobtrusive basis for a detailed expression of narrative content. Precisely because everyone knows how to roll a die and move that number of spaces, the players can then focus on what happens on the board rather than on how to make things happen.

Serious engagement with the themes and plot of *The Lord of the Rings* emerges from the rulebook, in which each party is described in much more detail than it would be ludically necessary. The section for each character

comprises in-depth background information, rules concerning the functioning of the character in the game, and strategy tips. This makes the text describing each character rather inefficient, given that the properly ludic elements are buried in heaps of contextual information. In fact, these rules sections are closer to the kind of character profile one finds in role-playing games than the schematic, utilitarian explanations that characterize board game rulebooks. These sections are phrased in the second person, as if to encourage a sense of identification between character and player. A good example comes from the introduction to Gandalf, of which I will reproduce a section (the original is longer):

Known to many as “the Grey Wizard,” you have used your prophetic knowledge for the purpose of good. You have dealt with the Dark Lord before, and know to a large degree how to protect yourself from his wiles. Because you seek the welfare and freedom of the inhabitants of Middle-Earth, your mission is to put an end to the atrocities of the Dark Lord and the White Wizard (your one-time ally), either by battle or by seeing that the Ring is destroyed in the Cracks of Fire. You may help the Ringbearer achieve his objective, and you yourself may carry the Ring if he is eliminated by a road hazard or Black Rider.

Unfortunately, however, you can’t be of any help to anyone for the moment because you’re a prisoner of the White Wizard. Using a deception to lure you into his White Tower, he caught you unawares and locked you atop his great fortress to keep you out of the way. Of course, among the friendships you have made with the friendly beasts and birds of Middle-earth there are those who have the power to rescue you, but it may be some time before your dilemma is discovered by one such deliverer [4].

The rules explain that the Gandalf player must roll a die each turn at the beginning of the game to determine when his escape occurs. Then, “once free, you may choose to offer the Ringbearer limited protection. By catching up to the Ringbearer … and moving with him over the same spaces on his turn, you may, if necessary, sacrifice yourself to allow the Ringbearer to escape an attack by orcs or Black Riders” (4)—a board game rendition of an option Gandalf also had in *The Live Ring Game*. Many rules of this type

follow, detailing possible interactions between Gandalf and other characters, and reproducing core narrative dynamics from the books. Many of these rules have the ability to channel gameplay along the lines of *The Lord of the Rings* without dictating the action excessively, and while still giving the players considerable freedom to explore many what-if scenarios. Tolkien's material, thus treated, ceases to be a single chain of crystallized content, and becomes more of a loose script that the players can use as the starting point for group variations.<sup>6</sup>

The same approach was taken by Howard Barasch and Richard Berg in their *War of the Ring* (SPI, 1976). As they explain in the designers' notes at the end of the rulebook,

in constructing a simulation on *Lord of the Rings* it becomes obvious that Tolkien's novel, or for that matter any novel, addresses itself to a continuous story line with only hints of possible alternative outcomes. Proceeding on that line of thought we had to postulate what *could* happen and give the players the option of exploring the various paths of alternate actions. Would you really want the Balrog to appear consistently in Moria? That latitude was taken to ensure that the game becomes a game not just a replay of the book.

The designer of a story-oriented game must therefore be seen not as a new author but as a mediator. Barasch and Berg did not rewrite Tolkien, but partitioned the original material into discrete units of meaning, and restructured the connections between the parts as a flexible combinatory system, delegating final authorship to the players:

The power of the author in a novel is supreme, for he can create disasters for his protagonists and just as suddenly deliver them from the jaws of certain death. That power had to be transmitted into the game in order for the players to relive all the excitement and drama of the story. This has been conveyed through the use of the Event Cards. ... Again latitude was taken both in the incorporation of additional events and the timing of the play of the events. ... And again that was the intention—create a framework of Tolkien and allow the players to follow the book

exactly (or as close as possibly—like a historical simulation) but also to explore the alternatives.

These considerations allow us to see the fundamental problem in the common objection that games can't contain stories because allegedly stories are linear while games are multicursal. In truth, stories and games are both linear *and* non-linear at the same time. Even the most traditional novel in the world constructs its plot against a background of hypotheticals that could have happened, but didn't. A mystery novel is pleasurable only when we can form multiple hypotheses about the solution, and the victory of an Amazon against a dragon is exciting only if we have reasons to believe that she could fail. It's true that a linear story only enacts one of these possible plots, but the presence in the audience's mind of possible divergent paths plays a pivotal role in giving the story its significance. Seen in this sense, the narrative functioning of games with a strong theme and a vivid setting is not that remote from that of novels and movies. The main difference is that games are *explicitly* structured as repositories of narrative alternatives, which their players are invited to assemble according to rules and in-game objectives. Yet, every time that the game is played, that cloud of potential developments will inevitably condense into a single (and in that sense perfectly linear) sequence of occurrences. The player controlling Saruman in a game cannot betray and also *not* betray Sauron within a single session. Sure, today the game may show Saruman taking control of the ring; tomorrow, in another session, Gandalf may act as the Ringbearer and be corrupted by the ring right as he stands by the Crack of Doom. Yet, each iteration of the game system will only create a single storyline at the expense of all others—which is exactly what happens the first time that we read *The Lord of the Rings* (or any other story) and we see our hypotheses dissolve one after the other until only a single course of action remains.<sup>7</sup> Both games and stories can therefore be said to represent single narrative plotlines that take shape out of a number of possible alternatives, with every new move in a game and every new step in a narrative adding to what happens in the storyworld, while also narrowing the range of what could happen next.

As for *War of the Ring*, Barasch and Berg went to great lengths to fulfill the premises outlined in the designers' notes. First, they provided a playable map of Middle-earth that has a marked evocative quality while also

remaining highly functional. The map does a great job at clarifying the mutual relationships between key locations, and in so doing it implicitly invites the players to examine possibilities and formulate strategies. This way, the player finds herself thinking about the situation thematically, that is, according to a range of possible events that may ideally take place in the setting. The game also includes an impressive array of characters from Tolkien's saga, describing each of them through an individual portrait, a fairly lengthy list of attributes, and flavor texts that clarify their background and personality. This approach makes the avatars in the game feel more like well fleshed-out characters from a role-playing game than traditional combatants in a wargame. Like in *Quest of the Magic Ring*, these descriptions encourage the players to role-play their characters, and to make them behave compatibly to the way they acted (or could have acted) in the books.<sup>8</sup>

The structure of the game turn, moreover, is organized according to the events and inner dynamics of *The Lord of the Rings*, once more encouraging the players to shape sequences of events that fall within a sphere of plausible what-ifs. Each turn starts with a Ring Phase, in which the Fellowship player rolls to determine Gollum's allegiance (which may switch several times in the game). Next, if a member of the Fellowship is wearing the ring, that character may attempt to remove it, and the fact that this is not an automatic action effectively simulates the risk of succumbing to the ring's influence. In the following phase, the players draw and play event cards that can add a great deal of theme and strategy to the game. The Dark Power player then receives a number of Shadow Points, and can spend them to search for the characters of the Fellowship. The Fellowship player may then resolve escape attempts for characters that were previously captured, and can move characters on the board. These characters may be spotted by the enemy if they enter a hexagon containing orcs or Nazgul, in which case combat may have to be resolved. Finally, the Dark Power player moves his units, using his evil agents to hunt down the members of the Fellowship, and maneuvering army pieces to assault the citadels belonging to the Free People. Such a detailed and intricate turn structure obviously cannot be explained in mere ludological terms; only the designers' desire to translate their source into a playable model can account for its multilayered complexity.

Of particular importance to establish the atmosphere and provide interesting options is also the presence of event cards that can trigger special situations based on the content of the original story. These cards are shuffled and randomly distributed to the players. Still, for all the randomness that using cards involves, the events on the cards are usually conditional, and tied to specific situations that must occur for an effect to be playable. For example, the event “Ents Vent Rage” can only be used if a hobbit or Gandalf have moved into Fangorn Forest at some point, and Isengard is controlled by the Dark Powers. These cards enhance the playability of the game because they ask the players to evaluate each card’s possible consequences and to think about the best ways to activate desirable effects. At the same time, the cards work as lexical units that contain their own basic sets of syntactic rules, and prevent outcomes that diverge excessively from their source.

The examples above are far from the only games inspired by Tolkien’s masterpiece in the years in which role-playing was taking shape, but I believe they more than suffice to demonstrate that RPGs were not the only reason behind the emergence of analog games that increasingly took on some of the qualities of storytelling. The same years in which role-playing gaming started its journey are also the ones in which Tolkien became a popular phenomenon, first among devoted enthusiasts, and later outside of the hobby thanks to a TV adaptation of *The Hobbit* (1977) and Bakshi’s film *The Lord of the Rings* (1978). This period also corresponds to a sudden expansion of the wargaming hobby, with a growth that led sales of wargames in 1977 to be six times what they had been in 1972 (Palmer, 13). In 1980s Glenn Kidd, the director of the miniature company Ral Partha, estimated that the wargaming industry had grown between 5 and 10 times in the previous years, and he had no doubt that the reason was in the enormous popularity of fantasy gaming.<sup>9</sup> It seems likely that in this expansion both Tolkien and *D&D* played a large role, and contributed to popularize among hobbyists the idea of immersive, playable worlds. Wargaming, *D&D*, and Tolkien truly formed a “Hobby Trinity” whose success underscored the elements the three had in common, and showed the possibility of many productive synergies. In so doing, wargaming, *D&D*, and Tolkien ended up boosting each other’s appeal, and encouraged explorations of new ways of combining game mechanics and storytelling. Tolkien’s stories became playable, *D&D* started telling stories through the conventions of miniature wargaming, and miniature wargames

expanded their offer to fantasy settings that gave prominence to individual characters.<sup>10</sup>

The Hobby Trinity also propelled new styles of tabletop games. The result was the formation of two main trends which, although overlapping in many instances, can still be distinguished quite clearly. On one hand, Tolkien's large-scale battle scenes and the growing popularity of wargaming spawned what I call the "Tolkienesque game." The term describes games that employ the techniques of strategic and operational wargaming to capture the epic flair of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Such games focus on movements and clashes of armies, with the inclusion of extraordinary individuals mainly in the role of supporters. Such combination of military groups and named heroes can effectively render the multifocal perspective of Tolkien's larger scenes: here a large group of goblins is maneuvering, there Thorin is leading the attack ("To me! To me! Elves and Men! To me! O my kinsfolk!"). Here a formation of Eagles is plunging from the sky, there Beorn, "alone and in bear shape ... tossed wolves and goblins from his path like straws and feathers." I also use the term "Tolkienesque" to describe highly thematic games that do not address Tolkien's work directly, but that are structured as strategic and operational fantasy wargames focused primarily on military groups, and secondarily on exceptional individuals with special powers and abilities.

The other tradition of fantasy games we could indifferently call "Howardian," "Leiberian," or "Dungeonesque." Like Howard's adventures about Conan, Leiber's stories about Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, and *Dungeons & Dragons'* general philosophy (which borrowed heavily from those two sources), the games in this tradition bring individual characters to the foreground, and mainly deal with stories of exploration and self-aggrandizement. The scale, consequently, favors tactically detailed skirmishes among unique characters over battles or military campaigns.

Obviously when I talk of Tolkienesque and Dungeonesque games I am not trying to erect walls, but only to sketch tools that may help us navigate the production of hobby games of the last decades. These two categories should simply be seen as particularly perspicuous extremities of a spectrum which includes a myriad of intermediate positions. In fact, designers have

occasionally produced games that would sit right in the middle of the spectrum. *Dragons: An Adventure into Middle-earth* (self-published, 1977) by Tim and Lee Harvey, is a perfect example of this approach, in that it is configured as a dungeon crawler about exceptional individuals acting in the world of Tolkien's saga and attempting to complete various types of missions in a modular net of hallways and chambers. Similarly, Coleman Charlton's *The Lonely Mountain* (Ice Crown Enterprises, 1984) casts the players in the role of adventurers from Middle-earth, and gives them the task of exploring the titular mountain and plunder as much as possible of Smaug's treasure.

These two games achieve the goals of combining Tolkien's materials with *Dungeons & Dragons'* philosophy, but the very fact that they appear as unusual hybrids reinforces the notion that by default their Tolkiennesque and Dungeonesque building blocks tend to be separate entities. Also, the process of hybridization seems to weaken, rather than enhance, the emotional interest of their sources. The focus on individuals looting treasure for their own gain, without the sense of a higher mission, ends up trivializing Tolkien's world, and depriving it of its lofty atmosphere. Maybe it is for this reason that the fantasy board games that followed, while still belonging to our spectrum of continuity, tended more decidedly to go toward the Tolkiennesque or the Dungeonesque mode, preferring in most cases to specialize in military epics or in individual quests—not both.

# 5

## The First Splash

While both of the trends we identified at the end of the previous chapter continued to produce successful designs over the years, our study will concern itself mainly with the style I called “Dungeonesque.” Granted, Tolkien’s saga greatly incentivized players to engage in story-rich games, and designers started analyzing *The Lord of the Rings* as a source of inspiration for design. It is however out of *D&D* that came a tradition of games that most closely fit the narrative model presented in the first chapter. With its focus on uniquely detailed characters developing over time in a persistent world, *D&D* reproduced the qualities of fiction better than any other game at the time. And given that *D&D* achieved this result through affordances that were barely distinguishable from those of standard wargames, it should come as no surprise if designers taken by the new style would often choose board gaming as the medium to create playable fiction.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter we will explore a range of games that belong to this tradition, and that started coming out already in 1975, showing how quickly the idea of telling stories through games circulated among hobby gamers and designers. Some of the games we will discuss show clear and considerable influences from *D&D*, while others most likely derive from narrative ideas that were being developed independently by players of wargame campaigns. Still, *D&D* is probably to be credited as the most influential source, as this would help explain why the quick development of story-oriented games massively favored the genre of high fantasy over every other.

Role-playing had just emerged from board gaming in 1974, with the first edition of *D&D*, that we immediately had what appeared to be a return to the origins with the release of the board game *Dungeon!* by TSR in 1975. Coming out a year after *D&D*, *Dungeon!* must have seemed to its first players like a highly simplified board game version of the original role-playing game. In reality, the interweaving of influences between the two games is much more complex than what the publication dates seem to indicate. A prototype of

*Dungeon!* was already complete by 1972, and it had been created by Dave Megarry, a friend of Arneson's, in response to the pressing requests that Arneson kept receiving by people who wanted to play his ur-*D&D*. Megarry came up with a board game that had the same theme and objectives of Arneson's design but could be played without a referee, with monsters and environment controlled entirely by the game system.<sup>2</sup> The experience of what was to become the first RPG could be enjoyed equally well when playing a board game, Megarry postulated, which shows how natural it was to perceive the storytelling elements of *D&D* as still belonging to the world of board gaming.<sup>3</sup> What appeared to be the first board game inspired by *D&D* was actually one of its sources, if not yet another fraternal twin.

In *Dungeon!*, each player chooses a character out of a list of four possible roles: the Elf, who has limited combat skills, but has an advantage in finding secret doors; the Hero, who is a conventional fighter; the Superhero, who is a more skilled version of the Hero; and the Wizard, who can rely on a pool of spells to be selected before the game begins.<sup>4</sup> The characters are not all equally powerful, but balance is preserved by the fact that the stronger characters must accumulate more points to claim victory. Each character is represented on the board by a generic plastic pawn, not a miniature, and in order to keep things as simple as possible the game didn't include character sheets or stats to quantify levels of skill or health. A character that is wounded in combat is forced to lose an item or be teleported to the initial space on the board ("where a Good Fairy will anoint his wounds with a healing balm and immediately cure them," as the rulebook says).

The board shows a system of tunnels, rooms, and chambers that the players will explore in search of treasure. The sections of the dungeon are marked as belonging to different underground levels, numbered from 1 to 6. In *D&D* and in most RPGs revolving around exploration, the players do not have the luxury of seeing the entire play area from the beginning, and a great deal of the excitement originates precisely from finding out what lies behind every door and around every corner. On the contrary, players of *Dungeon!* get a perfect view of the entire geography of the area, and they are all the most familiar with it after the first time they play the game. The only thing that provides a sense of progressive revelation is the exact content of each chamber, which is discovered only when a character enters that space. What is lost in mystery

and “role-playing-ness” the players recover in a type of gameplay that allows for a more rational, strategic approach, while still allowing for a degree of narrativity to emerge from the hostile encounters to be faced.

During set up, small cards representing monsters, traps, and treasures are shuffled and placed face down in the rooms and chambers of the dungeon. Players then take turns acting with their character, until someone has collected enough treasure to become the victor. An activated character will typically move up to five spaces per turn,<sup>5</sup> and, when applicable, interact with the environment by attempting to pass through secret doors or resolving combat with the creatures of the dungeon. When a character enters an area containing a monster, a round of combat takes place. Each monster card shows an illustration representing the creature in question, followed by a list of target numbers that the player must meet or exceed with a die roll to defeat the creature. These numbers vary based on the character that is attacking or the spell that is being cast, as in this example:

#### PURPLE WORM

Lightning	6
Fire Ball	8
Wizard	12
Super Hero	10
Hero	11
Elf	12

If the target number is met or exceeded, the enemy is slain, and the player may claim the treasure that the monster was guarding. If the result of the roll is not high enough, the character misses, and the player rolls on a table to resolve the effect of the monster’s counterattack. This combat system is in essence a simplified version of the combat procedure in *Chainmail*—and therefore *D&D*, which was based on it. In *Chainmail*, too, an attack is resolved by rolling against a given target number, which is determined by consulting a table and cross-referencing the combat capability of the attacker with the defense of the enemy. Here is an example from the man-to-man combat table of *Chainmail*, where the column on the left represents the weapon used by the attacker, and the line on top the armor of the defender:

	No Armor	Leather Armor	Shield Only	Leather + Shield	Chain, Banded, Studded or Splint Mail
Dagger	6	7	8	8	9
Hand Axe	7	7	8	9	10
Mace	8	8	8	9	8
Sword	7	8	8	9	8
Battle Axe	8	8	8	8	7
Morning Star	6	6	7	7	6

Basically *Dungeon!* streamlines this system by printing on each monster card the column that would apply in a table like the one above, and by making combat last only a single round. The procedure still remains a recognizable adaptation from *Chainmail*, which in turn brings the experience of playing *Dungeon!* close to that of playing *D&D*.

By today's hobby game standards, *Dungeon!* has considerable flaws, such as a massive luck factor, the use of skipped turns as penalties, and the dreaded possibility of player elimination. Also, Megarry designed *Dungeon!* as a competitive game that allows only one winner, and that in an optional variant even includes player-vs-player combat. This is not surprising given that the victory conditions of traditional and mass-market games, as well as of most hobby wargames, are precisely of this zero-sum type. When applied to role-playing, however, this approach failed to reproduce the sense of cooperation and shared triumph that constituted one of *D&D*'s most innovative traits.

With all of these shortcomings, *Dungeon!* has still enough theme and mechanical consistency to generate interest toward its content, and to give its gameplay a narrative quality. True, the sequences of imaginary events resulting from gameplay create a narrative that is fragmented at best, based as it is on an episodic string of combat-centered encounters. And yet, this is exactly the type of adventure that the players of the original *D&D* could expect: "initially, *Dungeons & Dragons* was largely gamist, doing little to encourage in-depth role-playing or any form of storytelling" (Tresca, 67).<sup>6</sup> To our contemporary gaze *Dungeon!* may appear like a very modest storytelling engine—one in which the player simply moves, flips a monster card, fights the monster, gets a treasure, and repeats. But in the context of its time *Dungeon!*'s immersive and storytelling potential was considerable, and could be seen as

engendering almost the same degree of narrative interest as *D&D*, which was the most story-oriented game available! *Dungeon!*'s simplicity also made it accessible to players traditionally outside of the ranks of hobby wargaming. As a 1977 article about *Dungeon!* explained, “the wary girlfriend or hostile wife who wouldn’t touch a C[ombat] R[esult] T[able] with a ten-foot panzerfaust may well enjoy moving through a maze and taking on assorted trolls and hobgoblins” (Michalski, 24). As such, *Dungeon!* may have acted as an entry point to the hobby for female players that did not feel at home in the specialized world of historical wargaming, and were still treated with some hostility in role-playing circles (Wells et al.; Fine, 68–72).

In the same year of *Dungeon!*'s release, Gary Gygax penned and published a set of guidelines called *Solo Dungeon Adventures*, which made it possible to play *D&D* in solitaire. The process brought Gygax to simplify and streamline many mechanics of the original RPG, and most importantly it delegated all the functions of the game master to an automated system, eliminating any room for ambiguity and discretionary adjustments. By functioning entirely through discrete, quantifiable, and non-negotiable procedures, *Solo Dungeon Adventures* restructured *D&D* according to the affordances of board gaming, while still retaining narratively poignant elements of the RPG such as identification with a unique character, strong theme, clear causality, progressive revelation, and so on. In so doing, *Solo Dungeon Adventures* went even further than *Dungeon!* into blurring the line between board games and RPGs. *Dungeon!* was a board game inspired by the proto-*D&D*, while *Solo Dungeon Adventures* was the actual *D&D* playable within the parameters of board gaming. This means that already starting from the year after *D&D*'s original publication, players could experience immersive, character-driven, story-centered gameplay both in role-playing and board game format.

The rules of *Solo Dungeon Adventures* were published in the first issue of *The Strategic Review*, a newsletter edited by Gygax and meant to promote the games published by the newly founded TSR. Gygax prefaced the rules by explaining that it had already “been possible for enthusiasts to play solo games of *Dungeons & Dragons* by means of *Wilderness Adventures*” (3). This type of adventure could be played on the board of *Outdoor Survival* using *D&D*'s system of random tables to determine encounters with enemies and monsters, which basically made it a fantasy variant of *OS*. With *Solo*

*Dungeon Adventures*, Gygax added the possibility of creating randomly generated dungeons that a solitaire player could explore.

*Solo Dungeon Adventures* contains a system of eight interlinked tables that are used to determine the main aspects of each section of a dungeon.<sup>7</sup> The first table requires the roll of a twenty-sided die, and determines the configuration of the new area the character is entering:

#### TABLE I. PERIODIC CHECKS

<i>Die</i>	<i>Result</i>
1–3	Continue straight, check again in 60'
4–7	Door (see TABLE II)
8–10	Side/Passage (see TABLE III), check again in 30'
14–16	Chamber (see TABLE V)
17	Stairs (see TABLE VI)
18	Dead End (walls l, r. and ahead can be checked for Secret Doors, see TABLE V. footnote)
19	Trick/Trap (see TABLE VII), passage continues, check again in 60'
20	Wandering Monster (see Vol. III, <i>D&amp;D</i> ), check again immediately to see what lies ahead so direction of monster's approach may be determined.

If for example our solitaire player had rolled a 1 on this table, she would draw a section of a straight corridor on a sheet of graph paper. Since no other event would need to take place at this time, she would roll again. Let's now say that she got a 4, meaning that her hero has come across a door. The player would then look up table II, and roll a twelve-sided die twice to determine the location of the door and the type of space behind it:

#### LOCATION OF DOOR

<i>Die</i>	<i>Result</i>
1–4	Left
5–8	Right
9–12	Ahead

## SPACE BEYOND DOOR IS

Die	Result
1-2	Parallel passage or 10' × 10' room if straight ahead
3	Passage straight ahead
4	Passage 45 deg. ahead/behind
5	Passage 45 deg. behind/ahead
6-12	Room (go to TABLE V)

If the second roll indicated a room, she would then move to table V, where she would roll several times to determine size and shape of the room, number and location of exit doors, and finally content of the room. Further die rolls are necessary to establish the exact nature of each monster, trap, or treasure that the hero has stumbled upon.

Even from this schematic description, it should be clear that *Solo Dungeon Adventures* was a well-meaning effort to provide a board-based alternative to role-playing gaming, but its execution was ultimately marred by the burdensome procedures for the creation of the setting. It still goes to Gygax's credit to have understood that one of the most intriguing elements of *D&D*, as opposed to traditional board gaming, resides in the mystery surrounding the size, shape, structure, and content of the play area, and in the exciting progression that results from the discovery of new sections of the place.

Gygax may not have had the right practical solution at the time of *Solo Dungeon Adventures*, but he certainly understood that the emotional draw behind *D&D* was in immersion, identification, and exploration, and that these advantages could still be had through the affordances of board gaming.

Another limitation of *Solo Dungeon Adventures* consisted in the sense of repetition that the system would generate after a while, taking away that element of surprise that is vital to role-playing gaming and storytelling-oriented board games. Once the random tables have become familiar, gameplay may start feeling like an exercise in mixing and matching fixed blocks rather than unraveling new facets of a fictional reality.<sup>8</sup> Gygax was aware of this problem, and in the rules of *Solo Dungeon Adventures* proposed an interesting solution: “a system of exchange of sealed envelopes for special rooms and tricks/traps is urged. These envelopes can come from any other

player and contain monsters and treasure, a whole complex of rooms (unfolded a bit at a time), ancient artifacts, and so forth” (3).

In 1962 Featherstone had already suggested a similar system of random event cards to add unpredictability to solitaire wargames (145), and the idea had resurfaced in the years of development of *D&D* when Tony Bath recommended the use of “Happening Cards” in *Setting up a Wargames Campaign* (1973). We see then that Gygax’s idea of text-based events in *Solo Dungeon Adventures* came from established conventions in tabletop wargaming, which again helps us appreciate the striking resemblances between the way both RPGs and board games can depict vivid characters, detailed environments, and surprising events.

Obviously, some messiness and a number of incongruities will have to be expected in a randomly generated dungeon. This becomes even more of a factor when the envelopes advocated by Gygax are added to the mix, because the authors of the texts cannot predict when, where, and in which combination the contents they generated will enter the adventure. The result can range anywhere between vaguely surreal to downright absurdist. An interesting connection can however be drawn between the envelopes of *Solo Dungeon Adventure* and digital and analog hypertexts, which share with Gygax’s design a structure divided in mobile and discrete “chunks” (or lexias) and a system that connects these units of meaning to one another.<sup>9</sup> It is fascinating to realize that the year after Gygax elaborated *Solo Dungeon Adventure* Will Crowther programmed *Colossal Cave Adventure*, the first work of digital interactive fiction, while Edward Packard published the branching book *Sugarcane Island*, which will become the inspiration for the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series.<sup>10</sup> Independently from one another Gygax, Crowther, and Packard came to the same conclusion that stories were something that the audience could co-create, not just receive, and such parallel developments go a long way to show that the time was ripe for this type of audience engagement.

In 1975 TSR published both a board wargame and a role-playing game designed by M.A.R. Barker, a professor of Urdu and South East Asian languages and the inventor of the imaginary world of Tekumel. Barker had been developing this setting for decades, and after learning of *Dungeons & Dragons’* combination of gameplay and worldbuilding, he decided to design

two games that allowed their players to mentally travel to Tekumel. One of these designs was the role-playing game *Empire of the Petal Throne*, which is often referred to as the second RPG ever published. The other was *War of Wizards*, which was released several months before *Empire of the Petal Throne*, and basically amounted to a stripped-down version of the role-playing game adapted into a tactical wargame.<sup>11</sup> Just like *Dungeon!* and *D&D* had come into existence as two sides of the same coin, so *War of Wizards* and *Empire of the Petal Throne* were developed as parallel portals to the same imaginary place, and as flexible toolboxes to generate stories in it.

*War of Wizards* features two magic users locked in mortal combat. The game takes place on a paper board on which the characters can move, and includes a long list of spells that can be used during the confrontation. Ludically speaking the design is a board game in the purest sense, with no umpire and no possibility to attempt actions outside of the written rules. Yet the game clearly displayed an evocative quality, and both Gygax in his foreword and Barker in the main rules elaborated on this point. Gygax insisted that when playing the game “it is not hard to imagine the two strangely garbed opponents standing at either end of the magicked arena, gesturing and uttering the awful incantations which send invisible terrors of visible manifestations of their power towards their enemy. ... When the game is played, this is actually the feeling one gets!” Barker, on his part, encouraged the players to think of the in-game actions of *War of Wizards* as part of a larger fictional situation: “Those who have read the works of such writers as R.E. Howard, J.R.R. Tolkien, Fritz Leiber, Katherine Kurtz, Jack Vance, Michael Moorcock, L. Sprague De Camp, Lin Carter, and others of the fantastic genre” (1) can think of *War of Wizards* as an episode in one of their favorite stories.

To this Barker added that “players in other forms of fantastic-medieval campaigns may also find it enjoyable to insert a “wizards’ duel” into their activities” (2). We have already established that under the definition of “fantasy medieval campaigns” hobbyists at this time gathered both traditional wargames and early role-playing games,<sup>12</sup> and *War of Wizards* allows us to get an even clearer sense of the free fluctuation of modes of play among the games we are examining. Tabletop games had spawned the quasi-wargame *D&D* and the quasi-RPG *Dungeon!*; *D&D* had inspired *Empire of the Petal Throne*, which we consider an RPG, but also *War of Wizards*, which we

consider a board game. *War of Wizards*, bringing things to full circle, could be enjoyed on its own as a board game, or plugged back into either traditional wargames or games that we consider RPGs, like *D&D*! The absolute porosity between RPGs and board games in the early days of the hobby could not be more obvious. An impressive example of this phenomenon is also in Phil Barker's book *Ancient Wargaming*, from 1975, in which it is explained that random events in a game are "sometimes invoked by the umpire through some sort of chance device, but sometimes by the other *role players*" (62, emphasis added). This may be the first time that the term "role player" appears in discussions about gaming, and it is used to describe wargamers! Truly this was an age of experimentation in which the overlapping nature of board games and early role-playing facilitated the transfer of storytelling functions from one form to the other, or, maybe more accurately, gave impulse to a simultaneous expansion of the story space in both styles of game.

In 1975, the same year of *Solo Dungeon Adventures*, *Dungeon!*, and *War of Wizards*, we also find cross-overs between board gaming and storytelling that were not produced by TSR. For example, *Sorcerer* (1975) by Redmond Simonsen represented the first incursion into the fantasy genre by SPI, the leading publisher of historical wargames at the time. Mechanically *Sorcerer* was still a wargame, but it already showed all the hallmarks of a Tolkienesque game. *Sorcerer* is set in the fantasy world of Bannorkhemea, which is said to sit at the intersection of seven parallel dimensions. This causes various types of magical energies to leak into this realm from different worlds, and skillful sorcerers can harness them to produce extraordinary effects. The game is divided in scenarios representing different types of situation, and as Arnold Hendrick explained in 1976, the purpose of these scenarios was to give shape to an imaginary history of Bannorkhemea and explore the biography of its main characters (14)—precisely what both wargame campaigns and *D&D* were attempting to do in their own settings.

The players control a mix of armies of trolls, demons, dragons, and the occasional human infantry, together with counters representing individual sorcerers. The board has an unusual look for a wargame, with hexes filled in pastel colors to indicate the type of magical energy that can be harvested in each area. Sorcerers can use this energy to perform special actions such as shooting magic bolts, splitting into three copies of themselves, or creating destructive vortexes. Collective military units are also affected by the energy

in the area they occupy, which may give them considerable advantages in combat. The result was a “refreshingly different” game, as one of its first reviewers wrote (Palmer, 175). *Sorcerer* may not be the most narratively intense game in our study, as it still tends toward imaginary history rather than storytelling, but it certainly represents another contributor to the general trend we are delineating.

*En Garde!*, by Darryl Hany and Frank Chadwick, also came out for the first time in 1975 for GDW, and would be followed by later editions in 1977, 1988, and 2005.<sup>13</sup> *En Garde!* combines the logic of tactical combat with that of role-playing games, rivaling if not surpassing the potential for identification that early versions of *D&D* afforded. *En Garde!* is described by its authors as “a semi-historical game/simulation representing many of the Errol Flynn movie [sic] set in the Seventeenth or Eighteen centuries” (1). The game “was originally devised as a fencing system, with background added to provide scenarios for the duels. After a time, it became apparent that the background was more fun than the duels and *En Garde!*, in its present form, was born” (1). In *En Garde!*, players take on the role of dashing young gentlemen and attempt to increase their social status over time. In this sense the game can be seen as a role-playing game, as players are given specific roles to play, and the goal, ultimately, is to construct a satisfactory biography for one’s own character (Renner, 28). The game is for this reason particularly original when compared to the first generation of story-oriented games, which almost inevitably had a strong spatial component and included an element of exploration.

The smallest unit of time in the game is the week, and weeks are grouped in months that constitute the main turns. At the beginning of each month the players discuss possible actions they intend to take, and write down on a piece of paper the plans for their character in each week of the upcoming month. A planned schedule may end up looking like this:

## PORTHOS

- 1: Go to Hunters [club] with Falstaff
- 2: Practice with rapier
- 3: Join Royal Foot Guards as Captain
- 4: Visit Bawdyhouse and carouse.<sup>14</sup>

Next, the players reveal their plans and resolve each scheduled activity. Common actions include gambling, visiting clubs, trying to be seen with people of high social status, investing money, buying “liquid refreshments” (9), enrolling in the army, and dueling.

Though structured around characters that live and evolve in a fictional world like in an RPG, *En Garde!* covers the resolution of all possible actions in the rules, making it unnecessary to use a game master, and framing the play experience as that of a pure board game. In most cases, the result of the selected action will be determined by rolling dice on a table and implementing the result. In other cases, the action may require adjusting some numerical values on the character sheet, but even such simple alterations still correspond to thematic changes in the world of the story. A more complex procedure is implemented when two players are in the same location and one of them challenges the other to a duel. In this case, the other players vote to decide if there is sufficient cause for a fight, and if that is the case, the duel is fought through simultaneous selection of actions. The players are also encouraged to add narrative details to the story, even if strictly speaking such details do not impact the flow of the action. Describing the color of the clothes of a character or the exact words that are used to challenge an opponent does not influence the outcome of an activity; yet, these creative, detail-oriented descriptions have the effect of strengthening the theme and increasing the narrative feel.

Outside of TSR, 1975 also saw the publication of the fantasy wargame *White Bear and Red Moon*. In Appelcline’s words, this game came to be when its designer, Greg Stafford, “decided to combine his interests in fantasy writing and gaming by creating a ‘do-it-yourself’ novel set in the world of Glorantha—which is to say a wargame full of thematic details that highlighted the magical creativity of the setting itself” (’70–’79, 248). Even a simple examination of the rulebook confirms that one of the goals of the game was to transport the players to a parallel reality full of wonders and adventure. Only a small part of the rulebook deals with the necessary ludic procedures, while large amounts of space are devoted to describing the world of the game and the many races that populate it. These descriptions add only in part to gameplay, but have the crucial role of giving shape and depth to the setting. In fact, no matter how fantastic the setting may look, the rulebook tells us that we should think of the game as a simulation, and treat the world of Glorantha as if

it was real (4). And, of course, the more seriously we take the representational elements of a game, the more likely we are to see its contents as the building blocks of a narrative. Unsurprisingly, then, Stafford explains that *White Bear and Red Moon* “is designed to work independently as a saga of a certain situation” (5). Such playable saga is of even greater value than most people realize, because, in the designer’s opinion, the fantasy genre “is not so much a suspension of disbelief as it is an acceptance of our own unconscious” (1). Immersive, story-rich fantasy games are therefore not an escape from reality, but a travelogue detailing a journey in the depths of our mind: “The game works the same way a minstrel’s lute works, forming a background for a tale of bravery or infamy. The game is an instrument for the unfolding history of Dragon Pass, Fantasy, and yourself. It is important to remember that fantasy is the Otherworld of our Reality. It is a dream, and a temporary Life for your Other Self. Use it as such” (71).

The following year, in 1976, TSR produced the fantasy wargame *Lankhmar*, inspired by Fritz Leiber’s stories about Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser.<sup>15</sup> The introduction in the rulebook explains that the board map “is amply suited for gamers who might wish to use it as a basis for imaginative campaigns of their own,” which means that *Lankhmar* could be used in *D&D* as an alternative to the board of *Outdoor Survival*, or could become the strategic map for a wargame campaign like the ones Featherstone and Bath had described. *Lankhmar*’s potential as a framework for playable storytelling also wasn’t hurt by the fact that a literary author like Leiber was directly involved in the design, making it natural for the players to expect story elements in the game.

*Lankhmar* combines a focus on military formations that maneuver on a map with attention to individual characters such as Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, giving the impression that the game belongs to the Tolkiensque line we have been discussing. In reality, the game puts more emphasis on these individuals than other Tolkiensque games do, and probably more than a game at this scale should. The intent may have been to get the best of both worlds, with large movements of armies in epic wars *and* well-defined stories about extraordinary characters. The result is an unfortunate blend of the strategic and tactical levels that creates almost surreal effects. Nowhere is this problem more visible than in the cost of certain activities in terms of movement points. Each turn the players receive a number of such points that can be spent to perform actions. Changing weapons for example costs a

movement point, and mounting on a beast two. It makes sense to think of such actions as requiring non-trivial expenditures of time if, and only if, the game operates at the tactical level, and each turn represents just a few seconds of in-game time. In this case choosing to sheath a sword and grab a spear would prevent the character from performing other actions such as parrying, dodging, or attacking, and would therefore make it worth to give that action a cost in game terms. The problem is that at the scale *Lankhmar* operates each turn represents entire days or weeks, and each hexagon on the map many miles of terrain. Traveling a hex of clear terrain costs a single movement point, exactly like the action of changing weapons, and it seems really awkward to quantify an action like sheathing a sword as the functional equivalent of five days of travel! The result is that soldiers seem to take days to brandish their weapons, or only seconds to cover many miles. A similar clash of scales is in the distances for ranged attacks. A player can use a troop armed with arrows or slings to target an enemy up to four hexes away,<sup>16</sup> which is quite peculiar when a simple look at the map tells us that that distance must correspond to fifty or sixty miles in the world of the game.

In an attempt to expand on the character-driven philosophy that Gygax and Arneson had been developing, *Lankhmar* allows the players to commit some of their game pieces to special quests (called geas) such as going on a pilgrimage or collecting ingredients to be delivered to a wizard. These quests also betray an influence from role-playing games by introducing discretionary elements which run counter to traditional board game conventions, and that can become problematic in the absence of a game master. Here is an example: “While every effort must be made to fulfill a GEAS, it need not actually be completed if an honest attempt has failed. For example, if a warrior assigned to a GEAS is killed in the process, this certainly constitutes an honest attempt and failure. Likewise, a hero sent to such a goal may retreat after being wounded in combat, for he has put forth a sincere effort” (rulebook, emphasis added).

Stipulating that a condition in a competitive board game depends on the honesty of a player’s effort is looking for trouble. If a character has just received a geas and is attacked and wounded before it had the chance to do anything, can we say that the character “made an honest effort”? Was the character honestly going to perform the task? Also, is the effort considered honest only if the character moves on the shortest path possible? If the

character gains some other type of advantage while traveling in the direction of the quest, does this diminish the honesty of the attempt? Does it mean that the character was pretending to be committed to the task while in truth pursuing other goals? Asking such questions may seem humorous, but it is the game system itself that encourages the players to think in these terms in order to gain perfectly legitimate advantages. If *Lankhmar* is played by competitive players, the passage above will probably cause unpleasant squabbles about the interpretation of this or that situation, marring the experience of gameplay. Discretionary rules of this kind should be reserved to games with a game master who has the authority to solve any ambiguity, rather than to an RPG-inspired board game where the players have equal authority.

If nothing else, then, the flawed design of *Lankhmar* can act as a cautionary tale for modern designers. To tell a playable story one must provide a framework of rules that is tailored to the needs of the representation. Borrowing the simulationist tools of campaign wargaming and transplanting them onto a situation about individual heroes would not do. Most of the games described in this book have reasonably gone one way or the other, either describing adventurers negotiating a dungeon, castle, or temple, or focusing on large-scale maneuvers of armies. Even when both elements are present in the same game, they must at least be kept separate: now we explore the tactical dungeon, next we join the army and journey across the land. *Lankhmar* attempted to apply a unified system of actions to two different types of frame, and the results turned out to be less than stellar.

# 6

## Children of the Dragons

*D&D* may not have single-handedly originated the bevy of story-driven tabletop games of the late 1970s, but it certainly played a key role in making this style of game visible beyond the niche of historical wargaming. After the initial splash of 1975 and 1976, the idea that board games could tell stories sent ripples across the entire hobby industry, with repercussions that we can still feel today. All of a sudden, many hobby board games started including fictional events that fostered a deep sense of identification with the characters and immersion in the setting. These games increased their reliance on individual, well-defined avatars, and toyed with the idea of character progression within a single game session and/or from game to game. This approach in turn strengthened the illusion of a persistent, evolving setting, and the psychological engagement of the players with the designs.

Meanwhile, as most role-playing games were still spatially oriented,<sup>1</sup> turn-based, and framed by conventional board game rules, the experience of playing an RPG remained barely distinguishable from that of playing a story-oriented board game. It would take until the late '80s before designers of RPGs started moving toward truly story-oriented play (Appelcline, '70-'79, 3).

An important element that originated in the synergy between board games and RPGs was the introduction of modular, variable play areas. By the early 1970s miniature wargamers were fully familiar with the idea of setting up different battlefields depending on the terrain of the battle, sometimes including random elements to simulate the lack of foreknowledge of the historical commanders. RPGs borrowed from there the idea of flexible environments resulting in ever-changing and unpredictable play areas. Already in the early days of the RPG hobby, several publishers started releasing accessories that could be used to enhance the physical space of the game. In 1975, the company Wee Warriors published a play aid called *Endless Dungeon*, which consisted primarily of cardboard sheets with walls

printed on them. These walls were to be cut out and glued vertically over floor sheets covered by a hexagonal grid, to form tridimensional rooms that could be arranged in different configurations. Soon afterwards players of RPGs would be able to acquire similar accessories thanks to TSR's *Dungeon Geomorphs* (1976–1981), Falchion Products' *Dungeon Decor* (1977), Games Workshop's *Floor Plans* (1979–1988), and Task Force's *Dungeon Tiles* (1980), which were sets of printed terrain tiles that could be combined to generate multiple locations.

Meanwhile the market for fantasy miniatures grew exponentially, in no small part due to the players' desire to use appropriately thematic characters to represent the actions taking place on those dungeon tiles. Options became available for players that didn't have the time or the inclination to paint metal miniatures. Bearhug Productions, for example, published several ready-made sets of cardboard fantasy figures called *Zargonian Creatures* (1980), which could be used to show the appearance and position of a large variety of characters. The combination of detailed terrain features and colorful miniatures gave context and a higher degree of reality to the narrative created in *Dungeons & Dragons*. In so doing, these accessories grounded the potentially fluid, free-form gameplay of *D&D* to physical components and strictly defined spatial relations, exactly like we have in board games and in the very miniature wargames that inspired *D&D* (Hyde, 428–432).<sup>2</sup> And, as we know, as long as role-playing games kept resembling board games, the chances that their narrative approach would extend into board games proper remained high.

By the time players of *D&D* became acquainted with the idea of playing in an area that could change each time, board games did not have any equivalent to offer. Traditional boards for games have a fixed size, shape, and configuration, and tend to be wholly available to the players' scrutiny. Yet, starting from the 1970s, we find several board games that have modular play areas, and that happen to share some of the key traits of *D&D*, such as a high fantasy setting, a focus on individual characters with unique powers, and an emphasis on combat and exploration. Either this is an extraordinary coincidence, or it represents an attempt to reinvent the affordances of board gaming to simulate the limited player knowledge and variable play areas of RPGs.

*Citadel* by Roy Goodman (Fantasy Games Unlimited, 1976) is possibly the earliest board game of this kind. The game depicts a party of fantasy heroes tasked with raiding the tower of an evil wizard to recover a stolen amulet. The tower is broken into different floor plans printed on six double-sided sheets of cardstock. Before the game begins, the evil player sets up the tower by placing face down tokens representing monsters, traps, and treasures. Another set of tokens is used to represent staircases that connect the floor plans to one another, allowing for vastly different configurations. In a game, map 1 may be connected to 2 and 3, and in the next game to 5 and 7, or many other combinations. While the architecture of each floor is stable, the variable interconnections and the concealed obstacles give the players controlling the heroes the experience of exploring an unknown and treacherous space.

In 1977 Wee Warriors, the publisher of the *Endless Dungeon* tiles, released *Labyrinthine*, a board game designed by Pete and Judy Kerestan. Again the perspective is that of a raid in a variable space, this time with the purpose of freeing the archetypal princess. Like in *Citadel*, the evil player must prepare the architecture of the play area in advance. The difference is that now each tile represents a single room or section of hallway, rather than a floor, resulting in a much higher number of combinations and configurations. This approach will become the standard way to create modular play areas in the following years, especially during the board game Renaissance of the 21st century. Somewhere around that time Wee Warriors also released *The Vanquished Foe*, a small fantasy wargame that included no publication date or designer credits (but was in all likelihood designed by Pete and Judy Kerestan). The game contains simple wargame rules, four dungeon tiles, and a set of counters representing terrain features and characters. While fairly basic and abstract, *The Vanquished Foe* still contributes to the diffusion of the idea that the play area of a game does not have to be inalterable, especially when representing RPG-inspired tactical combat.

The year 1977 also saw the publication of an interesting hybrid between role-playing game and board game, *Flash Gordon & the Warriors of Mongo*, authored by Scott Bizar and Lin Carter (the fantasy author and game designer). Published by Fantasy Games Unlimited, the game was marketed as a “schematic role play to recreate the adventures of Flash Gordon,”<sup>3</sup> and yet

the game is played in discrete turns, does not require a game master, and takes place on a map that regulates the action as rigidly as the play area of a board game. Players here take on the role of heroes who must travel across different regions of Mongo, improve their skills over time, recruit as many allies as possible, and finally mount an attack against the evil emperor.

A peculiar element of the design is that the section of the rulebook concerned with the setting describes each region in a single flow of information that combines environmental descriptions, flavor texts, encounters, and game procedures. In fact, there is no single section of the book where all the rules of the game are contained. After a general introduction to the main concepts, the remaining rules are only presented in the specific circumstances in which they will be used. The impression is not that the authors first created a game system and later applied it to the world of Mongo, but that they described each region of the place as evocatively as they could, came up with stories that could take place in those regions, and then crafted the corresponding rules accordingly, with different procedures for each location. The resulting game feels like a collection of location-based, ready-made fictional situations organized in scripts that the players must follow. A fairly extensive excerpt from the rulebook is probably the best way to exemplify this unusual solution. If the players have just reached the Ice Kingdom of Frigia, a player would read the following script quietly to herself, and then use some of the text to describe the environment to the other players, and the rest to resolve encounters and events:

Frigia is a frozen kingdom ruled by Queen Fria and her medievalesque court. Modern weapons co-exist with medieval society, as is the case in many areas of Mongo. It takes four turns to travel through Frigia.

Travelers in Frigia have a good chance of encountering a hunting party from the court of Queen Fria, as hunting seems to be a major sport of the country. The usual prey of the hunters is the ice bear so that such hunting parties are well equipped and armed. Two dice should be rolled for each turn spent in Frigia where a roll of under nine will indicate discovery by one of the many hunting parties out on ice. Should such a roll also be under four, the hunting party will be simultaneously attacked

by a snow serpent. A roll of doubles will indicate that Fria, the queen, is with the hunting party.

A snow serpent could also be encountered on a turn when no hunting party was in the area. A roll of eleven or twelve will indicate the presence of a snow serpent. Players/characters can either fight or run from a snow serpent. To flee, roll four dice and record the total. The member of the group with the lowest physical strength then roll[s] one die and adds this to his physical strength and stamina factor. If the result equals or exceeds the total roll of the previous four dice, the snow serpent is successfully eluded and each member of the group adds one to his physical strength and stamina factor. ... A failure in a flight attempt is the same as a decision to fight the beast so that the military skill of the most martial companion now comes into play. This character rolls one die and adds this to his military skill factor. He then adds two points for each companion and an additional six if in the presence of a hunting party from Frigia (to reflect the additional fire power of the hunting party). If this total exceeds twenty-four, the snow serpent has been vanquished. The conquering character should add two to his military skill rating and one to his physical strength and stamina factor.

...

Hunting parties from Frigia are so well equipped that it is useless to attempt to flee from them if encountered. It is possible to win their friendship by rolling one die and adding the highest charisma value to it. If this value equals or exceeds eighteen the friendship of the hunting party is secured and its aid with the queen can be relied upon. Failure to win the friendship of the hunting party will cause the group to be taken as captives. Cooperation in fighting a snow serpent will add three to the roll for gaining the hunting party's friendship [10–12].

This already intricate script does not exhaust all possible interactions in the region. The heroes may fail to gain the queen's friendship, in which case they are taken prisoners and must escape from her palace. If they do so, they must take a hostage to guide them across the difficult terrain of the region. As they run away they must keep rolling to see if a snow serpent is encountered. Finally, "upon exiting Fria's realm, the hostage is released immediately and

all characters receive one physical strength and stamina point for surviving the journey and its obstacles” (12).

When one considers that each region presents trees of narrative options of this kind, the net of possible occurrences in the game turns out to be vast, resulting in a rich and immersive setting. This is true even if the freedom of the players in the game is minimal. In most cases, the players will simply roll dice and follow the corresponding branches of the script, seeing how the story unfolds but not always having a chance to alter it. Nor does the game contemplate the possibility of attempting potentially anything like in a role-playing game proper. The point of playing the game is moving along certain branches of the script, selecting specific series of fictional events and seeing them coalesce into a pleasurable adventure. The result is that the game ends up playing as a sort of interactive text supported by a board game map. This is significant for our purposes because it aligns *FG&TWOM* with another style of story-driven gaming that was emerging at the same time.

This style is usually referred to as “paragraph-based,” and it presents a particularly strong synergy between narrative and ludic elements. Paragraph-based games come with traditional components such as a board, counters, dice, and cards, but also include sourcebooks with hundreds of numbered textual paragraphs, describing possible events that take place in the world of the game. The interaction between the sourcebook and the other components can be one of two types. In one version, the players move their characters on the board and turn to the storybook to read detailed descriptions of what they encounter along their journey. *Flash Gordon & the Warriors of Mongo* belongs to this category. In the other kind of paragraph-based game, the players navigate a net of textual segments by making decisions like in a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book, and occasionally move to a playable area to resolve actions in board game fashion, usually fighting tactical battles against the enemies described in the text. When the battle is over, the players return to the book to continue the story. Basically, in the first type of game region A may be adjacent to region B and C on the board, and if you are in A you can choose to move your pawn in B or C, later checking the book to see what you found there. In the second type, the text for region A will tell you something like “If you want to travel to B, read paragraph 10; if you move to C, turn to paragraph 212.” In one case, it is the board that mediates the

transitions between areas; in the other, the textual net. One style is board-centered, the other text-centered.

The origins of text-centered paragraph-based games are to be found (maybe unsurprisingly) in a role-playing game. It was 1975 when Ken St. Andre came upon the first edition of *D&D*, which he loved for its core ideas and intensely disliked for its complicated execution. Motivated by *D&D*'s shortcomings, soon St. Andre decided to create his own role-playing game, *Tunnels & Trolls*,<sup>4</sup> which was published independently in 1975 and later that year was picked up by the publisher Flying Buffalo. At a time when the RPG hobby was still small and it could be hard for players to find people to play with, Rick Loomis, owner of Flying Buffalo, thought of creating a solitaire adventure for *Tunnels & Trolls*. The result was *Buffalo Castle* (1976), the first RPG module conceived for solitaire play. The module was a booklet containing a series of numbered paragraphs that described the contents of the areas to be explored, and the player navigated the text like a work of interactive literature, relying on the mechanics of *T&T* mainly to resolve combat. The experiment was successful enough to encourage Flying Buffalo to release many similar adventures in the following years, including St. Andre's *Deathtrap Equalizer Dungeon* (1977), Michael Stackpole's *City of Terrors* (1978), St. Andre's *Arena of Khazan* (1979), and Glenn Rahman's *Sea of Mystery* (1981). To an extent these solitaire modules remained firmly planted in the realm of role-playing games, mainly due to their lack of a physical game space. To guide a hero from room to room a player would simply read the paragraphs in the specified order, while combat was resolved by rolling dice and adjusting stats, without a clear spatial component. Yet, by recasting the infinite range of options of role-playing into a self-contained net of areas and a discrete menu of actions, these modules were already transporting role-playing gaming in the direction of the type of interactions that characterize board games.

The next step was taken by U.S. Steve Jackson, who released the board games of fantasy combat *Melee* (Metagaming, 1977), and *Wizard* (Metagaming, 1978). In these games the players create and customize unique characters which are used to fight against each other. The main reason why they interest us is that they kickstarted the first generation of text-centered paragraph-based games through a series of programmed adventures called

*MicroQuest*, and published by Metagaming. The first installment was *Death Test* (1978), by U.S. Jackson, followed by seven further adventures between 1979 and 1982. The stories covered various aspects of fantasy adventuring, also including a blend of sci-fi and fantasy (*Security Station* [1980] by John W. Colbert), and a story based on Arthurian legends (*Grail Quest* [1980] by Guy W. McLimore Jr.). Two of the modules involved real-world treasure hunts (*Treasure of the Silver Dragon* [1980] and *Treasure of Unicorn Gold* [1981] both by Howard Thompson) with a prize of \$10,000 for the player who first deciphered the clues in the story (Appelcline, '70-'79, 221–227).

These adventures took the form of booklets containing the rules, a description of the setting, and a branching textual net conveying the contents of the story.<sup>5</sup> The games also included cardboard counters representing characters, key items in the adventure, and sometimes a map of the region where the story took place. At the beginning the players would create a party of heroes, and would then work their way through the text by making decisions at various points, like in a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book. While doing so, they would read fictional content that would gradually form a full story arc. When the heroes encountered enemies in the story, the text instructed the players to set up the battle board of *Melee* by placing all the necessary characters in specific initial positions. The booklet would then be put temporarily aside and the encounter would be fought out as a regular wargame. Once the engagement was concluded, the players would resume reading and continue to navigate the verbal tree of options until the next encounter. With this system, the players switched back and forth from imagining scenes based on purely verbal elements, to creating board game sequences resolved in terms of spatial relations, resource management, situational advantage, and manipulation of odds. This way, the designers of *MicroQuest* adventures virtually equated the representational power of language and board game actions, as a character, for example, would be just as dead in the storyworld if her figure was killed in a battle or if the text described her death. Adding a detailed net of textual units also brought to board gaming the advantages of literary expression, such as literature's effectiveness in evoking atmosphere, portraying character, generating sophisticated interconnections of events, and presenting surprises and plot twists. For the players of *MicroQuest* adventures, text and board-based actions became tools to synergistically

achieve the same objective of creating a fictional reality that the players could inhabit and explore.

Other games that came out in the late 1970s continued to expand on the idea of articulating fictional stories through the affordances of analog gaming. In 1978 Chaosium released *King Arthur's Knights* by Greg Stafford—a designer we already encountered when talking about *White Bear and Red Moon*. Ludically speaking, *King Arthur's Knights* is beyond any doubt a board game, as made evident by its reliance on a fixed set of rules and components that cover all actions allowed in the game and leave no room for RPG improvisation. Still, similarly to what happens in many RPGs, the players of *King Arthur's Knights* control individual avatars that go through a series of adventures and develop a unique biography over time. The game shows a considerable degree of open-endedness in this sense, and features a large number of possible situations and encounters.<sup>6</sup> Different types of knights are available to choose from, such as the errant knight, the knight at arms, and the great knight, each characterized by different sets of advantages and obligations. During gameplay the characters move around the map and resolve events generated by random tables and a high number of event cards. The knights may therefore fight duels and acquire treasures, like they would in an action-oriented RPG, but also perform less predictable actions such as carrying on diplomatic missions, investigating a murder, collecting taxes, participating in a tournament, seeking the Holy Graal, or rescuing Guinevere from her captors. Unusually for a game of the 1970s, *King Arthur's Knights* even includes considerations about the inner life of the characters. A knight may fall in love with a lady, and, if rejected, may end up becoming a hermit, or even be removed from the game because too emotionally devastated to continue his heroic career. As many of these events are determined by chance, the point in the game is not necessarily to develop optimal strategies, but rather to go along with the flow of situations generated by the game, seeing what happens next and enjoying the resulting narrative.

In 1978 *Swords & Sorcery* by Greg Costikyan was published for SPI. *Swords & Sorcery* was a game explicitly inspired by *D&D*, as made clear by the alliterative title and by obvious Easter eggs like the presence of a character called Gygax Dragonlord. *Swords & Sorcery* included two separate games that could be played on the same board: one, a fantasy wargame in the

Tolkienesque tradition, and the other an RPG-inspired game about individual heroes attempting to complete quests that went from slaying enemies to rescuing special characters or retrieving valuable items. Other players, in the meanwhile, would take on the role of the villains bent on hunting down the questing heroes. The quest variant of the game is the one that most closely contributes to our genealogy of board games that tell stories, because it is in this version that the players have the best chances to connect with fantasy individuals and immerse themselves in the overwhelmingly detailed setting of the game. The available characters are also notable for their multifaceted nature, which was brought to life by many stats and by a portrait and a name.<sup>7</sup>

In 1979 we have the publication of Eric Goldberg's *Commando* for SPI, one of the rare games of this period to attempt to develop a narrative outside of the genres of fantasy and sci-fi. *Commando* is a tactical wargame of man-to-man combat set in the 20th century, and yet in the year it came out it won the H.G. Wells Award for best roleplaying rules! The amphibious nature of the game is confirmed even today by the fact that *Commando* is listed in two separate pages on BGG: one as a board game, the other as an RPG.

*Commando*, in fact, includes both a set of rules to play the game as a standard wargame, and an entire second manual that builds on those tactical rules, adds the figure of the game master, and allows to play the game as a full role-playing experience. Like in a role-playing game, a player of *Commando* is encouraged to identify with only one character (the leader of a fireteam), to retain that character from game to game, to work to improve his initial stats and skills, and to think of the setting of the game as a persistent storyworld. The game master is expected to create the scenarios, play all roles not assigned to the players, and release information only in small installments, as needed in any given situation. As the rules explain, these functions can be performed in one of two modes: in tight, rule-bound gameplay, in which the game master acts mainly as referee, or in a free-form “that can readily be developed into an open-ended role-playing game” (RPG rulebook, 18). In either variant, when all of the suggestions above are taken into account, the experience of playing *Commando* becomes virtually indistinguishable from that of playing one of the many combat-heavy RPGs of the time (like *D&D* itself).

To return to the major trend of this chapter (that is, fantasy), in 1978 the publisher Philmar released a game by Terence Donnelly called *The Sorcerer's Cave*. The game included a set of generic plastic pawns, a deck of small cards, and two stacks of sturdy tiles representing tunnels, chambers, and special rooms. These tiles had the same function of the mobile terrain in *Citadel* and *Labyrinthine*, but displayed production values that made them considerably more attractive and thematic. Moreover, while previous modular games required careful preparation of the map by the defender, the terrain tiles were now to be randomly shuffled, drawn, and added to the play area during gameplay. An accompanying deck of event cards was used to populate each area with non-playing characters, treasures, and traps. These components basically acted as an analog AI performing the basic functions of a human game master. The effect was of reducing set up time, eliminating pre-game preparation, and engendering a sense of discovery and surprise that all players could enjoy, because no one knew in advance the exact articulation of the area.

In a later memoir Donnelly confirmed that the inspiration for *The Sorcerer's Cave* came in fact from *D&D*, if mainly with a desire to address the glaring ambiguities of the original rules, and to eliminate the preparation process required on the game master's part.<sup>8</sup> Tolkien also played a role, and furnished the game with a scenario called *The Ringbearer*, in which “a party ... tries to carry the ring from the gateway to the deep pool, which is at the center of the fourth level. This party has a head start of seven turns over a party of three trolls, whose object is to capture the ring and bring it to the surface.” Scenarios based on mythological materials such as the journeys of Theseus or Orpheus were included too, and held a special meaning in the mind of the designer. “The descent into the underworld is, of course, an ancient and powerful myth,” he wrote, and this myth can be seen as “a parable of man’s journey through the confined spaces of his own ego.”<sup>9</sup> Like for Stafford in *White Bear and Red Moon*, for Donnelly playing games about dungeons meant casting a flickering light on some deep and transhistorical meaning. The implication is that the striking success of the dungeon crawler genre might have to do less with the gaming taste of our age, than with the fact that this style of game allows us to connect with the archetypal structures of our mind.

In *The Sorcerer's Cave*, the players explore a dungeon by moving a pawn that indicates the position of their party, and facing perils brought to life by a deck of event cards. The players' characters can be customized through item cards, but the players should not get too attached to any member of their crew because combat is unforgiving to the point that a single hit is enough to kill a character. The designer's intent to simplify previous fantasy systems brought him to reduce the possible states of all agents to alive-and-in-the-game or dead-and-out-or-the-game, with no intermediate conditions. The solution allows to eliminate all bookkeeping, because all one needs to do to record a hit is to discard the card representing the unfortunate target. To counterbalance the frequent deaths, the game allows the players to recruit non-playing characters encountered in the dungeon. This system causes the roster of each group to change constantly throughout the game, reducing to some extent the potential for identification. Still, the game does encourage the players to project their tastes and interests onto the game by crafting new components and revising rules and procedures ad libitum: "The cards and the basic rules can be used to explore any situation that imagination suggests. New dimensions may be added to the characters, or new creatures, hazards, and treasures may be created with the blank cards provided." The result is a game that embraces the sandbox philosophy of most role-playing games, but that expresses its narrative potential through a discrete number of game components and a predetermined range of interactions.

*The Sorcerer's Cave* was followed in 1980 by *The Mystic Wood*, again by Terence Donnelly, and inspired by the Renaissance epic poems Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* (*The Frenzy of Orlando*) and Spenser's *Faerie Queen*.<sup>10</sup> At first sight the game looks similar to its predecessor, with professionally produced components, a set of terrain tiles that can be arranged in different configurations, and a deck of cards featuring events and encounters. An obvious difference is that the terrain now represents outdoor areas which form "an ever-changing forest that lies somewhere between Earth and Heaven" (rulebook). At a closer look other differences emerge too, and they are all intended to add detail to the world of the representation and increase the identification between players and characters. This time each player controls an individual paladin from Renaissance epics. Such characters are uniquely defined through different combat skills, special abilities, and victory conditions, encouraging the players to plan their strategies around the

specific goals of their hero. This in turn facilitates the formation of a psychological bond with characters that, although rudimentarily, may match one's own interests and style of play.

*The Mystic Wood* is set up by shuffling the 45 terrain tiles and arranging them face down in 9 rows of 5 cards each, in a process that ensures that no two play areas will be the same. During the game, players alternate moving their paladins around the forest and interacting with terrain features and possible encounters. Event cards generate monsters to slay, special situations to resolve, and important non-playing characters. There is for example a card representing a princess, and Roland can win the game by finding her and escorting her out of the woods (a nod to Orlando's traditional love for Angelica, princess of Cathay). Other cards may introduce obstacles such as a wild boar to hunt, a Saracen to defeat, or a magic whirlwind that carries away the active character. The events triggered by rules and game components may feel to a degree disconnected from each other, as it is to be expected from the randomness of the set up and the event generation. The result nevertheless may end up creating precisely the type of story that the designer had in mind when paying homage to traditional poems in which "the heroes and heroines wander through a sketchily-defined landscape punctuated by occasional palaces and cities and peopled with a host of minor characters: wizards, crones, clerics, fierce "paynims" slightly resembling Saracens, distressed maidens, robbers, royalty, and rustics. The always interesting encounters of the Knights with these characters and with one another form a succession of episodes only loosely connected by a central theme or plot." With this in mind, it becomes legitimate to see *The Mystic Wood* as a playable rendition of Renaissance epics, or at least as the outdoor companion to the underground adventures of *The Sorcerer's Cave*.

In the year between *The Sorcerer's Cave* and *The Mystic Wood*, game designer Richard Hamblen asked himself the same question that Donnelly had asked: "How do you capture the magic of fantasy literature in a game?" (*Magical Mystery Tour*, 3). Hamblen proposed an answer in his board game *Magic Realm* (Avalon Hill, 1979), which belonged to the recent trend of story-oriented fantasy designs, and like its predecessors pursued the goal of immersing the players in an intricate fictional world.

The first problem for a story-inclined designer, Hamblen wrote in an article, is variety. To give the reader the impression of a detailed setting, an author of fiction can make allusions that don't need to be fully developed, and that nevertheless create the illusion that the storyworld contains more than meets the eye. This is possible because the reader of traditional fiction is never given the option to check if there really *is* a fully constructed reality behind those allusions. A literary hero “may have the choice of joining a caravan bound for danger, leading an outlaw band, or seeking some lost treasure in the wild jungles, but he does only one of these and the others are only mentioned in passing” (*Magical Mystery Tour*, 3). The same technique is not available to game designers, whose job is to provide their players with meaningful choices that can be actually pursued. For a game to stimulate immersion then each choice must lead to a well developed scene, a fully delineated place, or a convincing encounter: “In a game the world has to be filled out from all possible vantage points ... has to include all the aspects that are present in adventure fantasy generally or it does not invoke its world” (*Magical Mystery Tour*, 3).

The game designer is forced to do some extra work compared to an author also when it comes to surprising the audience. An author can pack a book with unexpected twists and turns, and it will never be held against her if at a second reading those twists have lost part of their appeal. From a game, however, we expect high replayability,<sup>11</sup> and “a game that entertains like fantasy each time it is played must therefore be able to surprise its players with unforeseen developments even after they have played it many times and have become familiar with the mechanics” (*Magical Mystery Tour*, 3). The proposed solution is to include more components in the game than the number that will actually be used in a single session. Although several games had already taken this path before *Magic Realm*, Hamblen has the distinction of theorizing the idea with great clarity: “Fortunately, adventure fantasy generally is so full of variety that a game can be based on it and still provide surprises, but only if it can keep the players from becoming completely familiar with everything that can happen. Here the very size and complexity of a general fantasy game becomes a key advantage” (*Magical Mystery Tour*, 3). Designed on such premises, *Magic Realm* represents “a complete fantasy world so full of variation that the players have real choices to make, so full of diversity that no matter how many times it is played it can still surprise

you with its situations, and so filled with detail that the illusion of a complete world is created.... You can never be sure of what you will find, or what will find you" (*Magical Mystery Tour*, 4).

In *Magic Realm*, the players control fantasy heroes that travel across a modular, changing board, face dangerous encounters, and acquire wealth and experience. *Magic Realm* also includes incentives for the players to cooperate against common enemies,<sup>12</sup> which captures in part the cooperative dynamics of RPGing. The general idea, although developed at an unusual level of detail, is in essence the familiar one of employing the affordances of board gaming to tell a story the way role-playing does. What set *Magic Realm* apart from predecessors like *Dungeon!* or *The Sorcerer's Cave* is however how the game manages to incorporate continuity—one of the most important innovations that RPGs brought to the world of gaming. With the exception of wargame campaigns, board games at the time did not allow the players to link multiple game sessions in a narrative in which the outcome of earlier sessions would influence the parameters of the later ones.<sup>13</sup> Hamblen, too, initially presented *Magic Realm* as a game that generated only self-contained adventures, but soon after the publication he released a set of additional rules that allowed the players to keep their characters from game to game and develop them over time (*Developing Characters*, 13). Following these rules, each character that was still alive at the end of a game gained experience and resources that could be used in future sessions, allowing for character persistence and growth. These achievements would lead a character to reach new “stages,” which in essence represented what *D&D* calls “levels.”<sup>14</sup> At each new stage, a character would gain advantages such as acquiring fame, learning spells, or collecting treasure. This system of advancement was more rudimentary than its correlative in *D&D*, but it constituted an astounding leap from the philosophy that had dominated board gaming for millennia, and that had framed each game session as a discrete, complete, and isolated event.<sup>15</sup>

Not long after *Magic Realm*, Heritage published a game called *Knights & Magick* (1980) by Arnold Hendrick, which appeared to connect the narrative lessons learned by hobby board games of the late 1970s with the conventions of miniature wargaming that had given birth to *D&D*. *Knights & Magick* consists of three volumes of rules for miniature combat set in a world of high

fantasy, but its extensive worldbuilding, story-oriented approach, and numerous possibilities for customization, give the design a very strong role-playing feel.<sup>16</sup> The idea is perfectly described in the designer's notes, where Hendrick states that "one of the most enjoyable parts of fantasy gaming is conjuring up your own 'world' for gaming. Individual figures become famous characters, and through tabletop adventures begin to acquire a personality of their own" (Appelcline, '90-'99, 36).

Players in the game assemble their armies relying on what we may call a gamer's mentality, that is, in a perspective of optimization meant to increase the chances of victory. Once this is done, though, the rules encourage the players to add thematic detail and flesh out the wargame skeleton of the design into an RPG-like, story-driven experience. We are told that players should take the time to select name, appearance, and personality of all main characters; should come up with a background story for how their army was assembled and the generals recruited; and should explain why the characters are working together, and in order to achieve what goals. None of this preparatory work has any direct influence on the mechanics of gameplay, because the system treats two characters with the same stats as identical, regardless of their different backgrounds and personalities. And yet, for players immersing themselves in the world of the game, it makes an enormous difference to know that character A murdered character B's brother, and B is now seeking revenge; or that D and E used to be friends, and are now at war because of religious differences.

Once the main characters have been defined, the players of *K&M* are also expected to expand the characterization of the setting by creating a map of the realm, a history of the place, and even a calendar to keep track of future and past events. To add to the illusion of a living, breathing world, the rules also suggest putting together an ample deck of random event cards. Events generated by these cards, writes Hendrick,

can include a killing drought, a cold winter, or a very warm winter that doesn't freeze rivers or block mountains.... Riots may occur in villages, religious groups might make demands, or zealots start a new and heretical religious movement. Earthquakes or tidal waves can ruin the realm, bandits and marauders might halt trade and destroy the economy.

You could have a traitor in a high place, betraying nobles and troops.... Marriages and elopements could cause new enemies, or an opportunity for a new ally. Nobles might be ruined by scandal, excommunicated from the church, or murdered by a jealous husband, wife, or lover! Plague or sickness might stalk the land. The list of possibilities is endless [3, 36].

In Hendrick's mind, the history of a world of such richness deserves to be recorded for posterity, and shared with other fellow players. The best way to do so would be to create a newsletter detailing the happenings in the various realms generated by the players:

Each gamer contributes one or two short pieces on new developments ... or press releases about battles won.... For example, one short article might describe how "New Crown Prince appointed High General of the Northern Marshes." In reality, you might have found an interesting figure to paint as a general! Dynastic marriages, long lost sons and daughters, family members coming of age, or returning from adventures abroad, not to mention wandering mercenaries, exiles, and other important displaced persons can provide plenty of new characters. *Very soon the newsletter can be a source of entertainment and enjoyment second only to gaming or painting itself* [3, 36, emphasis added].

Clearly the designer of *Knights & Magick* saw his creation as a playable storytelling engine, and one whose narrative output could even generate its own literature. This literature (the newsletter) could in turn be enjoyed in itself, or still seen as a living part of the game. For example, a prince that started marching south in one of your games, and that I learned about in the newsletter, is now ravaging the countryside of *my* southern kingdom, and has therefore become a character of my portion of the campaign. After several battles maybe I negotiate a truce which also includes a marriage with my character's daughter. When you later read about these events in the newsletter, you integrate their effects in your own games, and continue to develop the story from there. Verbal events narrated in the newsletter and non-verbal actions performed in the game area then become interchangeable building blocks of an organic narrative experience.

It seems clear, at this point, that many designers of the late 1970s took it upon themselves to energize their board games with significant elements from role-playing games, and employed the affordances of board gaming to stimulate story-rich gameplay. And since from *Dungeon!* to *Knights & Magick* most games in this trend had a strong adventurous profile, it is worth mentioning two designs that experimented to some degree with the representation of their characters' emotions. The first of these two games is *John Carter Warlord of Mars: Adventure Gaming Handbook*, designed by Michael Matheny<sup>17</sup> and published by Heritage in 1978. *John Carter Warlord of Mars* may appear to be a regular manual of rules for man-to-man combat taking place in the imaginary world of Barsoom. The game, however, also included RPG elements that made it a more narratively poignant experience. For example, even though a player could control a small band of figures, the rules specified that only one of them represented the player specifically.<sup>18</sup> Such distinction encouraged identification between the player and a single character, with the benefits that we know by now.<sup>19</sup> The game is also played in campaigns that should be directed by an appointed judge. This judge will need to “construct maps of cities, or a part of a city, *layouts of a typical dungeon* under a city (a twisting maze of corridors and rooms, cells and such), all gross terrain features of the area to be covered during the adventure” (54, emphasis added). The judge controls all non-playing characters and reveals new elements of the adventure only as the heroes discover them, acting more like the game master of an RPG than the referee of a wargame.<sup>20</sup>

More interestingly, the wargame system is paired with a set of rules meant to simulate interpersonal relationships among the characters. In particular, and despite the bellicose title, *John Carter* emphasizes the romantic elements in Burroughs’ *A Princess of Mars* by encouraging the players to create scenarios in which they will try to win the heart of the princess.<sup>21</sup> To turn such endeavor into a playable sequence, the game includes a system of “Princess Points” that must be gathered to achieve the ultimate goal. Characters receive an initial number of Princess Points depending on their social status, physical appearance, military rank, and sported jewelry. Later in the game, a situation may arise where “you and the Princess meet face to face. . . . She sweeps down the entrance ramp, a flowing vision of beauty and majesty. There you stand at the feet of the ramp. Stupified, mouth hanging

open. The first impression will be very important. What will you do? What will you say?" (51). This paragraph clearly has little to do with the mechanics of movement and combat that inform the bulk of gameplay, and provides a moment of RPG immersion in the setting. To resolve the encounter with the Princess, the players roll on a table to determine the behavior of their character, resulting in a modification to their pool of Princess Points. Possible outcomes include a range of situations like "stare unabashed at Princess entire evening, occasionally drool. -50 pts" or "Princess joins you in a sad, beautiful song of ancient splendors and glories. Entire room falls hushed. +300 pts."

In 1980 the publisher Yaquinto came out with its own fantasy board game grounded in an RPG perspective. The author was again Michael Matheny, and the game was called *Hero: A Game of Adventure in the Catacombs*. The game presents the same characteristics of most other designs of this kind, with individual heroes, a thematically rich environment, fights against monsters, and heaps of treasure to be collected along the way.<sup>22</sup> The innovation is that the reason for adventure is to gain enough wealth and prestige to marry Alysa, the daughter of a powerful wizard, and for this purpose the game includes a sophisticated system to determine Alysa's reactions.

Each hero in the game is defined by eight main attributes: Physical Appearance, Intelligence, Strength, Luck, Movement, Weapon Proficiency, Hits (health points), and Class (which here means style, *savoir faire*). While creating a character, a player receives 70 points to distribute among these characteristics, allowing to produce a vast array of heroes—from a scrawny and congenial thief, to a massive and rude barbarian. The impression of individuality of the characters is enhanced by a section of the rulebook which explains what some of the numerical values correspond to in the world of the story. We learn for example that a level zero Intelligence equals that of "minerally deficient dirt," a medium level means that the character "believes professional wrestling is real," and a high level indicates an "amateur nuclear physicist" (12). While irrelevant to gameplay, this section helps the player visualize their hero in further detail.

During the game, each player moves their character on a separate board that is identical to that of the others. Players also control the monsters and traps that populate the boards of their opponents. The combat system is fairly straightforward, but the process of assigning damage has some twists to it. Damage from a monster may result in a number of negative effects, and a player's character may lose points in several of their starting attributes, which adds thematic depth by evoking different types of wounds. Damage that affects the movement rating may be seen as a slash in a leg, whereas a hit that reduces Physical Appearance may be seen as a broken nose or a gash on the cheek. This is a key element of the design because the conditions to conquer Alysa's heart are based on the characters' scores in Physical Appearance, Intelligence, and Class at the end of the game, combined with the amount of wealth they retrieved from the catacombs and the level of courage they demonstrated. This last factor is calculated by adding together the experience points generated by each slain monster, and applying a penalty based on the type of armor that was worn ("after all, how courageous can a guy be who sounds like a crab cannery when he walks around," 12).

Attempting to please Alysa therefore becomes the vital element of the experience, and the one that informs most decisions made by the players. Make a hero a veritable Adonis, and he may not have enough skill to survive the dungeon; design him as a warrior who only knows about combat, and it will take a large pile of loot to convince Alysa to marry this brute.

These victory conditions may appear simplistic (and not a little campy), but they must be credited as one of the rare attempts in adventure board games to include a psychological element. This is not a trivial innovation if we consider that RPGs would start to factor in this element only in the 1980s, with Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu* and *King Arthur Pendragon*.<sup>23</sup> Adventure board games equally neglected this element, and even in designs like *King Arthur's Knights* a devastating passion was something that merely happened to the character, not something that the players could integrate in their strategy. *Hero* in this context deserves to be remembered as not just another game that tried to tell an adventure story, but as a game that attempted to tell a different kind of adventure story.

## The Age of Expansion

As we saw in the previous chapter, and as we will continue to see, the distinction between board games and role-playing games in the early days of the hobby was fluid and porose, with great potential for narrative crossbreeding between the two styles. Throughout the 1970s almost every RPG still tended to frame the action in a firmly defined spatial grid, and to adopt a turn-by-turn temporal structure for at least some of the situations. For all intents and purposes, this approach made early RPGs little more than “glorified miniature games.”<sup>1</sup> This situation continued throughout the 1980s, which means that the osmosis between RPGs and board games continued too, and with it the possibility to transfer narrative ideas from one form to the other. This was so true that a commentator from the 1980s could write that “if you really can’t think of a storyline” for your wargames, “then look to films or literature. … One can easily turn any story into a battle scenario” (Parkinson, 35–36).

Plenty of examples are available to support this interpretation. In the third edition of TSR’s Western RPG *Boot Hill*, released in 1980, it is stated that in “many role-playing games … the emphasis is on tactical combat and acting out all the minute-by-minute decisions a character makes” (97). *The Complete Book of Wargames* edited by Freeman (1980) included a chapter about fantasy wargames and another one about role-playing games, and the very fact that the latter are included in a book about wargames is significant. The section about role-playing games includes an analysis of *Melee* and *Wizard*, which today are considered wargames,<sup>2</sup> while the section about fantasy wargames describes TSR’s *Dungeon!* as an introduction to role-playing games, and one that can be turned into a full RPG by using a game master (234).<sup>3</sup>

In 1982 the volume *Fantasy Wargaming* by Bruce Galloway asked the rhetorical question “what is fantasy wargaming?” In the early ’70s the answer would have been a combat game about military formations set in a fantasy world. After the success of *D&D*, however, fantasy wargames became something quite different: “each player assumes the persona of a particular character, be it witch, warlock, mighty warrior or pious priest, nimble-fingered thief, or brazen harlot. This is why it is known as a *role-playing game*. Unlike conventional wargames, in which the troops maneuvered on the table have no personality, in fantasy gaming each little metal figure becomes endowed with life and character” (vii-viii, emphasis added). The overlapping between wargames and role-playing games is so extensive that role-playing here is quite literally employed as the definition of wargaming!

In 1984, an article in *Military Modelling* magazine classified role-playing games as a subcategory of fantasy wargaming (Treadaway-Richmond), and in 1987 Quarrie’s *Beginners’ Guide to Wargaming* explained that “one of the greatest phenomena *within wargaming* over the last ten years or so has been the growth of the fantasy role-playing game” (131, emphasis added). The same idea was alive and well in 1990, in Martin Hackett’s volume *Fantasy Wargaming*. Hackett seems perfectly capable to differentiate wargames from role-playing games, the former depicting “the clash of two model armies of an associated time period,” and the latter turning each player into “a character in a book, while the book is still being written” (11). This distinction however simply describes inseparable facets of the same object. The reason is that “once your character has become powerful, he may very well have a complete army of followers” and take part into actions that pertain to wargaming. How can there be a true distinction between RPGs and wargames, then, when wargames are the natural sequel to a hero’s early adventures, and character-based role-playing is in essence preparation for war? The difference between the two seems then to be mainly a simple matter of scale and focus, as one style of play is bound to morph into the other over time. Actually, not only didn’t role-playing part ways with wargaming during the 1980s, but it even expanded its tactical element by adding layers and layers of minute technical detail. Surprisingly enough, then, many RPGs from the 1980s ended up looking even more like wargames than their predecessors from the 1970s!<sup>4</sup>

When we look at wargames proper, too, we can verify that during the 1980s many designs continued to absorb the narrative qualities of RPGs. A perfect example is the board wargame *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Ice Crown Enterprises, 1983), designed by Coleman Charlton and Bruce Neidlinger, and inspired by the *Middle-Earth Role Playing Game* that had come out the previous year for the same publisher. The game covered the first section of *The Lord of the Rings*, depicting the events from Frodo's departure from the Shire up until the disbandment of the Fellowship. While this focus may make the narrative feel truncated, it allows the game to revolve around a group of unique characters (like RPGs tend to do) rather than on the political maneuvers and clashes of armies of the later sections of Tolkien's saga (and wargames in general). We find in this game all the representational techniques that we have seen in earlier story-driven board games, such as individual characters, RPG-like sets of statistics, event cards meant to capture the richness of the in-game world, and simulationist mechanics with high representational value (as in the use of concealed information to reproduce the secretive movements of the Fellowship). These intensely narrative elements are paired with conventional wargame elements such as a map overlaid with a hexagonal grid, and a rigid combat system that organizes the opposing forces in two parallel frontlines. The level of complexity is also of the kind one expects from advanced historical wargames, to the point that it is advisable to employ a referee to help with the implementation of the numerous procedures.

The result, as respected game reviewer Tim Taylor has written, is “a role-playing game in board game format,” which can be used “as a framework for an extended role-playing campaign based on the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.” When seen in this light, the exasperatingly detailed rules find at least some justification in the number of variations on the original tale they can produce. Taylor offers a compelling example of this type of narrative:

In a span of two turns (about 10 days) an amazing sequence of events transpired. Frodo, traveling alone, was killed by the Nazgul, but Tom Bombadil showed up and subsequently destroyed them! Having no regard for the Ring, Tom Bombadil just left it lying among the grassy barrows! Merry stumbled upon Frodo’s grave and then found the Ring, but was rendered unconscious by Gollum! Gollum slipped on “My

"Precious" just as Tom Bombadil reappeared and put the poor creature out of its misery. Tom took Merry back to his house to heal, but once again left the Ring! In Bree, Aragorn had heard rumors of great battles in the Barrow Downs, and hearing nothing from Gandalf, he decided to investigate. It was Aragorn who found the One Ring, glinting in the sunlight upon a crumbled stone wall. Returning to Bree, Aragorn met up with Pippin who was wondering where all his buddies had gotten to. Against his better judgment, and requiring a tremendous exertion of will, Aragorn transferred the Ring to Pippin. The burden was too great and he knew Gandalf wanted a Hobbit to carry the thing. Aragorn decided that evening to make for Rivendell at top speed, so he bought a sturdy horse. He and Pippin rode like the wind for Rivendell. FYI, Sam had gone to the Grey Havens with Nazgul hot on his trail, while Gandalf acquired Shadowfax in Edoras, then mobilized the Rohirrim and Gondorians.

Another remarkable example of the story turn in wargaming of the 1980s is in *Fight in the Skies*, which we mentioned earlier as one of the first wargames to introduce individual units. *Fight in the Skies* went through three self-produced editions between 1966 and 1972, was published professionally by Guidon Games in 1972, and was picked up by TSR in 1975. Through all of these versions, *Fight in the Skies* remained for all intents and purposes a standard wargame. In 1982, however, TSR retitled it *Dawn Patrol*, and marketed it as a "role-playing game of WWI air combat." This version had colored counters and a playmat showing the landscape over which the planes were flying, making the play area look more like a proper fictional setting. Most importantly, *Dawn Patrol* included a supplement called *Role-Playing Aspects*, which encouraged the players to see their pilots as fictional characters rather than mere functions within the design. By using this supplement, "players create fictional personae who face the dangers of a game world and who get better with experience. Personal rivalries between fictional pilots frequently develop, and many players alter their playing styles just a bit to suit their best pilots' temperament" (S. Williams, 75).<sup>5</sup>

A similar approach was taken in *Cry Havoc* (1981), designed by Tony Webster and Gary Chalk, and published by Standard Games. *Cry Havoc* is a tactical game of man-to-man combat set in the Middle Ages, and based on a

linear core of rules that helps the events represented in the game to come to the foreground. The art for the board and the counters, created by well-known illustrator Gary Chalk, is unusually elaborate and expressive, bestowing a strong sense of presence to scenes created by the arrangement of the characters in the play area. Each character is given a unique appearance and name, which is unusual and in essence unnecessary in a wargame, but effectively gives these figures a quasi-RPG identity.<sup>6</sup>

In 1984 and 1986 the narrative potential of *Cry Havoc* was further expanded by the publication of two scenario books that added story-oriented playable situations. Each scenario was introduced by a section called *Setting the Scene* (a significant choice of words already), which described the inciting incident of the skirmish to be fought on the board. Most of these situations emanate little military flavor, and are rather characterized by the type of structured interaction among individuals that we find in action movies or role-playing games. Often the scenarios tended to draw a distinction between heroes and villains that is rarely seen in historical wargaming, but represents a common feature in fiction. In the scenario *The Knight Errant*, for example, “a company of mercenary soldiers has been terrorizing the village, threatening its inhabitants with dire punishments if they do not pay them in both money and kind. A wandering knight, Sir Richard, has encouraged the village to stand up to the extortioners, and they have defied the mercenaries. Arnim, the leader of the mercenary band, has decided to teach the villagers a lesson.” We may never be able to place this episode historically, but we can easily spot its resemblance with movies about cowboys or samurais who side with a group of villagers in a fight against the bad guys.<sup>7</sup>

It is also worth remembering cases of wargames that could be enjoyed by themselves, as self-contained designs, or integrated within role-playing games. This phenomenon dates back to the ambiguous nature of *D&D* (which could be seen as an RPG or as an expansion of *Chainmail*), and to the publication of the wargame *War of Wizards*, which was born out of a rib of *Empire of the Petal Throne* and could be used to enhance combat in other fantasy RPGs. Similarly, Tom Cleaver’s *Swordplay* (Cleaver Games, 1976) and Wilf K. Backhaus’ *Rapier & Dagger* (Fantasy Games Unlimited, 1978) were systems of combat rules that could be played as independent skirmish wargames, or combined with role-playing games such as *Dungeons &*

*Dragons or Tunnels & Trolls*. A few years later, *The Book of Mars* by David Tennes (FASA, 1981) was described as “both a reference source and a game system for miniature wargaming and role-playing games” (1).

In the 1980s this porosity between role-playing games and wargames also showed up in the way the two styles were interchangeably employed to represent events at different scales within a shared setting. Often “wargames did double duty, acting as stand-alone wargames and also as the mass combat rules for the role-playing game they spawned” (Glancy, 79). For example, “the rules for GDW’s 1989 *Last Battle*, a squad-based, hexmap wargame set in the [RPG] *Twilight: 2000* universe, were actually a stripped-down and simplified version of the RPG combat rules. … Many players reported using *Last Battle* to simulate mass combat while playing the *Twilight: 2000* RPG” (Glancy, 79). Similarly, *The Traveller* RPG gave impulse to a large number of wargames that could be used to supplement the role-playing game itself (Glancy, 79). In 1982, TSR released the sci-fi RPG *Star Frontiers*, and in 1983, it added the standalone expansion *Knight Hawks*, which is a board wargame that can be played on its own, or integrated with the RPG to depict tactical battles in that setting. The same can be said for a line of sci-fi games published by FASA and called *Renegade Legion*, which comprised several conventional board-and-counter wargames (*Interceptor*, 1987; *Leviathan*, 1989; *Prefect*, 1992) and also the full role-playing game *Legionnaire* (1990). Frank Chadwick’s steampunk role-playing game *Space: 1889* (Games Workshop, 1988) followed suit when it was expanded by the combat supplements *Sky Galleons of Mars* (1988), *Cloudships & Gunboats* (1989), and *Ironclads and Ether Flyers* (1990).<sup>8</sup> Later, Target Games produced both the role-playing game *Mutant Chronicles* and the miniature combat game *Blood Berets* (both 1993), which is basically a streamlined version of *Mutant Chronicles*. The majestically produced *Warhammer Quest* by Andy Jones and Gavin Thorpe (Games Workshop, 1995) went in the same direction by including two different rule manuals in the box: one that explains how to play the game as a board game, and the other with the rules to play the very same game as a role-playing game.

*Dungeons & Dragons*, the game that started it all, had also a role in this trend. In 1976, TSR had already published Gary Gygax’s *Swords & Spells*, a set of miniature rules for mass combat that could be played independently or

used as an extension of *D&D*. In 1985, they repeated the operation with *Battlesystem*, another wargame system set in the world of *D&D*.<sup>9</sup> In 1991, it was followed by *Battlesystem Skirmishes*, a scaled-down version of the original game. In 2001 Wizards of the Coast, which had by then acquired *D&D*, released a miniature wargame called *Chainmail*, which represented clashes of bands of *D&D* characters in wargame format.<sup>10</sup> The rules of this new *Chainmail* even contained conversion procedures to turn a character from the role-playing game into a combatant for the miniature wargame, and vice versa. A supplement called *The Ghostwind Campaign* went a step further, allowing players to retain and level up their characters from game to game, which means that a string of confrontations in the *Chainmail* wargame could virtually have the same flow and progression of the role-playing game.<sup>11</sup> In 2003 Wizards published *Dungeons & Dragons Miniatures Handbook*, another tactical wargame set in the world of *D&D*, and here, too, we find a structural continuity between board gaming and RPGing: “The *D&D* game follows the heroic lives of individual characters, a “close-up” as it were. The *Miniatures Handbook* “zooms out” to follow the fortunes of elite warbands fighting one another in lethal skirmishes” (4). The year 2003 also saw the publication of the first edition of *Dungeons & Dragons Miniatures Game* (revamped in a second edition in 2008), which provided sets of miniatures that could be used to fight skirmishes in wargame format or to visualize the action of a session of *D&D*. This wargame/RPG hybrid line resonated so well with the hobby community that new sets continued to be released until 2011.

There can be little doubt, then, that for the longest time tactical wargames and role-playing games existed as two sides of the same coin, or two interconnected ways of telling the same story. This solidarity would partially dissolve between the late 1980s and early 1990s, with role-playing games slowly veering in a more narrativist direction, and wargames returning to concern themselves mainly with armies and governments. This separation was far from absolute though (as the examples above showed), and it certainly did not spell the end for storytelling board games. By then almost 20 years since the original publication of *Dungeon!* and *En Garde!* had passed, and designers of story-driven board games had had plenty of time to figure out how to adopt the narrative philosophy of role-playing games directly.

To return to the '80s, we can see that in this period the trend toward small-scale fantasy wargames that borrowed heavily from RPGs continued.

*Caverns of Doom* is probably one of the most notable examples. Released by Heritage in 1980 and designed by Arnold Hendrick (the author of *Knights & Magick*) the game depicted parties of fantasy heroes raiding a subterranean system of chambers and hallways to slay monsters and plunder riches, like the dominant taste in RPGs at the time dictated. The game presents open-ended victory conditions that are quite revelatory of the narrative intentions behind the design. The point was to explore as much of the dungeon as one felt like, without any amount of killing or looting being designated as necessary to win. In fact, the rules made it clear that the point of the game was to experience the stories that would emerge from gameplay. Other games came out in the same period that followed the same premises: fantasy setting, RPG feel, limited play area, and a combination of exploration, looting, and combat. Examples include *Caverns Deep* (Ral Partha, 1980) by an uncredited designer, *Witch's Cauldron* (Ral Partha, 1980) by Glenn Kidd and Marc Rubin, *Crypt of the Sorcerer* (Ral Partha, 1980) by Arnold Hendrick, *Valkenburg Castle* (Task Force, 1980) by Stephen V. Cole, *Citadel of Blood* (SPI, 1980) by Eric Lee Smith, and *The Castle* (Mayfair, 1981) by Neil Zimmerer.

In general, the games above remained fairly small productions aimed at a very specialized audience. A very different trend also emerged in the 1980s, though, and it was destined to revolutionize the world of board gaming. This new style strived to combine the storytelling potential of RPGs with extremely accessible rules. It also moved away from the business model of miniature wargaming (which only provided the rules, and required time and money to build a collection of components) in order to produce self-contained, ready-made game sets that were fully playable out of the box.<sup>12</sup> This led to a style of board games that presented many of the narrative advantages we discussed in the previous chapters, but could be marketed to a much larger audience.

To achieve this goal, several story-rich games of the 1980s started making compromises with the conventions of mass-market games. The games we saw in the previous chapters were mainly designed by wargamers for wargamers, or by role-players for role-players, with the specific

expectations of that type of audience in mind. Many designs of the 1980s, instead, borrowed concepts and mechanics from mass-market games that had had little place in hobby gaming. Role-playing games, for example, had greatly reduced intragroup competition, preferring to have all players work together as a team. When role-playing was recast in board games for a larger audience, the designers often reintroduced competitive victory conditions, which is what a casual player accustomed to *Monopoly* or *Clue* would expect. Random movement, which had been almost banned from hobby gaming, made a return too—and every time that in an adventure game we find a paladin who has no idea of how far he will be able to move next turn, we can be sure that the representational logic of wargaming and role-playing has been replaced by the conventions of the mass market. These compromises, while frowned upon by hobby purists, still contributed to the success of the games in which they were used, and in the great scheme of things may have turned out to be beneficial to the diffusion of the hobby.

Given the projected marketability of these games, the publishers also invested in considerably higher production values. Miniature manuals sold in Ziploc bags, drab and cheaply produced maps, and in general all of the unpolished traits of many productions of the 1970s, were replaced by large and sturdy boxes, eye-catching cover art, colorful boards and cards, evocative game counters, and in some cases impressive plastic miniatures. The combination of attractive components, simple rules, and familiar mechanics turned many thematic games of the 1980s into considerable financial successes, leading to the publication of expansions, reprints, and updates. The formula has proven so strong that some of these games are still in print today.

The beginning of this trend can be dated to 1983, when Games Workshop released the first edition of one of the most successful fantasy games of all time—*Talisman* by Robert Harris. Beloved by many players and vehemently disliked by others, *Talisman* followed in on the steps of games like *The Sorcerer's Cave*, which were intended to convey the experience of *D&D* in a purely board-based, game-master-less format that could be played out of the box. With its linear mechanics, intensely thematic content, and endless potential for variety and expansion, *Talisman* emerged as a sort of “*D&D* for the masses” (Hensley), becoming a staple in the gaming habits of many

casual and not so casual players.<sup>13</sup> The result was a second edition in 1985, a plethora of expansions, a third edition in 1994, a line of expansions for that edition, a fourth version released by Fantasy Flight Games in 2007, an impressive range of over 20 further expansions, a reimaging of the original game in a sci-fi setting (*Relic*, Fantasy Flight Games, 2013) and another in a post-apocalyptic setting (*The Cataclysm*, Fantasy Flight Games, 2016).

*Talisman* is set in a rather generic world; a varied quilt of fantasy tropes like the original *Dungeons & Dragons* had been (and still is). Players take on the role of questing characters which incarnate fantasy categories and archetypes rather than well-defined individuals. These characters are represented by a figure that goes on the board, and a personal sheet detailing the character's stats and abilities. Each character has traits that differentiate it from the others, adding to the replay value of the game as players will have different experiences with different characters. The offer of multiple characters may also foster a sense of connection, making it more likely that players will find a type that resonates with their preferred play style and/or fulfills fantasies of identification.<sup>14</sup>

The board of *Talisman* is divided into three regions: an outer one, a middle one, and an inner one. Each region is formed by a track of spaces along which the characters move, giving the board the look of a trio of *Monopoly* movement tracks nested inside one another. All characters start from the outer rim, and move back and forth on it defeating enemies, acquiring special items, recruiting followers, and raising their initial stats. Later, the characters wander across the middle region basically repeating what they were doing in the outer rim, but in a much more hostile environment. This phase continues until a character has been upgraded enough to enter the inner region and recover the fabled Crown of Command. In modern quest games, retrieving a mighty artifact is often enough to be declared the victor; here, the Crown only furnishes the means to attack the other players' characters, introducing the familiar idea from *Monopoly* that the winner is the player who knocks everybody else out of the game.

Each turn the active player rolls a six-sided die to determine the number of spaces her character must move, bringing us back to the roll-and-move mechanic for which (again) *Monopoly* is most known. Players must move by

the rolled number of spaces in either direction along the track, without reversing direction. This seems to give the players some freedom, but in many cases the two destinations that can be reached after a roll are functionally identical (making the choice of direction irrelevant), or one of them is obviously better than the other (making the choice trivial). Random movement also subjects the players to having to wait until a lucky roll brings their character in a specific space they may want to visit. After moving a character, the controlling player interacts with the game space in which the character landed, following instructions printed on the board. In some cases, this means to select an option from a list, and possibly to roll a die to determine the exact outcome. In other cases, the player must draw an Adventure card from a deck of 104 cards, which may result in the hero finding a valuable item, facing an enemy, or resolving an event. These cards generate an array of situations that is meant to entertain us with its thematic richness; game-wise, however, the resulting encounters offer little meaningful interaction. In most cases the content of a card gives the player no opportunity to make any decision—one simply reads the text, and implements its effect. Also, since weak and strong enemies are shuffled together in the deck and may come out in any order, a hero may be squashed by mighty monsters early in the game and fall behind in the competition, while another may find magic items and followers without effort, face easy monsters early on, level up smoothly, and encounter the most fearsome enemies only when ready to overcome them.

All of this means that the players of *Talisman* are almost entirely at the mercy of luck when moving and fighting, and in most cases have no way of manipulating their chances to get a good card or roll a positive effect. Moreover, like in *Monopoly* (yet again!), *Talisman* has a runaway leader issue, meaning that once a player gets ahead of the pack it is hard for the others to catch up, and in most cases during the last hour of the game it is clear who the winner is going to be. When reversals occur, these too are due to luck rather than superior gameplay. As if all this wasn't enough, the characters in the game are not evenly balanced. The Prophetess, in particular, is known to be an unfairly powerful hero. If characters are dealt out randomly, a player receiving a weak character and confronting the Prophetess will be almost bound to defeat before the game even starts.

When we consider all of these factors, we can say that ludically speaking the game is mediocre at best, with a minimal space of decision, a massive random element, repetitive gameplay (roll, move, draw a card, roll again), only one path to victory, and long playtime. The secret of the game's enormous success must therefore lie outside of the game's mechanics, and when those are removed from the equation the only things left to consider are the theme, the setting, and the characters. It seems reasonable then to connect *Talisman*'s popularity to the fact that its bare-boned, familiar mechanics can give even the most casual player the opportunity to join in an undemanding, unpredictable, thematically rich quest. The game does offer some of the strongest selling points of role-playing games, such as highly iconic characters, personal advancement, the experience of exploration and adventure, and the thrill of going to battle against a range of exotic foes. *Talisman* has also the advantage of presenting its distinct role-playing atmosphere without requiring a dedicated game master, previous preparation, or the memorization of complicated rules. *Talisman* can be rightfully accused to be a clumsy and shallow design, but it still delivers the simulacrum of an RPG experience that may be entertaining to those who otherwise would not be interested in the genre, or even to serious players who have decided to take a break from their usual fare. Ultimately, *Talisman* succeeded because it told entertaining RPG-type stories while remaining easily comprehensible to a large audience.

The popularity of the game, in time, also expanded the narrative potential of the game. Already in 1984 *Talisman* went through a second edition in which the illustrations on the cards were in color—an irrelevant ludic change, but an important enhancement in terms of establishing an interesting storyworld. Not long after that, expansions for *Talisman* started being released on the model of supplements for role-playing games. *Talisman: The Adventure*, *Talisman Expansion Set* (both 1986), *Talisman Dungeon* (1987), *Talisman Timescape* (1988), and *Talisman City* (1989) started the trend, and many more expansions would be released over the years for every edition of the game. Through these supplements, players could expand the fictional reality of the game by adding playable heroes, encounter cards, and even new locations depicted on secondary boards. Given that the pleasure of playing *Talisman* was never in strategy and optimization but in trying on heroic identities, discovering things, and defeating enemies, the addition of such

expansions greatly increased the entertainment value of the game. Incidentally, this is another demonstration of the fact that quantity has a quality of its own in a story-oriented board game, and variety can make a great difference in the degree of immersion generated by a design. And given the success of the game, for *Talisman* this seems to have been more than enough.

In 1986 games and story met again with the release of the board game *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* by UK Steve Jackson.<sup>15</sup> The game was inspired by the well-known gamebook of the same title, written by UK Jackson and Ian Livingstone, and published in 1982. The book was immensely popular at the time, and launched not just the highly successful *Fighting Fantasy* series but the entire gamebook craze of the 1980s. Both the book and the board game *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* challenged the characters controlled by the players to navigate the dungeon of the evil wizard Zagor in order to defeat him and loot his treasure. A main difference is that the book is meant for a single reader while the board game is multiplayer, but this aside the game follows the book quite closely, to the point that the configuration of the board can be seen as an accurate rendition of the geography of the book. In both cases, the section of the dungeon next to the entrance is made of a fairly linear system of hallways and chambers; next, there is a complex net of rooms cut in two by an underground river; finally, a third section is a maze of twisty little passages that can easily cause the reader of the gamebook to be lost for hours. For reasons of physical space, the maze becomes much more manageable when transposed on a board, and certainly does not produce the frustration that the readers of the book know all too well. As it is to be expected, the game uses encounter cards to introduce monsters to fight and treasures to collect. Unfortunately, the number of such cards is small, so there won't be much surprise left for the players after every card is used during the first game. Such a limited range of content would be acceptable in other games, but it becomes a weakness in a design inspired by a book that includes a huge variety of situations, and that can entertain the reader for a long time before each nook and cranny of the dungeon is explored.

In 1986 we also have the publication of Richard Halliwell's *Rogue Trooper*, inspired by the British comic strip of the same title and published by Games

Workshop. The game and the original story are set in a sci-fi world that has been turned into a wasteland by chemical warfare. The game takes inspiration from the early storylines of the comics, in which a genetically modified soldier embarks on a mission to find a traitor in his army. The players of the game control different soldiers, and attempt to find the traitor before the others do. The intention behind the design, as the rulebook explains, is to employ the world of the comics as the setting for a highly thematic experience: “*Rogue Trooper* is an adventure game.... It borrows many elements from role-playing games.... Each game of *Rogue Trooper* tells a story, with the players each controlling a character in the story.” The characters move on a board divided in discrete partitions and face encounters generated by a pool of cards representing enemies to defeat, clues to collect, and items that can be used to one’s advantage. The result does not feel very different from the more popular *Talisman*, if not for the fact that *Rogue Trooper* gives the players more freedom to move and explore the world of the game. This in turn helps establish a sense of immersion in the players’ mind, especially for those who are familiar with the source comics and have an emotional attachment to the setting.

The following year (1987) Games Workshop released the first English-language edition of *DungeonQuest*, a game originally published in Norway in 1985 and in Germany in 1986. *DungeonQuest* represents yet another rendition of the main concepts of *D&D* in board game form, and exhibits most of the traits we have seen in games like *Talisman* or *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain*: professional production values, a sturdy box with an attractive cover, relatively simple rules, colorful components, competitive gameplay, and massive amounts of randomness. This last factor in *DungeonQuest* colors virtually every aspect of gameplay. Each player in *DungeonQuest* controls a hero who is attempting to reach the central chamber of the board and loot the obligatory treasure. Each hero starts from one of the corners of the board and is moved on a grid of randomly-drawn terrain tiles that the players place adjacent to one another, respecting the disposition of doors, rooms, and hallways in the tiles’ illustrations. Given the great number of terrain combinations that may emerge, the replayability of the game is enormous. It is playability, however, to suffer. The complete lack of order and structure in which the tiles are received makes it entirely possible that a player will build a short and direct path to the victory area,

while another will get stuck in a meandering maze of tunnels, or even be trapped in an area without exits, from which it is impossible to escape. The randomness of the encounters also causes many (if not most) heroes to be killed by threats they are not ready to overcome. And if massive luck and limited decisions made *Talisman* a ludically mediocre game, even more prominent randomness and virtual elimination of player agency should make *DungeonQuest* a truly terrible game.

This however cannot be entire picture, or we could not explain how a ludically problematic game like *DungeonQuest* could be successfully published in many countries, go through four editions (the last one dating 2010), and rise to the status of a modern classic. A way to tackle this mystery is to ask the players who have enjoyed the game, and the reviews posted by users of the BoardGameGeek website represent a natural place to start. In the words of user Joshua Buergel (jbuergel):

*DungeonQuest* is maybe the most nihilistic game that I own. It's going to crush, devour, mangle, mutilate and otherwise humiliate your heroes. But in a cheerful kind of way. ... Overall, the game is something more like a slot machine than a board game, as the strategic decisions are few.... But the atmosphere it creates is unique among dungeon crawlers, and I still enjoy bringing it out to this day for a few rounds of ritual humiliation.

Similarly, Rob Robinson (zombiegod) wrote that “*DungeonQuest* is very rich in atmosphere. Every game plays out like a story, albeit a short story at the best of times.” Many similar comments can be found on BGG that will confirm that, yes, the game might be an insult to all that hobbyists consider good and holy, but its immersive atmosphere, engaging theme, and entertaining sequences of fictional events can be enough to make the experience enjoyable. Once more we can verify that the community of players sees no problem in the fact that some games can tell stories, and that those stories can be so engrossing to make up for other abysmal shortcomings. It is actually in designs such as this one, whose ludic engine cannot possibly justify the players’ enjoyment, that we can find the most convincing examples of the value of storytelling in board gaming.

Another game that was released around this time and became known for its story-driven gameplay is *Arkham Horror*, designed by Richard Launius, Lynn Wills, and Charlie Krank, and published by Chaosium in 1987. The game had been conceived as the board game version of Chaosium's role-playing game *Call of Cthulhu* (1981),<sup>16</sup> set in the world of H.P. Lovecraft. Redesigned for Fantasy Flight Games in the 21st century and enriched by a constant stream of expansions, the game is also notable as one of the driving forces behind the Renaissance of board gaming of the last decade.

Players of *Arkham Horror* take on the role of supernatural investigators in the 1920s who are attempting to prevent the irruption of Lovecraft's cosmic horrors into our plane of existence. The game provides schematic but still individualized characters, and focuses its action mainly in and around the fictional town of Arkham, with the possibility of the occasional visit to a parallel dimension. The characters move along a net of streets to reach locations that may trigger a number of effects and encounters. While doing so, the investigators fight monsters, collect resources that increase their chances of success, and attempt to seal the transdimensional gates that keep opening on the board.

Although much simpler than *Call of Cthulhu*, *Arkham Horror* still shows its narrative and role-playing roots, and employs them effectively to enrich the players' experience. In *Arkham Horror* the players work cooperatively, and they all lose or win together against the challenges produced by the game system.<sup>17</sup> Cooperative gameplay is common these days, but wasn't so in the 1980s, when team-based RPGs were commonly translated into competitive board games (as we saw). *Arkham Horror* bravely introduced board gaming to the type of interplayer dynamics one finds most often in role-playing games. Like in other narrative-oriented board games, the players here control unique characters with individual sets of traits and considerable possibilities for customization through the allocation of Strength and Sanity points, items, skills, spells, and other resources.<sup>18</sup> The individuality of these investigators is such an important element that the rulebook encourages the players to introduce their characters to the group, precisely like it is customary in role-playing games.

At the level of the action, the game includes a series of encounter tables that must be consulted whenever a character interacts with a location. The nature of the encounter is determined with a roll of the die. In some cases, the effects of the encounter cannot be avoided, but in others the tables offer interesting choices to the players, and can even generate additional events through small narrative trees. For example, if a character visits the Silver Twilight Lodge, the owning player will have to resolve one of the following situations:

- 1—Monster appears.
- 2—Carl Stanford asks you why you wander beyond the public area. His eyes compel you: lose 1 sanity point.
- 3—“Care to join the Order?” Carl Stanford and his henchmen ask.
  - Accept and pay \$3.
  - Refuse and roll your Sneak: success and escape to the sidewalk outside; fail and lose D6 strength.
- 4—Carl Stanford and his henchmen find you rifling files. Roll Sneak: success, and go to sidewalk outside; fail and be interrogated: forget 1 spell because of anxiety.
- 5—Find valise containing something: draw 2 free items.
- 6—Gate and monster appear.

Monsters and items that come into play are drawn randomly from a solid pool of cards, adding variety and unpredictability to the interactions with the storyworld. In general, the game conveys enough content through cards, tables, board locations, monster counters, and all other components, that the combinations of this fictional material during gameplay allow for the emergence of significant narrative patterns.<sup>19</sup> The result is a series of situations that change from game to game and that the players enjoy for their thematic and narrative flavor. To increase the enjoyment of such story the rulebook even encourages the players to alter the rules and change the

difficulty as they see fit, in a soft approach to the ludic structure of the design that is typical of role-playing games and much less common in board games.

In the same year of *Arkham Horror*, TSR released a game called *Legend of Heroes*, by Graeme Morris. RPG theme, competitive gameplay, and extremely simple rules link the game to the tradition of casual fantasy games that had started with *Dungeone!* and had recently achieved great visibility with *Talisman*. The game board represents a net of tunnels and chambers that the players attempt to loot with their parties of heroes. The location of each party is marked on the board with a plastic pawn, while the individual members are represented by character cards that include an illustration of the hero and the stats to be used in combat. During set up, a card from a Room Deck is placed face down in every room on the board, changing each place's content from game to game. Once a party enters a room, the corresponding card is turned face up and its effects are implemented.

By 1987 the use of event cards in adventure games had become standard, but *Legend of Heroes* adds a twist to the idea by stringing together the effects of several cards in unusually well-developed sequences. Other adventure games may stipulate that when a hero enters a room the player draws a Monster card, and if the monster is defeated the player gets to draw a Treasure card. In *Legend of Heroes* there isn't a fixed order in which the elements of the game enter play. Each card tells the player what kind of card must be drawn next, so monsters may lead to treasures, treasures to monsters, traps to features, and in practice anything to anything else. Once a room is entered, the active player continues to draw from the indicated decks and resolve events until a card with the indication "end of the room" is revealed. The effect of continuity is strong, and it is intensified by the fact that the texts on the cards produce a seamless verbal flow, like a human game master would when describing a new situation. Below is an example of a possible sequence, with the words in italics indicating the deck from which to draw next:

## Laboratory

Strange smells and benches crowded with weird equipment identify this room as a laboratory. Fascinated by these amazing things, you are surprised as a...

*Hazard* →

### **Lightning Bolt**

zaps towards you.

After you have disarmed the lightning bolt trap, you discover a...

*Treasure* →

### **Jade Bracelet**

with a value of 300 gold pieces. As you pick it up you are suddenly confronted by a...

*Monster* →

### **Gargoyle**

flying across the chamber with its wings outspread. When the fight is over you have time to notice a...

*Treasure* →

### **Emerald Pin**

with a value of only 200 gold pieces. As you pick it up, you find a cloth bag containing a ...

*Treasure* →

### **Coral Brooch**

with a gold pin. Its value is 400 gold pieces. Quickly, you put it on and leave.

End of Room

Once a room is entered, a fictional chain must be traveled through entirely, until the end is reached. Fights must be resolved through procedures that may cause a pause in the chain, but as soon as the combat is over the flow of events resumes. Like in *Talisman* and other games of this type, randomness here is preponderant, and strategy is minimal. Even more so than in *Talisman*, though, these shortcomings are counterbalanced by a tight verbal structure that truly creates the impression that the game is telling a story. *Legend of Heroes* may not be the deepest design of its age, but it is certainly among the ones that most seriously attempted to transfer the narrative functions of a game master to the inertial components of a board game. In this respect, it is safe to say that this ludically unremarkable game achieved its goal. In so doing, the game also showed a particularly sophisticated reinvention of the narrative techniques that designers of board games had been experimented with for the previous decade.

# 8

## Paragraph-Based Games

The 1980s were the period of maximum flourishing of several forms of interactive storytelling. Two series of interactive books in particular stood out for their success and influence, and also exemplified the main forms that this type of fiction could take: the purely narrative interactive book, represented by the iconic *Choose Your Own Adventure* series, and the gamebook proper, launched by *Fighting Fantasy*, which paired branching texts with game mechanics such as rolling dice and updating numerical stats. Together with the increased visibility of role-playing games and digital text adventures, these books contributed to popularize the idea that stories didn't have to be something that one passively received; rather, they could now be toolkits, toy chests, sets of narrative materials that the reader was expected to assemble in a variety of ways.

Designers of board games, as we know by now, joined this trend toward playable storytelling in entertainment, and it wasn't long before they started realizing the advantages of integrating the verbal structure of role-playing games, gamebooks, and digital text adventures, within the affordances of board gaming. The games we saw in the previous chapters did so to a limited extent, usually by employing short and highly functional texts printed on their boards and cards. The games we will examine in this chapter went much further, and expanded the verbal element of their designs by including full booklets of numbered paragraphs describing hundreds of situations that could take place in the storyworld. These booklets conveyed more detail and atmosphere than what an encounter card or event table could, while also offering the opportunity for structuring strings of events in narratively effective sequences.

We saw early examples of this type of game with the solitaire adventures for *Tunnels & Trolls*, the booklets cum battlemaps in the *MicroQuest* series, and the narrative trees in *Flash Gordon & the Warriors of Mongo*. Another game

that came early in this trend was *Awful Green Things from Outer Space* by Tom Wham, originally published in the magazine *The Dragon* in 1979, and later in boxed editions.<sup>1</sup> The game portrays a group of scientists trapped in a starship with a rapidly multiplying horde of aliens. The narrative element emerges only if the scientists choose to use the ship's escape pods, in which case they must survive an "Epilogue" that is structured as an interconnected system of textual paragraphs.

Two games that came out soon after that were *The Voyage of the B.S.M. Pandora* by John Butterfield, and *Barbarian Prince* by Arnold Hendrick (both 1981). These games made a much more integrated use of the interaction between textual paragraphs and board-based actions. The excellent reception they received among hobbyists, in turn, gave impulse to a considerable diffusion of the genre in the years to follow.

*The Voyage of the B.S.M. Pandora* was published with issue 6 of the *Ares* magazine and as a standalone boxed game. Inspired both by *Star Trek* and the novel *The Voyage of the Space Beagle* by Van Vogt (itself a source for *Star Trek*), *The Voyage* is a solitaire game in which the player controls the crew of an interstellar scientific expedition in search of extraterrestrial life. The game comes with counters, rules, a paper map, and a booklet comprising 232 numbered paragraphs that describe events that the characters may experience. A small area of the map represents the sector of space where the Pandora is traveling. Each time the ship reaches a planet, the player rolls on a table to determine where exactly on the planet a research team will land. The rest of the map shows the possible environments in which the counter representing the away mission must be placed, with possibilities that go from alien cities to jungles, island clusters, and landscapes of molten lava. After choosing crew members, bots, and equipment for the current mission, the player starts moving the counter of the away team on the planet, using the paragraph booklet to discover the events occurring in each location that is entered. The fictional events represented in the text often affect the ludic state of the game, for example by giving victory points or eliminating some of the player's resources. As a result, the experience of playing the game is one of seamless integration of verbal, visual, and ludic functions. The texts and the illustrations help the player imagine the content of the represented situation, while also leading to the implementation of game mechanics, and these

mechanics lead to the production of further fictional content—like when a failed die roll causes the death of a crew member, or a successful die roll results in the defeat of a hostile alien.

*Barbarian Prince* (Heritage, 1981) shares the core philosophy of *The Voyage* by placing the focus of agency of the player in a specific space on a hex-based map, and providing a booklet of encounters that describe the events that take place in each hex. Here, too, random tables are included to increase the variety of the possible encounters. *Barbarian Prince* is a solitaire game in which the player controls Cal Arath, the Conan-inspired prince of the title. The job for the player is to explore the region showed on the map, defeat scores of enemies, and gather enough money to raise an army to fight the usurper who stole the prince's throne. Luck plays a large role in the adventure not just due to the die rolls, but also because the player has no way of knowing beforehand what kind of encounter awaits her in each hex. The effect, like in *The Voyage*, is one of discovery and progressive revelation, with the usual narrative consequences associated with this process. The narrative impression in *Barbarian Prince* is further strengthened by the fact that the possible events are not simply juxtaposed to one another, with a mini-adventure in each hex, but are actually interconnected in thematically meaningful ways. In a hex the protagonist may learn of a noble who is hiring adventurers; after traveling to the castle of that noble, the prince may be given the task to retrieve a certain item or assassinate a certain character, and the journey to accomplish this new mission may in turn lead to other chains of events and side quests. The game is notoriously very difficult to beat, and yet it has achieved the status of a classic among hobbyists, with its persisting popularity being both confirmed and strengthened by recent print-and-play remakes available online.

Paragraph-based games would catch on soon after the successful release of *The Voyage of the B.S.M. Pandora* and *Barbarian Prince*, and would become an important presence in analog gaming of the 1980s. *Ares* magazine, which had already published *The Voyage*, played a prominent role by releasing two other solitaire games based on the interaction of a physical play area and a booklet of encounters. The first of these games was *Return of the Stainless Steel Rat* (1981), designed by Greg Costikyan and inspired by Harry Harrison's sci-fi stories about the titular character. The game allowed

the player to choose the role of a hero or heroine—an unusual option at the time, and one which promoted psychological commitment in players of both genders and allowed to experiment with gender swapping. The purpose of the game is to navigate a maze controlled by a computer, reach the central area of the board, shut down the computer, and deal with the villain behind the crisis. As the game includes several villains and more areas and paragraphs that can possibly be explored in a single session, the game has a high replay value and retains a pleasurable sense of surprise even after repeated attempts.

The next paragraph-based game published by Ares was *The Damocles Mission* (1983) designed by Gerald Klug and Redmond Simonsen. This game also had a sci-fi setting, and this time the solitaire player controlled a group of astronauts exploring a mysterious, gigantic starship orbiting Earth. Again, the game relies on a collection of textual paragraphs to bring the theme and the story to life. What sets *The Damocles Mission* apart is its variable play area made of a pool of tiles that are randomly selected and added together during gameplay, generating new spatial configurations each time. The game is also unusual for its strangely pensive atmosphere, in which most of what happens appears to be incomprehensible or irrelevant (at least to human eyes). This take distances the game from the adventurous tropes the player may expect, and generates an unsettling impression of radical otherness. It certainly makes sense that if we encountered an alien artifact, such artifact would be under no obligation to be comprehensible by us, as the classic novel *Rendezvous with Rama* by Arthur C. Clarke had made abundantly clear. *The Damocles Mission* manages to capture precisely this type of possibility—one that is not rare in sci-fi literature, but that is not as frequently found in gaming.

Around this time, paragraph-based board gaming had also the distinction of bringing a narrative approach outside of the realm of fantasy and sci-fi. These two genres, as we have seen time and time again, have vastly dominated early experiments to turn board games into narrative engines, with fantasy taking the lion's share and sci-fi coming in as a distant second. The paragraph-based system, however, brought to life two historical wargames that are still highly respected in the gaming community: John Butterfield's

*Ambush!* (Victory Games, 1983) and Bill Gibbs' *Ranger* (Omega Games, 1984).

*Ambush!*, by the same designer of *The Voyage of the B.S.M. Pandora*, is a solitaire game in which the player leads a squad of American soldiers through different types of missions in Europe during World War II. The scale is man-to-man, allowing for a representation of individual characters that greatly facilitates the storytelling perspective. The player's squad is generated by combining expenditure of game resources and random die rolls, in a way that closely parallels standard character creation in the role-playing games of the time. *Ambush!* even includes the possibility of improving one's characters over time, just like characters of a role-playing game are expected to. Gameplay takes place on a map divided in hexagonal spaces, and movement on this map leads the player to consult a book with the description of what is encountered in each location. These texts can introduce new perils, furnish the player with important information, or simply add atmospheric details that, although ludically inessential, do enhance the sense of immersion in the world of the game. The hidden, unpredictable nature of this content allows for a variety of surprises to be sprung on the player, creating a palpable sense of tension.<sup>2</sup> The strength of the story that emerges from this system is the aspect that most players praise when discussing the game, and must be considered to be one of the reasons why *Ambush!* has become a classic in modern wargaming. The success of the system is also proven by the expansion of the original design through an entire line of further installments, which includes two standalone games (*Battle Hymn*, 1986, set in the Pacific theatre, and *Shell Shock*, 1990, a two-player variant) and four expansion sets (three for the original *Ambush!*, one for *Battle Hymn*). Especially when these products are added, the already impressive detail of each game session coalesces into a sustained narrative of great richness, and the game allows the players to enter fictional campaigns that are as varied, surprising, and rewarding as those in most role-playing games.

*Ranger*, which came out the year after *Ambush!*, is another solitaire wargame featuring small groups of individually defined combatants. The game depicts modern-day patrol missions forward of enemy lines, and is played on a laminated map which does not have a grid of discrete partitions imposed on it—an unusual solution which gives it a rather authentic look. The player

uses a dry erase marker to mark the position of her patrol and record movement on the map. Each time the patrol moves, the player draws a line to represent a new leg of the trip, the length of which depends on the terrain and the speed of march. At various times, a check must be taken to determine whether or not an event occurs, and when that is the case the action is resolved by consulting a booklet that contains a large range of numbered paragraphs. The concealed nature of the information in the booklet is very effective in a context in which the player's avatars are moving through unfamiliar territory and in conditions of limited visibility. The ability of the paragraph system to delay the release of information until the moment in which it is relevant puts the player in the realistic condition of not knowing what dangers may or may not await ahead. A peculiar effect of this is that the game may generate extremely suspenseful sessions in which basically nothing relevant happens. A patrol, after all, could just get lucky and manage to complete its mission without ever encountering significant opposition. In most other games such lack of meaningful events would be considered a fatal flaw, but in *Ranger* the mere possibility that each new paragraph *could* reveal a deadly enemy is enough to keep the player engaged, even in sessions in which such possibility doesn't actually materialize.

Another example of synergy between board and paragraph-based text is in *Convoy* (1984), an expansion for the game *Car Wars* by U.S. Steve Jackson (Steve Jackson Games, 1981).<sup>3</sup> *Car Wars* is a tactical wargame depicting vehicle combat in a post-apocalyptic world. In its original incarnation the game already contained a considerable level of detail and individual customization, meeting at least some of our requirements for storytelling in board games. The game most certainly became a playable story in the expansion *Convoy*, which consists of a booklet with 400 interlinked paragraphs detailing a journey from Lexington to Memphis to deliver vital goods. The players create their characters following the rules of the board game, and then start reading the story from paragraph 1, navigating the branching tree of decisions in the text like in a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book. When special situations occur in the story, the text instructs the players to set up the encounter on the board of *Car Wars*, and the sequence is resolved according to the rules of the board game. Once the board-based sequence is over, the players return to the booklet and continue to read and make choices in the text, taking into account the possible consequences of

what took place on the board. Both types of fictional events, whether verbally described or played on a board, equally contribute to moving the narrative forward in an organic interactive story. The flow is virtually the same that we saw in the programmed booklets in the *MicroQuest* series.

The following year two more paragraph-based games came out. They both presented a significant innovation on the formula because, while remaining solitaire-friendly like their predecessors, they also added a significant multiplayer perspective. The first of these games was *Star Trek Adventure Game* (West End, 1985), designed by Greg Costikyan and Doug Kaufman, and the other was *Tales of the Arabian Nights* (West End, 1985), designed by Eric Goldberg. *Star Trek Adventure Game* was mainly intended as a 2-player game, with one player controlling a ship of the Federation and the other a Klingon vessel. Players would alternate moving their ship on the board in an attempt to make contact with new planets and extend the political influence of their faction. Each time a player reached a new planet, the opposite player would consult a booklet of numbered paragraphs and read out loud the events that the active player would face in that mission. The idea is reminiscent of *The Voyage of the B.S.M. Pandora*, but with much less of a wargame feel to it. The descriptions of the events occurring on each planet in fact are not visualized on a tactical map, and take the form of short narratives that offer multiple types of decision to the active player (*Choose Your Own Adventure* style). Many of the situations encountered on the planets borrow directly from episodes of the classic TV show, giving the game a significant paratextual element.

*Tales of the Arabian Nights* allows the players to become adventurers in the world of Scheherazade, Sinbad, and Aladdin. The goal of the game is to travel around the board and collect Story points and Destiny points by interacting with encounters described in an impressive booklet of 1,400 numbered paragraphs. While the system to determine the paragraph to use in each circumstance is more laborious than in any of the game's predecessors, the narrative variety and richness that can emerge are astounding. The booklet may be used by a non-active player who reads the text out loud and explains the events concerning the active player's character (like in *Star Trek Adventure Game*). In a suggested variant, the active player reads the events in the booklet quietly to herself, and then tells the resulting story in her own

words. The focus of this variant is clearly on the quality of the stories that the players craft, as demonstrated by the freedom with which the players are allowed to treat the provided materials: “You may invent additional events, add new characters and circumstances, embellish the details, even wander from the original paragraphs to a certain extent.... Your basic purpose ... is to charm and entertain your fellow players” (7). The game is also known for its massive random element, which makes it difficult if not impossible to play strategically. This factor alone would cripple differently oriented games, but here it has the effect of relieving the players from the pressure of maximizing their performance in order to win. This way, the players’ attention can shift from the ludic functions of the design to the enjoyment of the flow of the story. The stories in the game, in turn, generated as they are by unpredictable and often surreal concatenations of events, tend to acquire some of the sense of magic and wonder of the original source material.

In 1987 Avalon Hill released the game *Dinosaurs of the Lost World* by Mick Uhl, which experimented with a new version of the paragraph-based approach that we could call “panel-based.” The game depicts groups of explorers researching a plateau in the Amazonian forest, and dealing with hostile natives, savage beasts, dinosaurs, and ape-men. Movement on the board is sometimes accompanied by random occurrences described on event cards, while some other times it leads the players to locations where they must resolve a special situation through the use of an Adventure Chart. Each such chart is a large player aid titled after a unique narrative sequence (like *Triceratops Hatchery Adventure* or *Lava Pit Adventure*), and shows a sequence of images visually organized in panels with textual captions, like on a comic book page. When going on an adventure, the active player places her party pawn on the first panel of the chart, and then moves it across the page interacting with the challenges in the illustrations on which it lands. To move the pawn the player can use special cards that allow to determine the space of arrival (and therefore the activated event), or can roll a die and move the indicated number of spaces, leaving the next challenge entirely to chance. Thematically speaking, this procedure leads to witnessing a sequence of imaginary events that unfolds in visual form. To give an example, the chart called *Geyser Adventure* can generate either of the narratives below (and a number of other ones) depending on the sequence of panels that is activated:

1. The explorers are attacked by a Dimetrodon. One of them says: “I think we’re his lunch!” [*Battle Dimetrodon*]
2. The explorers find a natural vent of hydrogen gas [*Draw experience card*]
7. The explorers are attacked by the Apemen [*Battle Apemen*]
8. One of the explorers is sickened by the gasses of the geyser... [*Lose 1 experience card*]
11. ...and drops a tool into the geyser [*Lose a tool*]
12. The geyser erupts... [*Draw event card*]
13. ...and the explorers run from the area. [*End of the Adventure*]
1. The explorers are attacked by a Dimetrodon. One of them says: “I think we’re his lunch” [*Battle Dimetrodon*]
4. The explorers sight an Arsinostherium [*Score 1 VP*]
7. An explorer steps on a “rock” that turns out to be an Arthropleura [*Score 1 VP*]
8. One of the explorers is sickened by the gasses of the geyser... [*Lose 1 experience card*]
9. The party is attacked by a Triceratops [*Battle Triceratops*]
12. The geyser erupts... [*Draw event card*]
14. ...and the explorers fill a balloon with gas and use it to escape the plateau. [*End of the Adventure*]

By alternating random and planned movement on a prearranged string of panels, the Adventure Charts ensure variety and unpredictability while also retaining a strong sense of progression and causation. Player agency also can have a role if the active player possesses the right cards and decides to play

them. Randomness therefore becomes something that often can be chosen, rather than passively suffered in every instance like in *DungeonQuest* or *Talisman*.

Another intersection of gaming, comics, and adventure, is in the solitaire game *Chainsaw Warrior* by Stephen Hand, published by Games Workshop in 1987. The game comes with a comic book that introduces the background story and the mission, and helps create the proper atmosphere.<sup>4</sup> The player controls a bionically enhanced soldier who must fight his way through a building swarming with transdimensional zombies. The locations and events in the game are constructed through the use of a deck of cards that show on one side the hero's current location as seen from the point of view of the protagonist, and on the other have a description or illustration of what the hero has encountered. Shuffled randomly and drawn one at a time, these highly visual cards are meant to create the illusion of an intricate net of passages that changes in every game. This way, the deck works almost as an extension of the comic book, each card virtually becoming a new panel in the story. The narrative connection is even more evident when, after reading the designer's notes, we find that the structure of the game was inspired by that of the gamebooks that were popular at the time (rulebook, 19).

While the examples above show how adventure games can benefit from the combination of board-based actions and a textual apparatus, such a synergy is nowhere as productive as in board games belonging to the mystery genre. The classic game *Clue* (Parker Brothers, 1949) and later mystery games like *Murder on the Orient Express* (Ideal, 1967), *Whodunit* (1972), *The Mysteries of Peking* (Milton Bradley, 1987), *Inkognito* (Ares, 1988), *Mystery Express* (Days of Wonder, 2010), *Outfoxed* (Gamewright, 2014), and scores of others, all rely on a fairly abstract and mechanical system.<sup>5</sup> In these games one does not solve a case by finding, selecting, and connecting clues logically, and taking psychology into account, like in the real world; rather, the players get to cross off options from a finite list as a reward for performing certain actions (like reaching a specific space on the board). For this reason, these designs convey little more theme and story than games of abstract logic like *Mastermind* (Pressman, 1971).

The board game *221B Baker St*, designed by Jay Moriarty and published by Antler Productions in 1975, made an early attempt to inject a higher sense of verisimilitude in its mystery-based proceedings, and it did so precisely by adding a paragraph system. The game comes with twenty case cards, each containing the description of a mystery presented in narrative form, as a true micro-story. This format does not isolate this or that element as relevant to the solution, and leaves it to the players to determine what may or may not be useful to unravel the mystery. Once the presentation of the case has been read out loud, the players start moving their pawns on a board that is strongly reminiscent of that of *Clue*, with the main difference being that the smaller areas represent streets and the larger ones buildings, rather than sections of a mansion.

When a player reaches one of the buildings, she consults a booklet containing the clues that might be found in that location. Some of these clues are riddles that we could define as extradiegetic, in the sense that they do not have a direct connection to the storyworld. Imagine for example a riddle whose solution is a word that corresponds to half of the last name of the culprit (say, “able” for “Ablewhite”). A clue of this type is extradiegetic because it does not belong to the world of the game, and goes directly from the designer to the player without any fictional mediation. Other clues are fully diegetic, as they concern events that take place in the setting of the game and are discovered by the investigators controlled by the players. In these clues we may learn that a certain suspect has an aversion to milk, or that her fiancé just came back from India, or a myriad of other contextually appropriate situations. The players must then patch together the clues and mentally relate them to the case, just like they would when accessing new information in a mystery novel. In fact, in order to arrive at the solution, the players must truly think of these clues as building blocks of a detective story rather than abstract data to check off from a list. This is so important that *221B Baker St* cannot be won on the grounds of pure gameplay only. A player may have great die rolls, optimize movement to perfection, and visit more locations than anyone else, and someone with fewer clues but more intuition might still be able to claim victory. Like the descriptions of the cases and the clues, the solutions too are presented in narrative form, which means that victory is not always clear-cut, and sometimes has to be negotiated with the other players. A player that believes to know the solution must explain her hypothesis and

demonstrate that she understood the essentials of the situation. Matching the content of the solution exactly is not required, and it is up to the other players to decide if the explanation is correct enough to grant a victory. This task, too, can only be performed by connecting with the design as a fictional narrative, as it is only in this way that the other players may adjudicate if the background story of the case has been understood sufficiently well.

A further step toward narration was taken in 1982 in the game *Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective* by Raymond Edwards et al., for Sleuth Publications. A look at the contents in the box may surprise a new player, as the game does not include common game components like a board, cards, or dice. Rather, *Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective* comprises a map of Victorian London, a fictional directory of the time, a series of fictional newspapers, a list of contacts of imaginary characters, and ten booklets containing the presentation of ten cases and a sequence of numbered paragraphs describing what may occur during each investigation. *SHCD* can be played in solitaire or cooperatively, and it is recommended that players go through the cases in the order in which they are listed because some information presented in a scenario may be needed to resolve a later one.

First, the players choose a case, take the corresponding booklet, and read the description of the mystery to solve. Next, they examine the fictional newspaper for the day of the case, trying to identify which of the events related in it may be of help. This done, it is entirely up to the players to decide how to tackle the mystery. The players, based on the initial information, must imagine being detectives in the setting of the game, and ask themselves what would make sense for them to do. Maybe they want to talk to Scotland Yard's coroner, in which case they consult the list of contacts, learn which paragraph includes a conversation with the coroner in the present adventure, and read the corresponding textual section. Maybe the players think that talking to a jeweler may be of help in a case about stolen diamonds, and they consult the London directory to look for one. If the numerical indication next to the name of a jewelry shop in the directory corresponds to a paragraph in the booklet that is being used, then the players can turn to that paragraph and find out what happens during a visit to that location. The content of the text may give clues that will lead to visits to other locations, or may be a simple dead end. If the number linked to a place

or a person in the directory is not in the booklet for the present case, the players must assume that following that lead would bring no significant gain. When the players do reach an encounter, moreover, they are not simply spoon-fed a new clue, but they are given a micronarration that they must analyze and interpret. There is no guarantee that a certain narration will contain anything useful, and if it does, the clues in it are not marked in any special way: they are simply part of the story. Like they would do when reading a mystery novel, the players must identify and connect the relevant elements dispersed throughout the narration, and connect them to one another logically to find the solution.

The game continues this way until the players feel that they have solved the case, or hit a wall and can't figure out what to do next. Since the game does not provide an explicit list of options to choose from, the only way to access new paragraphs is to successfully determine where to go next. In order to proceed in the game then the players must see non-obvious analogies and patterns, and use a bit of lateral thinking to connect clues to further locations where information may be found. This mechanism makes the feeling of immersion particularly strong, because to have a chance of victory the players must mentally enter the setting, think of each non-playing character as an actual person, and treat each morsel of information as referring to events taking place in a coherent situation. The detailed nature of the descriptions in the paragraphs also helps the players connect with the fictional materials of the game. The sense of inner consistency of the story is further enhanced by the interlinked nature of the various cases. Since some mysteries can only be solved by taking into account clues that had been presented in a previous scenario, the illusion is that of a persistent fictional world that continues to exist even between game sessions. A corollary of *SHCD*'s uncompromising focus on theme is that the game is rather challenging, and only works with attentive and committed players. In fact, *SHCD* simply cannot be played casually. One may play a game of chess while watching a movie or checking email, and as long as all moves that are made are legal, the game is effectively progressing. In *SHCD*, the fact that the locations one needs to reach are not explicitly given means that only the players who are interpreting clues correctly will be able to access new content. In other words, either one plays the game well, or one gets stuck not knowing what to do next, and can't play at all. Also, since clues are often scattered among

different cases, players need to review previous cases and newspapers before starting a new game, and should schedule several game sessions close to each other so that their memory of the previous cases is still fresh.

Still, the demanding aspects of the game do not seem to have worked to the detriment of the game's success. Quite the contrary, its staunch emphasis on story and setting has made it a much beloved design among serious players, as demonstrated by the number of international editions and official and fan-made expansions. *SHCD* has even seen a resurgence in popularity in recent years, with new editions in 2012 and 2017, and a 2017 expansion called *Jack the Ripper & the West End Adventures*, and a 2018 expansion titled *Carlton's House & Queen's Park*. As of this writing, *SHCD* is one of the highest rated games on BoardGameGeek, in position 66 out of the over 90,000 games in the site's database.

*Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective* has also inspired other mystery paragraph-based games based on the same formula. *Gumshoe* (1985), designed by Gary Grady and published by Sleuth Productions, adapts the ideas behind *SHCD* to the hard-boiled genre, casting the players in the role of detectives in the San Francisco of the 1930s. The production of the game is even more ambitious than that of its progenitor. On top of the basic components, it also includes fictional mugshots, fingerprint cards, lab reports, and autopsy reports, all presented as "actual" artifacts from the world of the story, and left to the players to analyze.<sup>6</sup> This abundance of materials already makes it harder for the players to sift through the irrelevant information and identify the actual clues. A further challenge is represented by the fact that, true to the hard-boiled genre, the cases are more convoluted and less clearly punctuated than those in *SHCD*. Such an intricate presentation gives the game an impressive mimetic quality, which forces the players to work their way through narrative byzantine tableaux like the ones we find in Hammett or Chandler. Due to the high demands of the design, however, *Gumshoe* seems to have encountered little favor even among committed players, receiving no expansions or later editions.

In 1986 Mayfair Games published *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine Game*, by David Bromley and Lair Brownlee, which provides the players with a series of cases, a booklet of textual paragraphs with possible encounters, a

map of the setting of the story, and a directory. In this game the players can take on the role of individual investigators, each depicted in play aids containing portrait, stats, and description of the character—which gives the game more of an RPG feel than *SHCD* or *Gumshoe*. Like in other paragraph-based mystery games, the players must identify the relevant clues from a series of fairly developed textual elements, and once again the only way to succeed is to analyze the information in a narratively appropriate way.<sup>7</sup>

The popularity of *SHCD* has even inspired brand new games in recent times. One such game is *Arkham Investigator*, designed by Hal Eccles and originally released in 2013 as a free print-and-play document. Later the game was incremented with the addition of new cases and published professionally by 8th Summit as *Mythos Tales* (2016). This time the format and philosophy of *SHCD* (with fictional newspapers, directories, maps, etc.) is employed to tell stories set in the world of H.P. Lovecraft's. The players analyze texts, unlock narrative threads, and patch together clues about secret cults and unfathomable horrors from other dimensions, with incursions in themes and tones more closely related to modern horror. Another game to continue this tradition is *Watson & Holmes* (Ludonova, 2015) by Jesús Torres Castro. This game shares the Victorian setting of *221B Baker St* and *SHCD*, and appears to be a blend of mechanics from the two. The game includes a series of cases, and each case comes with a set of cards that have the name of a location on one side, and the description of an encounter on the other. During set up, these cards are placed face down to form a grid.<sup>8</sup> Similarly to *221B Baker St*, the avatars of the players are physically moved to specific locations (here, the cards); the textual descriptions on the other side of the cards, however, have a level of detail and a narrative complexity that can be more closely associated with *SHCD*.

In conclusion, we can affirm that this style of game seems to be in good health even today, and once again part of such resurgence may paradoxically have to do with the recent diffusion of digital communication. When the original *Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective* came out in the early '80s, reading a newspaper printed on paper and flipping through the pages of a phonebook corresponded to the type of actions that players commonly performed in their daily lives, outside of the magic circle of the game. Manipulating the props of these games in the 2010s means to take a break

from the graphics and fast pace of video games, as well as from the experience of reading news online. Poring over the printed pages of a casebook, looking for a bit of information in a stack of newspapers, unfolding a paper map and studying it with others—all of these actions suddenly acquire a certain nostalgic, even exotic quality. Physically holding the same newspaper that ideally Sherlock Holmes, Philip Marlowe, or Randolph Carter could have held creates an intense emotional connection with the setting, and contributes to give gameplay an immersive quality that easily can translate into a strong, emergent narrative.

# 9

## Overproduction and Its Discontents

As the previous chapters showed, throughout the 1980s board games that tell stories built on the foundational ideas that were elaborated in the 1970s, developed them in innovative directions, and generally brought them to life in sets with considerably higher production values. Larger and sturdier components, colorful and detailed art, and atmospheric prose when it came to paragraph-based games, all made the experience of playing these games more pleasant, and helped the players establish a deeper connection with the fictional content of the designs. Starting from the late 1980s, however, something appeared to be changing in the physical making of the major story-driven games, and what had been good or even excellent production quickly turned into overproduction. In gaming lingo, this term applies to tabletop games that include an unnecessarily large and excessively elaborate pool of components, to the point that the material aspect of the game ends up hindering the game experience. If a board game that requires 100 bits to play is replaced by a set that takes 500 components to get the same job done, then this larger version most likely suffers from overproduction. Owners of such a bloated game may hesitate to bring it to the table due to the extensive work it would take to organize the components, set up the game, and put everything away at the end. Gameplay itself may suffer if the physical interface of the design causes frequent interruptions to locate the right components in a pool of hundreds of counters, tokens, and cards, or if certain elements of the equipment are particularly complicated to use. Different players of course may disagree on where exactly high production ends and overproduction begins, but anyone who looks at the hobby board games of the late 1980s and early 1990s will likely concur that the market was moving decidedly in the direction of bigger, heavier, and more materially intricate productions, regardless of which side of the dilemma this or that game may fall individually.

One reason for this trend was in the fact that at a time in which most purchases still occurred in stores, games competing for the buyers' attention benefited from standing out on the shelf in terms of size and graphics. Another and possibly more important reason was that publishers of tabletop games felt that they were losing the strategic initiative to video game consoles and computer games. The reaction was to emphasize the physical presence, tactile element, and visual detail that video games could not provide. This became particularly true for fantasy and sci-fi games, whose base audience was flocking to the ambiguities of *Myst* and the escapades of *Sonic the Hedgehog* much faster than, say, the audience of traditional card games and mass-market board games. Given that sci-fi and fantasy are the genres that designers of story-driven games traditionally found most appealing, the result was that games that tell stories were forcefully dragged into the competition with digital games, and, from there, into the maelstrom of overproduction. Incidentally, this last-ditch defense did not effectively counteract the shrinking of the market for hobby board games in the 1990s. If anything, it may have hastened its temporary decline of the late '90s through the release of games that had become too expensive for most teenagers to acquire, and too reminiscent of giant toy sets to appeal to adult board gamers—which made them in essence products without much of an audience.

Victims of overproduction included the new *D&D* board games, which came in increasingly bigger and heavier boxes and included more numerous, elaborate, and larger components. Many other RPG-inspired board games also became physically imposing, with hundreds of components, hordes of plastic miniatures, complex 3D scenery, and all sorts of eye-catching gimmicks. The trend can be clearly seen in games like *HeroQuest* (Milton Bradley, 1989), *Space Crusade* (Games Workshop, 1990), *Key to the Kingdom* (Waddington's, 1990), *Dark World* (Waddington's, 1992), *Battle Masters* (Milton Bradley, 1992), *Legend of Zagor* (Parker Brothers, 1993), and *Warhammer Quest* (Games Workshop, 1995), and may or may not have had a precedent in the 1981 board game *Dark Tower*, by Robert Burton and Allen Coleman (Milton Bradley).

*Dark Tower* was patently inspired by *D&D* and by the quasi-RPG board games of the previous years. The players took on the role of heroes journeying across a fantasy land in search of three special keys that would

allow them to enter the titular tower. Along the way the players would recruit warriors, purchase equipment, explore dangerous tombs, and defeat brigands and monsters. What distinguished the game from its predecessors was its elaborate production, full as it was of high-quality plastic models, and crowned by a large plastic tower that was placed in the middle of the board. This tower contained a small computer that received input through a keypad, and communicated the outcome of the players' actions by flashing numbers and images on a screen. If a player visited a tomb, for example, she would press a button to see what would happen next; if she tried to bargain at the bazaar, she would press another button to learn if the merchant lowered the price or refused the player's request.

Technically speaking *Dark Tower* was overproduced in the extreme, as its bulky and complicated apparatus (which the players needed to learn to use) was a disproportionately inefficient tool to perform the same functions that event cards, encounter tables, and die rolls had handled perfectly well in the previous decade. Still, in 1981, when not everyone had electronic entertainment at home, that tower truly was a mysterious and vaguely ominous artifact; an inscrutable game master that, yes, may have sounded a bit like a blender when its inner gears rotated, but could generate apparently out of nowhere the very stuff of dreams—battles with brigands, encounters with dragons and pegasi, the finding of wondrous items, and so on. Ask anybody who played the game at the time, and chances are that you'll hear a deluge of fond memories about the monsters, the challenges, the battles, and that crazy time when that incredible thing happened—in sum, you'll hear the stories that the machine told the players, all still vivid in their memories after so many years, with virtually no mention of the cumbersome procedures required to make the machine produce its magic. This is the reason why I hesitate to describe *Dark Tower* as the point of origin of overproduction in RPG-like board games. For all its ungainliness, the game did succeed at transporting its players to an exotic land of discovery and adventure, and when the content and the story of a game manage to shine so effectively through its components, it seems hardly fair to accuse those components of being overproduced.

Another borderline case is represented by *HeroQuest* (1989), designed by Stephen Baker and published by Milton Bradley. The game was yet another

attempt to pour the spirit of fantasy role-playing into a board game mold, and in so doing make it more tangible and accessible to its audience.<sup>1</sup> The game comes in a large box that contains, among other things, a foldable board, a wealth of plastic miniatures, many tridimensional pieces of plastic and cardboard furniture, and an imposing game master's screen like the ones one would expect in a role-playing game. These components reconfigure the game as a hybrid between a board game and an RPG in the mind of the players, even though, technically speaking, *HeroQuest* remains for all intents and purposes a pure board game, with discrete ranges of player options, non-negotiable rules, and clear partitions of time and space for both the players and the master. The hybrid element resides mainly in the fact that what is physically and ludically a board game provides its players with a kind of narrative experience that is akin to what one would derive from an adventure role-playing game. The components are also detailed and attractive enough to generate a strong evocative impression. Seeing one's own miniature maneuver around a piece of 3D furniture to fight the miniature of an enemy can certainly reinforce the sense of presence of the storyworld, and help generate an immersive experience.

*HeroQuest* operates at the tactical scale, and frames its action as a series of raids in a dungeon or dungeon-type space. Each game session can be linked to other missions described in the scenario book, forming a sustained story arc. Between missions the players can also equip their heroes with new items, strengthening the illusion of a persistent setting that the characters continue to inhabit even between game sessions. This sense of a parallel, virtual reality is also enhanced by a line of expansions that include new monsters, environmental props, and quest books presenting new sequences of narratively organized scenarios.<sup>2</sup> Through these additions, the fictional universe of *HeroQuest* expands in the same way role-playing settings do, with an initial core of content later followed by modules describing many new aspects of the storyworld. The temporal organization of the events in the expansions also seems to parallel the construction of expansive fantasy sagas, with each scenario in the game corresponding to a section in a book, and each game set corresponding to a book in the series.

*HeroQuest* features four archetypal heroes of fantasy literature and RPGs: a barbarian, a wizard, a dwarf, and an elf. The four heroes are split among the

players, and these players all win or lose together as a team. An additional player takes on the role of the game master and controls the army of the evil wizard Zargon.<sup>3</sup> The master is the only one who has access to the scenario book and knows all the information regarding the dungeons being explored. The master controls all monsters, adds environmental features to the board, manages the functioning of the traps, and tells the players the outcome of their attempts to find hidden doors. Differently from an RPG, the master of *HeroQuest* is not allowed to break or ignore rules, and must follow all instructions in the scenarios as written. In this sense, the master is playing the game like everybody else, rather than acting as a traditional RPG narrator.

The board of *HeroQuest* is divided into squares, and shows a net of hallways and rooms distinguished from one another by different colors and bold white edges. The board's physical configuration never changes, but since each scenario only uses certain areas, this static map can be used to carve out vastly different configurations of spaces. This way, the players cannot form an idea of the structure of the place they will explore simply by looking at the board. The heroes start in a designated space on the empty board, and the players learn about the contents of other areas only when their characters are in a position to perceive them. When the heroes enter a room for the first time, the master checks the scenario book and places all elements that the characters can see—so monsters, furniture, and doors, but not hidden traps, treasures, and secret doors. If monsters are present, the heroes must defeat them before they can take actions that will allow them to find the concealed elements. The consequence is that the players discover only in gradual installments which areas are actually in play, how they are connected with one another, what each room contains, and what *else* it may contain. With this system, the game reproduces one of the most enticing elements of adventure role-playing games, and imbues the design with the sense of progressive revelation that is typical of storytelling.

Each turn, the heroes move and take an action, or take an action and then move. Actions include attacking, casting spells, disarming traps, or looking for secret doors. To move a character the owning player rolls two six-sided dice to generate the number of spaces up to which the hero can move. This roll-and-move mechanic is a concession to popular mass-market games, but it is at least mitigated by the fact that the rolled number only indicates the

maximum number of spaces to move, not a mandatory distance, granting a certain freedom of movement in most rolls. Combat is resolved in a simplistic but overall effective way. When a figure attacks an enemy, the owning player rolls a number of dice based on the weapon being used, and generates a number of possible hits. The target then rolls a number of dice to see if any hit can be annulled by defensive abilities, and every unsaved hit reduces the number of Body Points of the target. Variety is added by the spells that some characters can cast, and by the maneuvers a group can execute to protect their weak members and send the heaviest hitters to the front line.

While not being as rich and varied as an RPG, *HeroQuest* came closer than most other board games of its time to give its players a narrative experience comparable to that of fantasy role-playing. Its elaborate and physically attractive components also raised the bar in the race for increasingly massive productions. The fact that in *HeroQuest* these components still remain functional is what allows the game to sit on the verge of overproduction without completely falling into it. For the game master it still is a chore to store the tridimensional furniture in the box, organize the pieces before play, and place the elements as the adventure develops. As the overall effect is highly pleasing and intensely thematic, the tradeoff is seen as acceptable by most masters.

In 1990 Milton Bradley, in conjunction with Games Workshop, published *Space Crusade*, a large game by *HeroQuest*'s designer Stephen Baker. *Space Crusade* features a series of battles between space marines and aliens, and only enters our discussion tangentially because it remains at its core a tactical wargame with a modest narrative component. It does deserve a passing mention as another hefty, massively produced game set that came with a horde of plastic miniatures and an eye-catching tridimensional board. *Space Crusade* may not add much to a discourse on games that tell stories, but it did contribute to give impulse to the idea that bigger could be better when it came to thematic games.

Another game that came out the same year and displayed an elaborate production was Paul Bennett's *Key to the Kingdom* (Waddingtons, 1990). The game transports the players into a fantasy world populated by monsters

and full of traps and treasures. The production of the game is impressive, with a large box, a good number of colorful cards and plastic miniatures, and an oversized board with highly detailed art. This board can be folded inward or outward to reveal or conceal different regions of the storyworld, changing the set of in-play areas that the players can interact with.

In this game the players control generic fantasy heroes tasked with the job of finding the titular key plus one other treasure. Mechanically, the game is a simple roll-and-move design, almost an even more abstract version of *Talisman*. The active player rolls an 8-sided die and uses the result to move both the non-playing character of the Demon King and their hero. The Demon King is moved first, and the active player attempts to place it with or adjacent to an adventurer belonging to another player, which would then be sent to the dungeon. Next, the active player moves her own hero along the available net of paths, without reversing direction, just like in *Talisman*. Many spaces on the board are marked by White Dagger symbols representing challenges that the players must resolve. The challenges are structured like the tables for special locations in *Talisman* or *Arkham Horror*, and the outcome of the event depends on random die rolls and/or ownership of certain items.

If one moves to the Snake Pit, for example, the following may occur:

### **Snake Pit**

Stop on the White Dagger. Immediately roll 3 times. Add up the numbers.

### **Roll 11 or more?**

Move around the pit and stop on the other White Dagger.

### **Roll less than 11?**

You slip and fall in. To escape to either White Dagger, choose 1 option before you roll the die:

### **Have a Grappling Hook?**

Roll 5, 6, 7 or 8 (1 roll per turn). Keep your Grappling Hook.

### **Have a Rope?**

Roll 1, 2, 3 or 4 (1 per turn). Keep your Rope.

### **No Rope? No Grappling Hook?**

Lose 1 equipment card. Immediately move to a White Dagger.

The fact that different pools of dice are rolled in the challenges does little to contribute to the thematic feel of the design, as it seems hard to understand why rolling three dice would capture the experience of jumping across a pit, while rolling just one would be better suited to represent an attempt to climb a wall. Similarly, the interactions with the monsters follow random-based procedures that are only differentiated by the numerical ranges that lead to victory or defeat, without any connection with the represented situation. Another problem is that these procedures offer no meaningful choice to the players. If the player has the right item or rolls the right numbers, she proceeds; otherwise, she is lost. In general, players of *Key to the Kingdom* don't take long before they become aware of the discrepancy between the material richness of the set and the abstract and arbitrary nature of the mechanics. While the production is not terribly extravagant, with *Key to the Kingdom* we can talk of overproduction in the sense that the number and elaborate nature of the material components are not nearly justified by the extreme linearity of the design.

A worse offender in this category is the game *Dark World* (Waddingtons, 1992) by Eamon Bloomfield. Thematically, the game bears strong similarities with *HeroQuest*, and it features a group of four heroes exploring the lair of an evil wizard and confronting a crowd of monsters. Gameplay however is fully competitive, with the wizard player working against the heroes and the heroes working against the environment and racing against each other to defeat the villain. The same set of rules binds both wizard and heroes, with victory going to the hero who defeats the wizard,<sup>4</sup> or the wizard if all heroes are defeated. As a result, *Dark World* borrows thematic and visual suggestions from role-playing games only to neglect their crucial

cooperative element, and frames the game experience as the type of conventional competition that casual players associate with board games.

Gameplay in *Dark World* is exceedingly simple. The order in which the heroes act each turn is determined randomly, and once this is done the heroes move on the board, resolve combat against the monsters, collect treasure, and attempt to make their way from the main area of the castle to a special area where the evil Korak can be found. A variety of monsters oppose the heroes in their journey, and a variety of items can be used to defeat them. The game is very luck based, with die rolls deciding the outcome of combat and leaving little room to make tactically important decisions.

The heroes are the archetypal knight, barbarian, dwarf, and ranger, and are embodied by unique miniatures. Each hero carries a specific weapon which is represented by a separate game piece that must be physically attached to the figure. This weapon may be replaced with a better one later in the adventure, which is done by removing and attaching game pieces as if they were the parts of a toy. During set up these upgraded weapons are placed inside little plastic chests with working lids, and scattered around the board. This board, in turn, comprises a tridimensional plastic element formed by 18 separate pieces that must be assembled before playing, plus a mounted board representing the floor of the lair, and a set of vertical partitions which represent the walls of the place and include functioning doors that swing on plastic hinges. This spectacular production, which would gather great acclaim if applied to a *Playmobil* or *Masters of the Universe* playset, appears sadly hollow when compared to the poverty of ludic elements it is meant to convey. The heroes may look different from one another, but they are all functionally identical in terms of gameplay—so the barbarian is not stronger than the others, nor is the ranger more agile than the rest. The same applies to the unique basic weapons the heroes carry, which must be matched to the correct figure during set up, but work all exactly the same. The pattern returns in the upgraded versions of the weapons, which look different from one another but give an identical advantage.

These considerations go a long way to show the difference between large production and overproduction. In a large and effective production even the most attractive components remain functional, and their physically elaborate

nature may enhance gameplay greatly. In an overproduction like that of *Dark World*, the steps required to make the components perform their tasks in the game are unnecessarily multiplied, and end up hindering gameplay. For example: during set up you look for your figurine and its matching weapon, attach the regular weapon to your hero, place the upgraded weapons in the chests, and randomize the chests. Later, you move your hero next to a chest, open it, take out the upgraded weapon, detach the old weapon from your figurine, add the new weapon to the figurine, and place the old one where you will be able to retrieve it later. In terms of gameplay, this entire process could be replaced by *not* giving any weapon to the heroes at the beginning (as there is no need to mark an initial state that affects everybody equally), and placing tokens representing the upgraded weapons on the board. Such considerations can be easily repeated for the board itself. The visual result when all pieces are assembled is impressive, but the investment of time needed to build the play area is not justified by gameplay advantages. For example, swinging doors may look neat, but players are not likely to actually push their heroes through them to reach a new area when it is much more practical to pick up a miniature and move it over the wall. Ensuring that the production makes movement from room to room look “as it should be” (that is, through a door) is a concern that makes sense in a playset, but that brings a pedantic approach to mimetic realism in a game.

In a similar vein, the random player order is decided by using one of the flashiest components of all of game history—the so-called Mace of Chaos (which, despite the name, has the shape of a sword). This plastic tool has a large hilt in which four colored marbles are free to move. At the beginning of each turn the wizard player shakes the marbles in the hilt before turning the Mace upside down and letting the balls fall in a random file in the blade. The order in which the marbles fall determines the order of activation for the current turn, each marble being associated by color to a hero. Using the Mace may delight some young players, but most players will find the whole procedure irritating after just a couple of turns.<sup>5</sup> There should be little surprise then if *Dark World* has been seen as the poster game for overproduction since the time it was released, and it remains to this day a cautionary tale against cluttering a game with attractive but unnecessary, and even counterproductive, components.

In 1992, the year of *Dark World*, Milton Bradley also released *Battle Masters* by Stephen Baker, and while the design is a fantasy wargame that does not belong to our trend of story-oriented games, its pool of over 100 oversized plastic miniatures and its 55 by 57 inches vinyl playmat deserve a mention as another example of elephantiasis in games, and one that may have reinforced the assumptions underlying this type of production at the time.

The following year (1993) saw the publication of *Legend of Zagor*, which was similar to *Dark World* in genre, theme, scale, and material excess. Designed by Ian Livingstone and published by Parker Brothers in the UK (but never distributed in the U.S.), *Legend of Zagor* was part of a transmedia project that included the release of a gamebook by the same title (signed by Livingstone, but penned by Keith Martin),<sup>6</sup> and four non-interactive novels forming the *Zagor Chronicles*, written by Livingstone and Keith Martin (under the pseudonym of Carl Sargent). The stories in these products take place mainly in the fantasy world of Amarillia, and feature the fight between the evil wizard Zagor and a group of archetypal fantasy heroes: Anvar the barbarian, Braxus the warrior, Stubble the dwarf, and Sallazar the wizard (replaced in the *Zagor Chronicles* by the female magician Jallarial).

In the *Chronicles* novels the story spans over a long period of time and across two worlds. It is useful to take a quick look at these novels as they provide a larger frame of reference for the board game and the gamebook. In the first novel, *Firestorm*, a group of heroes must banish the evil Bone Demon from Amarillia<sup>7</sup>; in the second, *Darkthrone*, Amarillia is threatened by Zagor, who possesses demonic powers and has entered this world through the portal opened to banish the Bone Demon. The heroes travel to Castle Argent, where Zagor has set up his lair, and embark on a fight that culminates with the body of the warlock being thrown into the Chasm of Fire. In the third volume, *Skullcrag*, the heroes of Amarillia discover that Zagor's magical essence is reforming, and journey to the world of Titan to perform an exorcism in Zagor's birthplace. In the fourth volume, *Demonlord*, the heroes return to Amarillia, and confront Zagor in a final showdown.

There are strong similarities that connect all manifestations of the story across board game, gamebook, and novels. The architecture of Castle Sargent, for example, is almost identical in the gamebook *Legend of Zagor*

and in the novel *Darkthrone*.<sup>8</sup> The gamebook and the board game take place approximately at the time of *Darkthrone*, as they feature a demonic Zagor recently arrived in Amarillia. The board game and the novel, however, allow a full group of heroes to face Zagor, while the gamebook tells the story of a lonely adventurer. In the gamebook and *Darkthrone*, the heroes must throw Zagor's cursed body into the Chasm of Fire, while in the board game a killing blow is all it takes to bring the story to its conclusion. Differently from transmedia universes like that of *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*, which strive toward inner consistency, the various retelling of the confrontations with Zagor on Amarillia and Titan are to be seen as mutually exclusive variations on the same theme,<sup>9</sup> and act as a decentralized system of paratexts commenting on each other.<sup>10</sup>

In the board game *Legend of Zagor* the forces of evil are entirely controlled by the game system, while each player takes on the role of one of the heroes and races against the others to destroy the villain (exactly like in *Dark World*). By giving victory only to the player who kills the warlock, the rules imply that freeing the world from the menace of Zagor is less important than gaining glory for oneself, as made clear by the fact that the players are allowed to attack each other to eliminate some competition!

In both the gamebook and the board game, Zagor's castle contains magic talismans and silver daggers that the heroes should collect to increase their chances of success. The gamebook explains that these aids have been sent by a benign wizard from another dimension, while the board game leaves the issue unaddressed, and relies on the convention of analog and digital games that the means to kill the big boss for some reason litter the very area in which the big boss lives. Zagor represents a recurrent villain in the *Fighting Fantasy* series of gamebooks, and he had been defeated in a previous installment. His resurfacing in *The Legend of Zagor* gamebook is justified through a fusion of his dead essence with that of a demonic spirit, which makes him a more formidable enemy than before. In the board game he is represented as a demonic figure too, but his peculiar appearance is not given any justification. The game in general simplifies the narrative of the gamebook and the novels, leaving out most of the background information, and in so doing weakens the overall story that its gameplay could generate.<sup>11</sup>

The game attempts to make up for what it lacks in narrative background by emphasizing the material side of the design. The play area represents the obligatory dungeon, and is formed by tridimensional plastic sections connected to one another by plastic bridges. On these sections, plastic heroes, monsters, and other decorative elements are placed, giving the game the look of a complicated playset. What stands out as the centerpiece of the composition, and the cornerstone of the game experience, is an electronic element located in Zagor's crypt, which produces the ominous voice of the warlock and is used to regulate various game functions.<sup>12</sup> Before play can start, the players use a series of buttons on the crypt to input the number and identity of the heroes that will be used. Then, during gameplay, whenever a hero lands on a tile that generates a random encounter, the owning player presses a button on the crypt and the voice of the warlock describes an event that must be resolved immediately. Such events may have negative or positive effects, and may affect any of the characters in play. When the active hero enters a room, the owning player presses the button corresponding to the area the room is in, at which point Zagor shouts "Who dares challenge me?" or "Who dares do battle with me?" The player answers by pressing the button that indicates her hero, and Zagor describes the numerical stats defining the enemy that must be faced. Once these stats are obtained, the active player marks them on a sheet of paper and resolves the battle in a fashion that's reminiscent of the combat system in the *Fighting Fantasy* gamebook series. Such an abstract way of resolving combat works perfectly in gamebooks, but when it is ported to a board game it completely ignores the spatial and material possibilities of the medium, which is almost jarring in a game with such detailed plastic miniatures for the monsters.

*Legend of Zagor* is impressive in its elaborate physicality, and it was clearly designed to wow its players with the gimmick of the electronic board. Too bad that a device that had been the eighth wonder of the game world when it appeared in *Dark Tower* in 1981 had become a mere triviality by 1993, when most players would regularly play video games that offered better renditions of their villains' behavior. By then, the mechanism to produce Zagor's reactions had become cumbersome at best, and prone to error due to the fact that the system used the same buttons for multiple functions. The melodramatic voice of the actor playing the warlock also does little to build a suspenseful atmosphere, and its utterances are likely to become irritating

after a while. A reviewer (Severi) has shared on BGG that he replaced the talking piece with a homemade deck of cards containing the warlock's sentences—a perfect demonstration that what was meant to be the crowning jewel of the production turned out to be detrimental to actual gameplay.

Before moving on we must also mention the game that in a sense represents the swan song of overproduced board games of the early 1990s, *Warhammer Quest* by Andy Jones and Gavin Thorpe (Games Workshop, 1995). The game comes in a massive box chock full of cards, cardboard tiles, plastic miniatures, terrain features, and three game manuals, one of which is a thick book that explains how to play *Warhammer Quest* as a role-playing game. More than ten expansions were released in the two years after the original publication, increasing the number of components (and play options) even further. In a sense, the game presents little innovation, and it seems to align itself with board games like *HeroQuest* as essentially another version of *Dungeons & Dragons* in board game form. While this assessment is technically correct, *Warhammer Quest* also managed to provide deeper and more flexible gameplay than *HeroQuest* and most of its predecessors.

*Warhammer Quest* features the adventures of the usual archetypal heroes (barbarian, wizard, elf, and dwarf) as they explore a variety of dungeons. The game includes all the hallmarks of the dungeon crawler genre of the 1980s and 1990s, with a simple sequence of movement and combat, unique stats and options for each hero, an army of enemies to defeat, and a series of rules on how to collect experience points and level up. At the beginning of each game, the players draw one of several possible “objective rooms” from a stack of terrain tiles, and roll on a table to determine which mission they will need to complete in that room. The players may therefore face a very large variety of tasks from game to game. In one game, they may be retrieving a dead body from a crypt to resolve an inheritance dispute, and in another they may be looking for the Fire Chasm to hurl a dangerous artifact into its flames (a situation that's reminiscent of both *The Lord of the Rings* and the Chasm of Fire in the *Legend of Zagor* gamebook and the novel *Darkthrone*). The game does not require a master, and relies for the creation of the play area on a smart combination of randomness and structure. Cards representing various sections of the dungeon are shuffled together, making sure that the card indicating the objective room is in the bottom half of the deck. When the

heroes reach a new area, they draw a card from this deck, look for the corresponding terrain tile, and add it to the developing map. As simple as it is, this system gives complete control of the organization of the play area to the game system, allowing all players to work on the same side in a way that was not possible in *HeroQuest* or *Dark World*. At the same time, the rules for shuffling the deck avoid the problems that tend to arise from completely random dungeons, in which the final boss may be encountered in the first room, or it may become literally impossible to win based on the order in which the locations are drawn.

What truly sets *Warhammer Quest* apart from other dungeon crawlers of the time, however, is the depth of its commitment to worldbuilding, character progression, and integration of board gaming and RPG mechanics.

*Warhammer Quest* pursues this goal at a whole new level. The manual that explains how to play the game as a role-playing game, for example, is already unusual just for the fact that it is there at all, in a board game set. This manual is also remarkable for its length and detail, both rivaling those of several bona fide role-playing games, and providing all that the players need to flesh out a vibrant world that their characters can inhabit. The manual includes random encounters, rules to travel from place to place, different places to visit in each village or town, equipment to purchase, new skills to acquire, a vast bestiary of monsters to fight, and a system to increase the strength of the monsters as the heroes level up and need harder challenges. It also includes the option of using a game master, while making it clear that such presence is far from essential.<sup>13</sup> This means that the players can perform RPG-type of actions, develop their characters, and explore a complex and mysterious fantasy world all through the rigid and clear-cut mechanics of board gaming.

This sense of variety, which makes the experience of playing the game so immersive, certainly owes much to the large number of components included with the main set and its expansions. When seen in this perspective, the label of overproduced game that is commonly assigned to *Warhammer Quest* in the hobby community is only partially deserved. True, the game is more largely produced than most, and it could be a great dungeon crawler even without all of the bits and pieces that it comes with. At the same time, *Warhammer Quest* is not exactly overproduced since all of these components can be put

to good use. The massive pool of components of *Warhammer Quest* is also massively representational, with each game piece enriching the illusion of a fictional world to explore. In this sense, *Warhammer Quest* is the acme of the trend toward spectacular, eye-catching game sets that started in the late 80s, while also representing the starting point for the idea of large but fully functional thematic games of the 21st century. The impressive Fantasy Flight Games edition of *Arkham Horror*, the large core sets of *Shadows of Brimstone* published by Flying Frog, or the jaw-dropping *Gloomhaven*, published by Cephalofair, and comprising 20 pounds of physical components, all find their origin in the balance between materiality and worldbuilding that *Warhammer Quest* showed to be possible.

To this legacy we must also add two new sets of *Warhammer Quest* that have been released in 2016 and 2017: *Silver Tower* and *Shadows over Hammerhal*, respectively. These sets beg the question of why, if *Warhammer Quest* was always a favorite among hobby players, it took about 20 years for its style of gameplay to make a comeback, and for publishers to decide to invest in new implementations of the game. The answer is probably that in its time *Warhammer Quest* was simply too expensive and demanding for casual players of games, for teenagers that were being lured away by video games, and for players of those simple and semiabstract games that were becoming popular in the U.S., and that would come to be known as eurogames.

*Warhammer Quest*'s production may have been justified by the wealth of game options it brought to life, but it came out at a time when any production of that size had become difficult to market. Several things had to happen before publishers started making beautiful, imposing game sets like *Warhammer Quest* again, and before massive but technically not overproduced games of this kind could become smashing successes among fans. In fact, such large productions are almost ubiquitous these days, and they represent not the last gasp of a dying beast but perfect evidence of the state of good health of the hobby. Many of the very people who walked away from board gaming in the 1990s, during their high school or college years, are now middle-class professionals who are returning to the hobby and can afford to purchase these large sets. These adults tend to be discriminating players who are not going to be fooled by ludically hollow components, but are willing to support impressive productions in which material beauty goes hand in hand with good mechanics. The existence of such a target audience,

in turn, has motivated the main names in the industry to sharpen their design philosophy and invest on games that both look stunning *and* play well.

The games that have resulted from this synergy between players' demand and industry's offer have also given an enormous boost to the interest in games that tell stories in the 21st century. After all, as we established in the first chapter, it is precisely from the combination of detailed components and tight mechanics that the most promising opportunities for storytelling in analog gaming tend to emerge. From the ashes of the age of overproduction, an era of high-quality, intensely thematic production arose, and it brought with itself a range of revolutionary narrative opportunities. We will discuss this phenomenon in more detail in the last two chapters of this book.

# 10

## The New Board Games of *Dungeons & Dragons*

It should be clear by now what a formidable inspiration *Dungeons & Dragons* has been, directly or indirectly, for designers of board games who aimed at providing their players with an immersive narrative experience. We also noted how highly thematic board games influenced the world of role-playing, causing RPGs to retain eminently board-based characteristics almost uninterruptedly from the 1970s to the 21st century.

In the 1990s TSR published several titles that explored precisely this grey area between role-playing and board gaming in yet a new fashion, this time through game sets that were not simply inspired by *Dungeons & Dragons*, but that *were* for all intents and purposes both *Dungeons & Dragons* and board games. I am referring to a range of starter sets designed to introduce new players to *D&D* in a turn-based, board-based format, while restricting the options of gameplay to those of a traditional board game. Still, despite a rigid mechanical organization that made these sets almost pure board games, TSR marketed them as full, legitimate role-playing games. I also include in this family of board games several titles released by TSR in the 1990s like *Dragon Quest* and *Dragon Strike*, which relied on the same story-driven philosophy of the games that were *D&D*, and were designed with the similar intent of helping board gamers make the transition into regular role-playing games. These games can also be seen as an attempt on TSR's part to capitalize on the success of *HeroQuest*, which is a very understandable idea when one considers that *HeroQuest* itself had been designed to exploit the popularity of TSR's *Dungeons & Dragons*.

An early example of repackaging and repurposing *D&D* as a bona fide board game was *The New Easy to Master Dungeons & Dragons* (TSR, 1991) by Timothy Brown and Troy Denning. The game is based on the basic version of *D&D*, which was a peculiar choice at a time when TSR was already planning to close down the basic line to make *Advanced D&D* the only

official game. Though living on borrowed time, *The New Easy to Master* was nevertheless supported through the release of three companion sets that could be played as standalone games or as expansions for the base set. These supplemental games were *The Goblin's Lair* by Graeme Davis, *The Haunted Tower* by William W. Connors, and *The Dragon's Den* by Ken Rolston, all published in 1992. *The New Easy* and its expansions were released in long and thin boxes in “landscape” format, as it was typical of mass-market board games of the time, and as opposed to the “portrait”/“bookcase” format in which most role-playing games were being published. Due to the predominantly dark background of the box cover, *The New Easy* also came to be known as the Black Box edition of *D&D*, which indirectly shows that the players had accepted it as a regular new installment of *D&D* in the tradition of the White Box (nickname for the first edition) and the Red Box (the revised 1983 edition).

Like proper board games, *The New Easy* and its companion games rely heavily on material components for the representation of the world of the story. For this purpose, each game includes large and colorful maps of the areas to explore, cardboard counters to represent treasures and furniture, and stand-up cardboard miniatures of heroes and monsters. These components effectively generate a sense of presence for the imaginary content of the game, transforming the square grid of the board into a stage for fictional events. In fact, virtually all in-game interactions with the world of the story take place through the medium of the physical components. With few exceptions, every creature to be encountered in the game is represented by a cardboard miniature, while every item and special terrain feature is depicted on a cardboard tile. The consequence is that all relevant events in the storyworld are determined by the placement and movement of physical components on the board, with the utterances made by players and master mainly giving a narrative frame to in-game occurrences, rather than creating entirely new events.<sup>1</sup>

*The New Easy* requires a game master to read the texts of the scenarios out loud to the players, just like in a conventional RPG, but gives little latitude to the master to improvise situations and alter content. The players, on their part, are encouraged by the game system to identify with their characters like they would in an RPG, while still remaining constrained by a discrete range

of actions and a fixed turn structure, precisely like in conventional board games. Moving, exploring, fighting, and looting also remain the focus of the experience, just like they had been both in conventional *D&D* and in all the games inspired by it. Like other board games of its kind, *The New Easy* faced the challenge of preserving the sense of mystery and surprise of an RPG while staging its action on a fixed play area. Given that the maps of *The New Easy* games never change, players get to see the entire geography of the place from the start, and they are all the most familiar with it after the first time they play the game. For this reason, the game is not fully set up before the game starts, and like in *Heroquest* the game master places the appropriate miniatures and counters on the board only when the characters gain a line of sight to them. In general, the result of all of these design decisions is a game that plays entirely like a board game and still gives the distinctive feel of a role-playing game.

In 1992 TSR also released the board game *Dragon Quest* by William W. Connors, intended to work as another introduction to *D&D* that could be played in board game form. Like *The New Easy*, *Dragon Quest* requires a game master and provides a large pool of physical components comprising board, cards, cardboard miniatures, and even some metal miniatures (a staple of classic wargaming). The map of the game is printed on a single board showing a system of rooms and hallways which is to be used for all scenarios. Like in *HeroQuest*, variety and surprise are obtained by using only some sections of the map in each game. All characters are represented by miniatures, and every object the heroes acquire and monster they encounter is introduced through cards: trap cards, treasure cards, spell cards, equipment cards, enemy cards, and so on. Any in-game action is mediated by material components and solidly grounded in the conventional parameters of board gaming, with movement being organized through unequivocal partitions of time and space, and every possible interaction being circumscribed by a finite number of materials. Still, through and around these elements, *Dragon Quest* creates a strong RPG impression by giving the players the option to attempt actions not explicitly described in the rules. The result is that in-game actions converge to form a meaningful chain of events that the players will experience as a narrative: “A *Dragon Quest* game unfolds in much the same way that a movie does. In fact, one of the easiest ways to think of the *Dragon Quest* game is to picture it as a story” (rulebook,

4). In order to clarify that *Dragon Quest* is mainly a springboard for storytelling and worldbuilding, the rulebook goes to great lengths to explain that the master must be first and foremost an effective narrator rather than a scrupulous rules lawyer.<sup>2</sup> This philosophy is so prominent that it leads to one of the most explicit endorsements of cheating that I have ever found in a board game. The rulebook of *Dragon Quest*, in fact, has no qualms about stating that “if the dice start to ruin the game, don’t use them. Just roll the dice behind the DM’s screen and pretend that the result you want has come up—the players will never know. It’s ok to make a few decisions without using the dice, especially if it means saving a player’s hero from a horrible death or preventing a game from falling apart. Remember, you’re in charge, and it’s your job to see that everyone has fun” (29).

The game revolves around conventional mechanics for movement, combat, and item collection, and includes three scenarios that are narratively linked to one another. In the first adventure, the heroes explore a mine rumored to be at the center of mysterious occurrences. The outcome of the adventure introduces the second scenario, in which the heroes embark on a quest to retrieve a special item they have learned about in the first game. This adventure ends with the arrival of an enemy who becomes the villain of the third scenario. All scenarios end with a cliff-hanger, including the last one—which encourages the game master to produce new scenarios that will develop the narrative further and expand the world of the game. The interconnected and open-ended nature of these adventures makes it easier for the players to think of the setting of the game as a persistent world to mentally inhabit for an extended period of time, like in an RPG campaign. As this occurs, gameplay is likely to gradually shift from the modalities of a highly thematic board game to that of a full role-playing game.

The ideas at the heart of *Dragon Quest* resurfaced the following year in TSR’s board game *Dragon Strike*, designed by Bruce Nesmith. The game requires the presence of a game master who has the traditional functions of a narrator in *D&D*, but also, unusually enough, competes against the players and wins or loses in the end. The players, once more, control fantasy heroes that move, fight, and loot on a fixed map divided in square areas. Each time a player takes a turn her character can move and then attempt an action, or attempt an action and then move. For their action, players can attack, cast a

spell, search for treasure, find and disarm traps, search for secret passages, question a monster, or attempt a feat. With the exception of the last one, all of these actions are completely comprised within a set of typical board game rules that the players cannot bend in any way. Trying to perform a feat, however, expands the sphere of action into the type of agency that is typical of role-playing games. Such feats may encompass anything and everything the players can think of, and in pure RPG style the players must describe the attempted action to the game master, who gets to judge of the feasibility of the action, and, if appropriate, determines the type of test that will decide the outcome of the attempt. This may result in awkward situations since the master of *Dragon Strike* is actually one of the contestants in the game. Problems are likely to emerge from this combination of narrator, referee, and player, as the game master may elect to allow or deny an action for the sole purpose of dooming the heroes and claiming victory for herself. When this occurs, both ludic and thematic elements of the design will be weakened.

Even with this limitation, the game can still act as an effective narrative engine because at least some masters will choose to fulfill their mandate as narrators, while the attractive components, smooth rules, and detailed scenarios can produce fictional content that despite the occasional glitch can function as a vehicle for interactive storytelling. The scenario book does a good job in this regard by presenting an impressive range of 16 adventures that take place in non-generic environments. The omnipresent dungeon is here paired with alternative locations such as castles, cities, and outdoor areas. To cover such variety of settings, several maps are included with the game, making *Dragon Strike* one of the most thematically varied games of its kind.

In 1995 TSR released yet another starter set for *D&D* that came in a “landscape” box and continued the tradition of *The New Easy*. Designed by Richard Baker and Bruce Nesmith, the set was called *Introduction to Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*,<sup>3</sup> and included pregenerated character cards, plastic miniatures of the heroes (but not the monsters), two highly detailed and evocative paper maps, and a CD explaining the core ideas behind role-playing to new players. For all of its apparent similarities with the Black Box edition, this set was more of a role-playing game than a story-driven board game, and from the get-go it encouraged the players to use their imagination to supplement and flesh out the actions on the map. To ensure that

the players made the transition into role-playing as soon as possible, the set only included the materials for two adventures, giving the master the task to design her own scenarios from early on. *Introduction to Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* is worth mentioning in our survey of board games that tell stories to show that even when designers considered “pure” RPGing to be the main goal to reach, they still tended to embrace the familiar mechanics of board gaming to facilitate new players.

An implementation of *D&D*-as-a-board-game that is much more relevant for our purposes was published in the year 2000 by Wizards of the Coast, which had by then acquired TSR, and *Dungeons & Dragons* with it. This game was released under the title *Dungeons & Dragons Boardgame: Diablo II Edition*. Based on the video game of the same name, this game combines some of the most traditional elements of *D&D* with thematic references to *Diablo II*, including the names of locations and monsters, the presence of Mana as a measure of spellcasting energy, and an available pool of heroes comprising Amazon, Necromancer, Sorceress, Paladin, and Barbarian. Board games based on successful movies or video games are all too often cobbled together by non-professional designers that have little understanding of and interest in the latest developments in board gaming. In the case of *D&D: Diablo II*, however, the task of turning the video game into an RPG-inspired board game fell into the hands of two passionate and knowledgeable designers: Jeff Grubb and Bill Slavicsek.<sup>4</sup> The result is a well-balanced blend of board game and role-playing game.

*D&D: Diablo II* requires a dungeon master who performs all the traditional tasks of narrator and referee,<sup>5</sup> controls all monsters and non-playing characters, and makes judgment calls about unusual actions the players decide to attempt. The job of this master, the rulebook points out, should focus on storytelling: “Play fair, have fun, and stick to the rules of the game. Those are the primary laws a DM lives by. If in doubt, make it up! ... It’s better to keep the story moving and the game fun than to get bogged down in the details.” Time in the game shifts between the fluidity of RPGs and the discrete segmentation of board gaming, with sections of the adventure in which the game master is encouraged to “move time along ... to get to the good parts,” and others in which time is strictly measured in rounds with a fixed amounts of activity allowed. Free flowing game time is mainly

reserved to the sections set outdoors, which usually make up the frame of the scenario, providing a brief introductory scene and an epilogue. Within these two extremities, the overwhelming majority of a game session is spent exploring underground systems of hallways and chambers fraught with monsters, traps, and treasures. Given that this part of the game is bound by the typical board game compartmentalization of time and space, we can say that the heart of *D&D: Diablo II* is that of a board game, with a degree of discretionary power given to the game master in order to enrich the range of possible actions.

The game space of each scenario is assembled using modular terrain tiles—an idea that we have seen resurfacing from time to time between the 1970s and the 1990s, and that some years after *D&D: Diablo II* will find one of its most mature expressions in *D&D*-based board games like *Castle Ravenloft* and *Wrath of Ashardalon* (also co-designed by Bill Slavicsek). The cardboard tiles that form the play area have different shapes and dimensions, and represent sections of the dungeon such as corridors and rooms, with, for example, a short corridor being made of  $2 \times 3$  squares, and a large room  $4 \times 5$ . These terrain pieces are shuffled and stacked in separate piles divided by type, and whenever the heroes reach the entrance of an unexplored section the master rolls a die to determine the type of area that has been found. The top tile from the corresponding pile is then drawn, and added to the expanding game map. Certain floor tiles also include symbols that instruct the game master to roll a die on an encounter table to determine which enemies, if any, will populate the area. We saw that since *Solo Dungeon Adventures* a limitation in this kind of table resides in how quickly they may start feeling stale and predictable to the players. The solution presented in *D&D: Diablo II* is that each scenario has its own set of encounter tables with different monsters and events. Scenario-based encounter tables also allow for a greater variety of non-generic locales to be represented, because a cavern mainly inhabited by rats and undead creatures will offer a different atmosphere and ludic experience than a geographically similar area in which demonic creatures or packs of mutated beasts have their turf. The same can be said for the tables used to generate treasures, which are also unique to each scenario.

The scenario instructions moreover include specific descriptions of special areas which further add variety, surprise, and atmosphere. For example, the tile with the altar room is used in multiple scenarios, but when it comes up in scenario 2 it represents a blessed area in which the heroes can restore lost Life and Mana, while in scenario 5 it contains a ferocious yeti that attacks the heroes on sight! Each scenario includes a special tile called Quest Room, which, similarly to what we had in *Warhammer Quest*, hosts the final confrontation that the players must overcome. It is also notable that the scenarios give shape to a larger, overarching story when they are played in the suggested order. In a scenario the heroes may hear of a special item, in the next enter a dungeon to look for that item, and in the following deal with the consequences of what happened in town while they were in the dungeon. The scenario book even includes a branching point at the end of scenario 4, where the players may decide to play scenario 5 and then 6, or skip 5 and go to 6 directly, constructing different narratives in each case. When one takes into account the modular board, the scenario-based content of the encounter and treasure tables, and the variable nature of each room, it becomes apparent that *D&D: Diablo II* offers a higher degree of thematic variety, and therefore narrative potential, than most previous games in its family.

The year 2000 also saw the publication of *Dungeons & Dragons Adventure Game*, designed by Jason Carl et al. (Wizards of the Coast, 2000). This set attempted to popularize *D&D* outside of the already established circles of role-playing, and followed in the steps of its TSR predecessors by applying the core rules of *D&D* to a series of game mechanics that turned the design into a story-oriented board game. The most notable element resides in the fact that *D&D Adventure Game* allows the players to level up their board game characters following the standard experience rules of *D&D*, which makes such progression “official.” This in turn allows the players to transfer their improved characters to full role-playing campaigns of *D&D*, and from there to develop them further in the full RPG. The very fact that a transition of this kind is possible is evidence of the tight continuity that bonds the two forms of play together—in this set, and in the hobby in general.

*D&D Adventure Game* requires the presence of a game master who acts as the narrator, and guides the players through fictional sequences that alternate RPG sections (in which the players can attempt anything and there is no clear

division of time)<sup>6</sup> with board game sequences in which all in-game actions are rigidly regulated. Like it happened in *HeroQuest* and *Dragon Quest*, *D&D Adventure Game* includes a single large map that represents different groups of interconnected spaces, only some of which will become part of each scenario. Also, like in other sets of this type, the Adventure Book insists on the idea that the role of the game master is not simply to operate the monsters but to keep the adventure engaging: “By now, characters should have a pretty good idea of what sorts of dangers await them. They might even have a set of standard responses when entering an unknown area.... It’s OK to encourage this sort of thinking, but it’s also good to make sure that the adventure doesn’t get too routine. Every now and then, you can throw in something new that makes the characters rethink their standard plans” (31).

In 2001 and 2003 Wizards of the Coast continued to explore the areas of continuity between role-playing and wargaming by publishing *Chainmail* and *Dungeons & Dragons Miniatures Handbook*, respectively. As we saw briefly in chapter 7, these games included wargame rules and lines of miniatures which allowed the conversion of characters from the *D&D* role-playing game into combatants for a miniature game, and vice versa.

In 2003 Wizards of the Coast published *Dungeons & Dragons: The Fantasy Adventure Board Game*, by Amanda Birksaw and Barry Yearsley, which had the distinction of spawning two expansion sets.<sup>7</sup> The game has a prominent physicality thanks to the inclusion of detailed plastic miniatures for heroes and monsters, realistic floor plans to be arranged in different configurations according to the scenario instructions, and tridimensional terrain features such as stand up trees and pillars, which contribute to create a considerable sense of place. *D&D: The Fantasy Adventure Board Game* pits a group of players controlling a party of heroes against a single player that controls all monsters, is fully bound by the rules of the game, and may win or lose. The heroes win if at least one of them completes the objectives of the scenario, while the monster player wins if the heroes can not possibly achieve their goals. The set generates a sense of story through the standard ingredients of this kind of game, like individual characters, thematically appropriate mechanics, evocative map and components. The characters are also allowed to improve over time and retain items and upgrades from scenario to scenario. Around these elements, *D&D: The Fantasy Adventure*

*Board Game* creates a strong narrative continuity by linking together the 11 available scenarios in a larger, overarching campaign. Each scenario grows smoothly out of the seeds planted in the previous ones, and in the process the setting acquires the traits of a complex and persistent reality. Each configuration of components on the board then ceases to be a mere bubble fluctuating in a void to become a window on a much larger world.<sup>8</sup> This impression is further strengthened by the open-ended nature of the last scenario, whose ill-defined outcome encourages the monster player to continue the story by adding new scenarios to the ongoing narrative.

Also in 2003 a new version of *D&D* came out. Usually referred to as the 3.5 edition, this edition was followed in 2004 by a starter set in board game form, called *D&D Basic Game*, designed by Jonathan Tweet. The set appears at first sight to be a traditional RPG starter set (*a la* Red Box edition), mainly due to the use of a master as an impartial and omnipotent narrator,<sup>9</sup> and the inclusion of large sections of gameplay managed through conversational exchanges between players and master.<sup>10</sup> Yet, for all of these factors, the set is listed on BGG as a board game rather than a role-playing game, and the users of the site tend to liken it to the iconic board game *HeroQuest* rather than to a proper RPG. The reasons for this perception are many. A key one is to be found in the prominence of the game's components as mediators of the narrative functions of the design. Every action in *D&D Basic Game* begins and ends with the repositioning of a physical component, while the verbal utterances surrounding such movements add color and detail to the action without ever contradicting it. The unusually high quality of the components, which include professionally pre-painted miniatures, greatly highlights the physical aspect of *D&D Basic Game*, and encourages the players to focus on the materials on the table like they would when playing a board game.

Another factor that drives the experience of the players in this direction is that *D&D Basic Game* drops the interaction between free-flowing time and turn-based time that is typical of RPGs. In this iteration of the *D&D* system, all actions are organized in discrete, clearly delimited segments in which characters always activate in the same order and are allowed only a fixed amount of activity. During a turn a character can move and perform one and only one of the following actions: attacking in melee combat, attacking with a

ranged weapon, opening a door, drinking a potion, reading a scroll, giving an item to an adjacent ally, searching an item, or moving a second time. The players are not given the option of coming up with new actions. The organization of such actions into a sequence of identical turns has the effect of keeping the pace of the game steady, and helps gameplay move along smoothly. When applied to a thematically rich game like *D&D Basic Game*, however, this “ravioli mold” structure may generate peculiar distortions in the construction of the fictional content. If each turn represents approximately the same amount of time in the world of the game, then each action allowed in a turn should take approximately the same time to complete. Vaguely surreal situations are then bound to arise when the game implies that a rogue can search a treasure chest for traps in the same time it would take her to quaff a magic potion. Such uneven handling of the temporal flow of the representation (paradoxically deriving from an even segmentation of gameplay) is a pitfall we encounter often in board games, and has a precedent in the oddities of *Lankhmar*. Its presence in *D&D Basic Game* may tell us why the game feels more germane to a board game like *HeroQuest* than to an RPG.

In 2008 Wizards came out with a fourth, and radically altered edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, and once again it followed the custom of pairing it with a starter set that was structured more like a board game than an RPG. The title was *Dungeons & Dragons Roleplaying Game Starter Set*, and its designer was *D&D* veteran Bill Slavicsek. This set is another hybrid between role-playing game and board game, to the point that it is listed in two separate pages on the BoardGameGeek website—one in the board game section, and one in the role-playing game section! Despite the prestigious brand, attractive art, and respected designer, this set seems to have had almost no impact on the gaming community, at least if one is to judge from the almost complete silence that pervades its pages on BGG. Moreover, the one reviewer of the game on BGG (Freelance Police) expresses a mixed opinion, and harshly criticizes the dense organization of the rules, which makes them difficult to access for the very audience of inexperienced gamers that the set is supposed to target. A close examination of *D&D Roleplaying Game Starter Set* confirms this perception. The impression is that the set was mainly designed to give a taste of the 4th edition to players already familiar with the system or with role-playing in general, rather than to draw in

complete newbies. An example is in the fact that the rules leave it to the players and master to decide how to handle the general flow of gameplay, without clarifying the distinction between segmented combat time and fluid, general in-game time (possibly assuming that any role-player knows it already). Therein may reside the structural ambiguity of the set, which will be played as a board game by masters that require all actions to take place in rigidly defined patterns, but will work as the platform for a role-playing game with a master that takes a narrativist approach outside of combat and dice-based tests.

This was the last attempt to date to release a starter set for *D&D* in board game format. When a new starter for the 4th edition came out in 2010, it was released in a red box that mimicked the look of one of the most iconic editions of *D&D*, and it placed a strong emphasis on narrative and story. This was so true that its contents were organized as branching interactive texts in the style of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series and the *Fighting Fantasy* gamebooks. The 5th edition came out in 2014, and included a starter set that had been conceived and structured as a role-playing game, not as a transitional board game. The lack of success of the 2008 board game hybrid *D&D Roleplaying Game Starter Set*, and the different direction of the following starter sets, are highly indicative of how fast the culture of role-playing and board gaming had changed in the early 2000s. By 2008 Wizards must have started realizing that most potential players of their 4th edition would have already played some of the previous versions of the game, which explains the density of information in *D&D Roleplaying Game Starter Set*. By the time the 5th edition came around, it became safe to assume that most players would already know the basics of the game, or, if truly young and inexperienced, would have a friend or a relative willing to share their love for role-playing (a luxury not everyone enjoyed in the 1980s and 1990s). Even if such figure is missing, the internet now offers plenty of instructional materials that are easily available to any neophyte who is curious about the game. This new set of circumstances has caused the almost complete extinction of the potential player who knows nothing about *D&D*, has no net of support, and must absorb both the dynamics of the game and the philosophy of role-playing entirely from a starter set. This in turn has ended the need for starter sets that introduced role-playing through a system of vastly known board gaming conventions.

Still, hybrids like *The New Easy* or *D&D Adventure Game* have allowed a generation of players to enjoy many hours of narrative gameplay in a clearly approachable and familiar format. In so doing, they also showed 21st-century game designers that the possibility to tell RPG-type stories through board games was real, and had a dedicated audience. The changes in gaming culture of the early 2000s demonstrated that to reach their full potential board games that tell stories needed to be designed as complete board game experiences, not as gateways to role-playing. Only then could board games be fine-tuned to fully absorb the narrative qualities of role-playing *within* their unique affordances.

By structuring RPG-type board games as true, full board games, designers could also delegate all game master activities to the AI of the board, and therefore reconfigure all players as equal partners (in cooperative designs) or contestants (in competitive ones). This philosophy allowed moving past the awkward ambiguities that we have encountered every time the figure of the game master was given the powers of a referee and the objectives of a contestant. The storytelling potential of RPG-type board gaming could then evolve unimpeded by the interferences caused by the presence of a competing referee. As a result, story-driven board games gained new sharpness, clarity, and focus, and developed in ways that could satisfy all participants equally while also responding to the inner needs of an organic, well-structured narrative. The following chapters will provide us with ample evidence of this change.

# 11

## Return of the Story-Driven Board Game

As we saw in several instances in the previous chapters, the 1990s represented a period of stagnation and recession for analog gaming, and one in which the hobby seemed destined to almost certain doom. Classic ongoing series of gamebooks like *Fighting Fantasy* and *Lone Wolf* closed overnight, pillars of the gaming industry like Avalon Hill and TSR were gobbled up by Hasbro, and highly thematic gaming cracked under the weight of its own overproduced components. The main reason for this crisis is almost certainly to be found in the rapid and vast diffusion of digital entertainment. Video games had been a respectable competitor of board games since the 1980s, but it is only in the 1990s that they gained enough ground to send worrisome shockwaves across the analog gaming industry. Meanwhile, the internet started making its way into people's houses at an unprecedented rate. With such an attractive and dynamic offer of screen-based entertainment available to the masses, what self-respecting gamer would want to spend time pushing cardboard counters and rolling dice?

Three main types of analog games survived in this environment, and in all three cases it is easy to identify what made them appealing alternatives to digital entertainment. The first was role-playing gaming, which precisely in this period started departing from the rigid board game models that had shaped it throughout the 1970s and 1980s and began to emphasize free-form storytelling and player interaction. In so doing, RPGs focused on the ineffable quality of direct human interaction that video games could not convey (and still cannot, at least not nearly at the same level of sophistication).

The other two styles of analog gaming that characterized the 1990s were the newly minted genre of the collectible card game (CCG) which found in *Magic: The Gathering* its first and most successful title, and the so-called eurogame, which developed in Germany in the 1980s and made its way to

America in the 1990s, in large part thanks to the success of *Settlers of Catan* (later simply *Catan*).<sup>1</sup> Both CCGs and eurogames paid particular attention to the material element of their designs, offering a type of experience that no computer screen could replace. CCGs did so by scattering their components across a series of blind boosters, and forcing the players to collect, organize, and trade cards in order to form effective decks. The process imbued the cards of the game with a new and special mystique, an almost talismanic allure. If you lose a piece of your Checkers set you can replace it with a button or a glass bead, but if you lose your Shiva Dragon or Force of Will for *Magic*, your ability to use their powers in the game is *gone*, and no home-made replacement would do. Meanwhile, eurogames invested in beautifully crafted and tasteful components, as opposed to the flashy bits of overproduced thematic games or the poor material quality of most mass-market games. Eurogames replaced plastic pawns with wooden solids, paper money with cardboard or wooden tokens, flimsy and drab cards with thicker and colorful ones, and fragile, thin boards with sturdy play surfaces. This way, eurogaming offered sets that were highly pleasurable to look at and to handle, added a tactile pleasure that video games could not offer, and matched the aesthetic taste of adult players.

But while RPGs, CCGs, and eurogames survived thanks to their focus on social interaction and material presence, what was happening to thematic board games—that is, to the board game designs that have the strongest potential to tell stories? The answer is simple: they remained dormant for some years, waiting for the conditions for their revival. Those conditions, however, took less time to arrive than anyone would expect in the mid 1990s, when the hobby seemed to be falling apart so quickly. Looking at the future from the perspective of 1998, certainly few people imagined that anyone would still be playing board games in 2018; no, we imagined that by now we would be too busy playing in holodecks and riding the hoverboards of *Back to the Future Part II*. What we didn't realize back then was how quickly the digital was expanding from the world of entertainment to that of our daily work and social interaction. And when doing our job and being socially active started meaning to stare at a screen for increasing amounts of time every day, it is unsurprising that some people began experiencing a degree of digital fatigue, which in turn brought back the desire for analog, unplugged, situated entertainment.

Now, there is no doubt that video games remain a major force in the entertainment industry. Moreover, even today's most devoted board gamers are far from being Luddites. Most hobby board gamers (including myself) own one or more video game consoles and have a collection of video games on their phone and their computer. Committed players of board games also use the internet for a number of reasons related to the hobby: to seek information about games, participate in discussions, post reviews, watch video blogs and listen to podcasts about gaming, support new designs through crowdfunding, purchase games, share pictures of components and game sessions on social media, and download files of expansions, supplements, or full games in print-and-play format. It is actually thanks to the online database and forum BoardGameGeek that board game enthusiasts have grown to become a community with a sense of identity, pride, and cohesiveness that was unimaginable until just a few years prior. People who make board gaming their main pastime do not take an oath to renounce video games and the internet; they simply retain an appreciation for the unique experience that analog games can produce, and feel the desire to enjoy its intense rewards on a regular basis. As this type of appreciation has been constantly growing in the last decade, so has the industry for hobby board games.

A force that kept the faith in storytelling in the years at the turn of the millennium is the publisher Two Hour Wargames (THW), whose designs are mainly based on the *Reaction* system, created by Ed Teixeira and constantly updated and adapted to different settings since 2000. *Reaction* is a set of rules for miniature wargaming that depicts skirmishes between small bands of characters. Every action in the game has a clear position in a well-defined structure and exists within rigorous parameters of time and space,<sup>2</sup> making the system that of an airtight tabletop game, not at RPG. The system is characterized by procedures that trigger specific events at various times, introducing unexpected situations and altering the turn sequence. This means that the game can react to the players' actions with chains of occurrences that no one had planned for, forcing the players to adjust their plans as they go. Another important feature of *Reaction* is the distinction between two types of characters, Stars and Grunts, which is meant to "capture the cinematic flavor of modern action movies where the Star is a larger than life character" (rulebook 7, 2015 ed.). Stars are limited in number, and just like Hollywood

heroes have the ability to cheat death. In ludic terms, this means that the owning player can occasionally accept a penalty to ignore a result that would kill a Star character; from a thematic perspective, this solution can result in spectacular sequences of last-second escapes and miraculous dodges. Most importantly, Stars can be fully controlled by their owning player, while Grunts may act in unpredictable ways under stress. The system requires that Grunts take a Reaction Test in certain situations, and the result may force the owning player to maneuver these characters against her will. The player may have planned to use a Grunt for a frontal assault, but a failed test now indicates that the Grunt ducks behind a wall or even abandons the battlefield. The automated reactions in the system even give players the option to leave complete control of one of the sides to the game's AI, making it possible to play cooperatively or in solitaire.<sup>3</sup>

Once the activation procedures above are paired with worldbuilding mechanisms such as a campaign system and a series of random tables for the generation of locales and encounters, the system can acquire considerable storytelling power. And while it is true that each player controls not a single character but a band, it is also easy for a player to identify mainly with one of the Stars in the group, with all the psychological and narrative advantages we know by now. This is precisely the direction in which THW has been going for years by adapting their *Reaction* rules to portray complex and detailed settings that the players' characters can inhabit in the course of long campaigns. Each new title in the *Reaction* system of the last decade has paired its rules with lengthy collections of charts, event tables, descriptions of imaginary places, and flavor texts that can generate very rich settings. Such tools can be used to create individual scenarios with different parameters and goals, and then to link these scenarios into larger narratives. Heroes can be customized between battles and reused in future games, so that just like in an RPG campaign the players' actions converge to construct the fictional biographies of a cast of evolving characters.

Ed Teixeira's *Six Gun Sound* (2002), for example, is a miniature wargame set in the Old West, and allows the players to take on the role of archetypes of the genre on either side of the law. Individual scenarios may see the characters attempting a raid or a rescue, confronting an old nemesis, robbing a bank or trying to prevent a robbery, or simply carousing around town to

recruit Grunts. Actions that are taken in a scenario may “unlock” other scenarios in a narratively logical fashion. Say, if a player’s Star is a criminal who is arrested in a scenario, the player rolls on a table to determine the outcome of the trial. If the Star is convicted, the situation leads to the Jail Break scenario, which is played as a skirmish between the Star’s confederates and the sheriff’s men. If the Star’s group wins and manages to escape from town, the player learns that a posse has been launched in their pursuit, and a roll on a table is used to determine if the criminals successfully elude the posse. If the posse catches up to them, a wargame sequence is played to resolve that event, and so on. The actions verbally described in the tables and those taking place in the wargame sequences have the same narrative weight, the same degree of reality in the general economy of the game, as they both give shape to fictional events that add to the ongoing narrative of the campaign. The large variety of possible situations, the detail of the representation, the logical causality that connects certain chains of scenarios, all contribute to give this miniature game a strong role-playing flavor, and certainly allow the players to create articulated narratives during a campaign. The setting in turn becomes a complex fictional world that the players can inhabit for however long they desire, experiencing a vast array of adventures in it. The persistence of the storyworld also allows for the interplay of new characters and recurring cast members that we commonly associate with serial fiction.

Another example of this idea is Ed Teixeira’s *Legends of Araby* (2003; 2nd ed. 2016), which is set in the imaginary Middle East of the *Arabian Nights*, and is described in the rulebook as “a perfect balance of traditional wargaming and the role playing game” (1). Like in other games in the system, the RPG element is completely handled through discrete, clearly defined board game mechanics, without the need for a game master. In this game the avatar of the player travels across fantastic lands and interacts with slavers, monsters, caravans, armies, nomads, and brigands. Interactions with non-playing characters may take the form of alliances, ambushes, challenges, hunting missions, raids, open battles, or quests (in themselves sequences of scenarios in pursuit of a higher goal). The locations are described by the text in some detail, and larger cities are divided into smaller sub-locations like the bazaar, the wealthy area, the docks, and so on.

Unusually for an action game, *Legends of Araby* also features detailed and intricate social interactions with the non-playing characters. The extent to which this factor is developed is worth an extended example. If a player's character encounters a dancing girl in a tavern, the player must roll to see if an admirer of the girl is present. If that is the case, a ten-sided die is rolled to determine the identity of the character:

### WHO'S THE BOYFRIEND?

- 1 or 2 = He is a Cavalry Trooper.
- 3 = He is a Citizen.
- 4 or 5 = He is a Mercenary.
- 6 = He is a wealthy Merchant.
- 7 = He is a Thief.
- 8 = He is either the Captain (1–3) or a Lieutenant (4–10).
- 9 or 10 = He is a Traveller.

Next, the player consults the description of the type that is encountered, determines the character's reaction, and resolves the interaction using the following table:

### BOYFRIEND INTERACTION TABLE

#### Favorable result

Will "back off" if you are of higher Rep[utation] or rank, otherwise will get "Belligerent."

#### Swept off her feet

Will "back off" and thank you for taking her off his hands as he was "finished with her anyway."

#### Asks player a favor

Will tell the player to "beat it before he beats you." If you don't then he will get Belligerent.

## **Becomes belligerent**

If equal or higher Rep[utation] go to **Challenge** encounter. If lower Rep[utation] will leave and return with 1/2d10 Extras of similar type to “kick your a\$\$.” Go to the **Open Battle** encounter.

If the dancing girl did not have an admirer, then the interaction develops according to the following table:

### **DANCING GIRL INTERACTION TABLE**

#### **Favorable result**

Will allow you to spend 2 times her Rep[utation] in A[dvancement] P[oints]. If you decline she will lose interest and walk away.

#### **Swept off her feet**

Will offer her place in town as a Hideout for you unless working in Zahira’s, in which case that will only get you the night. If refused will get Belligerent.

#### **Asks player a favor**

Wants the player to “loan” her 10 A[dvancement] P[oints] or “whatever he has.” If you decline she will lose interest and leave.

#### **Becomes belligerent**

Immediately calls for the guards if in Zahira’s and accuses you of “insulting her” and wants you thrown out. They will immediately do so starting first with unarmed combat but using as much force as needed. You are also “banned” from Zahira’s unless you can appeal to Zahira herself (1–3). If not in Zahira’s she will call for the Watch [64].

Further situations may develop from here. As one can see, the outcome of an action may lead to roll on an event table or to fight a battle that is resolved in a regular tactical wargame, and the conclusion of that battle, in turn, will

trigger events that will be resolved through the use of other tables or the fighting of other battles. Like in *Six Gun Sound*, text-based tables and wargame actions cooperate synergistically to generate fictional events that are equally “real” in the setting of the game.

The *5150* series represents THW’s application of the *Reaction* system to science fiction, and has resulted in a lengthy series of rulebooks covering almost every imaginable declination of the genre. The original title, *5150*, was released in 2006 and described in the text as a game of “man-to-man skirmish”; still, right after that specification, we are told that “*5150* unlocks a new and strange universe for your gaming” (rulebook, 7). In fact, *5150* includes a multilayered collection of materials to generate scenarios and handle encounters with a large pool of alien races. The worldbuilding aspect of the *5150* line is even more visible in some of the subsequent titles, like *New Beginnings: Urban Renewal* (2011). This set depicts a futuristic city in which the players attempt to accomplish the simple but daunting task to “have a successful career and retire well” (57). Between the start of a campaign and the attainment of that goal, ten years of in-game time will usually pass, giving the characters the opportunity to live countless adventures, attempt various professions, experiment with cybernetic and chemical enhancements, and interact with a colorful crowd of non-playing characters. In *5150: Fringe Space* (2016) your goal is again “to increase your Fame and Fortune and retire comfortably” (4). In this set the protagonist can travel to distant planets and embark on missions like hauling cargo or hunting down space pirates. The open-ended nature of these games’ campaigns should more than suffice to demonstrate how the main point of the experience is to explore a fictional setting and enjoy the narratives that the storyworld can generate through gameplay.

*Larger than Life* (2009; 2nd ed. 2015) is THW’s offer for the pulp genre, with players controlling adventurers of the 1930s that may battle mad scientists in a roaring metropolis today, and run from dinosaurs in a tropical jungle tomorrow. The story-oriented philosophy of the game is emphasized by the structure of each scenario, which is divided in scenes like the script of a movie:

**THE OPENING SCENE**—Where the Star gets briefed on what the story is about.

**THE TRAVEL SCENE**—Used to get the Star from Scene to Scene.

**THE ADVANCE THE STORY SCENE**—Scenes that contain the Clues (page 49) that the Star must solve to reach the Final Scene.

**CONFRONTATION**—Scene where the Star is confronted by enemies who may or may not be working for the Big Bad.

**CAPTURED**—Scene where the Star has been captured by the Big Bad.

**CHASE**—Scene where the Star has escaped capture and is trying to avoid being recaptured.

**THE FINAL SCENE**—Where the Story ends [45].

Another game that had stories to tell in the early 21st century was *Betrayal at House on the Hill* (Avalon Hill/Hasbro, 2004) by Bruce Glassco et al. Despite its foggy rules, which required a considerable number of errata and constant judgment calls from the players, the game has become popular to the point of acquiring something of a cult status among hobbyists. In 2010 Hasbro released an updated and improved version which gathered an even more positive reaction. In 2016 the game received its first expansion, *Widow's Walk*, which added a new pool of components and 50 new scenarios; in 2017, a fantasy reimagining of the game system called *Betrayal at Baldur's Gate* was published. These updates are good evidence that the game is still (or again) in very good health.

In *Betrayal at House on the Hill*, players control supernatural investigators and guide them in the exploration of a mansion that is rumored to hold an uncanny secret. Like in an RPG, the characters are defined by different numerical values and traits which make each unique. Also, the characters improve their skills and acquire equipment during gameplay in order to prepare for the tough challenges of the later game. Another similarity with adventurous role-playing resides in the fact that the characters explore an

unknown space, which is gradually discovered and charted during gameplay.<sup>4</sup>

The layout of the mansion is broken up into room tiles that are shuffled together at the beginning, and revealed and added to the play area when the players' characters move through an open edge. As new tiles enter play, our investigators gain a better understanding of the place, study the tactical opportunities and challenges offered by the layout, and face various types of encounters. A symbol on the newly revealed tile may force the active player to draw an event card and implement the effects described on it. This way the configuration of the place and the location of the events will change every time the game is played, establishing a strong sense of discovery and gradual revelation.

What adds more than anything else to the narrative feel of the game, however, is the mystery that surrounds the objectives and victory conditions of each mission. At the beginning of a session of *Betrayal* the players only know that something dangerous will occur in the house, and that they need to prepare themselves to face it. In the early phases of the game the players attempt to collect valuable items and improve their character's traits. Later, at a randomly determined moment, the main phase of the game (called "The Haunt") begins. At that point the players use a specific procedure to determine which of 50 possible situations the game is entering. These are radically different developments that introduce an impressive range of themes, making the game a sort of mini-encyclopedia of horror tropes. Depending on the scenario, the heroes may have to defeat vampires, zombies, werewolves, doppelgängers, cannibals, or a fast-growing blob; in other scenarios, they may have to assemble a set of items and reach certain locations to complete tasks such as performing an exorcism, finding a friend that has been buried alive, preventing a starship from leaving with a human cargo, or winning a game of chess against Death.

The Haunt phase in the second half of a game of *Betrayal* is significant not just because it adds new materials to the experience, but also because it redefines the interactions among the players. In many Haunts, a player is revealed to be a traitor working for the forces of evil, and if that is the case the game becomes a team-based competition, in which the traitor must defeat

all the other players, while they must cooperate to defeat the traitor. Other Haunts have no traitor, and all players must work together in fully cooperative mode against enemies controlled by the game system. In other cases, still, the absence of a traitor does not bring the heroes together, and dictates oppositional victory conditions that make gameplay perfectly competitive.

The game has been very successful in the hobby community, and yet it is simply inconceivable that the players would enjoy it mainly for the strength of its rules and mechanics. From that point of view the game is messy at best. The complete disconnect between the initial phase and the Haunt phase would be considered a flaw in most designs, first because it makes gameplay disjointed, and second because it may deliver a random and anticlimactic victory to one of the sides. When the victory conditions are revealed, one of the parties may already be close to acquire all that they need to win; conversely, the situation may be such that it becomes impossible for one of the sides to fulfill their victory requirements. It is also hard for the players to savor the interplay of rules and game mechanics when for the first half of a session the players do not even know which rules and victory conditions are going to be used—which means that they don't even know *what kind of game they are playing!*

What draws players to a game that breaks so many conventions of good design can only be the theme, the atmosphere, and the identification with the characters, and these reasons must be strong enough to make up for the unwieldy mechanics. User Clint Smith (oreot) wrote on BGG that *Betrayal* “is the essence of a thematic game; it puts theme and story over everything and tries to give you a classic B horror movie vibe.” Another user, Stephen Harkleroad (Coase), articulated his impressions in more detail: “*Betrayal* isn’t just playing a board game—this is definitely an experience game. Strip away all the wonky rules and die rolls, and you can really feel a story being told. Every single game I’ve played of this has been a memorable experience, so much so that I immediately wanted to play again.... I’d grade it a B- as an actual board game, but a clear A as an ‘experience.’” *Betrayal*, in short, is a game in which everything has been devoted to the creation of a narrative, even at the expense of sensible ludic considerations. The success of such a game demonstrates that there is, within the hobby community, a

large enough number of players for whom the enjoyment of an exciting story can excuse many technical shortcomings, and for whom even a “bad” game can still deliver a good story if the theme is strong enough.

Since *Dungeons & Dragons* has been one of the main sources for the style of games we discuss in this book, it is unsurprising that *D&D* also played a role in the recent resurgence of story-oriented board games. In 2010 Wizards of the Coast released a board game called *Dungeons & Dragons: Castle Ravenloft* (by Rob Heinsoo et al), which immediately gained large visibility and would end up being the first of a series of five titles (thus far).<sup>5</sup> *Castle Ravenloft* borrows its theme from the *D&D* module *Ravenloft* (1983), which has been a fan favorite since its release, and recasts the content of that adventure in a system of rules based on the 4th edition of *D&D*.<sup>6</sup> Both module and board game feature a confrontation between the players’ heroes and the forces of the vampire count Strahd. To accomplish the task, the board game adopts several ideas and conventions from narrative-oriented designs of the previous decades, like a vivid setting, a modular board, a variety of scenarios, individual heroes, and an automated method to determine the behavior of the enemies.

Players in *Castle Ravenloft* control heroes representing archetypes of *D&D* such as the ranger, the wizard, or the cleric. Each hero comes with a pre-generated character sheet and a set of cards describing special maneuvers and actions that the character can perform. Each such card includes a detailed description of the effect of the action, and often a target number that the player must match or exceed with a die roll to accomplish the task. Gameplay is fairly linear: players alternate performing actions such as moving, attacking, and discovering new areas; monsters enter the board when new terrain tiles are added; unexpected events may have to be resolved; monsters on the board activate to move and attack. To create the environment of the game the players draw terrain tiles from a stack, and combine them into different types of landscapes (usually nets of hallways and chambers). The deck of terrain tiles that is shuffled during set up, however, does not leave things completely to chance. If the objective involves finding a certain location (like in *Warhammer Quest*), the scenario instructions usually tell the players to shuffle the tile for that location between the 9th and 12th position

in the stack, ensuring that the goal won't be met too early or too late, while retaining an all-important element of surprise.

Monsters and other occurrences in the dungeon are generated by drawing cards from the appropriate decks. Monster cards determine which kind of enemy must be added to the board and explain how each monster behaves. Such explanations are mini-programs organized as flowcharts that the players read top to bottom, executing the first action that applies to the current game state. An example, from the card of the giant spider:

If the Spider is adjacent to a Hero, it attacks that Hero with a venomous bite.

If the Spider is within 1 tile of a Hero, it attacks the closest Hero with an acidic web.

Otherwise, the Spider moves 2 tiles toward the closest Hero.

The random generation of the play area, the use of cards to determine treasures and special events, and the automated behavior of the monsters contribute to create a simple but effective analog AI that covers the main responsibilities of a game master. As a result, *Castle Ravenloft* allows all players to play the role of heroes and enjoy dramatic sequences of discovery and combat. Another element that is crucial in creating a sense of narrative immersion in *Castle Ravenloft* is the scenario book, which presents 12 playable adventures. Most scenarios can be played in any order, with the exception of scenarios 12 and 13 which represent the two phases of the hunt for count Strahd. Each scenario has unique set up instructions and goals to achieve, and includes short flavor texts that are to be read in specific circumstances. For example, in scenario 3 we have:

### **When you start the adventure, read:**

In recent days, storms of chaotic magic have swirled out of Castle Ravenloft and wreaked havoc throughout the land of Barovia. The town's council of elders has asked you to enter the castle, discover the cause of this deadly magic, and put a stop to the periodic storms before all of Barovia is destroyed.

### **When the heroes reveal the laboratory tile, read:**

The chamber ahead appears to be a magic-user's laboratory, although it appears that the practitioner working here indulges in dark magic. You see a kobold in sorcerer's robes. He is in the midst of casting a ritual over a strange artifact. "Klak is busy!" the kobold sorcerer shouts when he notices you. "I must finish my work before Master Strahd becomes angry. Go away!" As you watch, a wave of chaotic energy radiates from the artifact and swirls upward, toward Barovia. "Soon," Klak says, "my infernal artifact will be ready to cast its spell and destroy Barovia! Hahaha!"

Ludically speaking these paragraphs are perfectly unnecessary, and their function is strictly that of reinforcing the sense of place and story emanating from the game. Acting like a good game master in an RPG, the first paragraph above establishes the goals of the mission in a narratively interesting way. The second, which is to be read as an introduction to the climactic sequence of the scenario, underlines the conceptual importance of the scene and increases the anticipation for the final showdown by forcing a timely pause in gameplay. Overall, *Castle Ravenloft* plays and feels like a game-master-less role-playing game in board game format. A considerable advantage of the design is that its linear and intuitive gameplay can be easily accessed by novices and casual players, which is all the more remarkable when one considers that this result is achieved without any of the compromises with mass-market conventions that we found in earlier games like *Talisman*. This, too, is a sign of how recent story-driven board games derive not from a rehashing of old design ideas, but from an exploration of innovative and vastly more effective techniques.

The following title in the series is *Wrath of Ashardalon* by Peter Lee and Bill Slavicsek (Wizards of the Coast, 2011), and it is based on the same game mechanics of *Castle Ravenloft*. *Wrath of Ashardalon* contains thematic elements from several *D&D* modules by Bruce Cordell. In particular, the scenarios feature the red dragon Ashardalon that was referenced in the *D&D* module *The Sunless Citadel* (2000), and that engages the heroes in an epic battle in *Bastion of Broken Souls* (2002). Another source of inspiration is the module *The Gates of Firestorm Peak* (1996), which provides the game with

its setting, several of its characters, and the thematic thread of an evil force that wants to open a mystical gate to another world. In this free treatment of materials from *D&D* tradition, the designers of the board game operated in the same way game masters are encouraged to do when preparing their adventures: borrowing, modifying, combining, hybridizing, and seamlessly joining narrative blocks in any way they see fit. Like in *Castle Ravenloft*, players of *Wrath of Ashardalon* can play most of the game's scenarios in any order. The exception is in scenarios 10 and 11, which are the first and second part of a single adventure. The 13th adventure also introduces the idea of campaigning, giving the players a framework to play the previous twelve scenarios in order, as a single adventure, and allowing the heroes to retain their acquisitions and purchase new items between game sessions. The campaign approach increases the sense of immersion and narrative progression even if its “chapters” had not been originally designed to converge into a cohesive plot.

The next game in the system, *The Legend of Drizzt* by Peter Lee (Wizards of the Coast, 2011) draws its materials from the series of novels by R.A. Salvatore set in the world of *D&D*, and featuring the dark elf Drizzt Do’Urden. The game also incorporates ideas from the *D&D* supplement *Neverwinter Campaign Setting* and the video game *Neverwinter*, placing *The Legend of Drizzt* at the heart of a transmedia project that is reminiscent of the range of narratives that surrounded *Legend of Zagor*. For anybody who is familiar with the saga in the novels, most of the scenarios in the game can also function paratextually, as playable retellings of a known story and opportunities to create variations on the original themes. *Legend of Drizzt* retains the narrative qualities of the other games in the series, but does not include a campaign system—an omission that is justified by the fact that the scenarios cover events from Drizzt’s life that are very distant from one another. The sequence of scenarios retains a modicum of continuity in the way some scenarios influence the content of the following ones, and may still form a cohesive whole in the eyes of the readers of the novels.

The following installment, *Temple of Elemental Evil* by Peter Lee and Ben Petrisor (Wizards of the Coast, 2015) presents a narratively tighter experience than any of its precedents. To ensure that the players appreciate the progression that has been programmed in the scenarios, the introduction

recommends playing the adventures in the order in which they are presented, which will lead to the creation of a long and structured story arc. In handling the final section of the campaign, the game also introduces a truly innovative twist, with the threat of the dissolution of the moral bond that holds the party together. Some in-game events in the early scenarios have been designed to physically separate the characters from one another and foster dissension in the group, for example by forcing a player to deal damage to another player's character.<sup>7</sup> These events are meant to subliminally prime the group for the main event of the final battle. When they have almost defeated the archvillain Velathidros in the last scenario, the players are instructed to read out loud a text in which the monster asks the active player to betray the rest of the group! If the hero refuses, the offer passes to the next player, and then to the next, until someone accepts or all refuse. In case everyone declines the offer, all players win if they collectively defeat Velathidros. If a player accepts the offer and joins the villain, her character must defeat all the other heroes in order to win. The party, in this case, must defeat both Velathidros and the traitor.

This scene clearly adds a lot more to the experience than just atmospheric flavor. If the proposal of betrayal is made to a hero controlled by a resentful player, maybe one that has been the victim of unfair treatment from others, there is a chance that that player will accept the offer and steal the victory from the party.<sup>8</sup> This climactic sequence is also more unpredictable than its correlative in most fiction. Novels and movies are replete with moments in which the hero must resist a terrible temptation, but how often does the hero *actually* succumb to that temptation? It is in gaming and in interactive fiction that one is more likely to see Luke rule the galaxy with Darth Vader, or Frodo keep the ring for himself. *Temple of Elemental Evil* reinvigorates the time-worn trope of the temptation by making both horns of the dilemma actually viable. This form of narration may not have all the nuances of traditional fiction, but it has the considerable advantage of potentially generating narratives that other forms of storytelling are unwilling or unable to enact.

The latest game in the system to date is *Tomb of Annihilation* (WizKids, 2017) by Kevin Wilson. The game follows the mechanical format inaugurated by *Castle Ravenloft* while also moving in the direction of campaign gaming that is more clearly a trait of later installments. In

particular, the adventure book recommends that the players experience the scenarios in order, and provides detailed instructions about the imaginary locations the characters can visit between adventures. The game is also the first to come with two separate sets of terrain tiles: one representing a jungle, and covering the adventures of the heroes in scenarios 1 to 9; the other showing sections of the dungeon that is the setting of scenarios 10 to 13. This division of the campaign in specific locations greatly contributes to the sense of progression, and therefore narrative development, of the overarching narrative of the campaign.

Another game system that deserves to be mentioned as part of the Renaissance of thematic, story-oriented board gaming, is *Shadows of Brimstone* (2014), designed by Jason C. Hill and published by Flying Frog. The game was unusually released not as a single set but as two self-contained, standalone games: *SoB: Swamps of Death*, and *SoB: City of the Ancients*. These sets rely on the same system of rules but present different characters, terrain, scenarios, and environmental elements. As a result, the components from the two sets can be combined to increase replay value, add flexibility to the customization of the characters, and expand the setting of the game. Speaking of the setting, in a market flooded by fantasy and sci-fi games, *Shadows of Brimstone* is particularly original for its daring combination of classic Western adventure and Lovecraftian horror. The game may therefore generate highly inventive scenes in which a gunslinger fires a mystical gun studded with glowing crystals at a reptilian humanoid, a salon dancer maneuvers acrobatically around tentacles that burst out of the ground, or a marshal walks through a dimensional gate that leads to a city on a frozen plateau.

*Shadows of Brimstone*'s gameplay is fully cooperative thanks to a system of random events generated by cards, an analog AI that controls the behavior of the enemies, and a variable play area that is assembled during gameplay as the players explore new locations. Each base set includes ten ready-made scenarios and plenty of suggestions on how to create further adventures. The scenarios present a vast variety of situations and goals, each functioning as a sort of short story or novella constructed through solid game mechanics and high quality components, which help us imagine ourselves as part of the narrative. A strong sense of sustained reality comes from the way in which

characters can be developed game after game, and from the events that take place in the storyworld between adventures. As the characters explore new areas, kill monsters, and complete missions, they gain experience points which allow them to level up, just as it happens in role-playing games and video games. Each level brings new abilities, skills, and advantages, while also allowing the player to increase the degree of individual customization. When a character goes up a level, two new traits are added to his or her profile: one determined randomly by the roll of the dice, and another freely selected from a unique table for each profession. The players therefore have a degree of freedom of choice in how they evolve their avatars, which means that over time the characters will start mirroring the player's preferences and play style, and feel more psychologically relatable.

Another element that binds the scenarios together and strengthens the illusion of a persistent world is the complex system of tables used to determine what happens to the characters as they visit the town outside of the main play area. *Shadows of Brimstone* builds upon the precedent of *Warhammer Quest* by structuring the visits to town as mini-games in their own right. *Shadows of Brimstone* includes several play aids that describe the places the players can visit in town and the options available in each of them. If a hero wants to buy a weapon, the player locates the blacksmith's table and rolls to determine random events. Maybe nothing remarkable will happen, or maybe rare items will be available for purchase, or a horse will have broken free from the stable, or the hero will be attacked by a deranged blacksmith. A visit to the saloon may result in events like facing an old rival, telling a tall story to an adoring crowd, being blamed for spilling someone's drink, or a range of other occurrences. The visit may also lead to the purchase of goods and/or to a game of poker or dice (to be resolved as a mini-game within the mini-game of the visit to town). A player controlling the saloon girl may also make money by dancing or pickpocketing the customers! Nor is the visit a simple vacation from the dangers of the main adventure. The longer the players stay in town, the more likely it is that some negative event will be triggered by the game system. Spending time to restore one's strength, gain money, and collect items contains therefore a push-your-luck element, forcing the players to choose between short but safer visits, or long, profitable, but also risky stays. Even the trips between the town and the main adventures are thematically accounted for, as the players need to determine if there are special events that

occur in those segments. These examples show how the system can easily generate a strong sense of presence and persistence. The characters of *Shadows of Brimstone* never seem to flicker in and out of existence between sessions as they do in so many other games. Rather, like in role-playing games, we always have a clear idea of where the heroes are and what they are doing, even when we are not playing the game. It is also noteworthy that *Shadows of Brimstone* counts over 60 expansions as of this writing, which contribute a massive apparatus of characters, settings, items, and adventures to the gameworld. Thanks to these supplements even the most committed players are likely to take months or even years before experiencing all the available places to see, enemies to fight, treasures to loot, and avatars to play. Given the ongoing success of the game, by the time they are done new expansions will most likely have been released! Such a substantial offer of thematic materials means that the game's components create the strong impression that each play area is but a window on a much larger, fuller, and more intricate reality, and one that can be traveled in any direction without fear of ever sighting the edges of the world.

Of all the publishers that have produced thematic, story-driven board games in the 21st century, no one has been as successful as Fantasy Flight Games (FFG), undoubtedly one of today's leaders in the hobby. As a publisher, FFG has managed to develop some of the highest production values in the industry, has attracted scores of talented designers, and secured licenses of cult franchises like *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Game of Thrones* (from 2002, way before the TV show!). These factors alone would probably help explain the popularity of the company. What however has made FFG such a highly respected publisher among gamers (and a key player in our study) is how the company has managed to synergize production, gameplay, and theme in many of their designs, to the point of making such synergy one of their most recognizable traits.

FFG's games are often large and sometimes even imposing, but without ever falling in the trap of overproduction. Themes are captured in detail within the engine of the designs, but usually without excessive or gratuitous complications. Most importantly, licenses are treated with the understanding of the sources that the fans want to see, and to a degree of detail and accuracy that most other publishers don't pursue (or at least, not as systematically).

Some companies believe that to make a game about *Star Wars* all one needs to do is to take the board of *Operation*, replace the patient with R2-D2 or BB-8, and presto, they made *Operation: Star Wars!* Fantasy Flight Games on the other hand realized that there was an audience in the 21st century for hobby games with strong themes and emergent narratives, and targeted it with games that engage with their theme at a deep level, convey the content and atmosphere of the original stories, and work as playable variants of those materials. FFG also consolidated its profile as a company specializing in story-driven board games by publishing new editions of *Talisman*, *DungeoneQuest*, and *Arkham Horror*, precisely some of the designs we discussed earlier as pioneers of professionally produced board games that tell stories. Fantasy Flight's dominant position in today's market is also of great interest to us because it demonstrates the great appeal that story-driven board games have in the board gaming community. The positive loop between a publisher that makes narrative board games and an audience that eagerly supports these products has greatly reinvigorated the idea that analog games can tell stories, and has encouraged other publishers to invest in this direction.

To get a better sense of Fantasy Flight's production, we can start by having a closer look at their remade version of *Arkham Horror* (whose paratextual elements Booth discussed in detail). The first printing of this edition came out in 2005, and was followed by two revised reprintings, numerous international translations, and a constant stream of official and fan-made expansions.<sup>9</sup> Like the original game, FFG's version was inspired by the role-playing game *Call of Cthulhu*, and was structured around the idea of producing an RPG-type of experience in a game-master-less, board-based form. FFG's *Arkham Horror* modified the earlier design in a considerable number of ways, and these changes preponderantly went in the direction of making the game more thematic by upgrading the representational components and feeding more imaginary content into the story engine. Materially speaking, this edition displays a lavishly illustrated mounted board with high-quality art, and sports detailed and expressive images for all characters in the game. These traits mark a great improvement from the generic look of the paper board of the first edition, the monochromatic illustrations of the investigators, and the black silhouettes representing the monsters. From the mechanical point of view, FFG's *Arkham Horror*

dropped the roll-and-move mechanics that had informed the first edition, and that by the early 21st century had become disliked by most hobby players. Each location in town is now also associated with a unique deck of event cards, which can generate a much higher number of situations than the original event tables. Moreover, the players of the new *Arkham Horror* fight not against an undefined impending doom, but one of several cosmic horrors. Before each game the players randomly select one of the Ancient Ones as their main opponent, and each such villain brings special rules and unique circumstances to the table.<sup>10</sup> This element forces the players to adjust their strategy according to the strengths of the enemy, and intensifies the atmosphere of the game by making it more focused, and therefore more evocative and compelling. The 21st-century edition of *Arkham Horror* also includes twice as many playable characters as the original version, giving the players more opportunities to find an avatar they can empathize with. The large number of available upgrades makes it possible to customize the characters further, and gives each hero a strong individual flavor. All of these improvements make it possible to establish a quasi-RPG sense of psychological involvement with one's character and with the world of the game.

This new edition of *Arkham Horror* has been so well received to motivate FFG not just to support many expansions to the base set, but even to produce other intensely thematic designs based on Lovecraft's mythology. Such games include *Eldritch Horror* (2013) by Corey Konieczka and Nikki Valens, whose scope has been broadened through 7 expansions; *Mansions of Madness* by Corey Konieczka, first published in 2011, expanded by 7 additional sets, and entirely redesigned in 2016; and *Arkham Horror: The Card Game* (2016) by Nate French and Matthew Newman, which already counts over 20 expansions. This last game is particularly notable for our discourse because, in the words of the designers, it

seeks to establish a role-playing experience in which each player takes on the role of a specific character: his or her investigator. The nature of the game encourages players to work together and communicate, but players are also encouraged to stay “in character” as much as possible while doing so. The game’s areas of hidden information (the cards in a player’s hand and deck) exist to maintain the feeling that each

investigator is a unique individual in the game world, and makes his or her decisions without complete and perfect knowledge of what everyone else knows or is thinking [rulebook, 12].

This approach encapsulates some of the concepts we have been discussing throughout this book—such as identification, and progressive revelation. This formula has clearly encountered the favor of its intended audience, as the game is presently ranked by the users of BoardGameGeek as 19th among the over 90,000 games and expansions on the site.

In 2007 FFG released a fourth edition of *Talisman*, which did not reinvent the original game like the new *Arkham Horror* had done with its predecessor, but paired the basic ideas behind the early version with stunning new art and some tweaks that slightly increased player agency. Even more important is the fact that FFG has released a substantial number of expansions which have added further locales for the players to explore, endless new monsters to encounter, heroes to employ as avatars, and so on. The original in-game world has thus been turned into an enormous sandbox in which the players can give shape to endless fictional events.

FFG of course doesn't only remake previous story-driven games. A good example of an FFG original is *Middle-Earth Quest* (2009), designed by Corey Konieczka, Christian T. Petersen, and Tim Uren. Set in the world of *The Lord of the Rings*, the game casts one player in the role of Sauron, and all the other ones in that of heroes attempting to foil Sauron's plans. The game features all the traits we have been considering in this study: an evocative setting, unique and iconic characters, game mechanics with strong representational power, and a large variety of possible encounters and events. To these elements the game adds several touches whose storytelling role is explicitly marked in the rules. Progress in the game is recorded by moving Story markers on a Story track divided in three sections, just like the three-act structure of a Hollywood film and three-part organization of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.<sup>11</sup> The players get to move their markers on this track by completing requirements described on several types of cards, which are called Plot cards for the Sauron player and Quest cards for the hero players. As if this wasn't enough, the final sequence of the game is called Finale, as opposed to the more common expression "end game." The use of

such narrative terms creates a specific set of expectations in the players, and the wealth of imaginary content produced by the game components more than meets such expectations. Reviewers that enjoyed the game punctually praised the narrative qualities of the design. An example comes from BGG user Amnese (also quoted in the introduction), who wrote:

But for me, the satisfaction in a game doesn't lie in "winning or losing." The satisfaction lies in the enjoyment of the gameplay and the narrative of the game that develops in playing with friends.... When I set out to play an adventure game, I want to travel around, I want to explore, I want to take on quests, I want to fight, and I want to see a nice, deep adventure story develop in my game. In essence, I want to be immersed in the role of the adventurer. I don't want to be bored by the simplicity of a game (and the lack of a narrative), but I also don't want to be side-tracked by dense and confusing rules.... For me (and this will be different for everyone), *Middle-Earth Quest* strikes a very nice balance.

The most articulate exploration of storytelling in board games that FFG has produced is however to be found not in a single game, but in a family of designs that started with *Doom: The Board Game* and developed into the games *Descent* and *Star Wars: Imperial Assault*. The founder of this family is *Doom: The Board Game* (2004) by Kevin Wilson. Based on the video game franchise of the same name and set in a research base on Mars, the game pits a player controlling a horde of Invaders against a group of Marines led by the other players. At its core, the game is one of tactical movement and combat, not too dissimilar from many wargames of this scale that came before. Several factors, however, make it important for our discourse. The first factor is that the game is scenario-based, and it includes a campaign system that encourages the players to go through all the adventures in a suggested order to experience an overarching narrative. Like in an RPG or a video game, the Marines even get to level up during the campaign and gain experience points that can be spent to acquire advantages.

*Doom*'s scenarios also bring back the idea of the scripted adventure and hidden map that we saw in *HeroQuest* and in the *D&D* board games of the 1990s. Each game session is based on a set of instructions that only the

Invader player has access to, and takes place on a modular board. At the beginning of a game session the Invader player places only the initial terrain tile from which the Marines enter the board, and explains the general purpose and parameters of the mission. New areas, monsters, and items, are added as the Marines move around the place and gain line of sight to them. Each location is introduced by flavor texts that the Invader player reads out loud to give the Marine players an understanding of what their characters perceive as they take in the new area. For example, when entering area 1, the Marine players will be given the following description: “The hydroponic equipment here has been smashed, scattering algae, leaves, and soil across the floor and walls. The rich, earthy scent of loam and natural decay pervades the area, but a sharp, coppery tang underlies it, a smell that you’ve come to recognize as human blood. Nearby, you hear the screams of two people. It seems unlikely that they’ll last for more than a few moments.” In this scenario the Marines must retrieve two passwords needed to activate a teleporter, and the scenes in which the information is found are described in intense, theme-appropriate texts:

The woman here is covered in blood and too far gone for you to do anything for her. However, as she sees you, she slowly and painfully writes the word PLUGH on the floor in her own blood, then goes limp.

The research scientist is clearly on his last legs. As you bend down to see if there’s anything you can do for him, he grabs you with desperate strength. “You must stop them. Use the security teleporter. I know one of the passwords… it’s XIZZY. Hurry!” Gradually, his grip on your uniform lets go, and he moves no more.

Functionally speaking nothing would change if these episodes were removed from the scenario entirely and replaced with two “keyword tokens” that the Marines pick up along the way. Still, there is no denying that these texts do affect the experience of playing the game, and contribute to build the feeling of dread that the players expect from a board game based on *Doom*.

Another element in *Doom: The Board Game* that is significant for our discourse is the presence of an intuitive and visceral combat system. While previous games and RPGs had relied on complex procedures whenever they intended to generate a large range of results, *Doom* obtained a similar effect

through the use of simple custom dice. Some sides of these dice show numbers indicating the distance at which the attack is effective. If for example the total rolled is 3, a ranged attack will hit a target no further than 3 spaces away. Some other sides show an X, and if an X is rolled the attack automatically fails. A third type of symbol is bullet holes, which indicate the amount of hits inflicted on the target if no Xs are present and the distance requirement is met. The number of hits scored is then compared with the armor value of the target. The outcome of an attack is therefore determined almost instantaneously, in the time it takes to roll some dice, and the result is easy to read in thematic terms. If an attack failed because of the range requirement, we can imagine that the bullets simply missed; if enough range points are produced but not enough bullet symbols, the bullets made contact with the target but didn't penetrate its armor; if an X was rolled, we imagine that the shot failed due to some unforeseen event, like a malfunction in the weapon. These three types of misses have the same impact on the ludic state of the game (the target is unscathed), but each type generates a different fictional event in the mind of the players and adds more variety to the narrative of the game.

The game was well received in the hobby world, as demonstrated by the fact that it received an expansion in 2005, a second edition in 2006, and a third one in 2016. The game also relied on a system so solid that it could be easily applied to other genres, leading to the creation of new designs and settings based on it. The first selected genre for this transposition, unsurprisingly enough, was high fantasy, and the result was the game *Descent* by Kevin Wilson, published in 2005.<sup>12</sup> *Descent* applied the main concepts and mechanics of *Doom* to a fantasy world that, over the years, would be expanded by a plethora of supplemental sets describing new places, characters, adversaries, items, and skills. *Descent*'s many expansions generated an enormously varied setting, with an impressive number of adventures to embark on, locations to explore, and heroes to identify with. This was already true for the first edition of the game, which was expanded by 5 boxed sets and a hardback volume containing 16 extra adventures. The impression that each game session of *Descent* takes place in a vast, RPG-like universe became even more intense in the second edition of the game (2012), for which over 40 expansions of varying size and complexity have been released as of this writing. Fans of the game have also created many

independent scenarios and shared them online. An offer of this type generates a sandbox universe that the players can mentally inhabit for months or years, and can customize to their liking by combining different sets in an endless variety of results. Like in an RPG, a game session of *Descent* becomes a mere glimpse onto a virtual world that seems to spread much further than the physical confines of the play area, and that contains virtually inexhaustible story potential.

Similarly to what happens in *Doom*, a player in *Descent* controls the environment and the monsters, while the others lead the heroes that must face the challenges of the scenario. Like in *Doom*, the relationship between the two sides is purely competitive. The monster player knows more about the scenarios than the hero players, but she is not a game master proper because she is bound by the same rules as the others and motivated by the possibility of winning or losing. Rules-wise, *Descent* is mechanically similar to its predecessor, but it also builds on that game's combat system by adding “power surges”—that is, symbols on the custom dice whose exact effect is detailed on the characters' information cards. The advantage of these surges is that a symbol may represent different abilities and actions for each character, resulting in an effective melee attack when rolled for a warrior, or in a powerful spell when rolled for a wizard. Thanks to these surges the game system manages therefore to pack a much greater amount of detail and thematic variety. Playing different heroes will then result in radically different game experiences, because the possible combinations of surge effects and personal equipment will make each hero behave in completely unique ways. This interaction of thematic variety and intuitive mechanics allows the events depicted in the game to shine through the mechanics with great clarity, and coalesce into narratively poignant sequences.

The game is scenario-based, and each scenario takes place in a play area assembled by using interlocking terrain tiles, with all of the advantages in terms of variety and discovery that this method involves. The narrative element is further strengthened by the fact that the scenarios also include flavor texts that punctuate various phases of the exploration. Like in *Doom*, most of these descriptions have no strict mechanical purpose, but they contribute to create suspense and sharpen the immersive illusion by detailing the sensory experiences of the heroes. For example, in scenario 4, when the

heroes enter a certain area, the monster player reads the following text out loud: “As you open the door, a flock of tiny bats flies overhead. With a rustle and a cacophony of squeaks, they disappear down the corridor. You realize that they must have been fleeing something inside the room, and you hear heavy footsteps and the scrape of steel on stone.” Are the squeaks of the bats necessary to the ludic functioning of the game? Obviously not, and yet players of role-playing games know perfectly well that this type of detail can make the difference between a sequence of die rolls and numerical adjustments, and a compelling, exciting adventure.

Things changed in the second edition of *Descent*, in which the players were instructed to build the play area and place all or some of the enemies during set up. This alteration reduced the sense of progressive discovery that permeated the first edition, making the game feel more like a tactical wargame than an RPG in board game form. Flavor texts also were reduced, and usually limited to a paragraph at the beginning and one or two at the end of each scenario. Mystery, suspense, and progressive revelation would however make a comeback to *Descent* in 2016, when FFG released an app called *Road to Legend*, meant to be used in combination with the second edition of the game. The app performs all the functions of the scenario book by describing the configuration of the play area and the placement of monsters, traps, and treasures. It also replaces the monster player by describing the behavior of all non-playing characters, making it possible to enjoy the game in fully cooperative mode or even in solitaire, with all players working together as heroes. In so doing, the *Road to Legend* app elevates the element of progressive revelation to heights that the system had not known before. Now during set up the players prepare neither the monsters nor the map, but only place the tile with the chamber in which the heroes begin their journey. The players then execute their turns normally, and when a hero moves to an unexplored edge the app is consulted to determine the terrain tile that must be added, and which creatures and other game elements are found there. This way the app doles out new bits of information only when the heroes are in a position to perceive them.

By hiding the extension, configuration, and content of the dungeon, the app throws the players back into the darkness and mystery that have seduced role-playing gamers since the first edition of *D&D*. While making the game

master unnecessary, *Road to Legend* still produces the pleasure of discovering a space that is ludically balanced and thematically interesting, because the general configuration of the place is not entirely random, but has been programmed in advance by a human agent. The app also brings back the intense atmosphere that pervaded the first edition of *Descent* by reintegrating flavor texts within the adventures. Every time that the players reach a new area, the app shows a text that describes what the heroes perceive, and helps the players immerse themselves in the situation. Sound effects and the possibility to have simple conversations with the non-playing characters have also been added, and they further enhance the narrative quality of the experience.

The narrative-oriented, RPG-like approach of the *Descent* line is also visible in the ways the various scenarios in the game are connected to one another. The first edition of *Descent* included a 2008 expansion called *Road to Legend* (like the 2016 app), which described what happens to the heroes between adventures, when they are not exploring dungeons and dungeon-like locations. The second edition confirmed the importance of this aspect by incorporating campaign ideas in the core set of the game. From the beginning, the players could then opt to embark on one-shot delves, or undertake complex quests involving a series of journeys, with activities taking place between adventures. In later expansions, the possibility of stringing together several scenarios in larger sequences took on an even more central role. Even a small expansion like *The Trollfens* (2013), for example, presented a trio of scenarios to be played in a strict order, followed by one of two possible end scenarios. Doing well in the early scenarios gives a side an advantage during the final confrontation, while also affecting the overall narrative created by the campaign. A larger expansion like *Labyrinth of Ruin* (2013) contains 19 scenarios, and presents them as an interlinked net of adventures to be navigated like a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book. The scenario system here even shows an overarching narrative structure divided in Act I, Interlude, Act II, and Finale. After playing the first scenario, the winner of the confrontation chooses one of two possible scenarios to play next, and this selection, in turn, will “unlock” certain future scenarios while making certain others unavailable. This organization grants the players the power to affect the course of the events and shape the development of the story. The players may not know beforehand which paths will be traveled

along the tree of possible options, but they will still experience a meaningful story arc constructed through a series of ludic confrontations.

The use of interlocking scenarios to generate large narratives became even more central in the release of the game *Star Wars: Imperial Assault* (2014), designed by Corey Konieczka et al. *Imperial Assault* is the FFG offer for man-to-man combat in the universe of *Star Wars*, and is mechanically based on the core ideas behind *Doom* and *Descent*. Once again, we have individual characters with unique sets of items and abilities which are often activated through special icons on custom dice. Again, we have intense combat action, a plethora of scenarios, play areas with variable configurations, and different victory conditions based on the objectives of each situation. Winning some scenarios may allow a player to “unlock” certain resources and characters, increasing the sense of causal connection and temporal progression from adventure to adventure. Many of the scenarios have been designed to be played in a specific order, and in some sections this connection is not linear but diverging, with instructions on how to continue the story in this or that direction based on the outcome of the previous confrontations. The scenario *A New Threat*, for example, will be followed by *Imperial Hospitality* in case of a Rebel victory, and *Fly Solo* in case of an Imperial victory. Plot-wise this campaign is structured like a branching text of interactive fiction, because playing a sequence of scenarios amounts to navigating a net of narrative options that link the played confrontations into an overall story.

In *Imperial Assault* the entire play area of a scenario is assembled during set up, but only the Imperial player is allowed to read the scenario instructions, which include flavor texts and provisions on when to trigger certain in-game events. While knowing the overall layout of the play area, the Rebel player can still be surprised by the identity, location, and number of enemies, and by a range of scripted events. Due to the concealed nature of these details, flavor texts recover the suspenseful and atmospheric qualities that they had in *Doom* and in the first edition of *Descent*. There is certainly a moment of tension and excitement when in a scenario the Rebel player enters an unexplored area, and the Imperial player introduces a group of enemies by reading out loud the following text:

The doors to the garage slide open, revealing more than just Luke's T-16. A squad of Imperial Stormtroopers is deployed inside with blasters raised, ready and waiting to capture the Rebellion's hero.

You see the terrifying outline of Darth Vader standing tall among the soldiers. With one hand he activates his lightsaber and with the other he points at you and Luke, indicating to his troops to begin their attack.

The result is a game system in which the players can explore the universe of *Star Wars* through the affordances of board gaming, and generate game sequences whose thematic perspicuity turns every game session into a short narrative, and each campaign into the playable equivalent of a movie or a novel. This ludic and narrative model clearly resonates deeply with the taste of today's gaming community—so much so that the game ranks 28th on BoardGameGeek as of this writing, and its success has already justified the release of five major expansions containing pick-a-path campaigns,<sup>13</sup> plus over 40 smaller expansions with extra characters, equipment, and scenarios. This should be a further demonstration that the success of FFG in the hobby industry is not simply due to their ability to acquire high profile licenses, but to the fact that today's hobby gamers want to inhabit expansive imaginary worlds and be the main actors in an exciting narrative. The fact that FFG added the possibilities of such interactions to preexisting and much-beloved storyworlds only makes the process even more compelling in the eyes of committed hobby players.

## 12

### How We Stopped Worrying About Replay Value and Learned to Love the Story

In this book we have seen many examples of how board game designers of the last decades have merged ludic functions and storytelling in ways that resulted in narratives of great depth and complexity. Interestingly enough, almost every step taken to transport the power of storytelling into board gaming has meant to shatter some of the traditional conventions of the hobby. The idea that all players control the same number and type of pieces has been dropped to make way to the kind of unique, individual characters we know from fiction, resulting in endless varieties of asymmetrical gameplay. The convention that a game always starts in the same way, with no influence from previous game sessions, has been replaced with arcs of interlinked scenarios that emulate the breadth and architecture of fiction. The focus on simple mechanics at the expense of theme has undergone a shift that has made higher complexity acceptable, and even desirable, whenever it could lead to evocative representations.

There is nevertheless an element of fiction that board games have struggled to capture until very recently, as to do so would have meant to attack one of the holiest pillars of conventional gaming. This narrative element is the plot twist, and the pillar it threatens is replayability. It is an accepted fact that a mystery novel or movie will be fully enjoyable only once, but millennia of game design have led us to expect that we should be entertained a large number of times by a game. The idea is particularly important for casual gamers, who want to maximize the return from the money they spent in the game and the time it took them to learn the rules. To a lesser degree, this is also true of hobby players. For narrative-based board games, this has meant that the goals pursued in the design have tended to be practical, like defeating a villain, rather than cognitive, like unraveling a mystery, with the reason being that a villain can be fought in many confrontations with different strategies, but a mystery can be solved only once. For this very reason,

mystery-themed games like *Clue* have implemented their topic in a very abstract way, generating the “case” through a random system that can result in many possible combinations, but that also bears little resemblance with mystery fiction or the logic of the real world. These games, moreover, cannot include plot twists because all elements of the mystery have equal chances to be part of the solution, and are therefore not placed on a scale of probability that could be later subverted for effect. More in general, obviously, replayable mystery games like *Clue* simply don’t have a prearranged and organic plot that the players could have the pleasure of unraveling.

A radically innovative path was the one taken by *221B Baker Street*, *Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective*, and the games they inspired. As we saw in chapter 8, these designs effectively captured the workings of mystery fiction by hiding an actual story within each scenario, and challenging the players to reconstruct it. This arrangement also made it possible to mislead the players in a certain direction to spring a major surprise on them later, thereby giving them the pleasure of being intelligently fooled that is typical of fiction. The necessary price to produce this effect is built-in obsolescence, as each scenario can be enjoyed only once, leaving no other remedy than to acquire new cases to be able to keep playing. The number of expansions produced for *221B* and *SHCD* shows that this is a viable solution, but still, looking at the big picture, designs with a fixed number of enjoyable plays have been a rare occurrence in the history of gaming. In recent years, however, several board games have been published that uncompromisingly attempted to create stories full of mysteries and plot twists, even when this meant that the game became less playable (or completely unplayable) after several sessions. The limited replay value of these games is apparent to anyone who approaches them, and yet the publishers still decided to invest in them, and the audience responded with unmitigated enthusiasm. This new trend furnishes us with ample evidence that the parameters by which committed board gamers approach their hobby have changed dramatically, to the point that the joy of experiencing an immersive board game narrative can now fully justify the purchase of games with a limited life span.

The most visible example of this phenomenon is a group of designs usually called “Legacy” games. The term originated with *Risk Legacy* (Hasbro, 2011) by Rob Daviau and Chris Dupuis, which was the first game to

introduce the mechanics that would become the distinctive trait of the system.<sup>1</sup> These games include components that come in sealed boxes and envelopes, and that the players are advised not to open until instructed to do so. The players set up the game and play it as normal until they receive the instruction to open one of the sealed containers. Such instructions are often located in the scenario descriptions, and may read more or less like: “If player 1 wins the game, open envelope 3A; otherwise, open box 4D.” The players then execute the instructions, and in so doing unlock new rules and components that are integrated with the game. The sealed containers will usually include a text describing events that take place in the world of the game, and rules and physical components used to bring those events to life on the board. New enemies and allies may be introduced through new tokens or miniatures. Fictional events may occur that will cause radical changes in the setting, and stickers with texts explaining the new situation are provided to cover the sections of the rulebook that have been outdated. Similar stickers may be included to paste on the board to add new features that have surfaced in the storyworld, or to hide the ones that can’t be used anymore. The process effectively alters the play area and the setting of the story in a permanent way. The same type of alteration occurs when the game instructs the players to write on the board with a marker, or even to tear apart and throw away certain cards and player aids.

This mechanism of unpredictable and irreversible change also invests the characters of the games. New characters may enter the stage while older ones may die or become otherwise unplayable in later sessions. The status of the characters may also change during a campaign, with characters shifting alliances and acquiring new skills or handicaps. In *Pandemic Legacy*, for example, the playable characters may acquire traits like “grizzled,” “flexible,” or “pilot,” and may develop interpersonal relationships like “family member,” “co-worker,” or “rival.” These relationships are marked by attaching matching stickers to the appropriate character cards. As a result, after a couple of games the Scientist may have become a rival of the Quarantine Expert, the grizzled Medic may be revealed to be a relative of the Generalist, and the Researcher may become too emotionally scarred to be in play.

Through these devices the Legacy system tracks the actions that take place during gameplay by permanently inscribing them in the physical copy of the game. This way, past sessions influence how future ones are played, making each session a chapter in an evolving story. The fact that new elements only become available during a sequence of games brings the idea of revelatory power in board gaming to a whole new level, while also offering unprecedented opportunities for story building and plot twists. In these games, the sequence of hidden events has been designed in advance, allowing for misdirection, surprises, and shocking twists. Maybe an ally introduced in game session 2 will be revealed to be a traitor in game session 8; maybe what appeared to be a threat will turn out to be a resource; maybe an area of the board which seemed useless will become vital, and so on. The radical idea of destroying the components that have become obsolete has also the effect of strengthening the sense of unilinear progression of the story, and gives each event in the game a sense of finality that few other forms of expression can offer. I can reread the death of a character in a novel over and over again, but if to remove a character from a Legacy game I must destroy the card that represents her, then that character is truly and completely *gone*, with no chances for me to rewind the narrative and replay that moment in the future. At the same time, the threat of the physical destruction of the components makes each play decision in the game particularly meaningful, because the consequences of a wrong move may later turn out to be impossible to take back.

Thanks to the Legacy system the narrative possibilities of a board game become as limitless as they are in traditional fiction, because the components and rules needed to create any sort of plot can be planned by the designer beforehand, and programmed to enter the game at an appropriate time, as the situation requires. In fact, the system allows the designer to carefully structure the pace and architecture of the narrative simply by timing the events that will trigger the opening of the containers. The result of all these innovations is a play experience that combines the affordances of board gaming with the narrative progression of RPGs and interactive storytelling, while adding also the finality and irreversibility of real life. As BGG user and player of *Risk Legacy* Jordan S. (metaripley18) has written:

*Risk Legacy* was probably the most unique gaming experience I have ever had. I greatly enjoyed it and it blew my mind that games could work that way. I've played RPGs such as *D&D*, *Vampire*, *Fate*, and similar, so the campaign style where my actions affected the world wasn't a totally new concept, but to see that applied to board games was crazy.... Every packet opened as a direct result of choices that we made. I felt like we were playing a game, shaping a world, and then lying in the bed that we made.

Each game in the Legacy system has therefore a limited life span, or, we should say, a limited number of plays in which the unique properties of the system will apply. When all containers have been opened, all materials have been used, and the script of the campaign has run its course, the game will have become very different from what it was at the beginning. At that point, copies played by different people will not be alike anymore, as each group will have turned their mechanically reproduced copy of the game into a unique artifact, a diary of sorts. At this point, a copy of the game can be played only as a conventional game that doesn't evolve anymore. In this sense, every copy of the game remains playable indefinitely, but its Legacy element (which drew the players to the experience to start with) has a clear and unavoidable expiration date.

*Risk Legacy*, in 2011, was the first game to give visibility to the idea of progressive and irreversible discovery in the board gaming hobby,<sup>2</sup> and it did so by applying it to the well-known game *Risk*.<sup>3</sup> Many of the elements we mentioned above found their origin in this game, even if the focus on states at war did not leave much room for the development of individual characters. On the other hand, due to its theme, *Risk Legacy* leads to the construction of a thought-provoking discourse about the irrevocable destruction caused by war. In order to open the box for the first time, the players need to break a seal that says "What's done can never be undone"—an unusually grim admonishment which introduces the message at the core of the Legacy philosophy. As the box is opened, the players find a sheet of paper with the following message: "We, the undersigned, take responsibility for the wars that we are about to start, the decisions we will make, and the history that we will write. Everything that is going to happen is going to happen because of us," followed by a blank space in which the players are expected to put their

signature. From the very beginning, before the first game session even starts, *Risk Legacy* makes a statement about the dramatic and momentous events represented in the game. Playing conventional games of war can be highly entertaining, and there is certainly something reassuring in being able to set up the next game as if nothing at all had happened, national resources instantly replenished and armies magically reformed. In *Risk Legacy*, the actions taken by the players affect the state of the storyworld and the physical configuration of the game permanently. This idea allows the players to be exposed on a small scale to some of the dilemmas of the depicted topic, and increases their sense of moral awareness.

In order to avoid spoilers, I won't go into detail about what each embodiment of the Legacy system has to offer—but I will point out that the very necessity of this type of discretion is in itself indicative of the novelty of the approach. Speaking in general and spoiler-free terms, we can say that *Risk Legacy* was followed in 2015 by *Pandemic Legacy: Season 1* (Z-Man) by Rob Daviau and Matt Leacock, which applied the Legacy system of progressive revelation to the cooperative game *Pandemic*. The game did so from an explicit narrative perspective, as the subtitle echoing TV conventions demonstrates. *Pandemic Legacy* catapulted the Legacy system to the attention of the gaming community even more than *Risk Legacy*, to the point that at the present time the game is rated as number 2 game on BoardGameGeek! The extraordinary achievement of *Pandemic Legacy* has predictably spurred publishers and designers to intensify their efforts in that direction. This race to release new Legacy games has already originated *Seafall* (PlaidHat, 2016) *Pandemic Legacy: Season 2* (Z-Man, 2017), *Charterstone* (Stonemaier, 2017), *Centauri Saga: Abandoned* (Vesuvius, 2017), and *The Rise of Queensdale* (Ravensburger, 2018). The most important release in this trend is certainly *Gloomhaven* (Cephalofair, 2017) by Isaac Childres, set in a persistent fantasy world that the players discover gradually in missions *a la Dungeons & Dragons*. This game is also remarkable for the massive number of physical components it includes, thanks to which the design can articulate an astoundingly complex and intricate storyworld. The effort in design and production behind *Gloomhaven* has been rewarded by a very warm welcoming in the hobby community, and in fact the game now ranks as *the* number 1 game on BoardGameGeek.

Meanwhile, new Legacy games are slated for future release, and awaited with great anticipation.

Even more radically than the Legacy designs, the games *T.I.M.E. Stories* and *Mansions of Madness* present the players with experiences that leave very little enjoyment to be had once they have been played a number of times. These games are close descendants of actual mystery games like *Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective*, but they bring that revered concept to life in innovative ways.

Corey Konieczka's *Mansions of Madness* came out for FFG in 2011, and was radically redesigned by Nikki Valens for a second edition published by FFG in 2016. Both editions show profound similarities with the RPG *Call of Cthulhu* and the board game *Arkham Horror*, especially due to the fact that they are cooperative games set in the imaginary world of H.P. Lovecraft. *Mansions of Madness* builds on the basic premises of *Arkham Horror* (strong theme, interesting characters, and intense atmosphere) but adds actual mysteries to tackle, meaningful clues to decode, puzzles to solve, and so on. For a character to benefit from a clue the players must do more than simply collect a generic Clue token (like in the first two editions of *Arkham Horror*); they must actually understand the implications of a textually rendered clue within the narrative architecture of the scenario, just like they would in real life or when trying to solve a case from mystery fiction. To make the experience work, the first edition of the game required a human game master who knew the secrets of the scenario, managed the environment, and presented puzzles and riddles to the players. The limitation of course came from the fact that once a scenario had been played to completion the adventure could not be repeated without losing much of its interest. At a second run combat might still be interesting, but in essence what was a unique intellectual adventure will have turned into one of the many games of tactical fighting out there. On top of this, the original release of *Mansions of Madness* was notoriously plagued by unbalanced scenarios, overcomplicated and redundant procedures, and extensive set up time. Despite all this the game was still successful, and even the critics focused less on the limited replay value than on the other factors mentioned above. For most players, the pleasure of solving mysteries and discovering the

hidden elements of the story seemed to overshadow the ludic deficiencies of the design.

The second edition of the game was released in 2016, and it has been consistently seen as a vast improvement over the previous one, to the point of being now 22nd in the general rankings of BGG. The rules of this edition have been streamlined, set up time reduced, and the role of a human game master has been taken up entirely by a companion app the way *Road to Legend* has done for *Descent*. Now, before set up, the players open the app and select one of the possible cases included in it. The app then informs the players about the situation their characters are facing and the mystery they will attempt to solve. Significantly, the only explicit goal given at this point is to solve the mystery, while the exact content of the mystery and the specifics of the victory conditions are not disclosed. In *Arkham Horror* I know from the beginning that I need to collect Clue tokens to win, while at the beginning of *Mansions of Madness* 2nd edition I must figure out the nature of the problem and the most desirable course of action to take. A scenario may instruct the players to investigate the disappearance of a person, and maybe it will be discovered that the person was kidnapped by an evil cult and must be rescued by the players. It could equally well be that the person *is* the leader of that cult, and in order to win the players will need to discover this fact, locate the person, and apprehend her. Like in fiction, the optimal end state of the situation is not specified at the beginning, and significant plot twists may occur. The downside of all this, of course, is that once the solution of a case has been found, there will be virtually no reason left for the players to attempt that scenario again.

The sense of progressive revelation is here provided by the way the app conceals and releases its content. When exploring a new area, the app tells the players to place certain terrain tiles on the table, and identifies possible places and persons of interest, which the players will mark by adding tokens to the newly placed area. The players will then perform their actions on the board as normal, and refer to the app to find out what each token represents in the fiction of the scenario. The app also explains how a player can interact with the item or person indicated by the token, offering different choices in different circumstances. No matter how important the app is, the second edition of *Mansions of Madness* is nevertheless far from being an app game.

Like for *Descent* and the *Road to Legend* app, the board, tokens, and miniatures of *Mansions of Madness* 2nd ed. remain indispensable to record and organize many other vital features of the design. For example, the app explains when and where enemies must be added to the board, but the movement of the heroes and their enemies is resolved entirely by repositioning the miniatures in the play area. Also, with its large box, elaborate plastic miniatures, beautifully illustrated character cards, and detailed terrain tiles, the game emanates a distinct sense of physicality which grounds the play experience in the manipulation of the elements on the table.

Another radical trade-off of replayability for storytelling potential is in the game *T.I.M.E. Stories* by Peggy Chassenet and Manuel Rozoy (Asmodee, 2015). In this game, the players take on the role of time agents traveling to different ages and places by projecting their consciousness inside the mind of local natives (called “receptacles”). The players embark on these journeys to solve complex mysteries and prevent disruptions of the temporal flow. The game is played in scenarios whose content is broken into several decks of cards: one presenting the receptacles that the players will control, one showing the locations that will be visited, and one the items the players can interact with. Special scenarios also include other types of cards to cover specific situations. Each location the players visit is formed by a set of cards that show different sections of the area, and that when placed next to each other in a row create a general view of the place. The players can then use actions to move their character’s pawn within the area and look at the back of the cards. Doing so means to zoom in that part of the scene and interact with its content, almost like in a point-and-click video game. The back of a card showing a non-playing character may detail a conversation with that character, for example, while the back of an image showing a desk may reveal the content of that desk’s drawers. When the players are satisfied with their examination of an area, they put away the set of panorama cards for that place and open up a new scene using the cards that form another location, moving from a room to the next, from a building to a street, or to and from any other allowed combination of spaces. The sum of these individual areas, in the process, is mentally configured by the players as an organic virtual place that can be navigated by taking actions in it. An increased sense of spatial presence and an intensified visual element are in fact some of the main traits that distinguish *T.I.M.E. Stories* from predecessors like *Sherlock*

*Holmes Consulting Detective*. The result looks and plays almost like an interactive visual novel.

The concealed back of the panorama cards, and the fact that players do not even know which areas will be available in a scenario, ensures that the experience will have a strong sense of progressive discovery. The mystery created by this arrangement of information is not solved by mechanically eliminating alternatives like in *Clue*, but by immersing oneself in the world of the story, understanding the reasons behind the behavior of the non-playing characters, and discovering and connecting visual and textual clues. The experience of playing *T.I.M.E. Stories* is driven entirely by the process of interpreting the visual props of a scenario as part of a fiction.

Since the game does not have a detailed combat element like *Mansions of Madness* nor the type of variable challenges the Legacy games can offer (which allow a design to retain some interest after the concealed content is discovered), *T.I.M.E. Stories* gives basically no reason to the players to return to a scenario after all mysteries have been solved. Attempting to do so would basically mean to mechanically repeat the same steps that were taken before, without any uncertainty or excitement. This means that the only way to keep playing the game is to regularly purchase new scenario expansions. Once again what would have been seen as a fatal shortcoming until a decade ago has been accepted in the gaming community as a small price to pay (figuratively and literally) for the advantages the system offers in terms of plot and atmosphere. Nine official expansions have already been produced, and 19 fan-made expansions are listed on BoardGameGeek, showing an effort from both the publisher and the community to keep the system moving forward. The present ranking of the game on BoardGameGeek is 49th, making *T.I.M.E. Stories* one of the most highly appreciated games of all time within the gaming community.

Another example of the recent trend toward story at the expense of replayability is *Legacy of Dragonholt* (Fantasy Flight Games, 2017) by Nikki Valens. Set in a high fantasy world, this game is a hybrid between a game-master-less role-playing game, a gamebook, and a board game. The game comprises a series of booklets and physical artifacts such a fictional letter, a diary, a set of cards, and a map—all of which, in the aggregate, give

the set a physical resemblance similar to *Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective*. The players of *Legacy of Dragonholt* can select for themselves one of the pregenerated characters that come with the game, or can create their own avatar through a process that is more involved and comprehensive than what we find routinely in board gaming. The explicitly stated goal of this procedure is to help the players think of themselves as characters in a living and breathing storyworld. In designing such characters, the players can flesh out their heroes' physical appearance, psychological makeup, and background, all with the purpose of adding "narrative depth to the stories you tell" (character creation booklet, 14). Some of a character's traits are left to the player's imagination, while others fall within a discrete (but extensive) range of options, as when choosing among 6 available races, 7 professions, and 24 skills. In today's digitalized world it is also easy to find online an illustration that matches the mental image one has of their uniquely generated hero. Once that image is printed and added as a portrait to a character sheet, it can provide the psychological, thematic, and narrative benefits that we have seen throughout this book.

After forming a party of heroes, the players of *Legacy of Dragonholt* start reading the adventures described in the booklets, and navigate the text by moving within a net of interlinked textual paragraphs, like in a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book or a *MicroQuest* adventure. For part of the experience the players rely on a highly thematic map of the town of Dragonholt to visualize their location and movement, which increases the illusion of reality and gives gameplay a board-based quality. The game system is ludically very intuitive: the players simply read the text of the adventure together and alternate making decisions for their characters, turning to the paragraphs that correspond to the actions they are attempting. Players also keep record of items, stamina, and time spent performing non-trivial actions. This last aspect adds a great deal of realism to the experience, as it allows some options to be available only at certain times. For example, a non-playing character may be spending the morning at the library, and if the heroes look for that character after a number of time units have been used, they will be told that the character has left. Similarly, certain stores may be open only during daytime, while others may open in the evening. The resulting impression is one of a vibrant, organic world, in which playing and non-playing characters

act in a contextually appropriate fashion, and opportunities come and go like in real life.

The game system is completely deterministic, without any random element. Even in combat, the players select their actions from a menu of options, and turn to the paragraph that describes the outcome of the action and the ludic adjustments that must be made (stamina lost or gained, skilled disabled or reactivated, etc.).<sup>4</sup> As in many other designs we saw in this book, the simplicity of the system is meant to encourage the players to focus on content, story, characters, and setting, without being distracted by calculations of numerical odds and manipulation of abstract strategies. Players who take the story seriously, think about each challenge thematically, and do what seems to make the sense in each situation, are the ones that will have the most chances of success, while being good at identifying optimal algorithms here gives no intrinsic advantage.

As they make their decisions, the players get to explore a large, highly navigable world, in which they may embark in a variety of quests, encounter a colorful cast of characters, and visit mysterious locations. The game is so open-ended that it does not have a scripted outcome, and the players can roam the setting freely until a conclusion will present itself, stemming naturally from the decisions that have been made. All of these elements, together with the atmospheric prose of the author, contribute to create a strong sense of immersion and to make the game feel primarily as a sandbox for exciting fantasy stories.

The drawback is of course that such adventures don't have much replayability. The plot twists inscribed in the text will obviously surprise the players only once, and the deterministic nature of the system will easily lead the players to identify the best path to achieve their goals after the first playthrough, depriving recursive play of any interest. Reading the comments of the players who tried the game, however, we can already see that the initial reception follows the trend of the other games discussed in this chapter. Players who dislike *Legacy of Dragonholt* criticize its low replayability and the fact that there isn't enough "game" in it; players who enjoyed it, praise the immersive narratives that the design helped them create, and mention the lack of replay value only as a minor annoyance, and

one that becomes irrelevant when compared to the entertainment that can be derived from the game. These players agree with the designer that *Legacy of Dragonholt* is not about winning or losing in the traditional sense, but about storytelling—so much so that “you might fail to find a fabled treasure or to save an innocent victim, but if you enjoy the story, that is a victory” (rulebook, 2).

Together with the other designs discussed in this chapter, *Legacy of Dragonholt* demonstrates the great weight that story has come to have in the contemporary hobby world; a weight, in fact, that may even tip the scale in favor of a game that has a limited life span and requires additional investment of money to acquire new scenarios. It seems that such negatives are easily forgiven, in the eyes of many contemporary players, as long as the story they find in the game is good enough.

## Epilogue

The games we saw in the last chapter give us a very clear picture of the crucial role storytelling has gained in recent hobby gaming. After over 40 years of experimentation, board games have refined their ability to create worlds and tell stories to extents that would have hardly been imaginable to the first players of *Dungeon!* or *The Sorcerer's Cave*. In the process, these designs have revolutionized the board game hobby by pioneering practices that run counter to the most established conventions of gameplay. Not everybody may enjoy stories in games even today, but few people in the players' community would deny that story-driven games have a large role in the hobby and are attracting a lot of positive attention. The triumph of storytelling over replay value is the strongest and most remarkable piece of evidence of this change, and the number of times I have mentioned the top rankings of BGG is further indication of how well story-driven games are being received. Given also the number of upcoming publications of story-driven games announced almost every day, it is reasonable to think that this style of game will continue to thrive for the foreseeable future.

In fact, virtually every historical trend, every tendency, every family of games discussed in this book is doing quite well, either because it has consistently remained a presence in the industry, or because it is experiencing a second blossoming. Board games inspired by *D&D*, for example, have a prominent presence in today's board game market, as already demonstrated by designs discussed earlier like *Castle Ravenloft*. Further corroboration comes from an offering of games set in the world of *D&D* that includes *Conquest of Nerath* (Wizards of the Coast, 2011), *Lords of Waterdeep* (Wizards of the Coast, 2012), *Dungeon Command* (Wizards of the Coast, 2012), *D&D: Attack Wing* (WizKids, 2014), *Dungeons & Dragons Dice Masters* (WizKids, 2015), *Tyrants of the Underdark* (Wizards of the Coast, 2016), *Assault of the Giants* (Wizards of the Coast, 2017), *Dragonfire* (Catalyst, 2017), or *Betrayal at Baldur's Gate* (Avalon Hill/Wizards of the Coast, 2017).

Board games in the dungeon crawler genre have been ubiquitous over the decades even when the setting was not *D&D*, and the genre seems far from having exhausted its possibilities. Story-oriented gameplay has become one of the most distinctive traits of this style of games. The narrative sophistication and constant expansion of the setting of *Descent* can attest to that point, and so can story-driven dungeon crawlers like *The Undercity* (Privateer, 2015), *Secrets of the Lost Tomb* (Everything Epic, 2015), *Frostgrave* (Osprey, 2015), *Perdition's Mouth* (Dragon Dawn, 2016), *Four Against Darkness* (Ganesha, 2016), *Gloomhaven* (Cephalofair, 2017), *Massive Darkness* (CMON, 2017), *Sword & Sorcery* (Ares, 2017), and *Darklight* (Dark Ice, 2018). This is not an exhaustive list, and it represents but a drop in a deluge of new designs based on a blend of imaginary settings, tactical combat, and storytelling. By the time this book reaches you, many more games will have joined their ranks.

Designs based on Tolkien's saga also retain a considerable presence in contemporary gaming culture. *War of the Ring* (Ares, 2004, 1st ed.; 2012, 2nd ed.), for example, depicts the events of *The Lord of the Rings* at the strategic level, while also telling the stories of the main individuals of the saga. The game is considered a modern classic, and at the time of this writing, is in the 14th position in the ratings of BGG. *The Lord of the Rings Strategy Battle Game* (Games Workshop) stretched through 23 sets and expansions between 2005 and 2012, while *Lord of the Rings: Card Game* (Fantasy Flight Games, 2011) has been expanded through an astonishing range of over 100 supplemental sets. *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (Cryptozoic, 2012), *Hobbit Tales from the Green Dragon Inn* (Cubicle 7, 2013), *The Lord of the Rings: Deck Building Game* (Cryptozoic, 3 sets between 2013 and 2014), *The Battle of Five Armies* (Ares, 2014), *The Lord of the Rings: Journey to Mordor* (FFG, 2015), *Hunt for the Ring* (Ares, 2017), also contributed to popularize the idea in the 21st century that Tolkien's materials could be experienced in the form of playable variants. In so doing, these designs demonstrated the persistent vitality of one of the earliest sources for storytelling in analog games.

It is also notable that, despite the narrativist school of role-playing that came into existence in the 1990s, the best-selling RPGs today are *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Pathfinder*, which both happen to be intensely tactical games of

combat and exploration, and are usually brought to life during gameplay through the use of colorful maps and miniatures. Thanks to materials of this type released by the official publishers, as well as an infinity of compatible components that can be downloaded from the internet and built at home, players of the two most popular RPGs regularly stage in-game sequences in a physical format almost indistinguishable from that of a board game. A recent game in this trend even represents a remarkable fusion of the Dungeonesque and the Tolkienesque lines we discussed in this book. *Adventures in Middle-earth* (Cubicle 7, 2016), in fact, is the conversion of the Tolkien-based RPG *The One Ring* to the official *D&D* game system, and allows its players to experience contents from *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* in a way that is reminiscent of the wargame tradition of *D&D*. Incidentally, *The One Ring* itself (Cubicle 7, 2014) shows strong connections to board gaming through a detailed system of tactical combat and a hex-based map on which movement is resolved as in a wargame or in the classic *Outdoor Survival*.

Meanwhile, miniature wargames are being expanded by full companion RPGs, as in the case of the tactical wargames *Malifaux* (Wyrd, 2009) and *Mythic Battles: Pantheon* (Monolith, 2017), which can now be experienced in role-playing format in *Through the Breach* (Wyrd, 2015) and *Mythic Battles: Pantheon the Role-Playing Game* (Black Book, 2017). The convergence between RPGs and board gaming is even bringing back hybrid designs that combine both modes of play structurally. Examples are in the still-ongoing release of THW games, together with *Hobbit Tales from the Green Dragon Inn* (Cubicle 7, 2013), which can be played on its own or integrated within *The One Ring RPG*; or *Wreck Age* (Hyacinth, 2012) and *Falling Stars* (Lock 'n' Load, 2016), which are marketed both as wargames and as role-playing games. All this goes to show that the symbiosis between RPGs and board games we have examined throughout this book is still very strong, and there is no indication it may dissolve any time soon.

Even the paragraph-based system that flourished in the 1980s, whose format may look dated in the digital age, is popular again. Evidence is in the recent reprints and progenies of *Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective*, in a new edition of *Tales of the Arabian Nights* (Z-Man, 2009), and in brand new paragraph-based games like *Doctor Who: Solitaire Story Game* (web published, 2009, 1st ed.; 2017, 2nd ed.), *Agents of SMERSH* (8th Summit,

2012), *Above and Below* (Red Raven, 2015), or *Legacy of Dragonholt*. The company Dark City Games specializes in paragraph-based games inspired by the old *MicroQuest* series, and as of this writing has released 14 fantasy modules, 5 sci-fi ones, and a story set in the Old West. In July 2018, a new edition of *Melee* and *Wizard* (the sources of *MicroQuest*) was launched on Kickstarter, and it was successfully funded in under an hour. The set includes a remake of several of the original adventures. Other games like *Stowaway 52* (Gamewright, 2015), *Jump Ship!* (Gamewright, 2016), *The 7th Continent* (8th Summit, 2017), and *House of Danger* (Z-Man, 2018), present a variant of the paragraph-based concept, as they construct narratives using not booklets but sets of interlinked story-cards. The narrative power of these designs, of course, remains the same.

The fact that old-school storytelling in games is being appreciated again can be seen equally well in the thematic games from the 1980s FFG has remade and expanded, and in the new sets for *Warhammer Quest*. In August 2018, FFG has also announced a third edition of *Arkham Horror* which will include modern narrative innovations such as multiple scenarios, a variable play area, and goals that are undisclosed to the players at the beginning. In other cases, traditional practices of playable storytelling have not just been brought back, but vastly improved upon. This is nowhere truer than in regard to the linking together of multiple adventures in a sustained narrative arc.

Campaign games may have been played in the enclaves of historical wargaming since the 1960s, but we owe it to modern publishers like THW, FFG, Wizards of the Coast, and Flying Frog, if that idea has now been turned into epic, immersive adventures that are enjoyed by a much larger audience of enthusiasts. The idea of a narrative sustained through sequential scenarios is now so common that many players expect to find some form of campaign option in newly released thematic games, and publishers of games that do include such options advertise it as a strong selling point.

Meanwhile, board gaming has found its strongest ally in the very digital revolution which seemed destined to give it its *coup de grâce*. A dizzying array of affordable games, miniatures, and accessories has become available through the practices of print-and-play. BoardGameGeek has furnished board gamers with previously unthinkable access to information about their hobby, and has helped create a strong, self-aware, global community of players that

no longer fears social stigma. Facebook has allowed players to meet more peers, and is used every day around the world to facilitate the organization of board game events. It is even possible to share free print-and-play games as Facebook posts by placing the rules in the text and the images of the components in the picture section. Kickstarter has offered a revolutionary business model that has led to the publication of the most majestically produced board games of all time—like Steve Jackson’s *Ogre Designer’s Edition*, a Titan which weighs 28 pounds and comes in a box measuring 24 × 20 × 6.75 inches. Beautiful giants such as this simply could not have existed before the preorder system of Kickstarter, because no publisher would have been willing to risk the enormous amount of capital required to produce these sets. When games of this size include a story element (which they often do), their spectacular range of components allows for unprecedented worldbuilding potential. Seeing what digital interconnectedness has done for board gaming in the last ten years, and considering that the internet is bound to remain an integral part of our lives, we can assume the board game hobby will continue to reap the benefits of its symbiosis with the digital world for a long time.

In conclusion, the industry for analog games appears to be vital and healthy, and within that world the appreciation for unique narratives board games can create seems to be growing at a fast rate. From where we stand, the future of the hobby appears full of exciting games to play, real and fictional people to meet, worlds to inhabit, and stories to tell. And now that you have finished reading this book, it may just be the perfect time for you to call some of your friends and try a new game—maybe one this study has brought to your attention. Who knows where that journey will take you, and what stories you will tell when you return.

# Glossary

The purpose of this section is to clarify the meaning of some of the terms employed in this book, either because they are not universally known, or because they are used with a special meaning in the gaming hobby.

**Analog game:** A game consisting entirely or mostly of physical, tangible components. Board games, cards games, and tabletop role-playing games belong to this category.

**Avatar:** The character that represents a player in the setting of a game. In analog games, an avatar is most often formed by the combination of a token or figurine marking the position of the character in the play area, and a player aid indicating the stats, resources, and capabilities of the character.

**Board game:** An analog game whose design revolves around a play area partitioned into discrete sections (as opposed to the fluid space of miniature wargames). This play area is usually represented by a physical board, but this is not strictly necessary—Checkers, for example, would remain a board game even if played on a grid traced in the sand. Cards, dice, and other types of components can be added, but the game still qualifies as a board game as long as the position of the pieces in the partitions of the play area remains the organizing principle of the design.

**Card game:** An analog game played entirely or mostly with cards. A card game may include a spatial component (like specific areas in which cards are placed) and other physical elements (like tokens), but it is still a card game as long as the cards remain its principal element.

**Children's game:** A game whose main intended audience is made up of children.

**Components:** The physical elements of a game; the props the players manipulate during gameplay. They include the board, all bits, the rulebook,

and the box.

**Dungeon crawler:** A game of movement and combat usually set in a high fantasy world. The players control individual heroes that explore a hostile environment, defeat enemies, and collect upgrades in order to complete a mission. The play area is most often an underground net of tunnels and chambers (hence the name).

**Hobby game:** A game whose main intended audience is made up of teenagers and adults who play games regularly, as their hobby. Hobby games tend to have more complex rules than casual games, higher production values, and be known for their designers and publishers. Hobby games include wargames and role-playing games as some of their subcategories. Most games discussed in this book are hobby games. Examples include *Catan*, *Pandemic*, *Hammer of the Scots*, and *Dungeons & Dragons*.

**Mass-market game:** A game designed and produced for the largest audience possible. These games have limited complexity, largely appealing themes, low or mediocre production values, and are usually known for their brand rather than their designer. Examples include *Monopoly* and *Clue*.

**Mechanics:** The types of actions the players perform according to the rules to further their position in the game. Shuffling and dealing cards in this sense are functional actions but not mechanics, whereas bidding, bluffing, managing one's hand, pushing one's luck, and taking tricks are.

**Miniature wargames:** Despite the name, the main trait of this type of game is not the presence of tridimensional figurines. Before the advent of board-based wargaming, most hobby combat games were played with toy soldiers, hence the label of “miniature wargames.” These games were played on unpartitioned dioramas or maps of the battlefield, and distances were measured in inches of actual space, not discrete boxes like in board gaming. In time, the distinguishing element of miniature wargames came to be seen as the use of this type of space, and not the presence of toy soldiers. In today’s hobby, the expression “miniature wargame” describes a combat game that is played in continuous space with the use of rulers to measure distances and check lines of sight, independently from the type of pieces it employs to represent the combatants.

**Role-playing game (RPG):** A story-oriented analog game in which the players take on the role of fictional characters, and describe the actions that their characters intend to take. A game master, in turn, describes the effects of those actions in the fictional setting of the game. Thanks to this system the players don't have to select options from a range of discrete possibilities, and can have their characters attempt potentially anything. Such freedom is in fact what constitutes the main difference between RPGs and other types of games. The role of physical components in the experience can vary enormously, going from nil (with RPGs entirely based on conversation) to massive. Sometimes the expression “tabletop RPG” is used to distinguish these games from the so-called “role-playing video game.” Within the RPG hobby, “role-playing game” usually indicates a tabletop role-playing game. This is also how I used the term in my book.

**Tabletop game:** Literally, a type of game that can be played on a tabletop. The term includes board games, card games, and role-playing games, and it is a more informal synonym of “analog games.”

**Traditional game:** A game originating before the 20th century, and played for centuries or millennia. Traditional games do not have an identifiable designer, and often exist in multiple versions as different groups have modified them throughout history. The rules of these games tend to be of limited complexity, while gameplay can still be very sophisticated. Examples are Chess, Backgammon, Go, and the Tarot.

**Wargame:** A game that depicts military combat in some detail and with some degree of realism. Games like *Stratego*, which have a military theme but are fairly abstract in nature, are commonly referred to as “war-themed games.”

# Chapter Notes

## ***Introduction***

1. Foà, 609–610; Marsilli, 98–103. On the history of the Tarot, see Dummett *The Game of Tarot* and *The Visconti-Sforza Tarot*, and Dummett and McLeod.

2. See Cardini, Foà.

3. Place, 25.

4. See Cottino-Jones.

5. The source for these games is Ringhieri (61, 65, 98), who also lists many other activities of this type. On this work, see Lencioni Novelli. On role-playing in the Renaissance, see Sutton-Smith, *Toys*, 222–224.

6. In fact, the *Book of the Courtier* itself is a fictional description of one of these games, in which the players worked together to create the character of a perfect courtier.

7. On *Snakes & Ladders*, see Botermans 19–32; on *Goose*, Botermans 141–152; Goodfellow, 14–19; Seville.

8. See Juul, *Half-Real*, 60.

9. See Calleja’s interpretation of Pearce’s essay (116).

10. On the representational quality of wargames, see Sabin, McHugh, Gonzalo, Creveld, Perla, MacCallum-Stewart, T. Donovan, *It’s All a Game*, 92–101; Lewin; Fourie, 43–122; Hofer, 93–110.

11. The sales have been growing consistently since the late 1990s, picking up prodigious speed especially in the 2010s. The North American market

reached an estimated 700M in 2013 (Takahashi), and 880M in 2014 (ICv2). In general, sales of tabletop board games have grown by 10 percent to 20 percent each year in the past decade (ICv2). Even when we look only at wargames, the consensus is that more are being published these days than ever before (Sabin; Priestley and Lambshead, 14). On this Renaissance in general see Booth, 1–2.

12. See Kirby. In 2016, after filling up the entire convention center in downtown Indianapolis, GenCon for the first time expanded into the Lucas Oil Stadium.

13. See Mendelsohn; T. Donovan, *It's All a Game*, 237–238.

14. See Wong.

15. T. Donovan, *It's All a Game*, 6–7; Grouling Cover, 156–159.

16. The number of registered users has also showed a particularly steep increase in the last years, going from zero to 400,000 in the 2000–2010 period, and from 400,000 to 1.2 million between 2010 and 2016. See [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Number\\_of\\_registered\\_BGG\\_users.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Number_of_registered_BGG_users.png) (last retrieved on 5/31/2017).

17. This is a new incarnation of an old practice described by Baker Provenzo and Provenzo.

18. T. Donovan, *It's All a Game*, 253.

19. On these categories, see Booth 8–9.

20. On the game, see Varney, Gascoigne.

21. On this game, see Appelcline, '90–'99, 219–220.

22. See Sellers, 99–100. See the idea of game pieces as a rhetorical text in Booth, 12.

23. For a similar discourse about video games, see Nitsche, 53.

## ***Chapter 1***

1. For a detailed discussion of which games have a representational element, and how they create a representation, see Juul, *Half-Real*, 130–156; Bryant Denton and Giglio, 67–73.

2. See Juul, *The Art of Failure*, 24–25; Manovich, 200; Dubbelman; Ip; Salen and Zimmerman, 364.

3. On *HeroClix*, see Pondsmith. On the narrative potential of the system see Booth, 121–126.

4. See Booth, 28 and 118; Lancaster, 100–105.

5. See Lancaster; Nell, 9; Schaufeli et al; Gerrig, 2.

6. See also Calleja; Dovey and Kennedy, 70–72; Bryant Denton and Giglio, 59–60.

7. See Altice, 38; Lancaster, 92–111.

8. This can lead to reliable results even if “the outcome of the game may be quite different from the real situation, because the game’s chief purpose has been the realistic simulation of the interacting forces” (Abt, 115).

9. See Pulsipher, *Game Design*, 62–63; Dee, 11.

10. In general, dice in games present a “mix of solid mechanical principles and resonant emotional associations” (Priestley and Lamshead, 61), and a player can feel a particular strong sense of agency when she is “holding the random number generator in her hand” (Klug, 42).

11. See also the concept of gestural control described by Bogost (*How to Talk*, 89–95). Also Isbister 73–109; Rambusch.

12. See also Chatman, 30–31, 75–77; Herman et al., 84–91; Herman, “Directions,” 137–162. On the construction of space in video games and digital interactive fiction, see Schell, 310–311, 335–341, 367–381; Rouse, 456–457; Meadows, 154–179; Calleja 73–92; A. Galloway, 118–120; Wood; Boellstorff et al.; McGonigal, 104–108. Pratchett 197–198, Rouse, 6, and Lazzaro describe exploring imaginary places as one of the main reasons why people play video games. See also T. Donovan 2010; Thiel and Huber. On worldbuilding in games, see W. Williams; Heussner et al., 49–76.

13. See also Herman, “Toward,” 64; Glassner, 310–312.

14. What Brathwaite and Schreiber say about exploration in video games applies to our topic too:

“For many players, exploration is fun in and of itself. The thought of going down into a dungeon and mapping its corridors is the digital equivalent of spelunking (caving)” (47).

15. See also Mahaffey, 42; Plamondon, 149; Thorne, 110–131; Calleja, 140.

16. See Calleja, 13; Glassner, 329–396.

17. Brockmeier and Harré have argued that “literature, as all arts, can be (and has always been) regarded as a laboratory in which possible human realities can be imagined and tested” (54). See also Sutton-Smith, *Ambiguities*, on the “individualized narrative” of modern games (105).

18. This is true of the way we interpret any type of fantasy fiction, according to Attebery (67). On the challenges faced by designers of fantasy worlds for gaming, also see Bachmann.

19. See Juul, *Half-Real*, 163. See also Castranova (88) for the concept of “selective fidelity,” which is used to describe simplified models of reality.

20. See also Plamondon, 138–139; Still in 2016, Priestley and Lambshead, 18.

21. For an in-depth analysis of causation in fiction, see Kafalenos. Also Bal, 194; Gerrig, 46–47; Chatman, 46. For causality in games, Bryant and Giglio, 132–138.

22. “People—or stand-ins for people—are the primary vehicles by which we make sense of stories” (Vermeule, 41); “Without personification there can be no storytelling” wrote literary theorist J. Hillis Miller (quoted by Salen and Zimmerman in regard to narrative in gaming -380-). See also Chatman, 107–145; Herman et al., 111–118, Schell, 345–365; Pulsipher, *Game Design*, 35; Heussner et al., 77–104; Lessart and Arsenault.

23. See Apperley and Clemens, 113–115; Frow, *Character*; Dansky, especially 14–16; Salter, 22–24 and 62–64; Schröter.

24. See also Calleja, 22–23.

25. See Bal, 8. For individualization in games, see Isbister, 52–63; Lancaster, 37–38. On the concept of avatar see Navarro, Call, Peaty, Waggoner.

26. This should be seen as a manifestation of our growing demand for interactivity in entertainment and art. See Jenkins; Jenkins et al.; Rose; Powell.

27. See also Isbister, 52–63; Glassner, 119–120.

28. See Freeman, 244; Lancaster, 37–55. Booth discusses player empathy for board game characters in 82–85.

29. See Castranova, 108; Tresca, 7; T.L. Taylor, 94–97; Sutton-Smith, *Ambiguities*, 156–159.

30. This idea fits Sutton-Smith’s interpretation of modern Western imaginative play as a combination of individualism and fantasies about overcoming adversity (*Ambiguities*, 165).

31. On the advantages of trying out different characters in a game, see also T.L. Taylor, 16–17. On the meaning of exploring different identities, see

Sutton-Smith, *Ambiguities*, 175–179; Giddens, 70–143; Valkyrie; Glassner, 457–458.

32. On sociality in RPGs, see Fuist, 123.

33. See Simkins; Bowman, 63–66; Kelly 2, 53–58; T. Donovan, *Replay*, 293–294; Weidling; Valkyrie, 127–146.

34. See Plamondon, 110; Yellowlees Douglas, 153; Schell, 305.

35. See Kafalenos, 20.

36. Bal describes a model of this kind to understand literature. “One division on human interest is that between processes of improvement and processes of deterioration. Both sorts are possible, both can be realized or not, and both can conclude successfully or not” (198). See also Sellers, 150–151.

37. On cutscene, see Sheldon 191; Orlando and Schwager, 104–105; Boon, 54–56; A. Galloway, 11; Dansky (b); Glassner, 217–219.

38. “The game system establishes the rules of reality within which pretense seems more plausible, adding to the experience of immersion and reducing cognitive dissonance. This framework also provides the mechanisms by which players measure success or failure, helping to mediate disputes and lending to a greater sense of satisfaction when players achieve their characters’ goals” (Bowman, 105).

39. This is a strong case of “ludonarrative dissonance”—ludonarrative dissonance being, in Sharp’s words, a breaking down of the fictional reality of the game world which “happens when the narrative mapped onto a game does not work in concert with the game’s mechanics and goals” (132). The term was introduced by Clint Hocking in a review of the video game *Bioshock*. See also Bissell, 129–158.

40. For more details about the subtleties of this strategy, see Orbanes, *The Game Makers*, 120. In general on the game and its history, see Anspach; Orbanes, *The Game Makers*, 91–122; Orbanes, *The Monopoly Companion*,

12–23; Flanagan, 85–88; Johnson, 195–200; Hinebaugh, 70–84; T. Donovan, 71–88; Pilon; Jackson.

41. All stories have this temporal dimension, and the world of the story “must be situated in time and undergo significant transformations” (Ryan, *Avatars*, 8). See also Herman et al., 57–61; Keen, 81. Salen and Zimmerman talk about the importance of a reversal of situation in games that have narrative elements (380).

42. On the importance of uncertainty in games, see Costikyan, *Uncertainty*, and Salen and Zimmerman 174–189. Juul, talking about video games, describes progression as one of the hallmarks of narrative-oriented games (*Half-Real*, 73).

43. These cards create a type of experience that is similar to what Husárová and Montfort called “shuffle literature.”

44. Later the use of chance cards is recommended by Asquith as a way to keep the game unpredictable when one is playing a wargame in solitaire (11–12).

## *Chapter 2*

1. See A. Galloway, 39–69.

2. Commonly using first person when speaking in the voice of the non-playing characters, singular or plural second person when addressing a player or the group, and third person when talking about the actions of non-playing characters.

3. The contrast is particularly strident in a board game like *Frag* (U.S. Steve Jackson, Steve Jackson Games, 2001) which was inspired by FPS and freely borrowed concepts like respawning (in fact, in *Frag*, a killed character rematerializes on the board the following turn).

4. This sniper view creates a more visceral experience by reinforcing “the player’s positioning in the game space” (Nitsche, 125). In so doing, *Chainsaw Warrior* also anticipates by several years a technique that will become common in digital first-person shooters.

5. See Salen and Zimmerman, 234.

6. See Plamondon, 183.

7. See Upton, 272; Anthropy, 158; Glassner, 389–391.

8. As Ostrander wrote, in a board game “story can appear anywhere: in the title of a card, in art, in flavor text—even in game mechanics. Stories aren’t restricted to media that can convey a beginning, middle, and end.”

9. In other words, a “story may emerge from the interaction of game elements, with no formal narrative design having taken place” (Boon, 45).

10. See Lancaster, 39.

11. “One cannot understand the playing of games without the rules of the game, but both are in constant motion toward and against each other; they are constantly redefined, negotiated, adapted, and denied by the other. The beauty, value, or politics of play reside precisely in the ways in which players solve this loose coupling” (Sicart, 89).

12. As amply demonstrated by Fine (122), RPG referees are usually willing to bend game rules and deviate from planned paths if by doing so the quality of the story is enhanced. With some caveats added by Castillo Jones in her commentary on Fine’s work (92–95), it was true in Fine’s times, and it is still true today that “the good story is more important than the sanctity of the rules” (Fine, 235).

13. Booth, 112–113.

1. See Sutton-Smith, *Toys*.
2. On the topic of imaginary worlds of fiction, see also Lubomír; Pavel; Castranova; Kelly 2; Thon; Dutton, 103–134; Bateman, 136. On the importance of maps in imaginary worlds, see Gazzard; Wolf, 156–157; Ryan et al., especially 50–74.
3. On Tolkien’s fantastic realism, see Mendlesohn and James, 44; Shippey; Walton, 329. On the role of Tolkien’s books in the development of the first RPG (*D&D*), see Peterson “A Game” and *Playing*, but also Tresca (23–46).
4. See Keen, 155; Lancaster, xxiii–xxiv.
5. As a result, Dovey and Kennedy wrote, “this engagement with highly realized topographic worlds then becomes characteristic of the *Dungeons and Dragons* table-top role-play game worlds and also of their online adaptations in MUDs, and now in the persistent worlds of MMORPG” (95).
6. Peterson, *Playing*; Ewalt; Tresca, 59–91; Appelcline, ’70–’79, 6–109.
7. On the role of the umpire in military games (the source of the game master in *D&D*) see McHugh, 88–90.
8. Griffith also noted the similarities between umpires of traditional wargames and game masters of RPGs (12).
9. In Charles Grant, “On Matters Military.”
10. As Glancy wrote, “part of the evolution from wargame to role-playing game was bringing the player down from his general’s eye view of the battlefield and casting him in the role of a single actor in the thick of the action” (71).
11. On these two books, as well as early essays about recreational wargaming in general, see Hyde, 60–79.
12. Given that the two books were composed independently from one another, we can assume that the similarities come from widely spread practices rather than direct inspiration from one author to the other. On

wargame campaigns, see also Grant, *Programmed*, 114–130; Hyde, 296–320; Burr.

13. In his 1970 *War Game Campaign* Featherstone describes the example of a “mythical” campaign inspired by the Franco-Prussian War (187–188). In 1969 Wise also wrote about campaigns, and stated that he considered historical campaigns more enjoyable than fictional ones (130).

14. A later system to create random terrain using a standard deck of playing cards was proposed by Silvester.

15. With the exception of the occasional rule set for early modern warfare which included rules for digging tunnels under the enemy’s walls. These rules clearly had a very technical tone, and nothing of the sense of mystery and marvel generated by Arneson’s dungeons.

16. See also Peterson, *Playing*, 306.

17. “What a historical wargame really simulates are the starting conditions of a conflict. The way that the conflict plays out is what makes the game interesting as a game experience” (Salen and Zimmerman, 442). On the importance of ‘what ifs’ in historically accurate simulations, see Dunnigan, especially 27, and Griffith, 9.

18. See Witwer, 91–92.

19. Peterson agrees that for all of its innovations and the unique feel it gave to its players, *D&D* “mostly repackaged and combined existing wargaming systems into a novel and successful formula” (*Playing*, 23).

20. In 1974, the same year of the first edition of *D&D*, Kenneth Burke released a scenario to play a fantasy battle based on the *Chainmail* system and the popular story of the pied piper of Hamlin. In this scenario, the mayor of Hamlin led an army of peasants, mercenaries, knights, and elves, against an army of trolls, orcs, were-bears, and giant bats, controlled by the piper (in *Panzerfaust* 64).

21. See also Peterson, *Playing*, 307–309.

22. In the random event generator of *Outdoor Survival* Peterson has seen “the prototype for the random encounter system of *Dungeons & Dragons*” (*Playing*, 311).

23. In *D&D* a first die roll would determine whether an encounter happened at all or not; a second die roll would identify the type of creature encountered (the options including Men, Animals, Undead, Dragons, Giants, Flyers, Swimmers, Werewolves), and a third roll would indicate the exact type of creature within the appropriate category ('90-'99, 16–18).

## ***Chapter 4***

1. See Bath.

2. See Grant, “On Matters.”

3. See Grant, “On Matters.”

4. This list only includes hobby games and not children/family games such as *The Hobbit Game* (Michael Gray, American Publishing Corp., 1977), *The Hobbit: The Adventures of Bilbo in Middle-Earth from The Lord of the Rings* (uncredited, Milton Bradley, 1978), or *The Lord of the Rings: Adventure Game* (Michael Gray, Milton Bradley, 1978).

5. If such destination is 3 spaces away, for example, any result of 3 or higher would place the active piece in the intended location, avoiding surreal overshooting effects.

6. Booth, 49: “In a way, playing a paratextual board game is like roleplaying fan fiction; the familiar characters and settings are there, but their relationship to each other and to the plot are variable.” Also 55–56.

7. On the idea of unilinear gameplay that pushes multilinearity to the background (but does not erase it) see Upton, 79; Booth, 48–49.

8. Particularly impressive in this regard is the section that describes Sauron's origin story and motivations, only to conclude that "in the game, Sauron is not represented by either a card or counter. The Dark Power Player is Sauron" (8). In other words, the description provides context for the story and invites the Dark Power Player to role-play Sauron, even if doing so offers no ludic advantages or disadvantages.

9. In a time in which no one knew for sure what the future of fantasy gaming could be, Kidd correctly prophesized that fantasy "might cool off but I don't think it's a fad. It seems like it's growing in geometric proportions and I don't know how long it will keep up. I think fantasy is here to stay" (46).

10. These sources also influenced the then larval field of video games, like in the case of the fantasy game *Adventure* for the Atari 2600 (1979).

## *Chapter 5*

1. The porosity between RPGs and board games at the time is also demonstrated by the way companies labeled their own games in their ads. In the rulebook for TSR's *Lankhmar* (1976) there is a section advertising RPGs like *D&D* and *Empire of the Petal Throne* as "free form games." *D&D* was described as "a three-volume set of rules for free-form fantasy games using paper and pencil and miniature figures"; *Empire of the Petal Throne* as an "attractively boxed free-form game."

2. Peterson, *Playing*, 185; Witwer, 97; Appelcline, '70-'79, 20; Schwalb, 90–91.

3. The result in turn could be seen as "a great introduction to all roleplaying games" (Schwalb, 89).

4. A later variant suggested by Timothy Jones in *The Dragon* magazine also included the Halfling, the Dwarf, the Cleric, and the Thief, plus a list of new treasures—all of which would contribute to add variety to the world of the representation.

5. Giving a fixed maximum number of movement points per turn was (and still is) typical of wargaming. At the time of the original release of *Dungeon!* roll-and-move games were still very common, and to avoid misunderstandings the manual specifies that characters do not need to roll dice to move. This is another example of the simulationist conventions of wargaming crossing over into the realm of story-oriented board games.

6. Pulsipher already discussed this issue in a 1983 article: “In the early days of fantasy role-playing (FRP) gaming, many players did not role-play in any significant sense of the word; that is, they did not pretend or imagine that they were in a real world different from our own” (“The Vicarious Participant,” 38).

7. As Costikyan wrote in his groundbreaking article on solitaire gaming (“You Against”), “The first system designed to handle solitaire situations was one that can be termed the “random” method. In a random solitaire game, the player’s major opposition is a set of random tables and randomly generated obstacles” (17). While correct in identifying the random system as the one at the origin of solitaire gaming, Costikyan did not mention *Solo Dungeon Adventures* as the oldest example of this type of game.

8. Costikyan, “You Against”: “The great advantage of a random solitaire system is that no two games are alike; thus, the game can be played an infinite number of times ... The great disadvantage of a random system is that all possibilities are known; all eventualities are right there in the rules” (17).

9. See Aarseth’s classic study on cybertexts.

10. On the history of analog interactive fiction, see Katz. See Sutton-Smith, *Ambiguities*, for a discussion of the ludic turn in 20th-century fiction (143–144).

11. Gygax describes the creative process behind the two games in an interview to *Panzerfaust* magazine (#69, 1975). On the continuity between *Empire of the Petal Throne* and *War of Wizards*, see Gush-Finch, 199.

12. *D&D* itself was marketed as “swords and sorcery wargaming with paper and pencil and miniatures” in advertisement contained in *War of Wizards*. In

the same list the board game *Dungeon!* is described as a “boardgame of fantastic dungeon adventuring for 1–12 players.” From these descriptions, *Dungeon!* sounds more of an RPG than *D&D*!

13. On the game, see Appelcline, ’70–’79, 156–158.

14. This is an actual example given in the book, at page 5.

15. Peterson, *Playing*, 561–566; Appelcline, ’70–’79, 29.

16. In a now outdated way of describing rules, the rulebook calculates distances for ranged attacks in terms of intervening hexes rather than distance between firer and target. For this reason the combat table for ranged weapon says that arrows and slings can be used to attack up to “a distance of 3 hexes,” which indicates a target actually 4 hexes away.

## *Chapter 6*

1. As Appelcline noted, in the first ten years of the genre “RPGs had been about location-based exploration,” and Until then, “most adventures were still location-based” (’70–’79, 335) and most “gamelasters were still running glorified miniature games” (’70–’79, 232).

2. In 1977, TSR released a supplement for *D&D* called *Spells & Swords*, whose purpose was to allow the players to conduct large scale battles set in the world of *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gush-Finch, 199). This supplement basically brought *D&D* back into the culture of battle-based wargaming from which it had just emerged. This is further evidence of the closeness between role-playing games and wargames at this time.

3. In a 1977 ad on the *Campaign* magazine (# 81, 39)

4. On this game system, see Peterson, *Playing*; Schick; Appelcline ’70–’79.

5. The only exception in the series was *Masters of the Amulets* (1981) by Mike Monastero, which followed the tradition of character-centered board

games we examined before and did not include a full net of textual paragraphs.

6. A similar game that came out the same year was *Quest* by Steve Atkinsons (Gametime Games, 1978), which also featured individual adventures pursued by Arthurian knights. The game was however much more basic and linear than *King Arthur's Knights*.

7. Each player in the game would control either a party of three questing heroes or a villain and its evil entourage. This multifocal projection of agency limited identification to some extent.

8. See Terence Donnelly, *The Sorcerer's Cave and Its Sequel*, in *Games & Puzzles Magazine*, Autumn 1980, now available in the files section at the page for *The Sorcerer's Cave* on BoardGameGeek (<https://www.boardgamegeek.com/filepage/1761/caveandwooddoc>. Last retrieved on 5/26/2017).

9. Terence Donnelly, from the memoir in *Puzzles & Games*.

10. On which see Appelcline, '80–'89, 223, and Pirrone.

11. See Booth 126–133.

12. As already noted in an article by Anchors.

13. Gary Gygax made sure to point out this critical novelty in the foreword of the first edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*: “While it is possible to play a single game, unrelated to any other game events past or future, it is the campaign for which these rules are designed” (booklet I, 3). See also Peterson, *Playing*, 501–502.

14. See Meyer, 218.

15. The consequence was that each character acquired “temporal thickness” (Carr), that is, the impression that a character lives across an extended span of time. See Booth, 148–149; Zakowski.

16. See Appelcline, '70-'79, 310. A review from 1981 described the game as a “bridge between fantasy role playing and miniatures,” and recommended it as a gift a wargamer could give to “some role player they’d like to recruit” (Swanson, 22). A review from 1983 underlined that “these rules … are mostly for individual and fantasy combat” and “are definitely aimed at the fantasy gamer” (Parker, 20–21).

17. Matheny’s involvement with gaming was as intense as it was short-lived, with an astounding output of 12 board games released between 1979 and 1981, mainly for Yaquinto, and absolutely nothing after that.

18. See Kanterman- Elsden, 23.

19. Also, when one considers that *John Carter Warlord of Mars* was inspired by stories in which the protagonist leaves his earthly body behind to be mysteriously transported into a second body on another planet, the game truly appears to reproduce the “portal fantasy” quality of the source texts.

20. From the rulebook: “The major duty of the judge is to control all activities in the adventure except the actions of the adventuring party of heroes … The heroes for the most part will totally control their own actions … They will decide where to go, and at what speed, how they will react, when they will fight, etc. The judge will control the various monsters and terrible beasts encountered as well as the actions of the bad guys” (53).

21. On the theme of love in games, see Enevold and MacCallum-Stewart.

22. Like other titles published by Yaquinto in this period, the rules also include a section that goes to great lengths to reassure wargamers that, despite the topic, the game is still a simulation (rulebook, 2).

23. See Appelcline, '70-'79, 259–260.

## ***Chapter 7***

1. See Appelcline, '70-'79, 232.

2. Using board games for the strategic level of a miniature campaign was also advocated by Newberg in an article for *The Courier* magazine (1982). See also Glick.

3. In 1981 Sam Gill wrote on the game magazine *The Courier* that the best wargamers “have learned the vital and difficult trick of *playing the role* of the general they are representing in the style of the period in which the game is set” (21—emphasis added). The practices of role-playing games here seem to have bled into historical wargaming.

4. See Appelcline, '80-'89, 175, 353; Glancy 73–76; Plamondon, 126. In the late 1980s, also, “*Dungeons & Dragons*, and virtually every other fantasy game ... still utilized a tactical miniature-based approach to magic, where a spell’s specific range and effects are outlined in rather rigid detail” (Wieck, 15).

5. See Timothy Brown, 105.

6. Moreover, each character is also depicted in different states on four separate counters, showing the character when healthy, wounded, stunned, and dead. The idea may originate from the multiple counters for the same character in *Outdoor Survival*.

7. *Cry Havoc* was followed by several games that recast the same philosophy in settings from different genres. *Samurai Blades* (1984) is set in Medieval Japan; *Dark Blades* (1986) is a fantasy version of the design; *Outremer* (1987) is set at the time of the crusades; and *Viking Raiders* (1987) is set in 8th- to 11th-century Viking culture.

8. Other examples include *Supervillains* (Task Force, 1982) a superhero game of tactical combat that introduced role-playing only in the advanced rules (Appelcline, '80-'89, 20) and *Battletech* (FASA, 1985). See Reed; Appelcline, '80-'89, 69.

9. In 1983, an article by Pulsipher explained how to be a good general in *D&D* battles “involving hundreds or thousands of creatures” (“The Fights of Fantasy,” 56), demonstrating that this kind of scale did have a presence and role in the game.

10. See Appelcline, '90–'99, 161–162.

11. In 2003 Wizards returned to the idea with a new line, *Dungeons & Dragons Miniatures Game*, which was designed at the skirmish level and targeted RPG players (Appelcline, '90–'99, 170).

12. This development is the predictable outcome of the decline of miniature gaming throughout the 1970s, while hobby board gaming kept steadily gaining popularity. A survey promoted by the wargame magazine *Panzerfaust* in 1975 already showed that 100 percent of their readers were interested in board wargames, but only 43.5 percent in miniature gaming (*Panzerfaust* #69, September-October 1975, 34).

13. This is also the opinion of an early reviewer of the game (Costello, 23).

14. On the importance of choosing a character in narrative games, see Booth, 28 and 122.

15. See Pramas.

16. See Cook.

17. *Arkham Horror* incentivizes a modicum of competition by allowing the players that contributed to victory the most to be recorded in a Roll of Honor, but ultimately players that do not work with others are bound to cause everyone to lose.

18. See Booth, 28 (although his considerations are based on the second edition of the game).

19. As Appelcline wrote, “though the game had a definite goal—to close the gates opening into Arkham—players could spend quite a bit of time wandering Arkham, finding items, gaining skills, and really developing their characters” ('70–'79, 264).

1. See Breault.
2. The title itself, *Ambush!*, alludes precisely to the constant threat of an hidden attack against one's men.
3. See Tidball.
4. This is one those paratexts that, as Booth explains, “influence our interpretation of textuality itself” (7). This in turn shows the many levels at which paratextuality can work: a game can be the paratext of a media franchise, an included comic can be a paratext of the game, and so on.
5. See Hinebaugh, 109–114.
6. These props act as tangible extensions of the setting into the world actually inhabited by the players, and strengthen the players’ emotional involvement with the fictional content of the game. This idea is similar to the “feelies” that were being packaged with many video games at the time. See Karhulahti, Peters.
7. The game never became a classic like *SHCD*, but commanded enough interest to justify the publication of two expansions: *From the Casebook of Nick Velvet* (1986) and *Dan Fortune* (1988).
8. Yet another variant of this idea is represented by *221B: A Story Driven Detective Game*, designed by Tom Hardy and released online as free to print and play. In this solitaire game the information the player must seek is broken down into paragraph printed on cards, and actions must be spent to travel to the locations corresponding to each card. As of this writing, only the core rules and a single case for the game have been released.

## ***Chapter 9***

1. See Gallela.

2. In *Kellar's Keep* (1991), for example, the heroes explore a system of caves to find an escape from a stronghold in which they have been trapped. In *Return of the Witch Lord* (1991), the heroes embark on a hunt for the titular villain through a maze of passageways infested by undead monsters.

3. The name is suspiciously similar to that of the evil wizard Zagor in *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* gamebook and board game. It also echoes the name of the line of cardboard miniatures called *Zargonian Creatures* from 1980.

4. Technically the winning hero player is the one who scored the most points in case the wizard is defeated, but in practice the way the point system works almost always assigns victory to the slayer of the main villain.

5. Last but not least, the game even includes the plastic figurine of a monster (the Haunter) that *never* goes on the board!

6. This has been a suspicion that has circulated among readers of *Fighting Fantasy* books since the publication of the novel. Ian Livingstone confirmed that Martin is indeed the author in Green, 164.

7. The book also has a connection with *Casket of Souls*, an illustrated puzzle book released in 1987, written by Ian Livingstone and richly illustrated by Ian McCaig. In this book, the reader must identify and interpret a series of visual and textual clues to be able to retrieve the magical artifact of the title. This artifact, in turn, will be used by Jallarial in *Firestorm* to banish the demon.

8. In both texts, the protagonist(s) must encounter the ghost of the wizard Remstar, move through a jail block, deal with a group of undead monsters, and face a dragon right before entering Zagor's chambers.

9. This situation did not make the virtual reality of the stories any less interesting, because especially thanks to the novels the setting was strong enough to create the illusion that a story somehow "happened" in the fictional world of these works, and we could therefore choose which interpretation we considered the most "accurate."

10. On paratexts and games, see Booth, Lancaster, and B. Jones.
11. The gamebook, however, is not a very story-oriented title, and while it is often praised for the design of the virtual space it creates, it has also been criticized as a fairly monotonous sequence of corridors, rooms, and monsters, without much else to give flavor to the experience. See the fan reviews for the book at [http://gamebooks.org/show\\_item.php?id=95](http://gamebooks.org/show_item.php?id=95). Last retrieved on 5/26/2017.
12. The idea of a computerized element in a board game is not new, and it had found a notable example in *Dark Tower* (Roger Burten et al., Milton Bradley, 1981). The year before *The Legend of Zagor*, another computerized talking device was the centerpiece of a board game—*The Omega Virus* (Michael Gray, Milton Bradley, 1992,—see D. Donovan).
13. The optional figure of the game master is only introduced at page 143 of the 190-page role-play book.

## ***Chapter 10***

1. Other items may be verbally introduced by the master, but they are mainly for flavor and do not contribute to the progression of the story.
2. For example, there is a rule that says that every turn the master must roll to determine if the party encounters a wandering monster, but such rule is immediately integrated with the specification that “if the heroes are getting weak from too much fighting, it’s a good idea to skip the Wandering Monster Check” (20).
3. See Appelcline, '70–'79, 97.
4. Jeff Grubb is a notable designer who worked on two modern reimplementations of the classic *Dungeon!* game (1989 and 1992) co-created the excellent *Star Wars Miniatures*, and worked on the *Heroclix* system, one of the most successful commercial projects in board gaming in the last two decades. Slavicsek also participated to the design of *Star Wars Miniatures*,

and later contributed to the design of a successful line of *D&D*-based board games comprising *Castle Ravenloft* and *Wrath of Ashardalon*.

5. As the rulebook explains (with an eye to the video gamer who may be reading an RPG manual for the first time) “the *D&D* game has something that no computer game can match. It has a Dungeon Master—a living, breathing, highly imaginative, wickedly creative master storyteller who can react to any situation and improvise solutions on the spot.” On improvisation in analog games, see Bakker Harger.

6. As the rules say, “some of the time, no one really cares how long it takes to explore a room, talk to a war party of dwarves, or search the bodies of hobgoblins” (16).

7. *Eternal Winter*, Wizards of the Coast, 2003; *Forbidden Forest*, Wizards of the Coast, 2004.

8. For a similar aspect in video games, Juul writes: “although the graphics depict an elaborate fictional world, only a small part of this world is actually implemented in the rules of the game” (*Half-Real*, 1).

9. Advanced Rulebook, 32.

10. Advanced Rulebook, 26: “some of the time, no one really cares how long it takes to explore a room, talk to a troglodyte, or search the bodies of orcs.”

## ***Chapter 11***

1. See Dee; T. Donovan, *It’s All a Game*, 237–256.

2. This sequence could be described as a flowchart that takes into account the possible behavior of the Grunts and NPCs, as in “If the Grunt does X, then Y occurs; otherwise, Z occurs.”

3. The *Reaction* system has in fact the same immersive potential of *Warhammer Quest* in its game-master-less version, with the advantage of a

much smaller monetary commitment on the players' part. The rules can be found at <http://www.twohourwargames.com/free.html>. Last retrieved on 5/26/2017.

4. Appelcline defined *Betrayal* a “horror storytelling game” (’70–’79, 229) and has included it in his 4-volume history of role-playing games. Speaking of horror games, see the precedent of the variable board of *Chill: Black Morn Manor* (Troy Denning, Pacesetter, 1985).

5. On this series, see Martin and Tyler, 258–266.

6. On the 4th edition of *D&D*, see Appelcline, ’90–’99, 174–198.

7. This effect occurs on purpose, as explained in the designer’s diary (Lee).

8. On the importance of social, emotional, and psychological factors in circles of board gamers, see Woods, 173–193.

9. On these two games, see Appelcline, ’90–’99, 305; Booth, 21–43.

10. See Booth, 29–31.

11. For a discussion of the concept of act in games, see Bryant Denton and Giglio, 90–110.

12. On this game see Moon; Martin and Tyler, 266–269.

13. A fifth one is currently in the making.

## ***Chapter 12***

1. See Mosca.

2. Some precedents of the Legacy idea exist. An example is the storytelling game *Sweet Agatha* by Kevin Allen Jr (self-produced, 2009), which can be played exactly once because its components must be destroyed during

gameplay. Such experiments however have not had any resonance outside of the small world of indie gaming (a niche within the niche of hobby gaming), and therefore we must still credit *Risk Legacy* for starting the recent trend of Legacy games.

3. On the regular game, see Hinebaugh, 134–144.

4. In this regard, the game is reminiscent of the highly regarded series of gamebooks *Virtual Reality* by Mark Smith and Dave Morris.

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# List of Names and Terms

Aarseth, Espen

*Above and Below* (game)

Abt, Clark

*Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (game family)

*Adventure* (video game)

*Adventures in Middle-Earth* (game)

*Agents of SMERSH* (game)

Aladdin (character)

Allen, Kevin, Jr.

Altice, Nathan

*Ambush!* (game)

Amnese (BGG user)

*Ancient Wargaming* (book)

Anthropy, Anna

Anvar (character)

Appelcline, Shannon

Apperley, Tom

Aragorn (character)

*Arena of Khazan* (RPG adventure)

*Ares* (magazine)

Aretino, Pietro

Ariosto, Ludovico

*Ariosto's Maze* (game)

*Arkham Horror* (game)

*Arkham Horror: The Card Game* (game)

*Arkham Investigator* (game)

Arneson, Dave

Ashardalon (character)

Asquith, Stuart

*Assault of the Giants* (game)

Atkinsons, Steve

*Attack Wing* (game system)

Attebery, Brian

*Awful Green Things from Outer Space* (game)

Bachmann, Douglas

*Back to the Future Part II* (movie)

Backgammon (game)

Backhaus, Wilf

Baker, Richard

Baker, Stephen

Bakker Harger, Brenda

Bakshi, Ralph

Bal, Mieke

Barasch, Howard

*Barbarian Prince* (game)

Barker, M.A.R.

Barker, Phil

Bartle, Richard

*Bastion of Broken Souls* (RPG adventure)

Bateman, Chris

Bath, Tony

*Battle* (magazine)

*Battle Hymn* (game)

*Battle Masters* (game)

*The Battle of Five Armies* (game by Di Meglio et al.)

*The Battle of Helm's Deep* (game)

*The Battle of the Five Armies* (game by Smith)

*Battle of the Ring* (game)

*Battleship* (game)

*Battlesystem* (game)

*Battletech* (game)

*Beginner's Guide to Wargaming* (book)

Bennett, Paul

Beorn (character)

Beowulf (character)

Berg, Richard

*Betrayal at Baldur's Gate* (game)

*Betrayal at House on the Hill* (game)

*Bioshock* (video game)

Birkinsaw, Amanda

Bizar, Scott

*Blood Berets* (game)

Bloomfield, Eamon

BoardGameGeek (website)

Bogost, Ian

Boiardo, Matteo Maria

Bombadil, Tom (character)

*The Book of Mars* (game supplement)

*Book of the Courtier* (book)

*Boot Hill* (game)

Booth, Paul

Botermans, Jack

Bowman, Sarah Lynne

Brathwaite, Brenda

Braxus (character)

Breault, Mike

Bress, Dan

Brockmeier, Jens

Bromley, David

Brown, Timothy

Brownlee, Lair

Bryant Denton, Robert

Buergel, Joshua

*Buffalo Castle* (RPG adventure)

Burke, Kenneth

Burroughs, Edgar Rice

Burton, Robert

Butterfield, John

Caillois, Roger

Cal Arath (character)

*Call of Cthulhu* (game)

Calleja, Gordon

*Car Wars* (game)

Cardini, Franco

Carl, Jason

Carr, David

Carr, Michael

Carter, John

Carter, Lin

Carter, Randolph

*Casket of Souls* (book)

Castiglione, Baldassare

*The Castle* (game)

*Castle Ravenloft* (game)

Castronova, Edward

*The Cataclysm* (game)

*Catan* (game)

*Caverns Deep* (game)

*Caverns of Doom* (game)

*Centauri Saga: Abandoned* (game expansion)

Chadwick, Frank

*Chainmail* (game)

*Chainsaw Warrior* (game)

Chalk, Gary

Charlton, Coleman

Charon (character)

*Charterstone* (game)

Chassenet, Peggy

Chatman, Seymour

Checkers (game)

Chess (game)

Childres, Isaac

*Chill: Black Morn Manor* (game)

*Choose Your Own Adventure* (book series)

*Chronicle 1: Origins* (game)

Chvatil, Vlaada

*Citadel* (game)

*Citadel of Blood* (game)

*City of Terrors* (RPG adventure)

Clarke, Arthur

Cleaver, Tom

Clemens, Justin

*Cloudships & Gunboats* (game expansion)

*Clue* (game)

Colbert, John

Cole, Stephen

Coleman, Allen

*Colossal Cave Adventure* (text adventure)

*Commando* (game)

*Commands & Colors* (game series)

Conan (character)

Conan Doyle, Arthur

*Connect Four* (game)

Connors, William

*Conquest of Nerath* (game)

*Conquest of the Ring* (game)

*Convoy* (game expansion)

Cook, Monte

Cordell, Bruce

Costello, Matthew

Costikyan, Greg

Cottino-Jones, Marga

*The Courier* (magazine)

Creveld, Martin

Crowther, Will

*Cry Havoc* (game)

*Crypt of the Sorcerer* (game)

*The Damocles Mission* (game)

*Dan Fortune* (game expansion)

Dansky, Richard

*Dark Blades* (game)

*Dark Tower* (game)

*Dark World* (game)

*Darkthrone* (book)

Daviau, Rob

Davis, Graeme

*Dawn Patrol* (game)

*Death Test* (game)

*Deathtrap Equalizer Dungeon* (RPG adventure)

Dee, Steve

*Demonlord* (book)

Denning, Troy

*Descent* (game)

Dillow, Jeffrey

*Dinosaurs of the Lost World* (game)

*Diplomacy* (game)

*Discovering Wargames* (book)

*Discworld* (book series)

*Doctor Who: Solitaire Story Game* (game)

Donnelly, Terence

Donovan, Dale

Donovan, Tristan

*Doom* (video game)

*Doom: The Board Game* (game)

Dovey, Jon

*The Dragon* (magazine)

*Dragon Quest* (game)

*Dragon Strike* (game)

*Dragonfire* (game)

*Dragons: An Adventure into Middle-Earth* (game)

*The Dragon's Den* (game)

Drake, Thomas

Drizzt Do'Urden (character)

Dubbelman, Teun

Dummett, Michael

*Dungeon!* (game)

*Dungeon Command* (game)

*Dungeon Decor* (game accessory)

*Dungeon Geomorphs* (game accessory)

*Dungeon Tiles* (game accessory)

*DungeonQuest* (game)

*Dungeons & Dragons* (game)

*Dungeons & Dragons Adventure Game* (game)

*Dungeons & Dragons Basic Game* (game)

*Dungeons & Dragons Boardgame: Diablo II Edition* (game)

*Dungeons & Dragons Dice Masters* (game)

*Dungeons & Dragons Miniatures Game* (game)

*Dungeons & Dragons Miniatures Handbook* (game)

*Dungeons & Dragons Roleplaying Game Starter Set* (game)

*Dungeons & Dragons: The Fantasy Adventure Board Game* (game)

Dunnigan, Jim

Dupuis, Chris

Dutton, Denis

Eccles, Hal

Edwardes, Martin

Edwards, Raymond

*Eldritch Horror* (game)

*Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine Game* (game)

*Empire of the Petal Throne* (game)

*En Garde!* (game)

*Endless Dungeon* (game accessory)

Enevold, Jessica

Essen Game Fair

*Eternal Winter* (game expansion)

*The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (game)

*Faerie Queen* (book)

Fafhrd (character)

*Falling Stars* (game)

*Fantasy Wargaming* (book)

*Fantasy Wargaming à la Tolkien* (game)

*Fate* (RPG system)

Featherstone, Donald

*The Fellowship of the Ring* (game)

*Fight in the Skies* (game)

*Fighting Fantasy* (book series)

Finch, Andrew

Fine, Gary Alan

*Fire Emblem* (game series)

*Firestorm* (book)

*5150* (game)

*5150* (game series)

*5150: Fringe Space* (game)

*5150 New Beginnings: Urban Renewal* (game)

Flanagan, Mary

Flash Gordon (character)

*Flash Gordon & the Warriors of Mongo* (game)

*Floor Plans* (game accessory)

Foà, Simona

Folengo, Teofilo

*Forbidden Forest* (game expansion)

*Four Against Darkness* (game)

Fourie, H. L.

*Frag* (game)

Freelance Police

Freeman, Jon

French, Nate

*Frenzy of Orlando* (book)

Fria (character)

Frodo (character)

*From the Casebook of Nick Velvet* (game expansion)

*Frostgrave* (game)

Frow, Jon

Gable, Wallace

Gallela, Anthony

Galloway, Alexander

Galloway, Bruce

*Game of Thrones* (franchise)

Gandalf

*The Gates of Firestorm Peak* (RPG adventure)

Gazzard, Alison

GenCon

Gerrig, Richard

Giddens, Anthony

*The Ghostwind Campaign* (game supplement)

Gibbs, Bill

Giglio, Keith

Gill, Sam

Glancy, Scott

Glassco, Bruce

Glassner, Andrew

Glick, David

Glimne, Dan

*Gloomhaven* (game)

Go (game)

*Go for Broke* (game)

*The Goblin's Lair* (game)

Goldberg, Eric

Gollum

*Gondor* (game)

Gonzalo, Juan Luis

Goodfellow, Caroline

Goodman, Roy

*Goose* (game)

Grady, Gary

*Grail Quest* (game)

Grant, Charles

Gray, Michael

Gray Mouser

Griffith, Paddy

Grouling Cover, Jennifer

Grubb, Jeff

*Gumshoe* (game)

Gush, George

Gygax, Gary

Gygax Dragonlord (character)

Hackett, Martin

Halliwell, Richard

Hamblen, Richard

*Hammer of the Scots* (game)

Hand, Stephen

Hangman (game)

Hany, Darryl

Hardy, Tom

Harkleroad, Stephen

Harris, Robert

Harrison, Harry

Harvey, Lee

Harvey, Tim

*The Haunted Tower* (game)

Heinsoo, Rob

*Helm's Deep* (game)

Hendrick, Arnold

Hensley, Shane

Herman, David

*Hero: A Game of Adventure in the Catacombs* (game)

*Heroclix* (game system)

*HeroQuest* (game)

Heussner, Tobias

*High Fantasy* (game)

Highley, G.

Hill, Wendell

Hillis, Ken

Hinebaugh, Jeffrey

*The Hobbit* (book)

*The Hobbit* (TV adaptation)

*The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (game)

*The Hobbit Game* (game)

*The Hobbit HeroClix: The Desolation of Smaug* (game)

*Hobbit Tales from the Green Dragon Inn* (game)

*The Hobbit: The Adventures of Bilbo in Middle-Earth* (game)

Hocking, Clint

Hofer, Margaret

Holmes, Sherlock (character)

Hood, Robin (character)

*How to Play War Games in Miniature* (game)

Howard, Robert

*Hunt for the Ring* (game)

Husárová, Zuzana

Hyde, Henry

*Imaginary Worlds* (book)

*Inkognito* (game)

*Interceptor* (game)

*Intro.duction to Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (game)

*Ironclads & Ether Flyers* (game expansion)

Isbister, Katherine

*Jack the Ripper & the West End Adventures* (game expansion)

Jackson, Steve (UK)

Jackson, Steve (U.S.)

Jallarial (character)

*Jenga* (game)

Jenkins, Henry

*John Carter Warlord of Mars* (game)

Jones, Andy

Jones, Bethan

Jordan S. metaripley18 (BGG user)

Jordison, Richard

*Jump Ship!* (game)

Juul, Jesper

Kafalenos, Emma

Kane, Steve

Kapell, Matthew Wilhelm

Karhulahti, Veli-Matti

Katz, Demian

Kaufman, Doug

Keen, Suzanne

*Kellar's Keep* (game expansion)

Kerestan, Judy

Kerestan, Pete

Kevorque, Constantine

*Key to the Kingdom* (game)

Kickstarter

Kidd, Glenn

*King Arthur Pendragon* (game)

*King Arthur's Knights* (game)

Kirby, Stacia

Klug, Chris

Klug, Gerald

*Knight Hawks* (game)

*Knights & Magick* (game)

Konieczka,

Konstant, Ed

Korns, Michael

Koster, Ralph

Krank, Charlie

Kurtz, Katherine

*Labyrinth of Ruin* (game expansion)

*Labyrinthine* (game)

Lambert, Chris

Lambshead, John

Lamming, Bill

Lancaster, Kurt

Landa, Jose Angel Garcia

*Lankhmar* (game)

*Larger Than Life* (game)

*Last Battle* (game)

Launius, Richard

Laws, Robin

Leacock, Matt

Lee, Peter

*Legacy of Dragonholt* (game)

*Legend of Drizzt* (game)

*Legend of Heroes* (game)

*Legend of Zagor* (book)

*Legend of Zagor* (game)

*Legends of Araby* (game)

*Legionnaire* (game)

Legolas (character)

Leiber, Fritz

Lencioni Novelli, Roberta

Lessard, Jonathan

*Leviathan* (game)

Lewin, Christopher

Litorco, Teri

*The Live Ring Game* (game)

Livingstone, Ian

*Lone Wolf* (book series)

*The Lonely Mountain* (game)

*The Lord of the Rings* (book)

*The Lord of the Rings* (franchise)

*The Lord of the Rings* (TV adaptation)

*The Lord of the Rings: Adventure Game* (game)

*The Lord of the Rings: Card Game* (game)

*The Lord of the Rings: Deck Building Game* (game)

*The Lord of the Rings: Journey to Mordor* (game)

*The Lord of the Rings Strategy Battle Game* (game)

*Lords of Waterdeep* (game)

Lovecraft, H. P.

Lubomír, Doleel

MacCallum-Stewart, Esther

*Magic Realm* (game)

*Magic: The Gathering* (game)

Mahaffey, Mark

*Malifaux* (game system)

Mancala (game)

Manovich, Lev

*Mansions of Madness* (game)

Marlowe, Philip

Marsilli, Pietro

Martin, Cathlena

Martin, Keith

*Massive Darkness* (game)

*Mastermind* (game)

*Masters of the Amulets* (game)

*Masters of the Universe* (franchise)

Matheny, Michael

McCaig, Ian

McHugh, Francis

McLimore, Guy

Megarry, Dave

*Melee* (game)

Mendelsohn, Tom

Mendlesohn, Farah

Meyer, Joseph

*MicroQuest* (game series)

*Middle-Earth Quest* (game)

*Middle-Earth Role Playing Game* (game)

*Middle-Earth Wargame Rules* (game)

*Military Modelling* (magazine)

*Modern War in Miniature* (game)

Monastero, Mike

*Monopoly* (game)

*Monopoly: Lord of the Rings* (game)

Montfort, Nick

Moorcock, Michael

Moriarty, Jay

Morris, Dave

Morris, Graeme

Morschauser, Joseph III

Mosca, Ivan

*Munchkin* (game)

*Murder on the Orient Express* (game)

Murray, Janet

*Mutant Chronicles* (game)

*Myst* (video game)

*The Mysteries of Peking* (game)

*Mystery Express* (game)

*The Mystic Wood* (game)

*Mythic Battles: Pantheon* (game)

*Mythic Battles: Pantheon the Role-Playing Game* (game)

*Mythos Tales* (game)

Navarro, Victor

Neidlinger, Bruce

Nesmith, Bruce

*Neverwinter Campaign Setting* (RPG supplement)

*The New Easy to Master Dungeons & Dragons* (game)

Newman, Matthew

Nissenbaum, Helen

Nitsche, Michael

Oden, Jim

Oerth (setting)

*Ogre: Designer's Edition* (game)

*The Omega Virus* (game)

*Once Upon a Time* (game)

*The One Ring* (game)

Onega, Susana

*Operation* (game)

*Operation: Star Wars* (game)

Orbanes, Phil

Orlando (character)

Orlando, Alexandra

Orpheus (character)

Ostrander, Katrina

*Outdoor Survival* (game)

*Outfoxed* (game)

*Outremer* (game)

Packard, Edward

Palmer, Nicholas

*Pandemic* (game)

*Pandemic Legacy* (game)

*Pandemic Legacy: Season 2* (game)

*Panzerfaust* (magazine)

Parkinson, Stewart

*Pathfinder* (game system)

Patt, Leonard

Pearce, Celia

Peaty, Gwyneth

*Perdition's Mouth* (game)

Perla, Peter

Petersen, Christian

Peterson, Jon

Petrisor, Ben

Pippin (character)

Pirrone, Matthew

Plamondon, Robert

*Playmobil* (toy line)

*Pokémon* (game series)

Pondsmith, Mike

Priestley, Rick

*A Princess of Mars* (book)

Pulsipher, Lewis

Quarrie, Bruce

*Quest* (game)

*Quest of the Magic Ring* (game)

Rahman, Glenn

*Ranger* (game)

*Rapier & Dagger* (game)

*Ravenloft* (RPG adventure)

*Reaction* (game system)

*Redshirts* (game)

*Relic* (game)

*Rendezvous with Rama* (book)

*Renegade Legion* (game series)

Renner, Scott

*Return of the Stainless Steel Rat* (game)

*Return of the Witch Lord* (game expansion)

Richmond, Chris

*The Ringbearer* (game)

Ringhieri, Innocenzo

*Risk* (game)

*Risk Legacy* (game)

*Road to Legend* (game app)

*Road to Legend* (game expansion)

Roberts, Charles

Robinson, Rob

*Rogue Trooper* (game)

Roland (character)

Rolston, Ken

Rouse, Richard III

*Royal Armies of the Hyborian Age* (game)

Rozoy, Manuel

RPGnow (website)

Rubin, Marc

*Rules for Middle-Earth* (game)

Rusch, Scott

Ryan, Marie-Laure

Sabin, Philip

St. Andre, Ken

Salen, Katie

Saler, Michael

Sallazar (character)

Salter, Anastasia

Salvatore, R. A.

*Samurai Blades* (game)

Sargent, Carl

Saruman (character)

Sauron (character)

*Sauron* (game)

Schaufeli, Wilmar

Scheherazade (character)

Schell, Jesse

Schröter, Felix

Schuessler, Nick

Schwager, Matthew

Schwalb, Robert

Schwarz, Jonathan

*Scrabble: The Hobbit* (game)

*Sea of Mystery* (RPG adventure)

*Seafall* (game)

*Secrets of the Lost Tomb* (game)

*Security Station* (game)

Sellers, Michael

*Setting up a Wargaming Campaign* (book)

*Settlers of Catan* (game)

*The 7th Continent* (game)

Severi (BGG user)

Seville, Adrian

Shadowfax (character)

*Shadows of Brimstone* (game family)

*Shadows of Brimstone: City of the Ancients* (game)

*Shadows of Brimstone: Swamps of Death* (game)

*Shadows Over Hammerhal* (game)

Sharp, John

Sheldon, Lee

*Shell Shock* (game)

*Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective* (game)

Shippey, Tom

Sicart, Miguel

*The Siege of Barad-Dur* (game)

*Siege of Gondor* (game)

*The Siege of Minas Tirith* (game)

*The Silver Tower* (game)

Silvester, William

Simkins, David

Simonsen, Redmond

Sinbad (character)

*Six Gun Sound* (game)

*Skullcrag* (book)

*Sky Galleons of Mars* (game expansion)

Slavicsek, Bill

Smaug (character)

Smith, Clint

Smith, Eric

Smith, Larry

Smith, Mark

*Snakes & Ladders* (game)

*Sniper!* (game)

*Solo Dungeon Adventures* (game)

*A Song of Ice and Fire* (book series)

*Sonic the Hedgehog* (video game)

*Sorcerer* (game)

*The Sorcerer's Cave* (game)

*Space Crusade* (game)

*Space: 1889* (game)

*Spells & Swords* (game expansion)

Spenser, Edmund

Sprague De Camp, Lyon

Stackpole, Michael

Stafford, Greg

*Star Frontiers* (game)

*Star Trek* (franchise)

*Star Trek Adventure Game* (game)

*Star Wars* (franchise)

*Star Wars: Imperial Assault* (game)

*Star Wars Miniatures* (game)

Stegmaier, Jamey

*Stowaway 52* (game)

*The Strategic Review* (magazine)

*Stratego* (game)

Stubble (character)

Suits, Bernard

*The Sunless Citadel* (RPG adventure)

*Supervillains* (game)

Sutton-Smith, Brian

Swanson, Mark

*Sweet Agatha* (game)

*Sword & Sorcery* (game)

*Swordplay* (game)

*Swords & Sorcery* (game)

*Swords & Spells* (game)

*Tabletop* (web series)

*Tactics* (game)

*Tales of the Arabian Nights* (game)

*Talisman* (game)

*Talisman City* (game expansion)

*Talisman Dungeon* (game expansion)

*Talisman Expansion Set* (game expansion)

*Talisman: The Adventure* (game expansion)

*Talisman Timescape* (game expansion)

Tarot (game)

Taylor, Tim

Taylor, T.L.

Teixeira, Ed

*Temple of Elemental Evil* (game)

Tennes, David

Tesauro, Emanuele

*Tetris* (video game)

Theoden (character)

*There and Back Again* (game)

Theseus (character)

Thompson, Howard

Thorin (character)

Thorne, Russ

Thorpe, Gavin

*Through the Breach* (game)

Tic-Tac-Toe (character)

Tidball, Jeff

*T.I.M.E. Stories* (game)

Tolkien, J.R.R.

*Tomb of Annihilation* (game)

Torres Castro, Jesús

Treadaway, John

*Treasure of the Silver Dragon* (game)

*Treasure of Unicorn Gold* (game)

Tresca, Michael

Tringham, Neal

*The Trollfens* (game expansion)

*Tunnels & Trolls* (game)

Tunstill, John

Tweet, Jonathan

*Twilight: 2000* (setting)

*221B: A Story Driven Detective Game* (game)

*221B Baker St* (game)

Tyler, Benton

*Tyrants of the Underdark* (game)

Uhl, Mick

*The Undercity* (game)

Upton, Brian

Uren, Tim

Valens, Nikki

*Valkenburg Castle* (game)

*Vampire: The Masquerade* (game)

Vance, Jack

Van Devender, John

*The Vanquished Foe* (game)

Van Vogt, A. E.

Varney, Allen

Velathidros (character)

Vermeule, Blakey

*Viking Raiders* (game)

*Virtual Reality* (book series)

*The Voyage of the B.S.M. Pandora* (game)

*The Voyage of the Space Beagle* (book)

Waggoner, Zach

Wallis, James

*War Games* (book)

*War of the Ring* (game by Barasch-Berg)

*War of the Ring* (game by Di Meglio et al.)

*War of the Ring* (game by Drake)

*War of Wizards* (game)

WargameVault (website)

*Warhammer Quest* (game)

*The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* (book)

*The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* (game)

*Watson & Holmes* (game)

Webster, Tony

Weidling, Gaby

Wells, Jean

Wham, Tom

Wheaton, Wil

*White Bear and Red Moon* (game)

*Widow's Walk* (game supplement)

Williams, John

Williams, Skip

Wills, Lynn

Wilson, Kevin

Wise, Terence

*Witch's Cauldron* (game)

Witwer, Michael

*Wizard* (game)

Wolf, Mark

Wong, Joon Ian

*Wrath of Ashardalon* (game)

*Wreck Age* (game)

*Yahtzee Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* (game)

Yearsley, Barry

Yellowlees Douglas, J.

Zagor (character)

*Zagor Chronicles* (book series)

Zargon (character)

*Zargonian Creatures* (game accessory)

Zimmerer, Neil

Zimmerman, Eric