THE ELUSIVE SHIFT

How Role-Playing Games Forged Their Identity

Jon Peterson

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Series Foreword

What might histories of games tell us not only about the games themselves but also about the people who play and design them? We think that the most interesting answers to this question will have two characteristics. First, the authors of game histories who tell us the most about games will ask big questions. For example, how do game play and design change? In what ways is such change inflected by societal, cultural, and other factors? How do games change when they move from one cultural or historical context to another? These kinds of questions forge connections to other areas of game studies, as well as to history, cultural studies, and technology studies.

The second characteristic we seek in "game-changing" histories is a wide-ranging mix of qualities partially described by terms such as *diversity*, *inclusiveness*, and *irony*. Histories with these qualities deliver interplay of intentions, users, technologies, materials, places, and markets. Asking big questions and answering them in creative and astute ways strikes us as the best way to reach the goal of not an isolated, general history of games but rather of a body of game histories that will connect game studies to scholarship in a wide array of fields. The first step, of course, is producing those histories.

Game Histories is a series of books that we hope will provide a home—or maybe a launch pad—for the growing international research community whose interest in game history rightly exceeds the celebratory and descriptive. In a line, the aim of the series is to help actualize critical historical study of games. Books in this series will exhibit acute attention

to historiography and historical methodologies, while the series as a whole will encompass the wide-ranging subject matter we consider crucial for the relevance of historical game studies. We envisage an active series with output that will reshape how electronic and other kinds of games are understood, taught, and researched, as well as broaden the appeal of games for the allied fields such as history of computing, history of science and technology, design history, design culture, material culture studies, cultural and social history, media history, new media studies, and science and technology studies.

The Game Histories series will welcome but not be limited to contributions in the following areas:

- Multidisciplinary methodological and theoretical approaches to the historical study of games
- Social and cultural histories of play, people, places, and institutions of gaming
- Epochal and contextual studies of significant periods influential to and formative of games and game history
- Historical biography of key actors instrumental in game design, development, technology, and industry
- Games and legal history
- Global political economy and the games industry (including indie games)
- Histories of technologies pertinent to the study of games
- Histories of the intersections of games and other media, including such topics as game art, games and cinema, and games and literature
- Game preservation, exhibition, and documentation, including the place of museums, libraries, and collectors in preparing game history
- Material histories of game artifacts and ephemera

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Raiford Guins, Indiana University Bloomington

Acknowledgments

On the evening of October 30, 2013, I had the pleasure to make Jonathan Tweet's acquaintance at Peter Adkison's place in Seattle. As we hunkered down over a board game, Jonathan cunningly distracted me with a series of historical questions, one of which became lodged in my mind: Which game system first attempted to simulate the structure of a story rather than the physics of a world? Some initial research into how the gaming community of the 1970s positioned that distinction opened up a series of related inquiries. Our ensuing conversation spilled over into telephone calls, emails, coffee shops, and Gen Con bars until in July 2015 I floated, "Do you think there's something that needs to be written about all of this?" So Jonathan served as the initial impetus for the present volume and became the first critical reader of early drafts, which centered on the chapter now called "The Role of the Referee." As punishment, he does appear in this narrative, but out of gratitude it is only at the very end.

Around the same time, the *Role-Playing Game Studies* anthology settled on a publisher. As Evan Torner developed the section "RPG Theorizing," I supplied him with some few primary sources and eventually with a draft of the present work. In the course of working on the anthology, I identified a few areas where historical light might be shed on the development of role playing in theory and design alike. Most of the "Toward a Philosophy" chapter followed from that research. Evan also helped to introduce a bit more academic rigor into my bibliography and citations.

Discussion about this growing project also slotted readily into several ongoing dialogues I was having, such as my discussion with Luke Crane

about the features that distinguish recent role-playing game designs from their "old school" forebears in the 1970s. Luke was even kind enough to tap the brain trust of the Burning Wheel Headquarters to assemble a list of such key features. It was thanks to Luke's influence that the chapter here called "How to Play" came into being. Victor Raymond, who reviewed early drafts, provided valuable insight into the fan experience of the 1970s and the epidemiological spread of role-playing games beyond the Midwest. Several threads of online-forum discussion about the origins of role playing, especially in the OD&D '74 forum, also helped core concepts here to gel.

I became connected to Henry Lowood as a co-contributor to the *Zones of Control* anthology, and in the course of a lunch at Stanford we discussed whether the current work might be a fit for the MIT Press series on game history. Thanks to the support provided by Henry and his series coeditor Raiford Guins, the idea received a favorable hearing. I am indebted to them as well as to Noah Springer, Elizabeth Agresta, Marge Encomienda, Mary Reilly, and Jim Mitchell at MIT Press for their advocacy in bringing this book to fruition and for making sure it received a much-needed review to whip it into shape.

Where possible, I have tried to base this study on sources available to scholars; during the course of this project, issues of zines like *Alarums & Excursions* and *Wyrm's Footnotes* fortuitously came out in a digital format. For access to more obscure fanzines, I am indebted to the Brown Popular Culture Library at Bowling Green State University and to the Pelz fanzine collection at the University of California, Riverside. Some of these materials, however, survive now only in private collections. For assistance with some of the scarcer sources here, I must thank Bill Meinhardt, Frank Mentzer, George Phillies, Lewis Pulsipher, Merle Rasmussen, and Matt Shoemaker.

A Note on Sources

Fanzines are notoriously difficult resources to work with. They often lack clear dates, operating on irregular schedules that mask their lapses by stubbornly attesting their "official" publication date or sometimes eliding it entirely. It is not always clear who wrote a given piece of text in a zine, given unconventional layouts or confusing attributions. Zines do not always have consistent page numbering schemes, a trait they share in common with early self-published role-playing products, which often shared a publication process. The same zine can even feature slightly differently titles across issues at the whim of its publisher.

Editorially, zines also present some challenges. Quotations from zines and related amateur publications here try to stay close the original, and although some spelling errors have been tacitly repaired, the grammar is true to the original, and there will be no [*sic*] warnings. Wherever there is emphasis in quotes, it is copied here from the original, though emphasis is also sometimes discarded for readability.

It is common in this literature to see abbreviations for key terms. "DM" for dungeon master is pervasive, and used equivalently with "GM" for gamesmaster. The community of the day knew well abbreviations for such game properties as armor class (AC), gold pieces (GP), and class names like magic-user (MU) or fighting-man (FM). "RP" signifies role-playing, and "FRP" fantasy role-playing.

The following fanzines are referenced in the text. Note that designations like "quarterly" or "monthly" refer to the intended production schedule; in reality, zines rarely appeared like clockwork.

AB: *Abyss* (Issue 13, June 1981; 16, December 1981; 21, October 1982)

AE: *Alarums & Excursions* (Monthly: issue 1, June 1975; 7, January 1976; 18, January 1977; 30, January 1978; 41, January 1979; 53, January 1980; 65, January 1981; 77, January 1982 . . . 149, January 1988; 161, January 1989)

AG: *Adventure Gaming* (Issue 1, July 1981)

AHG: *Avalon Hill General* (Bimonthly: issue 12 (4), November–December 1975)

APL: *APA-L* (Weekly: issue 497, November 1974; 499, December 1974; 508–511, February 1975; 513, March 1975; 519, April 1975; 520–523, May 1975)

APR: *Apprentice* (Quarterly: issue 3, winter 1979; 4, spring 1979)

AW: *American Wargamer* (Monthly: issue 2 (8), March 1975; 2 (12), July 1975; 3 (7), February 1976)

CO: *Courier* (Bimonthly: issue 2 (7), 1970; 4 (1), 1972); 6 (6), 1974)

CP: *Campaign* (Bimonthly: issue 77, January–February 1977; 94, November–December 1979)

CW: *Canadian Wargamer* (Irregular: issue 13, 1969).

DB: Domesday Book (Monthly: issue 3, April 1970; 13, summer 1972)

DR: *Dragon* (Bimonthly until 1978, then roughly monthly: issue 1, June 1976; 5, March 1977; 12, February 1978; 22, February 1979; 33, January 1980; 45, January 1981; 57, January 1982)

DW: *Different Worlds* (Bimonthly: issue 1, February–March 1979 [?]; 6, December 1979–January 1980; 11, February–March 1981)

EM: *Empire* (Irregular: issue 21, September 1975)

EU: *Europa* (Irregular: issue 3, November 1974; 4/5, January 1975; 6–8, April 1975; 9, July 1975; 12–13, February–March 1976)

FTA: *Fire the Arquebusiers* (Irregular: issue 1, November 1975; 2–3, June 1976)

GL: *Gamesletter* ("published every 1–4 weeks": issue 9 (58), June 1973)

GPGPN: *Great Plains Gameplayers Newsletter* (Monthly: issue 7, April 1974; 10, August 1974)

IW: International Wargamer (Monthly: issue (5) 1, January 1972)

MG: *Midgard* (Irregular: issue 1, January 1974; 2, April [?] 1974)

MF: *Midgard Forum* (Irregular: issue 1, August 1972; 6, April [?] 1973)

MN: *Minneapa* (Monthly: issue 39, March 1974)

MV: *Moves* (Bimonthly: issue 42, December 1978–January 1979; 47, October–November 1979)

QQG: *Quick Quincey Gazette* (Bimonthly: issue 1, October 1976; 3, December 1976)

SA: *Sorcerer's Apprentice* (Quarterly: issue 7, summer 1980)

SFF: *Science-Fiction and Fantasy Newsletter* (Quarterly: issue 87, February 1976)

SG: *Space Gamer* (Bimonthly: issue 9, December 1976/January 1977; 12, July–August 1977; 14, November–December 1977)

SL: *Slingshot* (Bimonthly: issue 9, January 1967; 24, July 1969; 37, September 1971)

SN: *Supernova* (Bimonthly: issue 9, February 1972; 25, March 1975; 27, May 1977; 29, September 1977)

SR: *Strategic Review* (Quarterly: issue 1 (1), February 1975; 2 (1), February 1976; 2 (2), April 1976)

TTT: *Table Top Talk* (Quarterly: issue 5 (2), March 1966; 5 (4), July 1966)

WF: *Wyrm's Foonotes* (Quarterly: issue 5, summer 1978; 7, 1979)

WH: *Wild Hunt* (Monthly: issue 1, February 1976; 12, January 1977; 24, January 1978; 36, January 1979; 48, January 1980; 50, March 1980)

WN: *Wargamer's Newsletter* (Monthly: issue 95, February 1970; 97, April 1970; 99, June 1970; 106, January 1971; 116, November 1971; 130, January 1973; 135, June 1973; 137, August 1973; 141, December 1973; 149, August 1974)

Introduction

What is the thing that we call a role-playing game?

Dungeons & Dragons (1974) has the distinction of being the first game in this modern genre, according to a broad if restless consensus. But anyone sifting through the game's earliest rules will observe the conspicuous absence of *role playing* as a term. After experimenting with *D&D* just after its release, the Minnesota university professor M. A. R. Barker ventured that it "is not strictly a 'war' game" (*WN* 149). This contradicted the very cover of the product, which proclaimed itself "rules for fantastic medieval wargames campaigns," but Barker was only the first of many to disagree. A whole community of fans soon rallied around the new genre of game that *D&D* had inspired, to which the label *role-playing game* would imminently become attached.

So *D&D* did not pin this label onto itself, which ostensibly deprives the genre's foundational text of any authority over the definition of *role-playing game*. It may have established the category, but it did so unwittingly—it was really the game's audience who perceived in it or perhaps projected onto it this quality they came to call *role playing*. It is therefore that community of early adopters we must investigate if we want to understand why they chose this label instead of another and what exactly they believed it meant.

Surely the first people who called *D&D* a role-playing game did so without any rigid definition in mind. They favored this term because it expressed something that they felt separated the game from its predecessors, something about the experience of the game that was for some the source of its irresistible allure and for others the root of its most frustrating

absurdities. Rather than agonizing over how to classify it, players were far more preoccupied with practical questions about play. What is the right way to approach *D&D* as a player or a referee? How could the base design of *D&D* be improved? In the early disputes surrounding those questions, which often contained appeals to *role playing*, we can dimly see what different people thought they meant by *role-playing game*.

Fueled by their passion for the game, the community raced through the problem space of theory and design, making astonishing progress in only half a decade. It was an educated and inquisitive community, one that would inevitably become self-conscious about coining such a term of art. In the first five years of the hobby, the quest to understand role-playing games exposed the most important questions of role-playing game design and theory. But the community's ambition to improve systems and practices drove much of the early philosophical investigation of role-playing games, more so than any academic interest in explicating games for its own sake. It might be more accurately stated that practitioners resorted to theorizing in an attempt to mend alarming divides that quickly emerged in the community, disrupting progress, and necessitating design experiments. Along the way, though, they developed some early and important ideas about what it might mean for a game to create a story.

The original *D&D* rules left so much unsaid, so much to the players' discretion, that to play it was to reimagine it. Its introduction billed it as "the framework around which you will build a game of simplicity or tremendous complexity."[1] As one early adopter put it in August 1975, "D&D is an outline for a fantasy game. The gamesmaster expands on the rules."[2] Much of the early writing about role-playing games captures that process: it is a tangle of variant rule proposals, breathless play reports, staunch critical opinion, and designer's notes. But a cluster of pioneering thinkers in this period crafted more considered essays that attempted to frame problems, define terms, and engage with prior literature. These key texts—by Lewis Pulsipher, Steve Lortz, Ed Simbalist, Glenn Blacow, and others—at first circulated in fanzines little read outside the insular and dedicated game community of the time. By 1980, the best of this literature had migrated to glossy trade magazines, where it reached a wider audience. Through the most

prominent of those, *The Dragon*, Gary Gygax commanded a gravitas not to be underestimated, though his position as the steward of both the interpretation and evolution of *D&D* made him simultaneously the community's most prominent authority and its most reviled object of censure. Innovation and subversion in this period grew with the stridence of Gygax's orthodoxy.

Determining the practices that *role playing* identified would furthermore become a key goal for producers of early commercial titles competing with *D&D*. These designers wanted to establish not just what a role-playing game is but also what it should be and how a next-generation system might realize that potential. One reviewer in 1979 quipped that "nearly every set of role-playing rules except D&D bills itself as a 'second generation' game" (*DW* 2), and, indeed, before 1980 some already discerned a third generation of systems.[3] Given that *D&D* originally attired itself as a wargame, some only grudgingly acknowledged *D&D* as even a first-generation role-playing game title. In this view, any self-proclaimed role-playing game could, by emphasizing and fostering role playing, improve on the genre's dysfunctional parent. But what were they emphasizing exactly? Early role-playing games did not break off cleanly from the legacy of conflict simulation, and many new titles incorporated systems and product marketing that could arguably identify them as either wargaming or role playing.

A study might follow any number of threads in illustrating how early players invoked the term *role playing* in their efforts to complete the shift to a new form of game. The most illuminating of these areas relate to a fundamental tension in role-playing games introduced by the earliest designs, one hinging on how players participate in the resolution of game events. One of the signature features of *D&D* is that its play takes place in a conversation between players and a referee, where players explain verbally to the referee what they want to accomplish. This makes it possible for new players to join the game without knowing the rules. The referee, by translating each player's statements of intention into game events, can let players feel as if they are in the situation of their characters, that they can attempt anything their characters are capable of—yet the secrecy and latitude required to exercise the referee's function can also paradoxically leave players feeling as if their actions hardly matter, as if they are helpless spectators of the

referee's personal show. Some players felt it was the epitome of *role playing* to lose themselves in their characters' situation, leaving it to the referee to sort out the resolution of game events; others, however, felt that they could not be said to play a role without understanding how—or even if—their choices were processed by the system of the game. The original *D&D* rules, being merely guidelines, lent themselves equally to either philosophy. In the name of optimizing for sometimes ill-defined properties such as realism, story, control, and immersion, role-playing game players and designers attempted to resolve the tension between those two approaches by altering how players interfaced with the game system. Comparing this early literature to debates still rumbling through the gaming community today amply demonstrates that the first philosophical problems to trouble role playing have proven the most enduring. Exploring these issues moreover sheds light on the fundamental question of why role-playing games have rules, and how those rules affect play.

Academics eventually began exploring the theory of role-playing games, with the first landmark study being the sociologist Gary Alan Fine's book *Shared Fantasy* (1983), but practitioners have never entirely relinquished their claim on this endeavor.[4] As the fanzines that carried the earliest theoretical works have receded into archival scarcity, much of the history of role-playing game theorizing in the crucial period from 1975 to 1980 is now little studied. Blacow's essay from 1980 dividing players into four types, "Role-Playing Styles," is widely known, but surveys of this literature characterize the period with language such as "there was still relatively little thought being applied to what constituted the act of role-playing itself."[5] Yet a close reading of the works in this neglected period brings us to a different conclusion and to novel insights into how and why the term *role playing* stuck.

It is hoped that this book will first and foremost serve as a guide to the key theoretical works of that period and as a summary of their conclusions. This critical literature builds on systems of the time, so to understand it we must further rescue from obscurity many published and experimental designs that have largely escaped the notice of posterity.[6] It is not the ambition of this study to settle on a tidy dictionary definition of *role-playing*

game but instead to show historically how the game community came to grapple with agreeing on one.[7]

Students of the more recent theory and practice of role-playing games may discover in this body of work some prefigurements of later thinking in design and criticism, couched in the vernacular that practitioners spoke at the time. Later theory did not engage with this literature, however, and without sufficient caution it would be easy to fabricate a dialogue based on parallels that might be significant or superficial, thus coloring our view of early thinking with later inventions. Pointers to potential parallels are therefore confined here to notes in order to give the early writers the space to speak for themselves. It is, after all, to be expected that these ideas recur cyclically in approaches to role-playing games if indeed the tension at the heart of their original design admits of no entirely satisfactory solution.

The organization of this book is loosely chronological. The first chapter explores the cultures of wargaming and science-fiction fandom, with a particular emphasis on character-playing precursors to *D&D* and early attempts to develop games with systems built around conversations. Chapter 2 looks in particular at the dialogue at the core of *D&D*, the sort of agency players have in the game, as well as the nature of statements of intention. Next, the basic system concepts "abilities," "alignment," and "experience" ground chapter 3 in a study of how the game community of the 1970s first understood the idea of playing a role. Chapter 4 tackles simultaneous discussions of the purpose of a referee or gamesmaster in role-playing games with regard to world building, system management, and story-telling. A brief interlude then explores skeptical arguments about the value of system design in games that are so open ended. The fifth chapter surveys the first crop of theoretical essays that attempted to define and situate role-playing games as well as the pressures introduced by the growing popularity of the genre and the changing demographics of the community. Finally, chapter 6 shows how the foundational concepts defined in the 1970s gelled at the start of the next decade into a point of maturity for role-playing games. An epilogue visits the conversations about the philosophy of role playing that recurred later in the 1980s, setting the stage for the modern era of role-playing game theory.

1 THE TWO CULTURES

Dungeons & Dragons famously resulted from the intersection of two cultures: a gaming culture of conflict simulation and a literary culture engaged with speculative and fantastic fiction. Or as Gary Gygax put it in 1976, "It arose from a combination of warfare with miniature figures and the desire to create heroic epics of the strange and supernatural" (*SFF* 87). To understand the first audience for *D&D*, it is therefore necessary to understand the two preexisting cultures of wargaming and science-fiction fandom, where the latter is understood to encompass fans of fantasy fiction. Science-fiction fandom got organized decades before the first games fans banded together, and the wargaming community would copy the pioneering structures that enabled science-fiction fans to forge their own identity: national and regional clubs, which hosted both local and large-scale conventions and published amateur magazines, or *fanzines*, for disseminating ideas throughout their membership.[1]

The two cultures shared a substantial overlap in membership, and almost as soon as wargaming fanzines began circulating in the 1950s, we see attempts to make fantastic literature the subject of wargames, most notably in Tony Bath's Hyboria. The monumental popularity of both the *Lord of the Rings* novels and the *Star Trek* television show in the late 1960s brought a new wave of enthusiasm for importing science-fiction and fantasy themes to wargames. These experiments led to the publication of Gygax's fantasy medieval wargame rules *Chainmail* (1971), which in turn triggered the collaboration of Gygax and Dave Arneson on *D&D*.

Wargaming was at the time, by any measure, a small and insular hobby. The most optimistic estimates placed its total scope at around 100,000 players, with a recognition that perhaps a tenth of that number were truly dedicated members, but even prominent clubs with a national reach had memberships numbering only in the hundreds.[2] It was moreover a homogenous community: Manuela Oleson, who identifies herself as "an amateur sociologist," conducted a survey in 1975 that led her to conclude that wargaming was "nearly exclusively a white, male pastime."[3] Participation by female players perhaps measured at around half a percent of the total. A much larger and more diverse set of people read science and fantasy fiction, but active participants in organized science-fiction fandom still leaned toward white, male, middle class, and college age.[4]

There can be no doubt that Gygax, Arneson, and their respective gaming circles identified far more with wargaming culture than with science-fiction fandom—but science-fiction fandom would embrace *D&D* immediately after its publication and play a crucial role in determining how the game's notoriously vague rules would be understood and popularized. Tellingly, during the game's development in the spring of 1973, when Gygax and Arneson solicited feedback from interested parties, their notice ran through *Gamesletter* (9 (58)) of the National Fantasy Fan Federation, one of the largest science-fiction fandom organizations. The fact that such an organization even supported a games-related fanzine shows how welcoming science-fiction fandom could be to a game like *D&D* and establishes that the science-fiction community's merger with games fandom had begun long before *D&D* went to press.

But the authors of *D&D* appreciated that there were two distinct markets. "From the sampling of wargame players I have spoken to about fantasy and SF," Gygax wrote in the fall of 1974, "and this number runs into several hundreds, it appears that there is a correlation between interest in imaginative writing and imaginative game playing. Some 90% of the sampling declare an interest in fantasy and SF" (*EU* 3). As a columnist for wargaming magazines who polled his readerships on these sorts of subjects, Gygax spoke from deep and direct experience with the wargaming community, but he could only speculate on the other culture:

"I wonder if among fantasy and SF fans not introduced to our hobby there is a corresponding possibility of interest in wargaming! As a guess I'd say while it is not as high as 90%, there must be quite an untapped source of new players among scifi fans." The fate of Gygax's publishing company, Tactical Studies Rules (TSR), greatly depended on the accuracy of that guess.

Both of the two cultures supported an open, collaborative environment where fans shared ideas freely, usually without much concern for intellectual property—the possibility that someone would pay money for the sort of half-baked ideas that filled these fanzines would have struck most as laughable. But it was nonetheless a peer-review community: the amateur press association (APA) fanzines exchanged by science-fiction fans in particular fostered a tradition of critical evaluation, where a regular group would publish material on a schedule while simultaneously commenting on other participants' ideas in prior issues, both of which led to lengthy and often rigorous discussion threads. Although such theoretical discussions appeared less frequently in the periodicals of the wargaming community, the merger of the two fandoms triggered by *D&D* would repurpose APA discussion toward understanding and perfecting that game. Gygax sporadically contributed to the APA dialogue, at least for the first few years, but he could not control it—the interpretations of *D&D* that took hold in the community would, in several particulars, stand in open defiance of his stated preferences.[5]

Ultimately, *D&D* would not belong entirely to either culture: its reception depended on both, and the friction between them helped to shape the way the game was first understood, played, and modified. As originally published, *D&D* was unapologetically incomplete, leaving much to depend on the assumptions that players brought to it. Posterity might be tempted to suppose that the initial interpretation of *D&D* rigidly followed the simulation-driven precepts of wargaming and that only later, after some shift that we might pinpoint to a juncture in history, did a faction of the community adopt practices that focused more on stories and characters. Identifying that unheralded moment could prove difficult, though, because any number of theoretical constructs or design features

could be argued to demarcate a transition.[6] But what the earliest literature around the game reveals is that those two philosophies were instead equiprimordial, deriving as they did from preexisting cultures, and that the original players of *D&D* drew equally from both camps. The theory and practice of early role-playing games emerged from the two cultures' messy reconciliation.

The prior study *Playing at the World* (2012) gives a detailed analysis of the roots of *D&D* in the activities of these two cultures—the difficulty of separating the playstyle that emerged after the publication of *D&D* from prior practices of wargamers and science-fiction fans is a major theme of that work. It is worth briefly recasting those findings here to emphasize less the causal chain leading to *D&D* and more the breadth of parallel activities in the two cultures that would shape the imminent critical and theoretical discussion about *D&D*.

THE LEGACY OF WARGAMING

The inventors and earliest practitioners of *Dungeons & Dragons* largely came to it from wargaming, bringing with them wargaming's critical apparatus and lexicon, such as they were. By the 1970s, organized wargaming fandom had existed for decades, so its design principles had been subjected to years of scrutiny by both commercial publishers and amateur players. However exhaustively the wargaming community had previously explored these design principles, though, transposing them to the new context of *D&D* altered them due to two key differences: the role of the referee and the scope of the simulation.

When we think of a wargame, we may first think of a competitive two-player board game in the vein of Avalon Hill's *Tactics* (1954), which has little practical need for a referee. Both players would study the game's rulebook and supervise one another's conformance to the system during play—which is not to say that heated disputes over rules interpretation never arose. But the wargaming hobby divided broadly into two categories at the time: board wargamers and miniature wargamers. Among miniature players, there existed a long tradition of referees who not only arbitrated

disputes but also managed the execution of the system, a practice that dates back to the Prussian *Kriegsspiel* of the early nineteenth century.[7]

In the pioneering Reiswitz system developed in the 1820s, players no longer moved pieces on a board but instead wrote orders just as they would to subordinates in wartime, and the referee—in consultation with the rules and sometimes dice—would determine the outcome. Reiswitz intended his game as a teaching tool that would instruct officers in the science of command, especially in drafting written orders, and so the authority of a referee in his game resembled the authority of a teacher over a classroom. By having his referee respond to player orders with only the limited intelligence that wartime commanders would receive, Reiswitz hoped his game would instill in a player "the same sort of uncertainty over results as he would have in the field."[8] Later *Kriegsspiel* authors such as Julius von Verdy du Vernois had learned from experience that prescriptive rules could make the game dull, overcomplicated, and unrealistic, so they granted referees total discretion in determining the outcome of game events, a movement then called "free" *Kriegsspiel*.[9] This broad referee discretion in deciding events unlocked a corresponding principle codified by Charles Totten's wargame *Strategos* in the 1880s: "anything can be attempted." Players can propose that their forces attempt anything that people in that situation could realistically do.[10] This idea was unearthed and reinvigorated by Twin Cities wargamers in the late 1960s, from whence it then exerted a crucial influence on *D&D*.

The core idea of the referee reached *D&D* through other intermediaries as well, of which Michael Korns's *Modern War in Miniature* (1966) is probably the most important. The referees, or "judges," of Korns's wargames "are the only ones who need to be familiar with the rules. The players only give orders as they would in actual combat."[11] But "orders" in this case included verbalizing the actions that a player wanted his personal soldier to take. Korns thus structured his game around a dialogue between the referee and the player. He gave an example where the player, a German soldier, hears from the referee, "The American is on your left about 12 meters away running at you with his bayonet." The player asks, "Can I still move?" and the referee replies, "Yes, but you are almost unconscious." The player then

declares his intended action: "I'm turning around and firing the rest of my schmeisser's clip into him."[12] The immediacy of this first-person dialogue creates a far more dramatic pace than the traditional *Kriegsspiel* conducted through written orders; this mechanism would appear essentially unaltered in *D&D*.

Korns recommended that referees keep maps and other canonical information about the state of the game world secret from the players so that "they know only what the judge tells them that their troops can see or hear. In this way the judges are used to isolate the players within the confines of the knowledge of their troops."[13] The importance of this referee function, of "isolating" the player, to later game designs cannot be overstated. Korns effectively did not want players to participate in the execution of the game system but rather to delegate that entirely to referees so that the players act as a person would in the situation that the game simulates—it might even be detrimental for players to understand how the referee decides events. Moreover, Korns did not clutter his book with rules; he instead gave real-world probability tables that referees could consult to decide game events if they had no better data for decision making. "There is only one rule to our war game," Korns wrote, and that is to "simulate reality." Although the "statistics and tables are designed to help" with that simulation, "when they get in the way, if they ever should, then you should discard them" in favor of any "procedure that better simulates reality than ours."[14] Referees have complete discretion to reinvent the rules as they go along.

Korns's "one rule" is in fact a requirement that a referee be ready to improvise any rule on the spot. Systems that built on Korns made this principle explicit: early drafts of *Fast Rules* by Mike Reese and Leon Tucker of Gygax's Lake Geneva group, for example, bear on their cover the legend "The presence of a judge may become more than ordinarily necessary due to the abbreviated form of these rules. No attempt has been made to deal with every conceivable situation. Some disinterested party will have to adjudicate the unpredictable situations which will arise and will have to invent new rules consistent with the basic framework laid down here." One person who observed *Fast Rules* in play in the summer of 1969 in Gygax's

basement remarked, "I never got to see the actual rules for the game, but they used a referee who did nothing but interpret the rules and tossed the dice. Nice idea" (*CW* 13). Historically minded wargamers recognized that this principle went directly back to the *Kriegsspiel* tradition, and they received periodic reminders of it: a 1972 article on the early history of wargames in the widely-read magazine *Strategy & Tactics*, for example, offered a gloss on how in Verdy du Vernois's system "the umpire would make up the rules and apply them as he went along and the players would have the freedom to attempt things that might or might not be allowed by the umpire."[15]

This referee latitude surfaced like a rhizome in the miniature wargaming community, and not just in the United States. Tony Bath was one of the founding fathers of British hobby wargaming in the 1950s, and as the referee of his long-standing Hyborian campaign, he had implemented similar principles for managing rules, players, and information. As Bath explained in *Setting Up a Wargames Campaign* (1973), a work that is a close cousin of *D&D*, "Each campaign week every player is provided with a situation report giving him all the information to which he is entitled; he then issues his instructions, based on this information, and I put them into practice." Like Korns, Bath did not make players privy to the execution of the system. "They are not concerned with the mechanics of the affair; I formulated the rules without consulting them and ultimate decisions are mine to make." This did not mean that the rules were immutable, and, indeed, Bath welcomed input from players: "Suggestions as to the way affairs are conducted are of course welcome, but are only implemented if they happen to suit me—in other words I am totally selfish about the whole thing. But nevertheless it works out pretty well."[16] Bath and others expressed this view of the role of the referee in the newsletters of his Society of Ancients, which were known to the designers of *D&D*.[17]

These examples show how miniature wargamers had long granted the referee total authority over the execution of the system. Accordingly, published miniature-wargame systems positioned themselves as mere guidelines that referees could and should modify as needed. In this sense, miniature-wargaming systems are a plastic thing: they get their shape in

play at the tabletop as the players and the referee tool them to the purpose of a particular game. In the noncommercial and collaborative community surrounding miniature wargames of the day, the distinction between a designer and a referee was fluid; a referee moonlighted as a designer on the spot when the situation warranted. "War gaming in miniature is a personal activity," one author wrote in 1962, "and each war gamer has ideas different from the next. No one conforms."[18] A referee who implemented modifications to a system needed only the audacity to then publish these new ideas to warrant the stature of a designer, and whether those rules circulated as a stand-alone page of tables in a fanzine to handle some particular wargame situation, or as an avowed variant of some prior ruleset, or as a wholly new wargame with a personal title emblazoned on its own fresh booklet was entirely at the whim of their inventor.

D&D inherited the plastic approach to system of miniature wargaming. The original rules insist that, "as with any other set of miniatures rules," they are merely "guidelines to follow in designing your own fantastic-medieval campaign," explicitly granting referees the power to change the system to suit their own tabletop.[19] This language echoes what one could already read in Gygax's *Chainmail* three years earlier, that "these rules may be treated as guide lines around which you form a game that suits you," language that effectively charged readers to become designers.[20] Gygax would elaborate in an article months later that in the *Chainmail* booklet "many unusual circumstances are not covered in these rules as they are meant primarily as guidelines. . . . The rules are purposely vague in areas in order to encourage thinking and initiative on the part of contestants" (*IW* 5 (1)). This vagueness granted players the latitude to attempt all manner of wacky actions, but "there is seldom any reason for precluding something unusual, although the final ruling should be left to the game judge."

This concept of referee latitude carried over into the *D&D* rules. "New details can be added and old 'laws' altered," the *D&D* rulebook continues, suggesting that "if your referee has made changes in the basic rules and/or tables, simply note them in pencil." Instead of players engaging in contentious "rule interpretations," *D&D* calls on referees "to decide how you would like it to be, and then make it just that way."[21] Although game

variants are quite common in games of all types—people play everything from poker to *Monopoly* with "house rules"—*D&D* follows Korns in furnishing a system that makes the development of local rules essential to play.

The authors of *D&D* took their own advice on this matter. Already in mid-1975, Gygax could write that "Dave and I disagree on how to handle any number of things, and both of our campaigns differ from the 'rules' found in D&D" (*AE* 2). If referees strictly adhered to the published *D&D* system, Gygax would actually see that as a failure: "I don't believe there is anything desirable in having various campaigns playing similarly to one another," he wrote, and "if the time ever comes when . . . players agree on how the game should be played, D&D will have become staid and boring indeed." Gygax explicitly encouraged others to innovate, urging, "if you don't like the way I do it, change the bloody rule to suit yourself and your players." This latitude naturally inspired experiments that led to the development and specification of variants—and ultimately to the release of competing commercial products, a consequence of the game's surprising success that Gygax apparently did not foresee.

Thus far in its development, *D&D* followed a design trajectory established by prior miniature wargames. But key differences in the role of the *D&D* referee created novel opportunities and challenges. In traditional miniature wargames, the power to tinker with the rules was invested in the referee because the referee was ostensibly neutral, whereas the players would have clear incentives to game the rules to their personal advantage to defeat opponents. A *D&D* referee commonly—though by no means exclusively—oversees a collaborating group of players in their conflict against a game world that the referee controls.[22] The *D&D* referee designs a game world that poses challenges and tests to the players in a way that may, to varying degrees, be adversarial rather than neutral. The immense power that referees of *D&D* command over the system and its execution means their own impartiality could be threatened by their discretion over how events are resolved. If only the referee understands how the system is run, with the players "isolated" from it, then how do players know that the tests they take are fair ones? In hindsight, this change in the referee's position introduced a tension in play, if not an outright design flaw, that

would become a major focus of critical commentary and design energy in the years to come.

Wargamers quickly recognized that *D&D* did not fit the usual mold, though many still initially received it within the competitive tradition of wargames, qualifying, if not rejecting, the putative neutrality of the referee. Echoing Barker, George Phillies wrote in "Phillies on *Dungeons & Dragons*" in April 1975 that "D&D is not a wargame in the usual sense," but he added that it "reduces to you vs. the gamesmaster and the dice." Dice provided at least something of a check on the referee's discretion: since the early days of *Kriegsspiel*, dice let referees remove themselves from a decision path. By rolling against printed probability tables in the rulebook to ascertain the success of an attempted action rather than simply deciding its outcome, the wargame referee ostensibly avoids unduly favoring or punishing a given player. The completeness and complexity of the system therefore guards against the referee's bias: the more the system prescribes the die rolls for possible situations, the less referees need to contrive their own ways to decide an outcome on the spot and thus the less they might inject bias into play. Effectively, this promises an informal separation of authority between the game designer and the referee, an expectation that the referee will defer to die rolls conceived by the designer rather than exercising personal discretion whenever possible.

However, the referee of *D&D* responds to proposed player actions that go far beyond the purview of a wartime commander, conceivably any activity that a person in the game's situation might attempt. *D&D* did not scope its simulation to commanding in times of war but expanded it to include control of the everyday activities of people, both in crisis and in repose. Transposing the game from a battlefield to a world of fantasy, where anything might be possible, intensified this shift. As such, the *D&D* referee took on a set of responsibilities and powers that had little precedent in wargames.

How could you design a system that would account for anything a player might propose? Rulebooks could grow only so long and complicated before a game became unplayable. The degree of complexity and completeness of a system is one of the fundamental decisions in wargame

designs. Traditionally, wargame designers cast the complexity choice as a trade-off between *realism* and *playability*: on the one hand, optimizing for the breadth and accuracy of the conflict simulation by providing a quantified, probabilistic model of as many game events as possible and, on the other hand, satisfying the often countervailing desire to make the game fun to play by minimizing the work of executing the system and keeping the rules simple and intuitive. Conventional wisdom held that a design could not do both: you increased one at the expense of the other. A game such as *Diplomacy* (1959) epitomized playability with its minimal rules and highly interpersonal seven-player structure, whereas the mega-games of the 1970s, such as *Drang Noch Osten* (1973) by Game Designers' Workshop, exemplified far more complex and realistic simulations by deploying legions of chits on a massive board. A referee could soak up the complexity of a wargame system, shielding players from it, but a careless designer could demand that referees take on Herculean responsibilities: Korns stressed that the ultimate goal of his system was to simulate reality, and he urged referees to construct the most realistic models possible to decide game events, all the while expecting referees to fill in any blanks on the spot.

The wargaming community had long since learned that different players might prefer different levels of realism or playability when they sat down to game around the same table. In 1970, Gary Gygax ascribed to his *Chainmail* coauthor Jeff Perren a distinction between the attitudes of two types of players he called "warriors" and "gamers," where "warriors seek to duplicate actual conditions of battle" to emphasize realism and "gamers are willing to twist realism any which way if a fun game results" (*DB* 3). Proposed player typologies along these or similar lines recurred in wargaming literature of the era. A few months later Steve Thornton advanced a more nuanced three-type model. Thornton spoke most warmly of the first type, those "fun wargamers who play just for enjoyment and who like non-complex, unambiguous rules that are quick to use" (*WN* 106). These he first contrasts with "'simulators' who try to re-enact battle conditions to the Nth degree," and then least favorably with "competitors," who "only play to win, invariably wrangling over the rules." Commentators who adopted

Thornton's typology quickly recognized how divergent expectations could lead to unsatisfying outcomes at the table. Fred Vietmeyer observed, "For an Avalon Hill box game competitor to be engrossed in simulation of uniforms, flags, dioramas, etc., may be for him a waste of time." A corollary is that "a simulator's interest simply cannot be held with the simple games" favored by those emphasizing playability above all else. For Vietmeyer, the key to avoiding conflict was to embrace relativism and accept that players could come to the table with different incentives: "For one type of player to place his own viewpoint as superior to another's hobby enjoyment is simply being too egocentric."[23] The recognition that players could be sorted into buckets by the properties they want out of games thus became part of the theoretical apparatus of wargaming inherited by the earliest adopters of *D&D*.

As many would soon point out, the simulation implied by *realism* transitions poorly to the realm of fantasy, but the designers of *D&D* nonetheless strove for a system that represented magic and monsters in a balanced way, preserving the logic of the fantasy literature that these systems emulated. But it might be said that its rules opted for playability over realism: no design could hope to encompass all of the situations that might arise in a fantasy game like *D&D*, especially a game that hoped to simulate people and not just wars. So the rulebook explicitly authorized the referee to alter the design, and with that *D&D* created an opportunity for referee bias that could not be governed by mere dice.

This necessarily brought the neutrality of the referee into doubt. In 1976, Kevin Slimak reaffirmed Phillies's tenet that, "really, D&D is a game between the dungeonmasters and the players; they are the two sides. The dungeon designer sets the problems for his adventurers and they try to solve them." But Slimak further recognized that this creates a peculiar conflict of interest for the referee: "Remember this when you run your game. You are playing with/against the adventurers, true, but you have ALL the advantages. If you use all these advantages, you'll get those players, for SURE, but in the long run, you lose. Doing this will kill off your game for sure" (*AW* 3 (7)). This power imbalance would persuade many that *D&D* could not be played as a wargame and that it was instead the foundational entry in a new game category.

The earliest literature that engaged with *D&D* largely did so on wargaming's terms. Wargamers loved variants and expansions on prior games, so much ink was spilled filling in blanks and extending *D&D* with sprawling arrays of new fantastic monsters, spells, character classes, and so on, which might be transposed from the dungeon to outer space or a postapocalyptic wasteland, where an adventurer might fall victim to a critical fumble or to a hit in a vital location or to any of a legion of novel combat mechanisms. These sorts of contributions to the system closely followed the variants that had long been developed for wargames. But to understand the intersection of the two cultures, we need to explore another conversation familiar to wargamers before *D&D* was released: one about playing characters in wargames.

GAMING AS CHARACTERS

Narrowing the scope of wargame simulation down to individual people had consequences, ones long documented by the community. Joe Morschauser, author of the seminal book *How to Play War Games in Miniature* (1962), had popularized a "roster system" that let miniature wargamers track data about groups of toy soldiers with paper and pencil, information such as their collective losses and morale. In 1966, his article "Humanizing the Roster System" proposed taking this a step further by keeping a roster for each individual in a small-troop action. A number would be tagged onto each toy soldier, corresponding to an entry in the roster that listed the soldier's name and attributes. "Think of it first in human terms! Does this particular man have good, bad or average eyesight? Is he a big, rough-tough man who would handle several of the enemy at once in hand-to-hand combat or is he just an average man with an average chance of surviving a rough-and-tumble?" (*TTT* 5 (2)). Crucially, Morschauser suggested that all of these sorts of data are quantifiable: "All these things can be expressed in terms of numbers or dice odds." For example, he proposed that "staying power" could be one such factor, and that as soldiers survived battles, their "staying power number may be increased."

"To really add a delicious personalized touch to games played under the Humanized Roster System," Morschauser continued, "one could go

so far as to give each figure a name, an age, a biography of sorts perhaps. Thus when he fights on the battlefield he will become the closest thing to a real soldier as is possible in miniature war gaming." He gave as an example the blue-eyed Private Henry Isaacs, who "isn't very fleet of foot but he's a damn good shot and a rough customer in a hand-to-hand tangle." No sooner had Morschauser published this idea than an article in response from a gamer in Greensboro, Illinois, revealed a similar "personal roster system" that had been in use there since 1960 and now encompassed approximately 400 individual soldiers.[24]

By the time Don Featherstone included the brief section "Personalised War-gaming" in his book *Advanced War Games* in 1969, he could speak to the consequences of the experiments with individual-level gaming that had transpired over the past decade. "It brought to table-top battles a strange sense of compassion," Featherstone wrote, "a self-identification with the little figures producing a marked reluctance to commit them to sacrificial missions." As an example, Featherstone described a set of miniatures as a fictional British rifle platoon from the Second World War, with a total strength of 37 men, each with a name and rank. "One thing is certain—in a very short time definite personalities and characters will be grafted upon these small, hitherto inanimate, figures. Some will be brave, others not so courageous; some will be killed and their names will vanish, leaving a feeling of tangible regret."[25] Even when strategy and chance governed the battles, players could not help but project onto the figures personalities that explained their performance in game. Featherstone would later make such wargame actions the subject of his book *Skirmish Wargaming* (1975).

Once a wargame soldier acquires this projected personality, new questions arise about how a player should incorporate the soldier's attitudes into play. These implications are fully on display in *Fight in the Skies* (1968), a First World War aerial simulation where each player controls a single pilot character, which takes "self-identification" to a new level. Mike Carr, the designer of the game, wrote in April 1970 that "one of the greatest things about *Fight in the Skies* is the fact that it is such a personal game" because "in *Fight* you control only one man, and in a sense, the way he performs is an extension of your personality. That is, if you want him to."

Carr instead encouraged "creating a personality for individual pilots" and having each pilot "perform according to his personality, not yours. If the opener says he's aggressive, then have him fly aggressively," though players presumably recognized this would not always be the most effective tactic (*Aerodrome* 11). Under the influence of films such as *The Blue Max* (1966), Carr encouraged players to write backstory "memoirs" for their characters, so fanzines dedicated to his game soon carried "Personality Profiles" relating the pilots' life stories to provide a better context for their actions in game. Carr promised that with these embellishments "it should be more fun for all of us."

The case of the *Western Gunfight Wargame Rules* (1970) most vividly demonstrates how a one-to-one-scale wargame—where each miniature figure represents one person—when staged as an ongoing campaign, leads to practices that players hesitated to call "wargaming." In the rulebook, its three designers, Steve Curtis, Ian Colwill, and Mike Blake of Bristol, England, entreated players to "Create Interesting Games with These Rules" based on scenarios familiar from Western films, usually pitting the "goodies" against the "baddies" in a showdown. "Each figure is given a specific task or individual order to carry out," details that were kept on a record sheet.[26] A report on a game from March 1970 has Ian Colwill acting as an umpire managing a game with ten players. In one scenario, Steve Curtis played his John Slaughter, who led a team of American lawmen against the forces of the outlaw El Manolito. Apparently, during the course of the battle, "Whilst the rest of the hardcases were frantically trying to kill each other—well, Mano and his amigo just calmly rode down the street, out of town with lead whining round their heads and the Wells Fargo bullion slung between their saddles. Not a scratch on either bandit. Magnificent!" (*Bristol Wargames Society Journal* 8).

Featherstone's review of the *Western Gunfight* rules in *Wargamer's Newsletter* hailed the "fascinating field of one-man-on-the-table-representing-one-man-in-real-life style of wargaming" (*WN* 99), leading to such a flood of interest that the Bristol Wargames Society brought out a second, more detailed edition the following year. Its rules explain how "each player must select a personal figure which . . . will act as the player wishes."[27] It is

one thing for the figures to represent individual characters, but another for a particular individual figure to be "personal" for each player. These personal figures in *Western Gunfight* were differentiated by more than just a name: they were separated into three ranks—novice, average, and professional—and with higher rank they had more points available to spend on three quantified combat skills, such as hand-to-hand, rifle, and revolver talent.

Much of the action in the Bristol *Western Gunfight* campaign centered around the exploits of their "stock characters," who reside in Pima County in the New Mexico Territory. A given session "might follow from a previous game," where the story had last left off, or it "could revolve around an entirely new factor," such as a surprise Apache invasion (*WN* 135). After many visits to Pima County from the late 1960s on, the characters began to develop distinct personalities, and the players began to write articles about the theoretical implications of that shift to a situation where "the players take on the attitudes of the characters they use, playing to both the spirit of the game and the time," as they put it at the beginning of 1973 (*WN* 130). "Having characters with lives of their own who find themselves in situations and then behave in character rather than simply acting in their own best interests, adds greatly to the enjoyment of the game" (*WN* 135). It is quite striking that this language—prior to the publication of *D&D*—already invoked the construction "in character" to describe how players should direct their personal figures. Or as Steve Curtis put it in another contemporary letter, their approach "really makes you play to the spirit of the game and makes each man (or woman, remembering the saloon girls) stay in character and do what each would do in a similar real-life situation. Who wins doesn't really come into it" (*WN* 137).

"Who wins" no longer matters? Once the *Western Gunfight* designers had reached that point, one of them, Mike Blake, had to submit an article to the *Wargamer's Newsletter* called "Yes, but Is It Really Wargaming?" Blake suspected "this is perhaps a question some readers may have asked themselves when reading one of the spate of articles on Skirmish wargames which have graced these pages of late." Instead of providing another battle report and meditation of the virtues of one-to-one-scale wargaming, this

piece posed a tactical problem—addressing the reader in the second-person singular. "It is noon on Sunday, 18 June 1815, on a hot dusty day near Lahne in Belgium." After describing the scene and furnishing a helpful overhead diagram, Blake built a bit of tension into this Napoleonic situation: he pointedly asked, "So, what do you do?" But before you could answer, he brought you deeper into the scene: "You are lying in the dust, peering through the heat haze at a dilapidated farm, with the sweat trickling into your eyes as your head swelters under its high, heavy and unwieldy bearskin, damning all generals as fools and wishing you were back in Paris!"

In a follow-up article, the *Western Gunfight* authors stressed how they hoped thinking about games this way would encourage "individual characters rather than faceless figures" (*WN* 141). They too felt the need for something like Carr's "memoirs" for their characters: "This development of miniature personalities, each with his or her own biography, is not a written rule, though perhaps it should be. As we have mentioned in previous articles, writing a story setting the scene for the game, and continuing the tale based on the game played, on into the next game soon develops into an interesting saga. The worth of your story depends largely on your own writing talent." Hobby wargaming had a long tradition of turning battles into stories: Robert Louis Stevenson and H. G. Wells, both fathers of the hobby, had turned their literary talents to dramatizations of their own early experiments with wargaming nearly a century earlier. But they largely narrated past conflicts—the Bristol wargamers instead applied the story-telling to set the scene before the game because "a narrative is invaluable for whipping up enthusiasm among the players." Putting all of the elements together led to something that did not seem so much like a wargame: "an informal 'campaign,' open-ended, with no particular side trying to rub out the rest—well not completely!" Victory was no longer the objective of play but instead the creation of an ongoing Western saga, serialized into individual game sessions. But was it really wargaming? And if not, why not, and which elements precipitated a shift away from wargaming? And, finally, what should we call it instead of "wargaming"?

In this Western setting, with its connections to Hollywood story-telling, the Bristol wargamers discovered something difficult to distinguish from

the "self-identification" later forged between *D&D* players and characters. Gygax read the reports about the Bristol group with interest, noting them in a letter that ran in *Wargamer's Newsletter* in May 1973, so he was directly acquainted with the Bristol ideas at the time that work toward a first draft of *D&D* was under way. Experiments with the Western setting in Lake Geneva led to games that would shape the system of *Boot Hill* later on.[28] In Dave Arneson's circle in the Twin Cities, they had similar experiences in the "Brownstone" campaign setting going back to 1971, where the exploits of Arneson's villain "El Pauncho," a local corollary to El Manolito, show that experimentation with characters in genre-based games was part of a broader movement in wargaming culture.

The name "Brownstone" signaled that the game was a variant of the Braunstein wargames in the Twin Cities pioneered by David Wesely. Under the influence of Totten's *Strategos*, Wesely ran a series of games that gave players control of individual characters in a crisis situation, characters who might not be soldiers and who might have objectives aside from military ones. Although Braunsteins had no formal rule system and were little documented at the time they transpired, Arneson would retrospectively cite them as crucial to unlocking innovations in playing characters: he credited Wesely with giving local gamers their "best boost away from traditional body counts, when you could actually win one of his Braunsteins without killing someone!" (*DW* 3). This was of course just one influence in the Twin Cities he cited, among many others: "Whether it's a 1-for-1 WW II Battle using the Korns rules or WW I Air Battles using Mike Carr's rules, there has been no lack of innovation." Mike Carr, who belonged to Arneson's Twin Cities group, played a preacher in the Brownstone setting.

If, as Featherstone believed, one-to-one scale games inspired a "self-identification" in wargamers, which in turn led to a shift toward acting in character, then we should be able to predict what happened when Gygax's *Chainmail* brought the one-to-one scale to a fantasy setting, including heroes and wizards inspired by Tolkien. Just as the Bristol wargamers would chronicle the exploits of their characters in *Wargamer's Newsletter*, Gygax sent in battle reports to that same magazine describing the conflict between the Warlock Huldor ap Skree and Count Aerll (*WN*

116). *Chainmail* emphasized fixed battles, using the rules to "refight the epic struggles related by J. R. R. Tolkien, Robert E. Howard, and other fantasy writers."[29] Gygax hoped to stage such battles in his own imaginary campaign setting, the Great Kingdom of the Castle & Crusade Society. Arneson, a member of that society, set his own fantasy adventures around the town of Blackmoor in the "Northern Marches" of the Great Kingdom. Local gamers effectively played themselves—Duane Jenkins, who had run Brownstone, became Sir Jenkins—in unique situations devised by Arneson, including dungeon explorations. Mike Carr, following his religious calling in Brownstone, became the "village priest" of Blackmoor. Arneson refereed these personal characters in a system granting him total latitude over the rules but also quantifying many attributes of character, most importantly an experience measure that let characters grow more powerful over their episodic adventures in the campaign. When Arneson shared with Gygax the playstyle developed for Blackmoor, the path to the publication of the "rules for fantastic medieval wargames campaigns" known as *D&D* had begun.

But, of course, Gygax and Arneson were not the first to try to blend wargaming with fantasy literature. Gygax's fantasy rules in *Chainmail* owed a significant debt to the prior work on adapting Tolkien for wargaming done by Leonard Patt (CO 2 (7)). And Patt's work was merely the closest ancestor in a long tradition of wargames inspired by fantasy fiction. Tony Bath pioneered these techniques, as we can see in such essays as "The Hyborian Age as a War Game Period" (1957) and "Campaigning with the Aid of Fantasy Fiction" (1967).[30] Bath ran lavish, protracted, world-scale wargame campaigns where multiple nations clashed, and to motivate international conflict he developed systems to simulate key persons in the governance of countries and their armies. Bath would sometimes award control of existing nonplayer characters to new players, as was the case with Charles Grant, who wrote in 1969, "I've had more fun out of my twelve months as Prince Vakar of Hyrkania (a greedy, treacherous and disloyal character, as I was informed) than I've had from any wargame campaign yet" (*SL* 24). Bath handed Grant a character with a preordained personality, quite a nasty one, and Grant understood it was his responsibility as a

player to direct the character's behavior accordingly. And at the same time as these wargamers drew in genre settings to inspire their games, genre fiction fans, especially in science-fiction fandom, were experimenting with ways to wring story elements out of games or to add gamelike qualities to collaboration on narratives.

COLLECTIVE AUTHORSHIP

Back in the fall of 1974, Gygax could only wonder if there was an appetite for gaming among fans of science fiction and fantasy literature. A couple of years later in a piece called "Swords & Sorcery Is a Game, Too!" he laid out his case to that potential market. "Until about two years ago . . . the swords & sorcery buff was unable to do much more than read" (*SFF* 87). With the release of *Dungeons & Dragons*, fans could take things further. Players would "set off on a series of 'adventures' which take place in towns, labyrinthine dungeons, or in the wilderness," and the referee "must set about building a whole fantasy world—large or limited—for his group of players to operate in." As a result, Gygax could report the game was "making inroads amongst college students and sword & sorcery fans. It is a game of personal adventuring which allows creativity on many levels and considerable player identification with the creation."

D&D captivated science-fiction fandom because that community was already predisposed toward games that would unlock a particular sort of communal creativity.[31] When Kevin Slimak postulated that a referee abusing the powers of the position would "lose" the game in the long run, he largely restated a sentiment that had been circulating in science-fiction fandom for a year. A key Los Angeles fan who wrote under the name "Ted Johnstone" posited of *D&D* in 1975 that "it's not a zero-sum game; the Referee, or Dungeonmaster, wins if the players enjoy his setting enough to want to come back and explore farther" (*APL* 511). It is a simple corollary that the referee "loses" if players abandon a game out of boredom or frustration. For both Slimak and Johnstone, a victory lay not in some triumph of the referee over the players but rather in that a good time was had by all. The two came from different cultures, but underlying both of their views

is the same fundamental insight: that even under the most despotic referee, players always have the power to vote with their feet and escape the game. This implicit power, at the very dawn of *D&D*, steered the wise referee toward collaborating with players instead of ignoring their preferences—though Slimak, versed in the legacy of wargaming, would already caution that "different people prefer different types of games" (*AW* 2 (12)).

Johnstone at the time authored genre novels under his real name, David McDaniel, and his perspective on how the referee might "win" recalls the path to success in writing fiction: keeping the readers satisfied. This implies that in *D&D* the referee has an opportunity, if not an obligation, to curate an experience that players will find enjoyable, perhaps a responsibility not dissimilar to that of an author. In another early 1975 piece, Johnstone explicitly rejected an approach to the game based on conflict between players and referees: "This is not supposed to be an adversarial situation—the point of the game is not to kill off the tourists but to give them an exciting ride" (*APL* 519). The referee had to work with the players, if not on their behalf, to create a story that would be thrilling enough to keep them wanting more.[32]

We should not be surprised to find Johnstone already devoted to a collaborative and authorial approach to *D&D*: a couple of decades earlier Johnstone was one of the protagonists behind Coventry, a fictional world realized by Los Angeles–area science-fiction fans in the late 1950s through a mixture of writing and live-action, in-character meetings.[33] In Coventry, participants directed the actions of their personal characters in that world through writing fiction, detailing the regions of Coventry controlled by their characters. But it was not a solipsistic exercise: they submitted their ideas as proposals to a central authority, who resolved any conflicts between participant narratives. On a few occasions, the players even met in person, in costume, and acted out their parts in negotiating treaties. Although Coventry never had a game system as such, it allowed a free-form approach to story generation that anticipated many far later developments.

Several participants in Coventry, including Johnstone, went on to be early adopters of postal *Diplomacy* in the 1960s—at first, *Diplomacy* belonged far more to the culture of science-fiction fans than it did to

wargamers. Tabletop *Diplomacy* required its seven players, each acting as the leader of an early-twentieth-century European nation spoiling for conquest, to reveal simultaneously their secret moves for a turn. In order to transpose that simultaneity to a postal game, John Boardman's pioneering adaptation required all players to mail their orders before each turn's deadline to a nonplayer *gamesmaster*—a term whose current use derives from *Diplomacy*—who was then responsible for distributing the results of moves to the players via a newsletter; Boardman called his *Graustark*. This gamesmaster exercised no personal discretion whatsoever, instead resolving any conflicting player moves exactly as the rules demand in a publicly verifiable manner.[34]

Los Angeles fans brought to postal *Diplomacy* a hint of Coventry's collaborative fiction through the medium of propaganda. Propaganda began as player-authored *Diplomacy* broadcasts distributed through game newsletters, nominally a means of intimidating or confusing rivals with public statements, but in practice propaganda let each gamer fictionalize the game world in his or her own way. These statements could pass themselves off as pronouncements by a country's leader, where the player took up the pen of the leader as a character; propagandists would hail or dismiss one another's public statements to serve their diplomatic ends. The propaganda narratives sometimes digressed from the intended setting of the game and ventured into whatever subjects the players found interesting, injecting a strand of fiction that could be tangential at best to game events. Johnstone himself has the distinction of authoring the first piece of postal *Diplomacy* propaganda in *Graustark* 2 in 1963, and he thus set the tone for decades of scandal sheets that would follow. Both Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, the authors of *D&D*, were veteran postal *Diplomacy* players, and records of their own protracted in-game propaganda survive today: their creation, *D&D*, would not be the first game to serve as a collective story-generation engine.

Some board games building on the principles of *Diplomacy* placed constraints on the players' behavior. In *Dynasty* (1969), which describes itself "as a socio-economical-political game" set in feudal East Asia in which each of the four to eight players is assigned a random "Personality." For example,

the Personality briefing stipulates that if you are playing the Emperor, "you are forceful and thoughtful," "just and reasonably compassionate," and will "reward those who obey and assist you." The description of each briefing ends with a phrase something like "For as long as you are the Emperor, your actions must be consistent with your personality stated above." Under various circumstances, players can end up switching roles: if the Warlord supplants the Emperor, say, then the rules dictate that each "must now play the game according to your new 'personality.'" This game was known in Los Angeles circles, and Jack Harness even "invented a playable game combining Monopoly and Dynasty, called Revenge!"[35] Other fan activities took *Diplomacy* into far less structured activities. The *Diplomacy* variant game "Slobbovia," conducted by mail starting in 1972, inspired players to serialize protracted comical adventures by adjusting the *Diplomacy* rules to make victory more or less impossible: with propaganda as the end rather than the means, individual issues of the *Slobpolitan Zhurnal* could easily exceed 25,000 words.[36]

In the shadowy zone between games culture and science-fiction fandom, all sorts of peculiar, hybrid beasts were born, some more viable than others.[37] In the early 1970s, new varieties of postal games offered players an opportunity to act "in character" in more open-ended games. They followed the precepts of postal *Diplomacy* in requiring a central authority to coordinate player contributions, though the powers that this referee wielded over the state of game world varied. Some experiments gave the referee absolute powers familiar from wargaming; others created a system closer to collective game design.

Perhaps the closest cousins of *D&D*, the Midgard family of postal games granted thirty or so players the characters of rulers, heroes, or merchants in a communal world. Hartley Patterson's earliest efforts to organize a Midgard game, as documented in *Midgard* 1 in January 1971—before the release of *Chainmail*—relied heavily on an "umpire or gamesmaster . . . to whom the players send their moves and from whom by return they learn the results of their actions," a design that borrows from postal *Diplomacy* but is leveraged to support a very different sort of game, one more reminiscent of free *Kriegsspiel*.[38] Crucially, Patterson imagined that the game

would have no victory conditions and would be so open-ended that the development of the rules would effectively be part of the game: "The rules will not be permanent and will be changed by the gamesmaster and players as the game progresses." Patterson recognized that he had positioned his game between the two cultures: "Basically I'm trying to balance Midgard on the fence between two at present totally separate fan groupings, whether it will succeed I just don't know" (*MG* 2). In order to build support outside of science-fiction fandom circles, Patterson even advertised in wargaming zines such as the *Wargamer's Newsletter*.

The viability of crossovers between the two cultures was boosted enormously by wargamers' receptiveness to gaming as characters. Hal Broome had been working on a Middle-earth wargame of his own devising in 1972 when he first learned of Midgard and its underlying principles, which quickly changed his plans. He insisted that "when Gandalf (played by J. Doe e.g.) runs across Frodo (J. Smith), they communicate as the characters do" (*SN* 9). This extended not just to adopting the voice of a character but also required that "players act in character and not have alliances that would contradict" the setting of the *Lord of the Rings*, as in having Gandalf team up with Sauron. Acting "in character" rather than according to the player's strategic or tactical interests became just as important in the fantasy setting as it was to the First World War flying aces of *Fight in the Skies* or the high-plains drifters of *Western Gunfight*.

The collaborative development of rules became a hallmark of games in the Midgard tradition and a key way to allow players to attempt anything. In 1972, Tom Drake's solicitation of players for Midgard II represented it as his main responsibility as the referee in the game: "One of the basic rules of this game is innovate. Use your imagination. The rules are simply the norm, a set of guidelines expressing the underlying physical, economic and natural laws. If you want something, or want to do something, not covered in the rules, suggest it to me, and if it doesn't violate the basic tenets of the game, we'll work out a set of rules between us."[39] Players openly discussed the rules and potential modifications in Drake's *Midgard Forum*, and from its sixth issue forward they even filled out a "Voting Sheet" covering proposed rule changes.

But how democratic could the system of a Midgard game really be? Tellingly, the first question Drake's player base voted on was "Are you willing to allow the GM to change a rule if it results in an obvious inequity as long as the change is made impartially and proposed in the next ish [issue] of *MF*?" (*MF* 6). The measure passed unanimously; interventions like this would surely be required for the smooth operation of a game. Similarly, Steve Messamer wrote in February 1972 about his plans for a fantasy game based on Midgard wherein "players are free to do as they like in the framework of the rules, the 'rational laws,' which are as loosely formulated as possible. This puts a lot of responsibility on the GM to interpret the rules and determine situations not covered by the rules explicitly. He also makes the players creative (hopefully)" (*SN* 9). The *Kam-Pain* (1974) rules used by the Midgard Ltd. game explicitly summarized a principle called "the GM's Cloak," which empowered the gamesmaster to "freely alter or delete existing rules, and add new ones" because the "rules make no pretensions to completeness or covering every contingency—that's why there is a Gamesmaster."[40] The language of *Kam-Pain* is notable for how unilaterally it bestows on the gamesmaster this authority to shape the rules or improvise new ones—latitude that may remind us of Korns—whereas we might sense in Drake's Midgard II phrasing more collaboration, or negotiation between the referee and the player.

Some of these experiments found little cause to empower the referee. Veterans of the British version of Midgard conceived the game Elsinore, which in 1974 lighted on a play-by-mail collective authorship structure similar to Coventry—but unlike Coventry, the organizer of Elsinore explicitly deemed it a "fantasy game," insisting that despite its lack of a recognizable system, it had crossed that vague boundary between authorship and play. A contemporary review by Lewis Pulsipher in *Supernova* summarized, "It is very freely structured. Each player writes a story about himself and his activities as a sorcerer, merchant, or whatever in the fantasy world. The GM puts these stories together, printing all but the secret parts, rejecting parts that don't mesh with other stories."[41] The role of the gamesmaster in such games, apart from establishing the initial setting and marshalling players, is effectively editorial, necessary only for reconciling conflicts like those in

postal *Diplomacy*; the players collectively wield total power over the state of the game world. In some respects, this was the diametrical opposite of "the GM's Cloak" because the gamesmaster of Elsinore had only the authority to select and curate excerpts from players' contributions.

The slow pace of postal play hampered the growth and viability of Midgard and Elsinore, but it did not prevent numerous attempts to build on their framework.[42] Most of these activities in science-fiction fandom remained quite obscure, so early witnesses of *D&D* ignorant of these precursors and parallels found its character-playing system revolutionary. *D&D* positioned itself in its foreword as a tool for "those whose imaginations know no bounds," for fans of "Howard's Conan Saga" or "Fritz Leiber's Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser" rather than for "those wargamers who lack imagination."[43] In the early, impecunious days of TSR, Gary Gygax relied heavily on pseudofictional articles presenting dramatized accounts of *D&D* game sessions to serve as free advertising, including his stories "The Giant's Bag" (1974) and "Expedition into the Black Reservoir" (1975), which mimic the fantasy fiction that inspired the game.[44] Gygax marketed *D&D* as a wargame but also positioned it from the start as a means to let players participate in and generate stories—recalling the tradition of Wells and Stevenson—as he dearly hoped this would appeal to the huge fan community surrounding fantasy and science fiction. Midgard players were certainly among the earliest adopters; Midgard II and Midgard Ltd. alike began folding *D&D* rules into their systems in 1974.

News of *D&D* spilled over from Arneson's Minneapolis gaming group to local science-fiction fans but first reached the broader fandom through accounts written by early cross-over fans such as Mark Swanson. Swanson epitomized the transitional player who devoted equal time to wargaming and science fiction as he straddled national organizations dedicated to these two cultures in addition to local ones at the university he attended, MIT. For the benefit of Los Angeles–area science-fiction fans, in November 1974 Swanson wrote up a short narrative concerning his character Helmuth, who is betrayed by his companions, including a certain "Lama Slimke," played by Kevin Slimak (*APL* 497).

Los Angeles fans long versed in Coventry and postal *Diplomacy* were no strangers to hybrid story/game entertainments, but even they puzzled over *D&D*. Swanson's story provoked an intense curiosity in Los Angeles science-fiction fandom, which demonstrates how unfamiliar *D&D*'s intersection of stories and games was. Hearing of it for that first time, Ted Johnstone remarked that "the game sounds fascinating" (*APL* 499). The game's rules, when imported by fans from San Francisco, would find fertile ground in Los Angeles, prompting Lee Gold to write up an account of her introduction to the game in the local fanzine *APA-L* 508. Fred Patton, a longtime community member, reacted with bafflement: "The *Dungeons & Dragons* description is fascinating, but I can't visualize the rules of the game that could result in such moves"; and another fan, June Moffatt, inferred from the expedition reports that "any one of the games makes a good adventure story" (*APL* 509).

D&D combined the plasticity of miniature wargames with the boundless creativity of authorship, which unsurprisingly meant that its experience depended crucially on its implementation—that is, on how referees and players chose to play within its "guidelines." Early adopters in different communities approached play with conflicting expectations about the function of the referee: some projected onto the game the omnipotent, ostensibly impartial referee of wargaming; others saw the almost editorial referee of postal *Diplomacy* and science-fiction fandom games in the tradition of Coventry. Although these communities were not completely isolated from one another, the lack of any early consensus about the referee's duties and authority proved a key catalyst for the disputes that would soon develop.

We can discern in the early literature a fundamental disagreement about the relationship between players, referees, and designers in *D&D*. If the referee is "playing with/against the adventurers," which is it—does the referee have to pick sides? Initially, this debate was about the interpretation of the original design, about identifying and weighing the different ways referees and players preferred to approach such games in practice, but it quickly began to develop into a more fundamental discussion of what kind of game *D&D* should ideally be.

EARLY PERCEPTIONS OF DIFFERENCE

We might observe that the initial players of *Dungeons & Dragons* divided into two camps—with due caveats about overlapping membership and interests—that reflected the two cultures of wargaming and science-fiction fandom: there were games people and story people. Although both cultures had experimented with referees operating game worlds for players in various ways, it would not be grossly inaccurate to say that the games culture brought with it some assumptions about adversarial interactions, whereas the story culture focused more on collaboration toward some mutual creative goal. Maybe a science-fiction fan would expect a referee to act as a facilitator, but a wargamer would be unsurprised to find a referee enforcing discipline like a martinet. Early adopters would quickly sense this division, and they became very concerned about which way was the right way.

So, was *D&D* meant to be adversarial or collaborative? We might be tempted to consult the cover of the game and resolve the matter by pointing to the word *wargame* there. It is, however, easy to dismiss this verbiage as the closest approximation the authors could themselves muster, being so steeped in that culture, though they tacitly meant something more expansive. In one of Arneson's first communications to Gygax about the Blackmoor campaign, he stressed how vital a "sadistic referee" was to the experience of the game, and there is no shortage of adversarial accounts of the play of Blackmoor.[45] But for a game that is so plastic, so insistent on being merely "guidelines to follow in designing your own fantastic-medieval campaign," how much weight can authorial intention really carry? *D&D* as a phenomenon was realized largely by its practitioners, the people who sat down to play it. The implementation of *D&D* depended hugely on the backgrounds and interpretations of its players and most of all of its referee.

During the first year of its existence, *D&D* reached only a few thousand players, and those pioneers needed time to develop local norms within their own gaming groups. Because *D&D* is above all a social game, no one reached an understanding of it in isolation, and players constantly searched for like-minded enthusiasts to recruit for adventures. The outreach of gaming groups and the mingling that happened through conventions and fanzines began to bring groups of players into dialogue with

each other—only to discover that they had independently settled on very different practices. "Part of the fun," Los Angeles fan Jack Harness wrote in 1975, "is in discovering some new enclave of players and seeing what they decided to do with the rules, telling them how you interpreted them," and so on (*EM* 21). Many early adopters encountered the game at college, and when they returned to their hometowns for vacation, they might uncover surprisingly different playstyles entrenched there. The controversy initially centered on symptoms rather than root causes: early adopters accused one another of playing games that were either too lenient or too dangerous. Generalizing from these initial reactions to differences in the community, a few trailblazing fans would soon start to position these disagreements as theoretical in nature, assembling a hasty framework for resolving conflicts about the proper approach to play.

In four large cities with communities of early *D&D* adopters—Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, and Boston—cross-pollination proceeded quite rapidly. Each of these major cities boasted lengthy pedigrees in both science-fiction fandom and wargames, and each supported several independent clusters of dedicated players. None, however, was very close to the midwestern roots of *D&D*, where the influence of the game's creators might hold greater sway. In keeping with hobby best practices, these coastal groups began publicly recording the state of their campaigns and hosting visitors unfamiliar with their ways. Many prominent Boston fans experienced *D&D* through the MIT Strategic Games Society, a wargaming club dating back to the mid-1960s; many Los Angeles *D&D* fans organized around the legendary Los Angeles Science Fiction Society, which housed the rules at its clubhouse and spread play reports through its weekly fanzine *APA-L*. Los Angeles science-fiction fan Lee Gold founded the early hobby's most influential monthly journal, *Alarums & Excursions*, in June 1975; about sixth months later, interest was sufficient to warrant MIT veterans Mark Swanson and Glenn Blacow's publishing a similar Boston-area venture, the *Wild Hunt*, which nominally focused on advice for referees.

Through these fanzines, early adopters aspired "to arrive at a truly intelligent version" of the game, in the words of Ted Johnstone (*APL* 523). Although TSR had in 1975 augmented and clarified the *D&D* rules

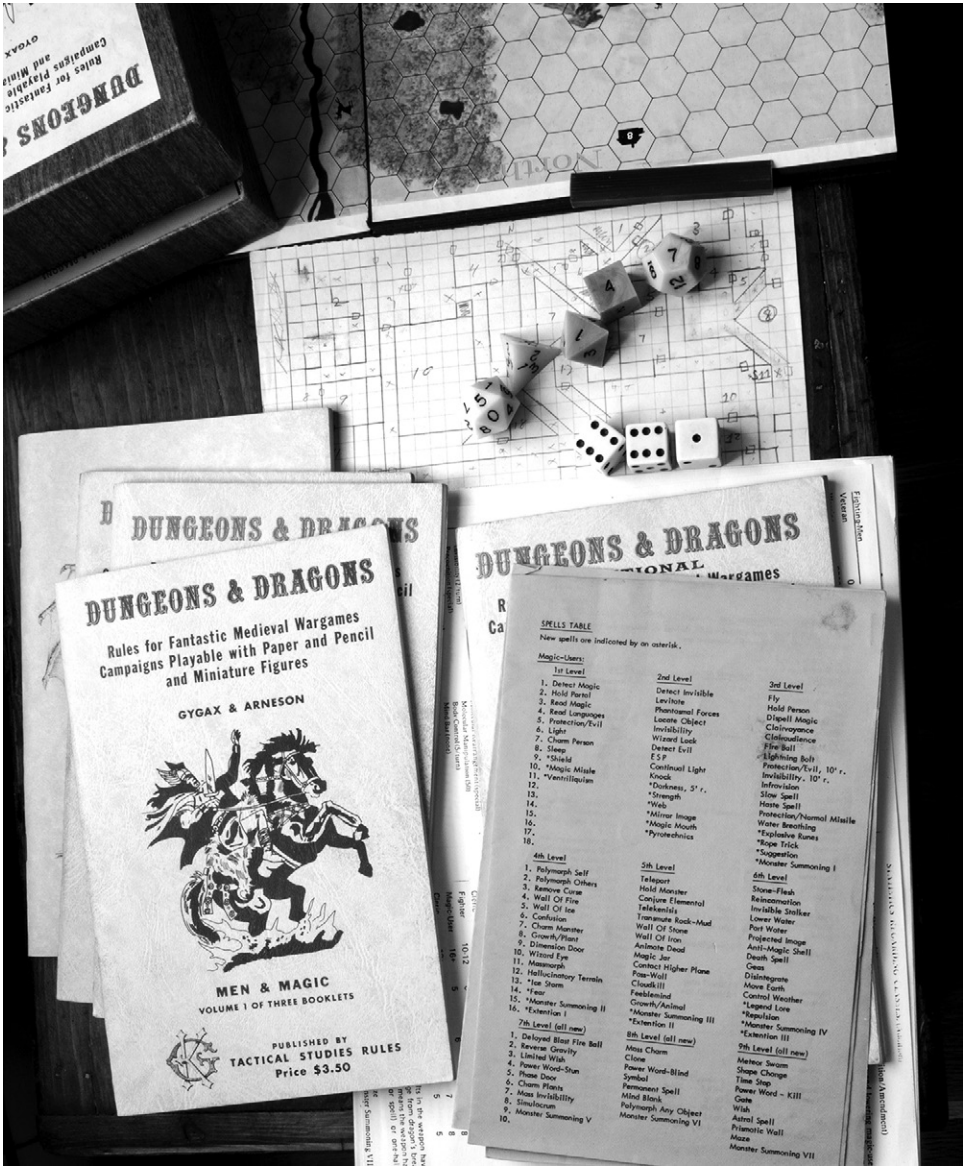

Figure 1.1

Materials for the playing of *Dungeons & Dragons*, circa 1975, including game manuals, dice, maps, and charts.

with a first supplement, *Greyhawk*, many players rejected the changes it introduced and began to push back against the authority of its publisher, as immortalized by Mark Swanson's rallying cry from the East Coast in *APA-L* 523: "D&D is too important to leave to Gary Gygax." Owen Hannifen echoed in mid-1975 from the West Coast that "by now, Gygax is just another dungeon-master" (*AE* 2). So much for authorial intention, but this left authority in short supply, as players who roamed between isolated pockets of gamers soon discovered.

In the first issue of her fanzine, Gold reported on visiting a nearby *D&D* group at Caltech. This group belonged to the Spartan wargames club, which would soon publish its early *D&D* variant "Warlock" (1975). We might say that Gold came more from the story culture and that she visited a group more invested in the games culture. In their midst, Gold found that, compared to her own group, "the Dungeonmaster is playing much more *against* the characters."[46] Her assessment corroborated Kevin Slimak's concerns about the problems of antagonism incumbent on the power imbalance between the referee and the players.

The shock of encountering unexpectedly adversarial dungeons and referees echoes throughout the early literature of conventions and the trip reports of itinerant gamers. After Wayne Shaw visited Nicolai Shapero's Bay Area dungeon Stormgate at the North American Science Fiction Convention in 1975, his write-up in *A&E* 5 described a very deadly dungeon, the sort of place where the party went through eight expendable "Button Pusher" nonplayer characters to deal with traps. If you visit Stormgate, Shaw promised, "my Cleric will read your characters' epitaphs." A few issues later, in *A&E* 8, Shapero countered, "Whoever said this business was supposed to be easy? And as I recall your group had less than 40% casualties—which for Stormgate is fairly light. Usually, only about 40% of the original party gets back to the surface from the 7th level." This elicited pushback from Glenn Blacow in Boston, who called that number "unreasonable" (*AE* 10). Blacow would later clarify that a particularly deadly dungeon in Boston belonging to Kevin Slimak killed around half of its experienced visitors—though it conveniently provided easy access to resurrection services (*AE* 14).

The most famous example of early players encountering a surprisingly deadly dungeon is the collective experience at the first Origins convention in 1975, in Gygax's infamous "Tomb of Horrors" tournament, which inspired a later *D&D* module. Designed as a sieve to winnow down large parties of fifteen adventurers to hardy survivors, the Tomb is a gauntlet of arbitrary death traps: collapsing ceilings, spiked pits, poison clouds, merciless ambushes, and unforeseeable disintegrations. Mark Swanson emerged from a botched run disillusioned with Gygax's style as a referee: "Play a Gygax game if you like pits, secret doors, and Dungeon Roulette. Play a game such as in *A&E* if you prefer monsters, talking/arguing/fighting with the chance met characters and a more exciting game" (*AE* 4). Reports like this further eroded confidence in the authority of the game's publisher.

This communal disapprobation of lethality inevitably inspired an equal and opposite form of censure: condemnation of overgenerous referees by hardened players who found some of the dungeons they visited too gentle. For example, the Caltech group, which seemed "brutal" to outsiders, reportedly did not permit players to bring characters from other groups to their sessions because they refused to accept the experience points awarded by more lenient referees. This may sound draconian, but consider a report in February 1976 from Long Beach in *A&E* 8 by Steve McIntosh, which casually mentioned that he ran a 250th-level Magic-user and that another player in his group ran a 1,000th-level character—just two dozen months after *D&D* was first published. Blacow helpfully estimated that a 1,000th-level character would require on the order of 100 million experience points and that even making 20,000 experience points per week in dungeon crawls (no trivial feat) would only yield the necessary sum after a century (*AE* 10). He added that the highest-level Magic-user playing in his own Edwyr dungeon was 9th level, and this after nearly two years of play.

Thus, a good amount of early commentary in *A&E* that did not bemoan the lethality of visited dungeons instead lashed out at the "grossness" of foreign gaming groups in which characters seemingly amassed unchecked power. Tales of outlandish rewards trivialized the accomplishments of more modest gamers, and so for many fans they struck a personal chord

that could trigger personal attacks. But for the publishers of *D&D*, this augured poorly in more fundamental ways. As alarming as it was to see disputes among players threatening the social networks necessary to spread and enjoy their product, TSR's owners had a more practical challenge: they hoped to sell future supplements, but they had to tailor those rules to specific levels of adventurers. Their *Greyhawk* supplement provided spells and systems to accommodate Magic-users of the 22nd level, up from the 16th in their original game, but what was the prospect of marketing to a fragmented community where some characters never rose to even to 10th level, but others skyrocketed to the 250th level?

In a vein similar to Slimak's maxim that "different people prefer different types of games," Gygax himself urged a collaborative approach in his essay "*D&D* Is Only as Good as the DM" in 1976: "While adventurers in a D&D campaign must grade their play to their referee, it is also incumbent upon the Dungeonmaster to suit his campaign to the participants" (*SR* 2 (2)). But from there he pivoted to censure those referees who succumbed to the temptation to turn "dungeons into a veritable gift shoppe of magical goodies," where "experience points are heaped upon the undeserving heads of players" who quickly rise scores of levels. Casting the referee as solely responsible is in keeping with Gygax's public statements about the intended role of the referee, who "will act as arbiter of all fortune from henceforward, and his word will be absolute law" (*EU* 4/5). Gygax now inverted the concern that Slimak expressed about abusing the power of the referee: rather than taking an overly antagonistic stance toward the players, the referee can be too eager to make the game satisfying by doling out excessive rewards.

Gygax encouraged referees to fall back on the impartiality of dice: "If a favorite player stupidly puts himself into a situation where he is about to be killed, let the dice tell the story and KILL him" (*SR* 2 (2)). This encouragement to "let the dice tell the story" might serve well as a wargamer's motto, though Gygax backpedaled from this lethality slightly, conceding that at times "Divine Intervention" on the referee's part should preserve worthy adventurers—but only those who have earned it. How that karmic justice should be allotted, Gygax left to the referee's discretion, like much else in the game.[47]

Gods, Demi-Gods & Heroes (1976), an official supplement assigning classes, levels, abilities, and hit points to deities in the same manner as *D&D* characters, declared in its foreword an explicit purpose of trying "to reach the 'Monty Hall' DMs" who run "'giveaway' campaigns" in order shame them into rewarding characters more parsimoniously.[48] Players quickly countered that the blame for level inflation rested solely on TSR; Caltech referee Nick Smith retorted, "The original *D&D* rules provide a system whereby characters can advance indefinitely (as it says in Book I itself), and *Greyhawk* does its best to make it easy" (*AE* 14). Indeed, the presence of a system in which characters were able to increase in power necessarily steered players toward progression as the goal of play. But Glenn Blacow concurred with TSR that there was a problem when "a lot of games are so magic-rich that your ultra-level characters are so well-equipped that they outclass the gods in special abilities" (*AE* 16).

Perceptive readers may have observed that Blacow, an unusually prolific early commentator, railed against lethality in one breath but then against generosity in the next. This provoked a sharp rejoinder from Shapero: "Look, man, you can't have it both ways. On the one hand, you say you want to avoid having the game turn into a more or less automatic moving players upwards, and on the other hand, you scream in agony over 60% causality figures" (*AE* 11). But Blacow defended his position as one that avoids extremes and seeks the proper middle ground—as his views developed further, we shall find Blacow's search for this balance looming large in early role-playing game theory. By the beginning of 1976, Blacow already had enough perspective on the matter to include in the first issue of *Wild Hunt* a "Philosophy Note: some Dungeon Masters take the position that they are trying to help the characters gain wealth, rank, etc., while others brag about the kill ratio in their games. I've had some people tell me Edwyr was far too dangerous, while some others have griped that it's too soft." Notably, this was also the subject of Blacow's three-page essay "Balance in D&D," which he circulated through *A&E* 12. Without balance, Blacow argued, "a campaign can deteriorate into either a gigantic giveaway or into a continual slaughter of player characters." The essay struck a chord among early readers: it would be quickly reprinted in issue 20 of the British zine

News from Bree, the first evidence that there was an audience for critical literature about this intriguing new game.

Blacow's essay "Balance in D&D" refocused discussion in *A&E* onto the fundamental questions of the degree to which players and referees should compete or collaborate—but the division would persist. Sherna Burley responded in the next issue that "playing D&D as a competition between DM and player can result in some ugly scenes. The DM holds too many of the high cards. When I DM, I'm out to give the players a good adventure, with rewards or penalties fairly meted out. I don't have anything to win or lose myself except for the satisfaction of having been a fair and just Deity." She then echoed Ted Johnstone's maxim "D&D is not a zero-sum game." But Lew Wolkoff replied that "D&D is a mental challenge, the DM vs. the players. There's more of them, but he gets to set things up in advance" (*AE* 14). He clarified that "the DM's challenge, though, isn't to wipe out the expedition. He/she is supposed to prepare the field so the players know they've been in a fight, but where the challenge was in using their own abilities—not dice or gross treasure—to survive." Fervor for one approach or the other made it hard to gain the perspective to see matters from both sides: Charlie Luce summarized the situation in 1976 with "I have seen in *A&E* quite a bit of what I call the 'One True Way' syndrome" (*AE* 13).

The nascent *D&D* community faced a significant crisis over these perceived differences in play style, but the intuition that a particular game was either too competitive or too cooperative was only a symptom of a deeper divide among practitioners—a divide we might say that resulted from an ambiguity fundamental to the design of the game, which the hobby then still struggled to articulate. But as Thornton's player typology suggested, the wargaming community was long aware of such divisions in the community, that outside the mainstream of "fun" wargamers there were people who wanted to steer games toward excesses of aggressive competition or dispassionate simulation. Determining the root causes of these differences would become the first and most urgent task of role-playing game theory, and the early exploration of these differences exposed tensions built in to the most basic structure of the game.

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