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Gaming Between Places and Identities: An Investigation of Table-Top Role-playing Games as Liminoid Phenomena

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Abstract

This work explores the links between table-top role-playing games and the cultural anthropologist Victor Turner's theory of liminoid phenomena, as described in his seminal essay *Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: an Essay in Comparative Symbology*. It explores the possibility of using Turner's theory to better understand these games and their context within the broader cultural paradigm. It is argued that the complexity of these (and other) games, in particular the intricacy of interactions and behaviours that arise when players interpret potentially subversive written rule-sets, makes them hard to classify succinctly. There is however a great potential for linking table-top role-playing to a wider body of academic theory regarding the function of ritual and pseudo-ritual behaviour in post-industrial societies through the auspices of Turner's work.

Declaration

I declare that this dissertation/thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Digital Animation in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

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15th day of February 2010

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Contents

Abstract ii

Declaration iii

Acknowledgments iv

List of Images vi

Introduction

Ritual Play? 1

Chapter 1

An Investigation of Table Top Role-playing Games as a Medium of Play 4

Chapter 2

An Exploration of Victor Witter Turner's Theory of Liminoid Phenomena 27

Chapter 3

Table-top Role-playing Games as Liminoid Phenomena 40

Chapter4

Conclusions 75

Works Cited 83

List of Images

Figure 1

Rulebooks 5

Figure 2

Character Sheet 7

Figure 3

Polyhedral Dice 12

Figure 4

Victor Burgin: ***What Does Possession Mean to You?***

7% of our Population Owns 84% of Our Wealth 55

Figure 5

Cover of *Violence:*

The Roleplaying Game of Egregious and Repulsive Bloodshed 60

Introduction: Ritual Play?

In his seminal essay *Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual* Victor Turner solidified his concept of the liminoid as a category of proto-liminal activity that could more easily be applied to the complexities and nuances of post-industrial societies than the traditional concept of the ritualistic liminal developed by Arnold van Gennep in *The Rites of Passage*. This category of liminoid activity has since been employed by several scholars studying traditional table-top role-playing games (TTRPGs) to contextualise these games as rituals of contemporary society, allowing their analysis to benefit from the wealth of writing on the liminoid produced by Turner, as well as other scholars such as Richard Schechner[1] who employed and expanded his theories.

This research paper aims to explore the relationship between Victor Turner's anthropological theories of the liminoid, and TTRPGs. The intent is to engage in a close reading of Turner's writing relating specifically to the liminoid.[2] This is then tied to an analysis of the existing literature on role-playing that deals with the phenomenon through the lens of Turner's theory,[3] as well as a discussion of the texts (rulebooks) that form the foundation of traditional TTRPGs. The objective is to arrive at a set of conclusions regarding the relationship between Turner's body of theory relating to the rituals of contemporary society and an activity within that society which can be interpreted as ritualistic. Based on the conclusions drawn from such an analysis, hypotheses are

[1] Schechner worked closely with Turner and applied his theories to performance studies (Turner, 15-17).
[2] In particular his essay *Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology.*
[3] Notably, the work of Martin Ericsson and Christopher J. Dyszelski.

proposed as to the precise nature of this connection, which may serve to further situate it within the small, but growing, body of theory relating to gaming.

The body of scholarly theory on role-playing games is small to say the least. It is growing however, particularly through the auspices of McFarland Publishing and the recent arrival of the *International Journal of Role-Playing*, as well as several notable publications from northern Europe where live action role-playing (LARP)[4] has become particularly popular.[5] As with any fledgling body of academic knowledge, much of the focus of scholarly investigation into the medium has been aimed at acquiring an extensive, broadly conclusive, and workable definition that will help to facilitate an understanding of the phenomenon that is theoretically complete, and will be able to place it within an effective context for further analysis. The attempts to do so have been wide ranging and often seemingly incompatible at first glance, ranging from the ethnographic (Gary Alan Fine[6]) to the psychoanalytic (Michelle Nephew[7]). Martin Ericsson proposes that in trying to

> define our nascent art form … theories have attempted to create borders and definitions for what role-playing is – or in many cases, what good role-playing is. This quest for definition has thus far led to the birth of a number of strict and fairly unforgiving descriptive models, useful as tools for defining the uniqueness of role-playing in relation to other performative genres such as dance, sports, re-enactment, stage theatre and child's play (16).

He goes on to propose an expansive treatment of the subject, taking into account more well established academic theories such as those relating to performance studies, arguing that this might be useful in constructing a more inclusive theory for LARP, providing a

[4] See Chapter 1 and 3 for a discussion of LARP and its relationship to TTRPGs.
[5] See *Beyond Role and Play: Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination* (edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros) for a collection of academic essays produced by predominantly Nordic scholars relating mainly to LARP.
[6] In his book *Shared Fantasy: Role-playing Games as Social Worlds.*
[7] In her essay *Playing With Identity: Unconscious Desire and Role-playing Games.*

mechanism through which it might be situated within the boundaries of a broader and more comprehensive academic discourse (16).

This research report extends and interrogates this proposition by investigating the possibility of applying Turner's theory of liminoid phenomena to TTRPGs. Beginning with an overview of the specifics of table-top role-playing, its history and conventions (Chapter 1), it then moves on to a discussion of Turner's theories with a specific focus on his theories of the liminoid (Chapter 2). In Chapter 3 the discussion continues into an investigation of the applicability of his theories within the context of TTRPGs, relating these to the academic theory that exists on the subject of role-playing as well as the texts that inform the play dynamic of these games. Fringe issues such as the prevalence of extreme violence as a modality of play are highlighted, as well as the implications of defining TTRPGs as contested conceptual spaces. Focussing on the participatory and subjective aspects of play as informing the potential for gaming to be viewed as a liminoid activity, it is argued that a complex relationship exists between play and culture that might be better understood through the study of TTRPGs, regardless of the fact that their classification as liminoid phenomena is at times questionable. The possibilities for this form of analysis are intriguing since they present the prospect of situating TTRPGs within the broader field of ritual and performance, and providing a useful tool for those who wish to study these games in the context of a broader social discourse. It is however, not an easy terrain to negotiate, especially due to the great wealth of imaginative possibility provided by the average TTRPG.

Chapter 1: An Investigation of Table Top Role-playing Games as a Medium of Play

This chapter begins with a description of what a table top role-playing game[8] (TTRPG) is and how these games are typically played. It then moves on to a brief discussion of the history of these games, providing an historical context and discussing some of the ways in which they have been influenced by the broader social structures in the context of which they were created. It will end with an overview of, and introduction to, the body of critical theory which has sprung up around these games, with special attention given to the way in which Victor Turner's theory of liminoid[9] phenomena has been employed by some scholars in their analyses of TTRPGs.

Most TTRPGs are defined to a large extent by the rules which facilitate play, these mechanics are central to the play dynamic, and what follows is a short discussion of the importance of this aspect of the play dynamic. *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*), originally published in 1974, is commonly regarded as the first fully fledged, commercial TTRPG (Mackay, 15). Now in its 4th edition, the *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook*[10] begins with a section describing what a TTRPG is. It maintains that:

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[8] It is typical in TTRPG parlance to refer to both the rules codified in the play manuals, and the act of playing, as the game. This is an important point to bear in mind since it highlights the interdependence of these two elements in the TTRPG. Neither is complete without the other, and the context of usage determines the particular status of the word 'game' throughout the following chapters.

[9] Turner characterised liminoid phenomena as instances of post-industrial cultural life that fell beyond the boundaries of normative societal structures. He regarded them as similar to the liminal structures present in the rituals of pre-industrial cultures, though he argued that liminoid phenomena were not limited to the ritual sphere, but were, rather, often associated with periods of leisure or 'free' time. Furthermore, he argued that liminoid phenomena had the potential to subvert and change societal structures, while liminal phenomena were generally supportive of cultural norms, albeit through a complex process of inversion (Turner, 53-55). These concepts will be discussed in far greater detail in Chapter 2.

[10] *D&D* has three main rulebooks: *The Player's Handbook*, which covers the creation of characters, and most of the game mechanics that are used by the players during play; *The Dungeon Master's Guide* which covers the rules pertinent to the game master (*D&D* refers to the game master as the 'Dungeon Master'), and *The Monster Manual*, which details the behaviour, habitat and tactics of the creatures that inhabit the *D&D* world, as well as their relevant game statistics.

> A roleplaying game is a storytelling game that has elements of the games of make-believe that many of us played as children. However, a roleplaying game such as D&D provides form and structure, with robust gameplay and endless possibilities.
>
> D&D is a fantasy-adventure game. You create a character, team up with other characters (your friends), explore a world, and battle monsters. While the D&D game uses dice and miniatures[11], the action takes place in your imagination. There, you have the freedom to create anything you can imagine, with an unlimited special effects budget and the technology to make anything happen (Heinsoo et al, 6).

The Players Handbook stresses that almost everything that characterises a typical TTRPG session may change according to circumstance and the whims of the players. Typically the most constant factors in a game are the rules themselves, which usually would have been bought in the form of a book or downloaded from the internet as a PDF (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: The first and fourth edition D&D Player's Handbooks, containing many of the rules governing play.

[11] The 4th edition of *D&D* has returned somewhat to its war-gaming roots in that its combat system uses miniatures to represent the characters. This is not typical of most TTRPGs currently on the market.

However these rules are often modified by the players, supplemented by house rules that are customised to the style of play of a group. Gary Alan Fine wrote an ethnography of TTRPG players first published in 1983, entitled *Shared Fantasy: Role-playing Games as Social Worlds*. He argues that: "Describing the 'typical' gamer by a single example is impossible, probably more misleading than instructive" (47). As such it is difficult to extrapolate any definite statements about a typical TTRPG session.

Nonetheless, TTRPGs are often played by three to six people, sitting around a table, thus the moniker "table top". TTRPGs are also sometimes referred to as paper and dice, or traditional RPGs. The players are divided into two distinct categories. Most of the players will have created a *character* according to the rules of the game system that they are playing (for example *D&D*). Typically the character is represented by a collection of numbers, recorded on a piece of paper often called a character sheet (see Figure 2). These numbers represent the personal qualities of the character, for example how strong, intelligent or charismatic she/he is.[12] They are often referred to as statistics, attributes, or just stats for short. Different rules provide different ways of generating these stats. Some rely on chance, using dice to generate character statistics, others allot each player a number of points that they can use to buy stats, many other systems also exist. While early TTRPG systems tended to only have a short list of about 6 to 10 stats, contemporary game systems often supplement these with a list of skills that the character may potentially become proficient in, such as the ability to scale sheer surfaces, or fight

[12] It is important to realise that the selection of stats provided for a character in a given game can heavily influence that games typical style of play. Early games (like *D&D*) for example, tended to favour physical stats, while some later games such as *Vampire: the Masquerade* provided more stats for mental and social attributes. Essentially the stats that are provided tend to delineate the boundaries of play to some extent. For example, characters in *Vampire* have a stat called "appearance" which determines how physically attractive the character is considered to be. Since *D&D* has no equivalent stat, it is unlikely that the physical attractiveness of a player's character would become an important factor in the narrative of a *D&D* game, whereas in *Vampire* this is a much more likely possibility.

with a sword, or haggle with merchants. Often these skills supplement a relevant stat or attribute so that if a character has a high score in both her/his "manipulation" stat and "politics" skill[13], she/he might make a good politician in the game-world.[14]



Figure 2: The character sheet provided in the D&D fourth edition *Player's Handbook*.

[13] The term "skill" is often used quite loosely.
[14] These stats are taken from *Vampire: the Masquerade* (Achilli et al).

The imaginative aspect of character creation should also not be overlooked. Players are given a choice when creating their characters. The distinct capabilities of characters are delineated to a large extent by the specificities of the rules system being used, but the personality and individual history of the character is left mainly up to the player. Mackay has argued that:

> Players draw not only from the drama sphere of the game system to create their characters, but from the cultural sphere as well, assembling their characters from their memory. These memories were once embodied in the real, non-diegetic environment of the player – everything from day-to-day interaction with others who leave impressions on the player to memorable images culled from the players' experience with art (77).

The choices made by players regarding how they create and play their characters are relevant to the argument presented in this paper since the aspect of preference is central to Turner's theory of the liminoid. Furthermore the choices made available to the players through the auspices of the game system will help to clarify the distinction made between post-liminal and liminoid phenomena, discussed in more detail in the third chapter.

Typically one player is distinct from the others and is often referred to as the "game master" (GM). While the other players each control a single character, the GM controls the world that those characters exist in and the non-player characters (NPCs) that they interact with. The GM is usually considered to be the adjudicator of the rules and any disputes that might arise during the course of play. Traditionally the GM was afforded an almost godlike status within the diegetic context of the game, sometimes to the point where she/he would command the power of life and death over the players' characters (Fine, 154-162). However more recent games have tended to identify certain problems (such as extreme megalomania) associated with this method and have

attempted to emphasise the co-dependant roles of the GM and the other players (see: *Vampire: the Masquerade; D&D 4th Edition*).

The GM is also tasked with preparing a basic narrative structure or outline, and presenting it to the players. TTRPG narratives are a tricky area since the issue of authorship is ever present. Whereas a traditional narrative represents the voice of one author whose story is then interpreted by an audience of some sort, possibly through the auspices of actor/s or a text, TTRPG narrative is a reciprocal performance. Typically the GM prepares the outline of a story in which the characters of the other players are the main protagonists. However this story is not complete without the input of those players: usually the GM will begin by presenting the players with an imaginary situation in which their characters are currently embroiled, the players will then describe to the GM what it is that their characters do in reaction to this situation, the GM will then describe the results of those actions within the imaginary world, guided in her/his decisions by the rule-set being used. If the success of an action taken by a player's character is in question then the resolution mechanic (discussed below) is applied to the appropriate stats, and then based on the outcome of a die roll the GM continues to describe the situation to the other players. This conversational dynamic represents the behavioural underpinning of most TTRPGs. If the rules are removed from the equation what you end up with is a story told by several people all at once. As John H. Kim has argued "in a RPG, the author and the audience are the same" (35). The controlled chaos that inevitably ensues is comparable to an improvised theatre workshop without the physical acting (in TTRPGs players describe rather than act out the behaviours of their characters) or, significantly, the participatory process evident in many of the rituals of traditional societies, including

those of the Ndembu people studied by Victor Turner. In *Social Dramas and Stories About Them* Turner describes a category of Ndembu folktale, known as *kaheka*, noting that "[t]heir distinctive feature is that they are part told, part sung. At key points in the narration the audience joins in a sung refrain, breaking the spoken sequence [of the storyteller/narrator]" (67). This exchange between storyteller and audience has interesting parallels to the TTRPG process just described. A key difference is the fact that the refrains in the Ndembu folktale are prescribed and follow a set pattern whereas the responses of players in a TTRPG are not. As discussed in the next chapter, an important distinction between liminal and liminoid phenomena is the aspect of choice inherent in the liminoid process.

It is the role of the GM to construct a narrative, and TTRPGs are often arranged into a series of interlinked adventures or stories that feature the same characters (and players) over several sessions of play. Cumulatively these adventures are often referred to as a campaign[15] which can be thought of in much the same way as an epic, like Homer's *Odyssey*, with each incident in the saga representing a single adventure spanning one or more sessions of play.[16] Individual play sessions may last anywhere from four to 12 hours or more, and campaigns may last for months, years[17] or even decades. M.A.R Barker's[18] legendary "Thursday night group" has been running a linked series of games continuously since the mid-1970s (Lischka, 1).

[15] War-gaming parlance (see below for a discussion of war-gaming in relation to TTRPG's).
[16] Typically GMs will try to cover a single plot arc per session of play, thus creating the impression of a series of interlinked adventures that help players to build strong emotional bonds with their characters over time.
[17] I am currently running a campaign that started just over a year ago.
[18] Chair of the Department of South Asian Studies at the University of Minnesota until his retirement in the early 1990s.

Because campaigns can go on for so long, most game systems include rules for character development. In many games this means that character stats and skills have the potential to be increased as the game progresses, thus making characters more effective in their chosen area of expertise. Many games use an experience point mechanic to drive this progression. As the game progresses the GM awards experience points (commonly shortened to XPs) at the end of each session to each player character[19], these are then used to increase the character's stats. *D&D* for example, uses the concept of character "levels" to drive this progression. Characters start at level 1 and, when a player's character has accumulated enough XPs through play, the player is entitled to increase the character's level by one step, which provides the character with increased abilities and options for further statistical improvement according to the player's whims.[20] Other systems, such as *Vampire*, treat XPs as a form of currency, allowing the player to "spend" the XPs they have accumulated through play to "buy" new abilities and stat increases for their character. It is interesting to note how improvement in many TTRPGs is directly linked to the accumulation of various forms of in-game capital.[21] This system of accumulation, and the implicit cultural assumptions that inform it, are central to the play dynamic of many TTRPGs and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 where it will be linked to Turner's assertion that liminoid phenomena are most often produced in post-industrial societies.

[19] XPs are awarded for a number of reasons including: defeating in-game foes, finding treasure, completing quests, successfully using skills, good role-playing (convincing acting of one's character), sometimes just for making the game fun for the other players, as well as a host of other reasons.
[20] The character might be entitled to a new power or spell, and their 'hit points' (which determine how much damage they can endure during combat) may increase.
[21] Typically players can accumulate various things within the game aside from XPs, such as gold coins, magical items, supernatural powers and so on.

A major element of play for most TTRPGs is the "resolution mechanic", the system that is used to determine whether an attempted action by a player's character in the game-world succeeds or fails. Typically dice are used to determine this, so for example in older versions of *D&D*, a player who wanted her/his character to jump over a fence would roll a twenty-sided die[22] and compare the result to the character's "dexterity" stat. If the number rolled was lower than the score for the stat then the player's character would have managed to jump over the fence, if the number rolled on the die was higher then the character would have failed to jump over the fence, possibly resulting in negative consequences for that character in the game (mild concussion perhaps, the exact consequences of failed rolls are often left up to the GM[23]).[24]



Figure 3: TTRPGs typically use several types of dice. The above set is used to play *D&D* and consists of seven dice ranging from four to twenty sided.

While the practices that have been described are common to many TTRPGs, both classic and contemporary, there have also been many valid attempts to break out of this mould and explore other avenues of player interaction, a good example is the *Rune* role-

[22] Many TTRPGs use dice that have more (or less) than six sides. These are typically referred to as polyhedral dice (see Figure 3).
[23] Although in some instances the rules will prescribe a specific outcome, in the example above the character would probably incur a certain amount of damage based on the rules for falling specific to that game system.
[24] This is an example of a very simple (and somewhat archaic) resolution mechanic that does not take into account the *degree* to which a character's action succeeds or fails. Most contemporary games have more sophisticated and nuanced resolution mechanics designed to overcome the rather binary results provided by their predecessors.

playing game[25], in which the role of GM is shared by all the players, with the responsibility passing on to the next player at the end of a "scene" (Laws, n.p.). Attempts to move away from traditional conventions are evident in other aspects of contemporary game design as well, such as the *Amber Diceless Roleplaying Game* which, as the name suggests, does not use dice to drive its resolution mechanic. Instead far more emphasis is placed on descriptive use of language and the situational proclivities of the players themselves (Wujcik, n.p). The penchant for constant reinvention evident in TTRPG design has interesting parallels to Turner's distinction between liminal and liminoid phenomena discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, where he argues that liminoid phenomena often exhibit this same propensity (41).

The above mentioned factors form the experiential basis of most TTRPGs in circulation today. In the interests of space and clarity the description given has been brief and somewhat generalised. Over the past thirty five years a myriad of games, informed by an ever expanding plethora of design philosophies have emerged to challenge conventional assumptions of play. However these various iterations all owe their existence to a small number of games first produced in the United States during the 1970s, and to an extent some of them still cling to conventions that owe their existence to this specific time and context.

Paul Mason, in his introductory essay[26] for the anthology of essays on role-playing entitled *Beyond Role and Play: Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination*, argues that "[a]lmost any attempt to record the early history of role-playing gets mired in the agenda of the historian" (1). In fact, as may be evident from the

[25] Also notable as it is a TTRPG based on a computer game, showing that the flow between media is far from unidirectional. The relationship between TTRPGs and computer RPGs is discussed below.
[26] *In Search of the Self: A Survey of the First 25 Years of Anglo-American Role-playing Game Theory*

discussion thus far, a simple definition of what constitutes a role-playing game is elusive. Specifically, the distinction between a role-playing game and a game where a role is played is not at all clear. For example in many computer role-playing games players control a character whose destiny seems to be largely in their hands. It is however debatable as to whether this is truly role-playing, since players are seldom required to take on, to some degree, the persona of the character being controlled, nor do they have a great deal of control regarding the overall narrative content and direction of the game. Typically TTRPGs emphasise these aspects of play far more than most other games in which a role might be played without actually *role-playing* (notable exceptions include live-action role-playing: see below). However, because of player autonomy the distinction is not always clear, since a player could role-play their character in a computer game if they wanted to.

In the last thirty years "role-playing games have grown and evolved into a large number of forms" (Hitchens; Drachen, 3) and as noted above, this is further complicated by the emergence of new forms of role-playing and pseudo-role-playing games such as computer role-playing games (CRPGs) and live-action role-playing games (LARP), both of which are experientially distinct from TTRPGs. Adding to the confusion is the argument over the precise historical origins of TTRPGs. Mason indicates that the historical documentation of RPGs is not comprehensive, citing David Palter who claims that as early as the late 1960s he was involved in what he refers to as a "talking game", a game that Mason notes bore a strong resemblance to later RPGs, but also "had affinities with many other forms of shared spoken entertainment, so it is difficult to claim it as the

'first' role-playing game" (1). This makes it hard to define the exact point when TTRPGs emerged as a specific and distinct gamic[27] form.

These complications arise partly from the lack of a solid definition of what constitutes a RPG, and specifically a TTRPG. Up to this point in the discussion a colloquial definition of TTRPGs has been employed, predicated mainly on the descriptions provided in various rulebooks, notably the *D&D Players Handbook*, quoted above. Michael Hitchens and Anders Drachen have recently provided a more comprehensive and academically sound attempt at a general definition of RPGs in their essay *The Many Faces of Role-playing*. They identify six key aspects that may be used to determine if a game is indeed an RPG. Their requirements are: (1) a *game world*: there must be an imaginary game world for players' characters to inhabit. (2) *Participants*: the players of an RPG are divided between one or more players[28] who dictate and describe how the world operates, and another set of players who control imaginary characters inhabiting that world. (3) *Characters*: these characters may be defined in quantitative and /or qualitative terms, and may have the potential to develop in some way. (4) *Game master*: the rules of the game (including those pertaining to the game world itself) are adjudicated by one or more players sometimes referred to as game master/s (GM). (5) *Interaction*: "[p]layers have a wide range of configurative options for interacting with the game world through their characters". (6) *Narrative*: events in the game world follow a basic narrative format (Hitchens; Drachen, 16).

While the categories Hitchens and Drachen provide are fairly comprehensive, they fail to take into account several anomalies. For example they argue that an RPG

[27] Alexander A. Galloway's term refers to things relating to games.
[28] In CRPGs this role may be simulated by the computer.

must have a GM, a player who adjudicates actions taken by the players' characters in the diegetic context of the game, and who controls all the elements of the game world that are not directly controlled by the player-characters. This stipulation is somewhat problematic though, since it rules out a category of "GM-less" role-playing games (to which I will return), examples of which include *Universalis: The Game of Unlimited Stories* and *The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen*. Nonetheless, the definition provided by Hitchens and Drachen is arguably the most comprehensive and academically sound to date and as such it will be the one used in this dissertation. It is important to realise that the definition of what an RPG is, is as ephemeral as the history of the first RPGs themselves, and these definitions and histories are still widely contested in the literature.

What is not contested is the fact that TTRPGs as a commercial gamic form emerged from the miniature war-gaming community of the North American Midwest in the early 1970s, since this is where, in 1971, Gary Gygax and Jeff Perren first published the *Fantasy Supplement* along with their *Chainmail* miniature war-game. Though *Chainmail* was not an RPG in and of itself, it foreshadowed many of the ideas that would be contained in the first published version of *Dungeons & Dragons*, generally regarded as the first true TTRPG (Mona, 25; Hitchens; Drachen, 3; Mackay, 15).[29]

Miniature war-gaming originated in Prussia in 1811, where an artillery officer, Herr von Reiswitz, developed a game that he dubbed *Kriegspiel* to help educate young Prussian military officers. Over the next century-and-a-half miniature war-gaming was adopted as a form of entertainment by the middle classes in several European countries (Mackay, 13-14). By the 1960s it had made its way in various forms to the United States

[29] Once again though, this is contested. *D&D* was certainly the first commercial TTRPG.

where it had acquired the status of a serious hobby for a small demographic that included Gygax and Perren (Mackay, 15).

While Gygax and Perren had been working on the *Chainmail* game, another war-gamer, Dave Arneson had taken his games in a new direction. Allowing players to control a single character rather than an army, he injected a fantasy element into his games by adding enemies for the players' characters to fight that were drawn from the works of J.R.R. Tolkien (similar in spirit to what Gygax and Perren were doing with *The Fantasy Supplement* for *Chainmail*) (Mackay, 14). *D&D* came about when Arneson and Gygax collaborated to produce a more orderly set of rules for playing in the style that Arneson had pioneered (Mackay, 14-15).[30, 31]

Over the next decade, the popularity of the games increased somewhat and they gained a cult following, mainly amongst war-gamers and science fiction fans (Mackay, 16). Mason has noted that the early versions of *D&D* were not written in a style that was conducive to mass market appeal, since the rather convoluted rules assumed a degree of familiarity with war-gaming and its associated conventions. The rules were also woefully incomplete, not covering many situations that often arose during regular play. This factor encouraged early players to invent rules for situations that the official rules did not cover (Mason, 2).[32] Over time these rules evolved into independent and fully functional systems, which resulted in the development of new role-playing games whose rules sometimes bore only a passing resemblance to those of *D&D*. Mackay notes that "[t]he

[30] It is important to note that *D&D* represents a distinct departure from miniature war-gaming, since it does not require the use of miniatures to represent the characters and can thus be said to be an entirely new gamic form.
[31] The authorship of these rules has been disputed. Gygax claimed that he had written most of them, but Mason names him as the editor, and asserts that his claims of authorship are spurious (2).
[32] Known as 'house rules', a term taken from war-gaming.

trend was to create role-playing games based on works of literature", ranging from the works of Jules Verne to popular comic books (17). He notes that a primary function of these later RPGs was to attempt to simulate the narrative structures present in these works of fiction[33]. This is an important development since earlier games, and specifically *D&D* had been only loosely inspired by fantasy literature, and had not focused heavily on narrative as an element of play, preferring to focus on developing the rules into a coherent and workable system[34] (Mackay, 17). As Mason notes:

> Initially, writing about role-playing games … was resolutely technical. The game experience mainly consisted of pretending to be a character who would descend into a subterranean cave complex (to which the word "dungeon" was somewhat inappropriately affixed), fight monsters, and recover treasure (3).

The move towards a more narrative-centric approach to gaming is important for the current dissertation since it provides a link to the mythological underpinnings of ritual processes discussed at some length by Victor Turner in his work. It could be argued that the desire for a stronger narrative structure in these games represented an early attempt to generate meaning through play by the players of these games. As Turner notes we may regard narrative etically[35] "as the supreme instrument for binding the "values" and "goals"… which motivate human conduct, particularly when men and women become actors in social drama, into situational structures of "meaning" (86).

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[33] This is a trend that can still be seen in game design today. A recent example is *The Song of Ice and Fire RPG* published by Green Ronin Publishing, and based on the series of novels of the same name by George R.R. Martin.

[34] The lack of narrative structure inherent in the rules of D&D is a criticism that is levelled at the game to this day and is particularly evident in attitudes towards the latest edition of the game(see: beowulfdahunter's play-test review *I Got to Play 4th edition D&D… Just not D&D* for an example).

[35] Refers to etic (as opposed to emic), a term used by anthropologists to describe data obtained from a perspective *outside* the culture being studied. For example, an account of a ritual obtained from an anthropologist observing the ritual is considered to be an etic account. On the other hand, an account obtained from a member of the culture participating in the ritual is considered to be an emic account.

The literary inspiration chosen for these games is equally important since it is indicative of the demographic that initially informed the development of TTRPGs, and has had a strong influence on the direction that their development has taken over the last thirty-five years. Fine notes that an early *Judges Guild Journal* survey found that a large portion (51%) of the gamers in the survey over the age of 21 had "more than a college education" and were fairly erudite, Fine also notes that these results were replicated in a separate survey performed by *The Space Gamer* at around the same time (41).

Another important influence on the development of TTRPGs, as noted by Mackay, is popular culture, and specifically the pop culture of 1970s and 1980s North America. The specifics of this period in history are relevant and elegantly illustrate the context in which TTRPGs developed.

> A sense of exasperation, exhaustion, and futility permeated the American sociopolitical climate after the double fiascos of Vietnam and Watergate. The late 1970s also brought the postcolonial atrocities of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and the killings in Mozambique, the Iranian albatross hung from the impotent head of Jimmy Carter as his administration suffered through an oil-shortage crisis (Mackay, 21).

Mackay argues that many of the themes present in TTRPGs to this day, such as the simplistic struggle of good against evil present in many fantasy themed TTRPGs[36], can be traced to a longing in the American consciousness of the time for a return to a simpler, less ambiguous, moral framework devoid of the aforementioned complexities and vague threats to the US cultural paradigm.[37] In support of this assertion he points to other elements of pop culture that seem to have dealt with the situation similarly, such as George Lucas's *Star Wars* films (which saw a TTRPG adaptation soon after the release

[36] Examples include: the early editions of *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Middle Earth Role-playing* by Iron Crown Enterprises and *The Star Wars Roleplaying Game* by West End Games.

[37] It should be noted that Mackay's argument centres on the role-playing games produced in the United States. During the late 1970s and early 1980s games such as *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* were being produced in Europe as well. These games exhibited their own unique cultural bias.

of *Return of the Jedi*[38]), amongst a host of other imitators. "This explosion of fantasy films indicated the ideological context characterizing the six-year time span covering their releases." (21-22).[39] Mackay likens this to the interest in "cowboys and Indians … that permeated the political rhetoric and cultural climate of the 1950s" in the US, in which good and evil are clearly and simplistically delineated, in much the same way that Soviet communism was universally vilified, figured as a great, terrible, savage and alien evil to be overcome through the intrinsically civilised and civilising good of the US. Mackay argues that the zeitgeist of 1950s North America was mirrored in the stories that were told at the time and the games that were produced (21).

It is interesting to note that players of *D&D* were, up until the current edition of the game, required to choose an "alignment" for their character that included a stipulation as to whether the character was good, neutral or evil in nature.[40] The current (fourth) edition of the game gives players the option of playing an "unaligned" character whose moral code is essentially ambiguous (and somewhat self-serving) (Heinsoo et al, 19-20). This is arguably related to the current moral ambiguity of the cultural context in which the game has been produced.

This interface between TTRPGs and popular culture, which Mackay has characterised as a "recursive history" (21), is an important aspect informing play. I have already mentioned the influence of science fiction literature and 1980s fantasy film, however it is important to realise that TTRPGs have also influenced other forms of

[38] 1983

[39] The success of *Star Wars* itself is also relevant here, since movie studios no doubt saw an opportunity to cash in on a fad, however the fact that many of these films were successful seems to support Mackay's argument.

[40] The choice of character alignment in previous editions of *D&D* was not simply a cosmetic consideration either. Certain creatures in the world inhabited by the characters would be required to react differently to characters depending on their alignment, and players who did not play their characters according to their alignment were subject to various penalties (Cook, 64).

popular cultural production. Notably "[c]omputer adventure and computer role-playing games – emerging in the last fifteen to twenty years[[41]] – owe an enormous debt to the table-top role-playing game" (Mackay, 23). John Carmack and John Romero, the founders of *id Software* and the creators of the phenomenally successful computer game franchise *Doom*[42], have mentioned that they played, and were heavily influenced by *D&D* while creating *Doom* (Kushner 6-7). Similarly the text based MUDs (multi-user dungeons) that began to appear on the first computer networks at universities in the US during the late 1970s were a direct attempt by computer science students to recreate the experience of TTRPGs on a computer.[43] These early attempts are significant since they represent the genesis of what would eventually become the sprawling virtual worlds of games like *World of Warcraft*[44], that are increasingly becoming part of the popular consciousness and world-wide media landscape. One might even argue that *D&D* played a significant (if unintentional) role in the development of a global culture of play identified by Edward Castronova in his book *Synthetic Worlds: the Business and Culture of Online Games*.

Another important concept that needs to be introduced at this point (as it pertains to the argument) is Mackay's concept of the "imaginary entertainment environment" (IEE). Mackay identifies a new development in pop culture: places that do not exist and yet are known to the general public. The *Star Wars* "universe" is an excellent example of this phenomenon. It was originally introduced to the public through George Lucas's trilogy of sci-fi movies, however it has since become the setting for numerous other

[41] This reference was first published in 2001.
[42] 1993
[43] See the first three chapters of *Dungeons & Dreamers* by Brad King and John Borland for a more detailed account of this phenomenon.
[44] 2004, Blizzard Entertainment

works of fiction including books, TV series and games (including several TTRPGs) by a diverse set of authors. In this way Mackay argues that the setting has in some ways become a place, though its borders extend no further than the nebulous terrain of the popular Western consciousness.

Similarly, the fictional setting of a TTRPG is one of the most important elements informing the experience of play. It determines the context for the players' characters, and delineates what is possible and what is not. In the early years of table-top role-playing there were few proprietary worlds and generally GMs were expected to create their own (Fine, 15-17), however, as the games became more popular the creation and distribution of detailed and (supposedly) believable worlds became an integral part of the fledgling TTRPG industry. Writing at the time (1983), Gary Alan Fine[45] noted "[s]ome [players] criticize the lack of social structure in [*D&D*]. Competing game designers, even those impressed with the innovations of *D&D*, cite this omission as a rationale for the creation of new games" (17).[46]

Mackay argues that this growing insistence on the creation of believable and persistent fantasy worlds (what he terms IEEs) was not limited to TTRPGs, but was rather a defining characteristic of the pop culture of the 1970s and 1980s in the US. He cites a growing interest among the youth of the time in the works of authors like J.R.R. Tolkien, the creator of *Middle Earth* (which has since become an IEE in its own right, spanning multiple media including several TTRPGs), the setting for *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy of novels (27). He also notes the popularity of films like *Star Wars*, which

[45] Author of the ethnography *Shared Fantasy: Role-playing Games as Social Worlds*.
[46] At the time it was customary not only to create a new setting for a game, but also an entirely new set of rules. Debates still rage to this day as to whether a game's rules should be tailored to its setting or not. This continuing debate can be followed on the forums of the internet game development community at www.indie-rpgs.com.

took place in an intricately developed "galaxy far, far away", and the fact that this "universe" was later developed even further to the point where it has now begun to rival *Middle Earth* in terms of detail and complexity.

The discussion will now focus briefly on an examination of the state of academic theory relating to TTRPGs. In 1994 in the inaugural issue of *Inter*Action* Robin D. Laws wrote, in an article entitled "The Hidden Art: Slouching Towards a Critical Framework for RPGs": "[r]ole-playing games have existed for many years as an art form without a body of criticism. Reviews of RPGs have been common for nearly as long as the games themselves. Criticism, however, remains an unploughed field" (1). RPG theory as a growing body of academically sound knowledge is a fairly recent development and, until the last decade, the vast majority of writing on the subject was limited to discussions and criticisms of various game design philosophies as well as reviews of popular games (Laws, 1). The first attempt at a comprehensive study of the practise of role-playing (and TTRPGs in particular) was published in 1982 when Gary Alan Fine produced his ethnographic account of the experiences of various gamers in his book *Shared Fantasy: Role-playing Games as Social Worlds*. Apart from this text, little was published for the next decade. In the early 1990s discussions began to emerge on internet forums as well as internet relay chat (IRC)[47] channels such as <rec.games.frp.advocacy> regarding theories of play specific to TTRPGs. These were generally attempts at developing a model of play that adequately defined the role-playing experience.[48]

Interestingly, most of these models emphasise the subjective experience of play, and are either implicitly or explicitly concerned with the quality of the play experience,

[47] A form of internet text messaging designed for group communication through user created channels.
[48] See: the Threefold Model developed on <rec.games.frp.advocacy> between 1997 and 1998, as well as the theories proposed by the 'Turko School' of Finnish Live Action Role-players.

rather than its situation within a broader cultural context, in other words they are almost exclusively emic in their focus.[49] Few, if any, attempted to position themselves within broader theories of accepted academic discourse. In fact it was not until Mackay wrote *The Fantasy Role-playing Game: a New Performing Art* that there was an authoritative text attempting to relate TTRPGs to a formal set of academic theories[50] in a way that might be useful to those not directly involved in playing role-playing games. This was an important development as it drew attention to the relationship of TTRPGs to other forms of popular entertainment and situated them within a broader discourse (McNamara in: Mackay, xiii).

A great deal of useful theory also began to be generated in several northern European countries in the late 1990s where, in 1999, the first Knutepunkt (meeting point) conference was held. Scandinavian RPG theory has tended to focus heavily on LARP[51] since live-action gaming (where players dress in costume and actually act out the roles of their characters) is far more popular there than in the rest of the world (Montola; Strenros, XI-XIII).[52] Knutepunkt is particularly notable since each conference is accompanied by a book containing soundly constructed academic essays discussing anything and everything role-playing related. This is partly due to the conference's links to the avant-garde role-playing movement that has gained strength in northern Europe. This movement seeks to have LARP recognised as a valid mode of artistic expression (see: www.larpconference.org).

[49] This also highlights the need for a coherent theory of play, broadly applicable to TTRPGs (there are currently no less than five distinct models currently in usage).
[50] In this case performance studies.
[51] In fact the early Knutepunkt conferences were LARP only affairs, though they have since diversified their interests to embrace all forms of role-playing.
[52] With the possible exception of Australia.

In the US the trend towards academic analysis of role-playing games has continued to gain momentum with the publication of several other books, mainly from McFarland Press[53], that continue to examine various forms of role-playing in light of traditional academic models of human interaction, behaviour and cultural proclivity. This has led to a situation where a multitude of theories compete for acceptance. While at first this may seem confusing, it has resulted in what Mary Strine, Beverly Long and Mary Hopkins have called (in their case referring to performance theory) "an essentially contested concept". This observation is equally applicable to RPG theory where, just as in performance, the specificities of a given game and group of players heavily influence the way in which games play out. As Mackay has argued, the potential for RPGs to become art is to a great extent a factor of who plays them and how.

Regardless of their specific definition, TTRPGs represent a unique gamic form whose play dynamic has diversified over the last thirty five years to encompass a wide and varied catalogue of interesting examples. Their influence on other games and mediums has been substantial, affecting the bearing of the early computer and video games that spawned the massively popular industry seen today.[54] In particular, the simple format of the TTRPG has encouraged a great deal of experimentation within the medium. Since the core systems of TTRPGs can be transmitted as simple written documents they are easy for small groups or single authors to produce, resulting in a vast number of individual systems. This glut of choice has produced a culture of experimentation and unpredictable innovation within the medium, the result of which has been a number of divergent and even subversive forms. This propensity in gaming has interesting links to

[53] Notably Mackay's book *The Fantasy Role-playing Game* is published by McFarland Press.
[54] For a comprehensive (if somewhat allegorical) account of this process see Brad King and John Borland's book *Dungeons & Dreamers: The Rise of Computer Gaming Culture From Geek to Chic.*

the characteristics that Victor Turner ascribed to a category of phenomena which he termed “liminoid”, cultural practices and artefacts that exist on the limen of modern, post-industrial societies.

Chapter 2: An Exploration of Victor Witter Turner's Theory of Liminoid Phenomena

"Victor Witter Turner was born on 28 May 1920 in Glasgow, Scotland, the son of Captain Norman Turner, an electronics engineer, and Violet Witter, founding member and actress of the Scottish National Theatre" (Deflem, 2). He would later become a prominent figure in the recent history of cultural anthropology, noted for his work with the Ndembu people of central southern Africa, his focus on ritual, and what he termed 'comparative symbology', a system of symbolic analysis that "does more than merely investigate cultural genres in abstraction from human social activity" (Turner, 21). In his paper *Ritual, Anti-structure, and Religion: A Discussion of Victor Turner's Processual Symbolic Analysis*, Mathieu Deflem (Associate Professor at the University of Southern California's Department of Sociology) discusses Turner's life and the context of his work. In summarising Turner's work, the first section of this chapter will refer predominantly to Deflem's paper.

Turner was interested in what he referred to as social drama, a notion that he introduced "as a device to look beneath the surface of social regularities into the hidden contradictions and eruptions of conflict in the Ndembu social structure" (Deflem, 3).[55] Turner's focus on life and ritual as performed by persons alive and in the process of living is one of the primary motivations for using his method of analysis to better understand TTRPGs. Turner's focus on life as lived makes his theories particularly useful when describing games since they are not artefacts but rather elements of experience that

[55] Turner was a lifelong pacifist and his doctoral thesis *Schism and Continuity in an African Society: a Study of Ndembu Village Life* focused on conflict resolution in Ndembu society (Turner, 1957).

exist in the moment of play. Just as ritual is lived by its participants, so too are games lived by their players (Galloway, 1-39).

The context in which Turner produced his work is relevant as, no less than any other human being, he was to an extent a product of his times and of his own personal history. His first mentor Max Gluckman, "exiled South African anthropologist and spiritual leader of the Manchester School" of anthropology would greatly influence his early work, though he would later diverge from the confines of British structuralism (Deflem, 2).

Turner was, from the very beginning of his career, primarily interested in ritual and its function and efficacy within human society. Deflem, however, notes that he was initially hesitant to deal with ritual as a separate and self contained domain of study. Referring to Kuper; Ortner; van Donge; Webner and Turner himself, Deflem argues that this was due to his position within the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute of Sociological Research[56], under whose auspices he was to perform his initial research pertaining to Ndembu social cohesion (3). Deflem notes that Gluckman encouraged Turner to first study the principles of Ndembu social organisation before attempting an analysis of their rituals (4). He argues that Gluckman's functionalist model of social order produced a "prejudice against ritual", within Turner's analysis whereby rituals were seen as mechanisms of social cohesion, essential to society's continued functioning, but possessing no culturally formative value in and of themselves (4).

In 1963 Turner moved to New York to take up a professorship at Cornell University. While waiting for his visa he read French folklorist Arnold Van Gennep's

[56]Founded in 1938 by a group of researchers from the Victoria University of Manchester, its aim was to study ways in which native and non-native peoples in southern Africa could successfully coexist (Deflem, 3).

The Rites of Passage, in which Van Gennep outlines his thesis, that there are three stages to "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age" (Van Gennep in: Turner, 94)(Deflem, 7). Van Gennep's ideas were to have a profound influence on the development of Turner's theories and were directly responsible for his later theories pertaining to liminoid phenomena (Deflem, 7).[57]

Van Gennep had identified what he considered to be three specific stages that characterised all rites of passage. These are: the separation or pre-liminal phase, where the subject/s are separated from their previous environment, often they are taken to a sacred space, separate and secluded from the profane spaces of daily existence, and outside the sphere of everyday life. This is followed by a marginal or liminal phase during which the social status of the subject/s is ambiguous and possibly fluid. During this phase, according to Van Gennep, it is not uncommon for rites of inversion to take place during which the implicit assumptions of the subject/s and the typical norms of their society may be inverted and/or questioned.

> Liminality may involve a complex sequence of episodes in sacred space-time, and may also include subversive and ludic … events … each susceptible not of a single meaning but of many meanings. Then the factors or elements of culture may be recombined in numerous, often grotesque ways, … arrayed in terms of possible or fantasied [sic] rather than experienced combinations. … Novelty emerges from unprecedented combinations of familiar elements (Turner, 27).

This is followed by an aggregation or post-liminal phase during which the subject/s are reintegrated with everyday society, though they may be subject to changes in status, obligations or privileges (Van Gennep, 78). Turner noted that all Ndembu rituals were characterised by this threefold progression (the Ndembu even had specific

[57]This theory, as I will discuss later, was an attempt to apply Van Gennep's theories to the complexities of modern, post industrial societies (Turner, 1982).

names and rituals for the separation (*Ilembi / Kulemba*) and aggregation (*Ku-tumbuka*) phases) (Turner, 13-14 in Deflem, 8).

"Having adopted the processual [sic] view of ritual from Van Gennep, Turner throughout his work repeatedly discussed the importance of the liminal, intermediate phase of ritual" (Deflem, 13). As previously mentioned, one of the central concerns of Turner's work was the role played by symbols in the ritual context and he notes that:

> The symbols exhibited [during the liminal phase] express that the "liminal persona" are neither living nor dead, and both living and dead; they express the ambiguity of the interstructural [sic] period… they are considered neither male nor female, deprived of rank, status and property. They are treated equally and are subjected to the rest of the community. In sum, the liminal subjects are "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner, 95 in: Deflem, 13-14).[58]

This notion of a cultural space 'betwixt and between' that of everyday life was to become a central component of Turner's later work where he would more fully examine the implications of this status shift, and extend this notion to the pseudo-ritualised behaviours of contemporary Western societies. Here a strange and intriguing complexity was evident, in stark contrast to the more simple processes identified by Van Gennep. Deflem notes that that this shift away from dealing exclusively with Ndembu ritual happened around the time that Turner delivered his Henry Morgan lectures at the University of Rochester in 1966 (13).

In 1969 Turner published *The Ritual Process* in which he introduced the notion of 'communitas', a concept that he had developed to denote the feelings of camaraderie expressed by subjects during the liminal phase of ritual processes (Deflem, 14). He argued that this feeling of togetherness and equality was in part a result of the seclusion

[58]This ambiguity of status has interesting parallels in certain aspects of TTRPGs, some of which have been identified by Sandy Antunes in her essay *Leaping into Cross Gender Role-play* and will be discussed more fully in the next chapter.

of subjects from profane society during liminality. Other contributing factors include the lack of a definitive status afforded the subject/s during these rites. This results in a break down of the typically rigid stratification of power and influence often evident in 'traditional' societies (Deflem, 14-15). Turner extended this notion to societies in general, identifying a dialectical process in cultural history, a cyclical element constantly in flux whose poles were essentially inversions of one another. He saw evidence for this theory in the rise and fall of nations, states and ideologies: as rigid structure becomes ever more pervasive in a society, the propensity for revolution, the dissolving of status barriers, becomes ever more likely (Turner, 131-140).

The concept of communitas has interesting links to experiences of play in TTRPGs, where Fine has noted that people from many disparate walks of life would often come together to play at the local gaming club that he joined as part of his ethnographic research. During gaming sessions Fine notes that typical social divisions were ignored and a sense of camaraderie was present amongst the players (Fine, 137-139).[59]

As Turner's understanding of Van Gennep's ideas solidified and became entrenched in his own thinking he began to extend the three phase model of ritual beyond the boundaries of Ndembu culture into the sphere of modern, post-industrial society. In 1982 he published a book entitled *From Ritual to Theatre: the Human Seriousness of Play*. In it was an essay entitled *Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual: an Essay in Comparative Symbology*. Here Turner codified several of his major theoretical

[59] Similarly, Johan Huizinga argued in his book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, that a "magic circle" or "socially constructed barrier … exists around games (Huizenga [sic], 1949). Inside the circle there is a set of rules and norms that makes the game spaces different from everyday life. These rules often include different sanctions on behaviours and a removal of hierarchies" (Williams, et al, 6).

concepts. He discussed what he meant by comparative symbology, noting that as a branch of study:

> Comparative symbology is narrower than 'semiotics' or 'semiology' …, and wider than 'symbolic anthropology' in range and scope of data and problems. … It *is* involved in the relationships between symbols and the concepts, feelings, values, notions, etc. associated with them by users, interpreters or exegetes: in short it has *semantic* dimensions, it pertains to meaning in language and context (Turner, 20-21).

The stipulation about context is relevant since, as previously noted, Turner was very much concerned with the use and efficacy of symbols in ritual, and specifically in how they informed its performance. In this essay he elucidated his stance on their interpretation.

More notably for the topic at hand, he also discussed Van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage*, giving an overview of the thesis it contains and considering in particular the liminal phase of ritual identified by Van Gennep. Turner here classifies and summarises many of the features of liminal rituals, noting that these processes are all encompassing for the subject/s. They involve not only an eventual change in status, duty and other social criteria but also literal physical changes in environment and appropriate behaviour for the duration of the ritual process.

> The passage from one social status to another is often accompanied by a parallel passage in space, a geographical movement from one place to another. This may take the form of a mere opening of doors or the literal crossing of a threshold which separates two distinct areas, one associated with the subject's pre-ritual or preliminal status, and the other with his post-ritual or postliminal status (Turner, 25).

This is important; liminal rituals often involve a complete recalibration of the subject's socio-cultural field, in many cases a diametric inversion of norms and practices and a complete dissociation from profane life, to the point where "[t]he [subjects] are, in fact temporarily undefined, beyond the normative social structure" (Turner, 27).

In this process Turner identifies a key aspect of his expanded concept of Van Gennep's liminal phase of ritual[60], that of anti-structure. Quoting Brian Sutton-Smith (who is in turn referring to Turner's own theory), Turner notes:

> The normative structure represents the working equilibrium [of a society], the 'anti-structure' represents the latent system of potential alternatives from which novelty will arise when contingencies in the normative system require it. We might more correctly call this second system the *protostructural* system … because it is the precursor of innovative normative forms. It is the source of new culture (Sutton-Smith, 18-19 in: Turner, 28).[61]

Turner seems to agree with Sutton-Smith's interpretation of his own theory as he later notes that "to my mind it is the analysis of culture into factors and their free or 'ludic' recombination in any and every possible pattern, however weird, that is the essence of liminality, liminality *par excellence*" (28).This view of liminality as the basis of cultural innovation has parallels with the theory of play as the genesis of new cultural forms put forward by Huizinga in *Homo Ludens*.[62]

Taking 'play' as a starting point Turner then goes on to discuss the differences that have arisen between 'traditional' forms of culture and Western post-industrial societies. He notes that the distinction between work and play is typical of these post-industrial societies, whereas 'traditional' peoples seldom distinguish between the two. This distinction is important to Turner's argument since it forms the basis for his division between liminal and liminoid phenomena.

Turner argues that in Western societies there has arisen a division between work and leisure (of which play is considered a subset), and that this division is highly

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[60]It should be noted that Van Gennep typically refers to liminal rituals as "transitional rites" (Van Gennep, 78).

[61]This is particularly relevant to the argument presented in this paper since here Sutton-Smith is referring specifically to his "series of experimental studies … of children's (and some adult) games both in tribal and industrial societies" (Turner, 28).

[62] The parallels between Huizinga's theory of play and Turner's theory of liminoid phenomena are interesting, but beyond the scope of this paper.

significant to the structure of ritual in those societies. He argues that 'traditional' societies do not make a clear distinction between these two realms, that they are far more notably defined by the distinction between the profane and the sacred, as well as cyclical seasonal divisions of time (30-32). "Work … had a natural rhythm to it, punctuated by rests, songs games, and ceremonies" (Turner, 35) and as such the clear division that we see between work and leisure in post-industrial societies was simply not present, it did not make sense to think of life in these terms since to a large extent the types of activity engaged in were dictated by external forces and seasonal changes beyond the control of the people who followed them.

Turner further argues that the very definition of play and work as distinct entities did not necessarily exist in these agrarian societies. Referring to the *Bhagavad Gita* he notes that "we find a conection [sic] made between sacrifice and work: 'From food do all contingent beings derive, and food derives from rain; rain derives from sacrifice and sacrifice from *work*. From Brahman work arises.'" (Turner, 30). Clearly this is not the same definition of work as the one we hold today.

> The point is … that these play or ludic aspects of tribal agrarian ritual myth are, as Durkheim says "de la vie serieuse" i.e., they are intrinsically connected with the "work" of the collectivity in performing symbolic actions and manipulating symbolic objects so as to promote and increase fertility of men, crops and animals … to cure illness, to avert plague, to obtain success in raiding, to turn boys into men and girls into women, … and so forth. Thus the play is in earnest, and has to be within bounds (Turner, 31).

For Turner the liminal rituals of "traditional" "cyclical, repetitive societies" are essentially methods for the perpetuation of the accepted social order, mechanisms for maintaining the status quo. They provide a mechanism for enhancing the social mean through their processes of inversion. By turning the accepted structures of society on their

collective heads, they show the subject/s of the ritual the dire consequences of a world out of kilter.

For Turner the liminoid is closely linked to the concept of a separate 'leisure time' in Western societies. With leisure comes a concept of freedom,

> … *freedom from* a whole heap of institutional obligations prescribed by the basic forms of social, particularly technological and bureaucratic, organization… [and] *freedom to* enter even generate new symbolic worlds of entertainment, sports, games, diversions of all kinds… [as well as] *freedom to* transcend social structural limitations, freedom to *play* (Turner, 37).

Central to this is the concept of freedom of choice: liminal rituals are prescribed by social norms and dictates, liminoid phenomena are engaged in through active volition. Turner also notes, here referring to Edward Norbeck's article *Man at Play* (48-53), that the protestant work ethic that underlies particularly North American notions of leisure time has sought to diminish the importance and value of these aspects of social life, characterising them as indulgence and privilege (39). This has led to a situation where liminoid activities are not taken as seriously as their 'work' counterparts, and much like the jester who is at liberty to criticise the king as long as he keeps the tone light, liminoid activities may be openly subversive in nature given that they are viewed as intrinsically frivolous. Unlike their liminal equivalents they seek to undermine the social order rather than reinforce it, the association with freedom of choice as a prerequisite for liminoid activity has led to a situation where they are, far more so than liminal spaces, the source of new and radical culture. As evidence of this trend Turner indicates the often subversive content of contemporary art and theatre.

> Just as when tribesmen make masks, disguise themselves as monsters, heap up disparate ritual symbols, invert or parody profane reality in myths and folk-tales, so do the genres of industrial leisure, the theatre, poetry, novel … rock music …art …, etc., *play* with the factors of culture, sometimes assembling them in random, grotesque, improbable, surprising, shocking, usually experimental combinations. But they do this in a much more complicated way than the liminality of tribal initiations (Turner, 40).

The convoluted nature of modern society affords the artist, the creator, the space and propensity to work with weird forms filled with complex liminal meanings, to generate "not infrequently, models, direct and parabolic or aesopian, that are highly critical of the *status quo* as a whole or in part" (40).

Turner does however note that "given *diversity* as a *principle*" many creators will choose to generate works that support, either implicitly or explicitly, the accepted order. He argues that those that do, more closely resemble their liminal, "tribal" antecedents, and that this class of activity may more rightly be defined as a form of pseudo or post-liminal activity, rather than being truly liminoid. Here he refers to the satirical works of Jonathan Swift, Lord Robert Stewart Castlereagh and Evelyn Waugh which he argues "have a 'ritual of reversal' form, indicating that disorder is no permanent substitute for order" suggesting that they are more closely linked to the inversive reinforcement characteristic of liminal phenomena than the characteristics that he ascribes to the truly liminoid (40).

Diversity of cause and the individual propensities of participants will to a large degree dictate the status of an activity as post-liminal or liminoid. TTRPGs, being games, are highly subject to the proclivities of those who play them, and thus their classification within the bounds of Turner's theory is equally variable. They are not mere artefacts, rather they are alive insofar as they are played by people, they are experiential and diverse in form, and must be viewed in the context of those who engage in them as an *activity*. Any game has the potential to become a simulacrum for the player's implicit beliefs and expectations, and though this may arguably become the basis for a form of

subversive introspection, a solipsistic questioning of all that is held to be true and just, this is by no means guaranteed and, as will be argued later in this paper, the opposite is often true, sometimes despite the best efforts of those who create the games.[63] That said Fine has noted that on the whole, role-players tend to be a somewhat subversive group, not easily given to support for commonly accepted norms. In fact "[a]ccording to one science fiction [and TTRPG] fan: 'Most fans *prefer* to be as strange as possible'" (Bainbridge 211 in: Fine, 45). Their "[i]ntense commitment is a symbol of their deviance in that it precludes participation in other activities that are considered 'normal'" (Fine, 45). The opinion of this informant represents a recurring theme in the ethnographic research presented by Fine, though it may not be wholly representative of all role-players.

Given that liminoid phenomena are a distinct category of activity within post-industrial societies, and given that they are distinct from other liminal and pseudo-liminal activities, a clear definition is in order. Towards the end of *Liminal to Liminoid* Turner provides a list of five criteria that distinguish the liminal from the liminoid. These are as follows:

(1) Liminal phenomena are found predominantly in tribal and early agrarian societies, where what Durkheim has referred to as a "mechanical solidarity" exists (Turner, 53). In these societies unity of purpose becomes a precondition for survival, and so it is not surprising that the reinforcement of societal custom through the auspices of liminal ritual is the norm.

In contrast, liminoid phenomena "flourish in societies with 'organic solidarity', bonded reciprocally by 'contractual' relations, and generated by and following the

[63] *SLA industries* is an example of a game designed to be culturally subversive, though it achieves this goal mainly through exaggeration rather than inversion, see Chapter 3 for a discussion of this game.

industrial revolution" (53). Turner notes that these phenomena are common to all post-industrial societies, both socialist and capitalist.

(2) Liminal phenomena are collective and calendrical, following the natural rhythms that dictate the important times and life experiences of agrarian peoples. They are functional within the cultural expectations of the society from which they originate. "[T]hey appear at what may be called "natural breaks", natural disjunctions in the flow of natural and social processes" (54).

Liminoid phenomena are typically individual in nature "though they often have collective or 'mass' effects. They are not cyclical, but continuously generated, though in the times and places apart from work settings assigned to 'leisure' activities" (54).

(3) Liminal phenomena are integrated into societies as a whole, they are supportive of society through a process of inversion "representing its necessary negativity and subjectivity" (54). They support the dominant cultural paradigm by showing initiates the consequences of non-conformity.

Liminoid phenomena are separate from the central concerns of society; they are marginal, betwixt and between the power structures of monolithic institutions. They display no unity of purpose, nor are they specifically concerned with the perpetuation of society as a whole (in fact quite the opposite is often true).

(4) Liminal phenomena have a mass collective character. They are closely linked to the identity of the society in which they are produced. Often they represent its history and cultural identity and often (even though they are inversions of social norms) they still operate within the broader cultural paradigm laid out by their creators (54).

Liminoid phenomena are idiosyncratic, strongly representative of the individuals who create them, but not of the broader social order. Notably they tend "to be generated by … individuals and in particular groups – 'schools,' circles, and coteries[64] – they have to compete with one another for general recognition and are thought of at first as ludic offerings placed for sale on the 'free' market" (54).

(5) Liminal phenomena are often functional in the sense that they lubricate the 'gears' of a society, helping things to run smoothly. Their inversive qualities are ultimately superficial compared to their unifying potential.

Liminoid phenomena are often subversive to the point of actively seeking the downfall of society, they take the form of "social critiques or even revolutionary manifestos … exposing the injustices, inefficiencies, and immoralities of the mainstream economic and political structures and organizations" (55).

The elements of difference described above form the basis of the critique contained in this essay. As previously mentioned, any type of game provides a slippery subject for analysis since ultimately the form that it takes will be dictated by the players. Nonetheless TTRPGs represent a specific approach to gaming, and contained within this approach are certain implicit assumptions, possibilities and limits to the scope of play. In the following chapters these specificities will be analysed in terms of Turner's theory of liminoid phenomena in the hope of arriving at a conclusive understanding of the relationship between the theory presented by Turner and this endlessly fascinating style of play.

[64]It is interesting to note that TTRPG players often arrange themselves into groups that play on a regular basis. Players often feel an affinity to their group and believe that their style of play is superior to that of other groups.

Chapter 3: Table-top Role-playing Games as Liminoid Phenomena

Turner intended his theories to be applied to specific works and areas of culture. In *From Liminal to Liminoid* he gave several examples of areas within post-industrial societies that he felt were sites for the creation of liminoid phenomena, they included the spheres of art, drama and literature, where, he felt, subversive content was likely to be produced by individuals who existed on the limen of society in a perpetually liminoid state. These artists, actors and writers provide society with a means by which to reinvent itself, a pool of swirling potentiality, from which new culture might be created. In the following chapter I will explore the possibilities and problems associated with classifying TTRPGs along these lines.

In his essay *Play to Love: Reading Victor Turner's "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual; an Essay in Comparative Symbology*, Martin Ericsson has drawn links between Turner's theories and the actualities of play experienced by participants in live-action role-playing games. He emphasises the 'otherness' of LARPers, their liminal separateness from their parent culture.[65] LARP is particularly susceptible to this form of analysis since it is often considered to be one of the most obviously performative offshoots of traditional TTRPGs. In fact "Turner's list of the defining elements found within liminality and their functions reads like a veritable checklist for larp organisers" (Ericsson, 21). As was briefly mentioned in chapter 1, LARP is a form of role-playing game where, unlike TTRPGs, players assume the roles of their characters and act out (i.e. they physically perform) those roles. Most LARPers make or buy costumes for their characters that they dress in before the game begins. They then get together, and

[65] Here Ericsson is referring specifically to Scandinavian LARP.

physically play the roles of their characters, remaining in character for the duration of the game session, which usually lasts for several hours. Several sessions may be played consecutively over a period of several days. In this sense it is very similar to an improvised theatre workshop. The primary difference between LARP and more traditional forms of TTRPG is its physicality. Some TTRPG players might speak 'in character' saying verbatim what their character says, but they will usually stop short of actually acting out the specific behaviours of their character, LARPers do not, and because of this, a principal feature of LARP is immersion, the breaking down of the barriers between the character and the self, similar to the process employed by method actors in which they 'become' their character.[66] What separates a LARP session from improvised theatre is the implementation of a rudimentary set of rules, sometimes loosely based on the rules found in TTRPGs.[67] Because of the emphasis on acting in LARP, the rules governing the game are usually very simple (dice mechanics may be replaced by a game of 'rock-paper-scissors', or the simple flipping of a coin for example) thus promoting performance and enhancing the immersion of the players in their imaginary world. In fact immersion is often the primary stated objective of LARPers, and a common reason given for participation.[68] Mike Pohjola has argued that this may serve as the foundation for viewing LARP as a site for the creation of new culture, which has

[66] John H. Kim has discussed the concept of immersion and its relationship with story in role-playing at some length in his essay *Immersive Story: A View of Role-played Drama*. Mike Pohjohla has discussed immersion as a tool for self exploration in LARP in his essay *Autonomous Identities: Immersion as a Tool for Exploring, Empowering and Emancipating Identities.*

[67] A good example of this being the *Minds Eye Theatre* LARP games produced by White Wolf Publishing, the publishers of the *Vampire* TTRPG. It is worth noting that LARPers often invent their own rules, proprietary rules systems are not as popular among LARPers as they are among TTRPGers, mainly because of the simplicity of LARP rules.

[68] For more information see *Autonomous Identities: Immersion as a Tool for Exploring, Empowering and Emancipating Identities* by Mike Pohjola.

interesting ramifications for the positioning of role-playing games as liminoid phenomena (see Chapter 4).

The strangeness often associated with LARP (see footnote) stems from its extreme emphasis on performance and acting out the roles of characters. A general uneasiness seems to exist in mainstream society, as well as the role-playing sub-culture, regarding activities that blur the line between the self and the other, and this is sometimes evident in attitudes towards LARP and LARPers.[69]

These differences are highly relevant since they inform the experiential basis of LARP. However LARP's roots in table-top role-playing mean that there are also notable similarities between the two gamic forms. In many ways the foundations of both are similar, however LARP places a greater emphasis on performance, immersion, and physicality, while de-emphasising the rules systems and semi-rigid narrative structure of more traditional TTRPGs. If these points of divergence are borne in mind then the literature on LARP can serve as a useful starting point for an analysis of TTRPGs. While LARP is sometimes treated as the bastard child of TTRPGs, it is also typical of TTRPGers to regard themselves as something of a counter-culture (Fine, 45-47), and in this sense they have much in common with LARPers. The degree to which both groups seek to knowingly subvert the normative structures of society in their games has important ramifications for the classification of TTRPGs as liminoid phenomena.

[69] www.1d4chan.org, the table-top gaming Wiki notes in it's article on LARP that the "community at large typically regards LARPing as the least cool of all RPG-related pastimes, reasoning that although they [TTRPGers] might spend large amounts of their time shouting excitedly about dice rolls in a dark basement, at least they're not running around in a forest in their underpants." Arguably, this is because LARP strays into what is traditionally thought to be the territory of liminal activity, the particulars of which often represent an inversion of society's implicit value systems (Turner, 28).

One of the significant points made by Ericsson in his essay is the distinction between the liminal and liminoid. He notes that "[w]hile role-players may feel pride and wonder in the connections between rite and role-play, they must still remember that the aim of a truly liminal rite is to ensure the stability and continuation of established norm patterns and to teach the initiates the mythological deep structure underlying those patterns". In other words, they serve to support the dominant cultural paradigm (21). As will be argued later in this chapter, many games systems and gamers exhibit a degree of implicit complicity with the norms of contemporary society. Mackay has argued that there is "[t]he possibility of the role-player becoming subject to the discipline of social forces through a replication of the structures of power within the form of the role-playing game itself" (128). However, as previously noted, Fine states that many role-players are drawn to culturally subversive forms of behaviour, and the link between role-playing and rites that are in fact supportive of society's dominant institutions does not always sit well with them, though there is evidence that many games are (perhaps unwittingly) played in this way (Fine 73-80; see below).

Another scholar who has used Turner's theory of the liminoid extensively to analyse role-playing games is Christopher J. Dyszelski in his doctoral thesis *Encounters at the Imaginal Crossroads: an Exploration of the Experiences of Women in Role-playing Games*. Dyszelski's approach is predominantly ethnographic. Drawing strongly from data gathered during interviews with female informants he states that "[o]ne major consideration of this project is the ways that role-playing games may serve as liminoid spaces" (235). Dyszelski is predominantly concerned with how role-playing may serve as a transformative liminoid space in which self appraisal may take place, and how

"increased connection to and investment to [sic] character and … fantasy spaces leads some players to deeper awareness of and interaction with the world around them" (236). This view of liminoid spaces as a means to personal growth is very much in line with Turner's concept of communitas, discussed earlier. However Dyszelski is careful to note that this is a potential contained within the modes of play promoted by these games, it is not necessarily an inherent feature of all role-playing games and activities. This view is parallel to Mackay's argument that TTRPGs may be viewed as a form of performing art. Mackay does not suggest that all TTRPG games and gamers approach their hobby in this way but rather, simply, that the games have the potential to be used in this fashion (157-159). He points out that:

> Gamemaster and role-player Nicholas Fortugno has observed that "anyone who role-plays consciously and well is an artist because they are motivated beyond escapism into the participation of the creation of an aesthetic object" (121).

This stance suggests that a certain critical effort and engagement is required from the players in order for the game to be considered art. The subversive content of certain TTRPGs similarly, requires a certain degree of complicity from the players in order to be effective.

In elucidating the stance that TTRPGs might be considered an art form, Dyszelski puts forward the experiences of players *and* their characters, by interviewing the players while they are in character and treating the responses as though they were those of the character rather than the player. He emphasises the 'otherness' of the characters portrayed by players. Referring to the experiences of Christine (a TTRPGer and novelist) he notes "Christine's refusal to participate in an interview of [her character] Kai reflecting on Christine's perspective demonstrates her experience of Kai as truly "other"

with at least some degree of autonomy. It also demonstrates her deep respect for that autonomy" (238). Dyszelski argues that this engagement with an 'other' who is not 'other' has helped players to arrive at a deeper understanding of their own personal context and the relationships that they build with actual 'others' (236-7).

The transformative power that Turner ascribed to liminal and liminoid spaces is of interest to those who have studied RPGs. In *Play to Love*, Ericsson even goes so far as to suggest that LARPers "have the option to let themselves be affected deeply, to use games as personal rites of passage and change, as signposts on an ever-changing journey towards death; to grab traits from the characters, learn new attitudes and ways to form social bonds" (22). This process presents the potential of the gamic form to encompass an element of choice that can inform these latent possibilities. The question remains to what extent this may be said to be true, and how to negotiate the tricky, somewhat ephemeral ground that lies between a mere pastime, a leisurely indulgence granted only fleeting import by its participants, and the deeply meaningful and fundamentally human endeavour identified and encapsulated in the works of Victor Turner. The potential for TTRPGs to be transformative liminoid spaces will be the primary concern of the rest of this chapter.

It is useful to begin the exploration of gamers and the texts that inform their experiences of play with an examination of the role-playing games themselves. Although the nature of play in TTRPGs depends to a large extent on the proclivities of those who play them, the rules that inform play can be highly influential. If nothing else the choice of which rules to use when running a game is indicative of the aspirations of the players. A rules heavy system like *D&D* will support a different style of play to a system like

Vampire where the game designers have purposefully opted for a resolution mechanic that is particularly simple and unobtrusive, in the hopes of promoting narrative engagement and role-playing as the primary defining aspects of the play experience. Players may also choose rules based on previous experience with a given system since over time, as they become familiar with a given rule-set, those rules become more transparent and less obtrusive during play allowing for deeper immersion.

Many contemporary TTRPGs come with a setting[70] that is either explicitly or implicitly developed in the rule books, while older games like *D&D* tend to be more generic in their setting, expecting the players (and particularly the GM) to develop their own background for the game. Traditionally games happen in an imaginary place that forms the backdrop and context for the events that unfold during play. The setting of a game provides a useful point of departure for the analysis of TTRPGs as liminoid phenomena since it offers a codified description of the diegetic spaces implied in the game's rules.[71] The lack of a specific setting (and therefore implied context) in older games makes them harder to analyse in terms of Turner's theory since, to a large extent, the world in which the story takes place will dictate the norms of behaviour and interactions expected from the player's characters, subversive or otherwise. As such the following section will deal predominantly with games that have a specific default setting provided in the rules. It should be noted however that *D&D* is not the only 'generic'

[70] Here setting refers to the imagined place in which the imaginary events of the game occur. For example a game based on the works of J.R.R. Tolkien would have Middle Earth as its setting. In the game *SLA Industries* (discussed below) the setting is the dystopian planet Mort. Some games, notably *D&D*, do not have a well developed default setting, rather they present a set of fairly generic rules to which any number of settings may be attached by various GMs. Another example of a generic system is *GURPS* (Generic Universal Role-Playing System) published by Steve Jackson Games.

[71] The game still consists of an interaction between the rules of the system and the motivations of the players, and it should be borne in mind that players may move a game away from the implied diegesis of the rules through their character's actions in the game, as well as through the whims of the GM.

system available (see footnote 70).[72] The setting for a game is significant and highly relevant to the discussion at hand as it defines the space in which the 'events' of the game take place. As Dyszelski has argued:

> The primary intention of these "imaginary entertainment environments" (Mackay, 2001) is the creation of a shared and co-created imaginal space between the "real world" and "fantasy" where the intersection of person, player, and characters is played out. The permeability of these boundaries allow popular culture references to slip into and enrich the fantasy space … In this gaming space of multiple frames and intersections, where the "I" may refer to person, player, or character depending on the context, part of the fun and challenge is maintaining the distinction between them while simultaneously playing with those permeable boundaries (Fine, 1983; Mackay 2001). (Dyszelski, 235).

He goes on to argue that these 'places' can be viewed as liminal/oid spaces. Removed from the mundane certainties of everyday existence, and possessed of a playful malleability of form, function and meaning, these worlds and the stories that take place in them do bear a notable resemblance to the liminal and liminoid spaces described by Turner in *Liminal to Liminoid*.

While one might argue that there is an obvious distinction between a real physical space where liminal/oid rituals are enacted, and the imaginary space of the TTRPG, this can be a problematic assertion as the following excerpt from an interview conducted by Fine with a player demonstrates:

> I know a few people … who seem to think that the fantasy world is real and that the real world is fantasy … They seem to think that *D&D* is real; that's their whole life – nothing else, and that this world is just something we put up with in order to go into these games, which to me is a very scary thing [Personal Interview] (218).

Equally as important as the setting are the character options given to players in TTRPGs. Some games, like *Vampire: the Masquerade* provide players with rules for

[72] Although the core rules do not contain any reference to it, Wizards of the Coast (the publishers of *D&D*) do produce a line of books presenting a high fantasy setting for *D&D*, the world of Faerun, also known as *The Forgotten Realms*. Many people consider this to be the default setting for *D&D*.

playing explicitly liminoid characters (in this case vampires), creatures that exist permanently on the limen between life and death, who must deal with the consequences of a bizarre change in status, from that of an ordinary human to that of a "bloodsucking [corpse] returned from the grave to feast on the blood of the living" (Achilli et al, 21). Even in *D&D* players take on the roles of archetypal "classes" (professions) derived from the semi-mythological past of Western Europe, such as warriors, mages (who wield other-worldly magical powers), rogues and clerics in the service of strange gods and demons. The archetypal nature of these classes and their distinctive links to mythological characters and themes provide them with a decidedly liminal flavour. In the TTRPG *Call of Cthulhu*,[73] players take on the roles of fairly ordinary people who are slowly exposed to the horrors of the Cthulhu Mythos and it's plethora of intergalactic horrors that will ultimately drive them insane. The game is primarily concerned with the shock generated through the discovery that the world the characters thought to be real is a lie, that their lives are ultimately controlled by hideous monsters. The game *Kult*[74] also takes this premise as its starting point. In fact its catch line is "reality is a lie". These games deal with the interface between normality and the "things" that lie on its limen, in many ways they emphasise the dangers of straying too far from the cultural norm. Arguably this is comparable to the way in which liminal rites in "traditional" societies serve to "ensure the stability and continuation of established norm patterns and to teach initiates the mythological deep structure underlying those patterns" (Ericsson, 21), though the situation of these games as forms of entertainment is more in line with the characteristics of liminoid activities.

[73]Inspired and based on the writings of H. P. Lovecraft.
[74] Published by Paradox Entertainment.

Dyszelski argues that:

> Through deep character play in the game, players explore the nuances, similarities, and differences between their character and themselves. This creates more conscious contact and deeper involvement with these characters and may precipitate changes in their lives and perspectives" (237).

He asserts that the process of exploring the liminal self (the character), who is also the 'other' results in a deeper understanding of a subject's socio-cultural situation.

Dyszelski is eager to emphasise the transformative possibilities of role-playing, its ability to allow a highly personal engagement with the 'other', and thus facilitate an increased awareness on the part of the participant of the implicit, underlying structures of society at large. This is however a problematic position at best. As Ericsson notes:

> The integration phase of Van Gennep's rites des passage[75] model and it's relation to live action role-playing is quite tricky. Role-players are notoriously bad at letting their liminoid experiences change them, or at least admitting to being changed by them (22).

This is equally true of TTRPGs as it is of LARP, as suggested by the earlier quote from Fine in which the interviewee notes that another player's inability to distinguish real life from the diegesis of the game is "scary" (218). Most role-players accept that TTRPGs are just games and to imply otherwise is often considered something of a faux pas (Fine, 217-222).

One criticism that can be levelled at the current body of literature regarding role-playing, and a theme that is evident in Mackay, Dyszelski and Ericsson, is the focus on a highbrow, avante garde potential within role-playing that often seems to be at odds with the ethnographic data, particularly that provided by Fine. There is little in Fine's work to suggest that the majority of TTRPGers are principally concerned with the transformative

[75] Crucial to Dyszelski's argument, since it is during this phase that the lessons learnt during the liminal period are solidified within the subject.

power of role-playing suggested by Ericsson and Dyszelski, nor are they greatly interested in framing gaming as a type of performing art, as suggested by Mackay. This is not to imply that this issue has eluded any of these scholars, they all note at some point that the subjects they are respectively dealing with represent an unusual and possibly under-explored potential within role-playing rather than a common feature of play. However, this fact does not necessarily preclude the categorisation of TTRPGs as liminoid phenomena. Turner himself notes that the category of liminoid phenomena in post-industrial societies encompasses a broad spectrum of activities, including those that might be considered somewhat frivolous (55). Additionally it should be borne in mind that the distinction between liminoid and post or pseudo-liminal phenomena is not strictly defined by Turner, and the boundary between the two categories is hazy and fluid at best.

Certainly it can be argued that certain aspects of specific games, far from undermining and subverting the dominant paradigms of society, rather serve to reinforce them. Characters in *D&D* for example, progress primarily through the accumulation of experience points, wealth in the form of gold pieces, and the acquisition of new, more devastating powers. The typical means for the acquisition of these forms of in-game 'capital' is the use of violence. *D&D* 4th Edition in particular stresses the importance of confrontation as a central game mechanic[76]. Its tactical combat system (which employs miniatures to represent the player's characters) is one of its major draw cards, to the point where some critics have argued that the game has come full circle, returning to its roots, becoming little more than a glorified miniature war-game as of its latest edition[77] (see:

[76] Killing monsters is the main source of XPs in the game, though other narrative means also exist.
[77] This is a debatable criticism, since as always, much depends on how individual players choose to run their games. Certainly 4th Edition provides a great plethora of rules for those who wish their characters to engage in mindless violence.

beowulfdahunter's play-test review *I Got to Play 4th Edition D&D… Just not D&D*) . These mechanics and their motivations (those of accumulation and acquisition through the use of violence) do not seem particularly subversive of popular notions present in Western culture. If anything they seem to draw their inspiration from the themes present in the copious productions of the pop-culture industry (of which games like *D&D* form a small though significant part (Mackay, 20-26)), most notably the narrative elements present in much of Hollywood action cinema, video games[78], and popular fantasy and science fiction literature. This seems to indicate that games like *D&D* "buttress, reinforce, justify or otherwise seek to legitimate the prevailing social and cultural mores and political orders" (Turner, 40), making their classification as liminoid phenomena problematic and suggesting that they are in fact more correctly classified as post-liminal phenomena.

However the TTRPG industry is nothing if not self-reflexive. *D&D*, being the root of almost all contemporary commercial TTRPG systems, is also the target of much criticism by game designers themselves, particularly members of the 'indie' role-playing movement, strongly represented at *The Forge* website (www.indie-rpgs.com), where designers are actively encouraged to find new and interesting solutions to old problems in TTRPG design by reconfiguring the design conventions, base mechanics and implicit assumptions laid out by games like *D&D*. As well as the designers at *The Forge* there have been other attempts at re-imagining the mechanics and imagined spaces provided by TTRPGs. The British company, Hogshead Publishing have an imprint called New Style, which publishes several small games that attempt to subvert many of the conventions of

[78] Another criticism leveled at 4th Edition is that its core mechanics have been too heavily influenced by massively multiplayer online video games like *World of Warcraft* and *Everquest*.

traditional TTRPGs. These range from GM-less games like *De Profundis: Letters from the Abyss*, to the role-playing meta-game *Power Kill*, which is a mini-game designed to be played in conjunction with another TTRPG like *D&D*, and is specifically intended to force players to question the moral assumptions that inform the behaviour of their characters in the game (more on this game below).

At one point Hogshead Publishing also published a game produced by Nightfall Games called *SLA Industries* (pronounced 'slay' industries, and currently being published by Cubicle 7 Games).[79] Whereas the New Style games tend to be small, compact oddities (most are only about 24 pages long), *SLA Industries* is a full length, fully functional TTRPG with a comprehensive and fully realised dice mechanic, a character advancement system, a complete background and setting and the potential for extended campaigns spanning many months of play, just like *D&D*. However upon closer inspection of the themes present in the game, it is hard to characterise *SLA Industries* as anything other than somewhat subversive.

The game puts players in control of a character known as an 'operative' in a dark futuristic setting reminiscent of the film *Blade Runner*.[80] Operatives are essentially contract killers, hired by the corporate entities that own the planet where the game is set ('Mort') to kill anyone they do not like. Additionally, the possibility exists for characters to become celebrities through their services to the corporations, since all their exploits are filmed and broadcast as reality television shows, eagerly consumed by a rabid public whose only relief from the dreary repetitiveness and grinding poverty of their pointless existence as corporate wage slaves is the mindless violence provided in the media. *SLA*

[79] Referring to the Hogshead edition, published in 2000.
[80] Ridley Scott, 1982.

Industries is intentionally bleak and nihilistic, the designers of the game seem to have made every effort to emphasise the empty pointlessness of a world gone mad (on Mort it never stops raining and greasy black clouds blot out the light of the sun). They have extrapolated the worst qualities of modern Western society and fashioned from them a nightmare future where corporate greed has become the only factor driving human existence. By exaggerating these qualities in the game world the designers encourage players to deal with these issues. Obviously the degree to which this occurs and the extent to which it encourages a critical engagement with them in the real world, is entirely up to those playing the game. *D&D* glosses over the fact that game-play typically involves what most would consider to be psychotic levels of violence were they to be perpetrated in the real world, for example the 4th Edition *Dungeon Master's Guide* describes an "encounter" (i.e., a point in the story where the characters might battle humanoid "monsters") thus:

> Encounters are where the game happens – where the capabilities of the characters are put to the test and success or failure hang in the balance. An encounter is a single scene in an ongoing drama, when the player characters come up against something that impedes there progress [i.e. other creatures] (34).

At no point do the rulebooks ever question the validity of solving problems through violence except to suggest that providing alternative solutions might enhance play by providing more variety for the players.

SLA Industries on the other hand, encourages players to consider the motivations of their characters, simply by acknowledging the fact that they are essentially murderers, involved in what many would consider to be socially unacceptable activities:

> The life of an operative [player character] is greatly removed from normal civilian life. To most it is an enviable position of fame, excitement and high adventure, though the television viewing inhabitants of Mort are misled by the biased media channels. In truth the operative's existence is dangerously short… It is [a way of life] where states of mind are confused, asocial

> behaviour and psychoses have become popular. Thousands of operatives struggle relentlessly to clutch onto their sanity and continue to climb the ladder of power and success (Allsop, 38).

This emphasis in *SLA Industries* could be read as subversive. Artists in other media have often used the mainstream media as a vehicle for the delivery of subversive content designed to encourage a critical engagement with issues that are often taken for granted within Western society. A good example would be Victor Burgin's 1976 piece *What Does Possession Mean to You? 7% of our Population Owns 84% of Our Wealth* (see Figure 4). Joan Gibbons notes that Burgin was influenced by the writers and artists involved with the Soviet magazine *Lef*, "especially their faith in the power of the advertisement as a 'poetic supplement'" (32). The above mentioned piece looks like a glossy magazine advert and is meant to be published as such. It has immediate impact precisely because it sneaks up on the viewer, disguised as it is in the trappings of everyday consumer culture. The text that accompanies the 'advert' though (which is the same as the title), is anything but typical. The same could be said of *SLA Industries*, initially it poses as a typical TTRPG, but it soon becomes apparent that it will require players to make difficult moral decisions with regard to the actions of their characters. It will force them to confront the violent power fantasies that underlie their hobby, as "SLA Industries teaches its operatives to face and become murderers on a daily basis" (Allsop, 50). Referring to "Contract Killers", a possible vocation for player characters in *SLA Industries*, the rulebook makes their motivations clear:

> In most cases the work of the Contract Killer is purely showmanship. He or she acts like a madman in front of the camera in order to get better ratings… The media love to see Contract Killers really taking each other apart and the money falls in with the fame and sponsors. Most Contract Killers are very stable and professional, more like combat businessmen than insane mad men (Allsop, 98).

SLA Industries compels players to engage with the line that exists between fantasy and reality through the blatant endorsement of extreme violence within its diegetic spaces. It demands a critical engagement with the issues it raises, and it does so by crossing lines, stepping on toes and slaughtering sacred cows.

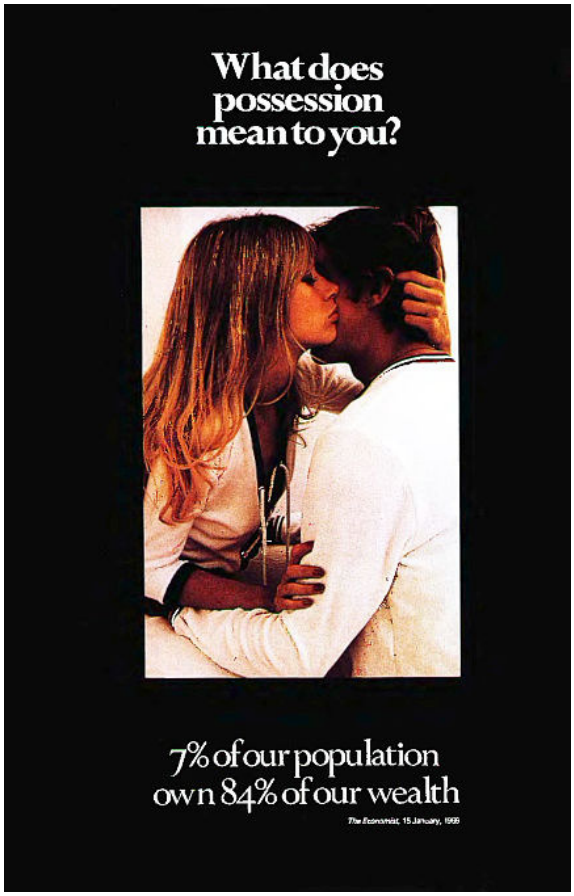


Figure 4: Victor Burgin: What Does Possession Mean to You? 7% of our Population Owns 84% of Our Wealth

SLA Industries subversive content operates from within its diegetic context. Unlike *D&D* it does not ignore the moral ambiguities that are present in the narratives it is designed to present, but rather exalts them allowing them to become part of the play dynamic itself, and to enter into the consciousness of players and, by extension, their characters without degrading their critical relevance. However, it does this from within

the traditional gamic context of a TTRPG. The same cannot be said for another of Hogshead's games, *Power Kill*.

Power Kill is not a game unto itself, it requires a more traditional TTRPG to be played, onto which it attaches itself as a "roleplaying metagame" (Tynes, 1). Its rules are spartan, the entire rulebook is only three pages long, containing none of the traditional dice mechanics and complex procedures detailed in a typical TTRPG manual. Rather, "[y]ou 'play' POWER KILL at the beginning and ending of your [regular gaming session]" (1). Before play begins players are required to take their regular TTRPG character sheet and write at the top, in bold letters "PATIENT'S DELUSIONAL IDENTITY" (1). Before the regular TTRPG session the first phase of *Power Kill* is played. During this phase the GM is referred to as the "counsellor" and is required to ask each of the players a series of probing questions. The players are required to respond "in character" (namely, to pretend that they are their character from the regular TTRPG). The questions are as follows:

1) How many times a month do you find yourself in genuinely life-threatening situations?
2) How many people have you killed in your life (approximately)?
3) Do you believe that there are times at which you must take the law into your own hands and dispense justice as you see fit?
4) Have you "dispensed justice as you see fit" in the last thirty days?
5) Have you ever taken personal possessions from a corpse?
6) Do you believe that you are, at times, persecuted or threatened because of your physiology? (e.g., because you are an elf, dwarf, halfling, drow, alien, mutant, super-powered human, vampire, ghost, werewolf, wizard, or faerie?)
7) Can you perform physical or mental feats that the average human being is utterly incapable of?
8) Do you believe that the acquisition of sufficient material possessions or slaughter of living, sentient beings (i.e., experience points) can suddenly and dramatically change you, physically or psychologically?
9) On a scale of 1 to 9, please rate your general feelings towards beings racially, ideologically, or physiologically different from you; 1 means fear, 5 means tolerance, 9 means hatred.
10) Are you proficient with any weapons or melee fighting styles? Which ones?

(Tynes, 1-2).

The "counsellor" takes note of the player's in-character responses and then the regular TTRPG session begins. All of the above questions relate to situations, activities and behaviours that are often encountered in typical TTRPGs, in fact, as has been argued earlier in this paper, many games such as *D&D* actively encourage this sort of behaviour by characters, through the awarding of specific in-game capital (in the form of XPs, and so on) for murder and pillaging[81] presented within the framework of a gamic space.

The second phase of *Power Kill* comes at the end of the regular TTRPG session. Here the players take on the role of 'Power Kill Characters' (PKCs)[82], violent criminals who 'have been remanded to the care of the state mental health care system' (2). The counsellor then reframes the events of the game that has just been played for the other players and their PKCs. So, if:

> [i]n the game session, the characters were secretive vampires confronted by a rival clan in a nightclub [and a] period of heated discussion ensued, followed by a sudden outbreak of violence in which the characters killed the rival clan [then,] [i]n the real world, the PKCs entered a nightclub. They hassled and provoked – via argumentative behaviour – a number of random club-goers, and an altercation ensued. The PKCs being prepared for the use of deadly force, subsequently killed the chosen club-goers (Tynes, 2).

Once this is done the counsellor asks the players the same ten questions that were asked during the first phase of *Power Kill*, only this time the players answer as their PKCs rather than their regular game characters. Once a month the player acting as the counsellor is required to compare the responses of the players over time and note any variance. Specifically, she/he is required to note if the responses of the in-game characters are becoming increasingly similar to those of the PKC.

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[81] I am aware of one game that even actively encourages rape (see: F.A.T.A.L by Byron Hall "a fantasy role-playing game with an unusual focus on sexual violence" (rpg.net)). Fine has also detailed several accounts of male gamers' characters raping or threatening to rape in-game characters controlled by the GM (146).

[82] Except the GM who is once again the counsellor.

Tynes concludes *Power Kill* by stating:

> The actions taken by characters in [normal role-playing games] would almost always be completely unacceptable in the real world; it is only the shoddy trappings of genre conventions that allow RPG players to consider their stories "heroic" or "dramatic." Stripped bare of themes and story arcs, RPG sessions consist of endless variations on the life of a criminal … What is the true source of our enjoyment of this hobby? Is it the exploration of a given set of genre conventions? Or is it the illicit thrill of engaging in criminal behaviour, sanctified in a safe trapping? What is the source of our FAE [fun and entertainment] anyway, and why? POWER KILL is meant to suggest a few answers. Or at least, to ask a few questions. (3)

This game attempts to engage with the implications of the behaviours that are encouraged in many game systems and exhibited in the characters that gamers often choose to play. In this way it strongly conforms to one of the most distinctive traits Turner ascribed to liminoid phenomena: it is highly critical of the implicit assumptions of gamers and their alter egos. Of course it could be argued that in a broader sense it actually reinforces the underlying values of Western society (particularly regarding violence) which TTRPGs in fact subvert in the sense that they encourage it. Power Kill is attempting to subvert the dominant assumptions present in the rule systems of many popular TTRPGs such as *D&D*, and in that way it also subverts other popular views of violence portrayed in various media such as television and cinema. However in blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, by couching the regular TTRPG within the space of another game actively seeking to place itself betwixt and between the real and the imagined, it reinforces a deeply held belief of contemporary Western thought: that violence in the real world is unacceptable. While on one level *Power Kill* may be questioning the hypocrisy of a society that condemns violence and yet saturates itself with images of violent excess, on another level the fact that it is a game itself suggests that it may in fact fall into the category of post-liminal rather than liminoid phenomena. Although *Power Kill* exists on the limen betwixt and between the TTRPG and the real

world of the players, ultimately the moral questions it seeks to raise about other games are not particularly subversive of the dominant societal paradigm itself, but rather of the incongruous depictions of violence found in entertainment media within that paradigm.

This then brings us to the third game from Hogshead Publishing to be discussed, *Violence*, described on their website (www.hogshead publishing.com) as a game of "killing and looting in an endless frenzy of senseless and moral free bloodshed".

Violence: the Roleplaying Game of Egregious and Repulsive Bloodshed belongs to a special category of somewhat tongue in cheek TTRPG games and supplements similar to the woefully un-politically correct *Chainmail Bikini*[83] supplement for 3rd edition *D&D* published by E.N. Armoury. Nonetheless it contains a fully functioning (though somewhat simplistic and intentionally haphazard) game system. The cover illustration depicts a maniacally grinning, dangerous looking fellow, drenched in blood, wielding a large knife and a semi-automatic rifle, surrounded by the corpses of what are presumably his victims. The introductory text for the game (headed: "Welcome to *Violence* you degraded turd") goes as follows:

> After many years of labouring in the vineyards of game design, holding aloft the Platonic ideal of what the *Ars Ludorum* can achieve, and working for the time when game design shall achieve its place among the pantheon of muses … I have come to an unutterably grim and depressing realization.
>
> You puerile adolescent – and post adolescent scum don't give a tinker's cuss. Berg was right, when he told me, lo these many years ago, that there's no point in trying to write a good set of rules because you idiots can't tell the difference between a good set and a bad set anyway (Costikyan, 4).

[83] A set of absurdly detailed rules spanning an entire book, dealing exclusively with the in-game implementation of a form of particularly notorious female attire often favoured by the illustrators of lurid 'swords and sorcery' book jackets.

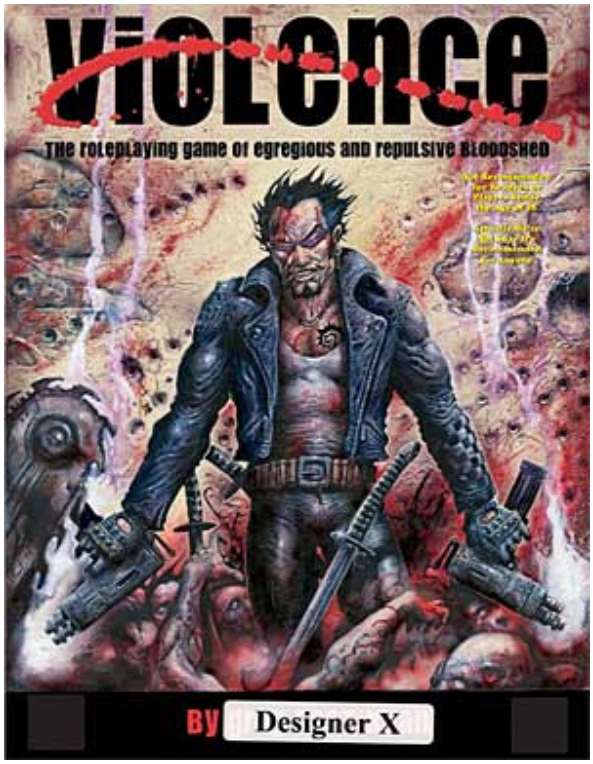


Figure 5: The cover image of *Violence: the Roleplaying Game of Egregious and Repulsive Bloodshed*

This then sets the generally irreverent and intentionally offensive tone for the rest of the book. Costikyan (who refers to himself throughout the work as "designer X") does not pull many punches in his attempt to produce what is arguably the most gratuitous and puerile TTRPG on the market today. However, couched in his obscenity and cynicism is a revealing exposé of the very same issues that *Power Kill* tries to address in a more formal manner. In many ways *Violence* is a game where the "genre conventions" so heavily criticised by *Power Kill* have been stripped away (or at least replaced with another more obviously problematic set of conventions), laying bare the ugly underbelly of a hobby that is so often predicated on the juvenile power fantasies of players.

The characters that players control in *Violence* are very similar to the PKCs of *Power Kill*, they are:

> "[monsters] in the true sense, not the "fantasy" one. [They] are … degraded, bloodthirsty savage[s] … [who] delight in pain and blood and mayhem. [They] won't live long, I promise you, but [they'll] leave a trail of mangled corpses in [their] wake" (Costikyan, 5).

In *Violence* players control an 'ordinary' human being, there are no "races" or "classes" to choose from. The setting is the real world, and there are no super-powers or long lists of "special" abilities to acquire, only the psychotic tendencies of the characters as the players choose to play them. The skills and stats included in the system (which Costikyan would have us believe he made up as he went along)[84] are all geared towards violent encounters of one kind or another, with most relating to the use of firearms or other forms of weaponry. The setting for "adventures" is equally mundane, and players are encouraged to take advantage of high density, inner city housing facilities as the sites for their exploits since, as the rulebook states, they are conveniently located, and filled with an abundance of helpless, innocent victims for them to rob, mutilate and murder. Players are advised to pick out the weak and infirm, old ladies and single mothers,[85] as their targets since they are (supposedly) more likely to be feeble and defenceless, and the legal consequences of their murders less severe. Statistics for an array of dangerous weapons and equipment are provided to help in this task.

Violence also provides an innovative new way for characters to gain 'experience' (and thus improve their stats), in which players are expected to buy experience tokens from Hogshead Publishing.[86] The amount of experience acquired bears no relation to the character's activities in the game, the more money players spend on experience tokens

[84] Judging by their haphazard construction, this is not altogether implausible.
[85] Game statistics are provided for both.
[86] Hogshead never actually printed and sold experience tokens, rather Costikyan is presumably making a point about the absurdity of the concept of 'experience' adhered to by most TTRPGs, and drawing a connection between it and the consumer culture that informs it.

the more experience their characters get. If they cannot afford tokens then their characters do not gain new abilities.

Violence also provides rules for the acquisition, use and selling of a wide variety of illegal drugs, including substances such as PCP which can be used to make the characters more effective in combat. Furthermore, the game includes advice on what to do if the players want their characters to engage in torture and/or rape, although Costikyan points out that:

> the image of a bunch of overweight, under sexed, unbathed gamers sitting around, drooling while they tell themselves what they're doing to the 'bitch' is [pretty] repulsive. Homoerotic, in a way, yes? … I'm not at all sure I want to encourage this kind of crap. Actually, I'm absolutely positive that I don't. But then we're supposed to be wallowing in the muck, aren't we? Catering to these repulsive adolescent fantasies. If we must, we must (20).

And so it continues. To say that *Violence* is an attempt by Costikyan to undermine and subvert the implicit assumptions and world views that inform many TTRPGs is perhaps an understatement. Few other games take things this far.

Certainly *Violence* treads on some toes in its attempt to make a point. TTRPGs are not the only form of gaming where absurd levels of violence are often encouraged within the diegetic context of the game. Video games like the *Grand Theft Auto* series by Rockstar Games, which have achieved a far greater degree of cultural and media saturation, have received significant attention from the powers that be (particularly conservative politicians in the United States and Europe) decrying the levels of violence they depict.[87] In fact the potential behaviour of a *Grand Theft Auto* character (murder, car-jacking, wanton destruction of private property) bears a strong resemblance to the

[87] While I am aware of the highly contested nature of the research regarding violence in games, it has been extensively addressed by several notable scholars and is beyond the scope of this paper. For more information see: *Grand Theft Childhood: The Surprising Truth About Violent Video Games and What Parents Can Do* by Lawrence Kutner, Ph.D. and Cheryl K. Olson, Sc.D. for a discussion of the ambiguous effects of violence in videogames on children.

behaviour that is encouraged in player characters by 'Designer X' in *Violence*. Both types of game offer a certain degree of anonymity in play: aside from the fact that none of the acts 'perpetrated' are real, there is also the issue of "otherness" raised by Dyszelski in relation to his informant Christine earlier. It is not the player who is engaging in acts of violence, but rather the character that they play. Many TTRPGers emphasise their ability to distinguish between themselves and their character (Fine, 57-59) , and often see it as a mark of skill in the art of role-playing if they are able to play characters whose personalities, cultural context and moral values differ greatly from their own(145-152).[88] Fine notes that "[i]n fantasy role-playing games [the player] not only determines what others will do, but does so while playing a character – a hypothetical person with attributes, fears, emotions, and goals" (205). As one of Fines informants argues:

> If one is going to create a world that is "alive" and charged with real adventure, role playing is essential. One must get *inside* his character, see what motivates him and makes him unlike any other, breathe life into him as an individual, and above all surrender one's twentieth century self to the illusion and *be* that character – see, feel, think, and act as he would (Fine, 206).

Why though, when given the option, do they so often choose to play the role of violent psychopaths, even if they themselves do not display any such traits in real life?

Michelle Nephew, in her essay *Playing with Identity: Unconscious Desire and Role-playing Games*, has suggested that role-playing games act like Plato's "Ring of Gyges".[89] The anonymity and "otherness" provided by the character role that the player assumes presents them with an environment where there is nothing to loose from acting

[88] It is interesting to note that the latest *Grand Theft Auto* game (number 4 in the series) has introduced a strong narrative element centred around a carefully constructed character. One might argue that the narrative and intense characterisation serve as a justification for the character's actions in the game, since he is "forced" by diegetic circumstance to behave in an anti-social manner, thus relieving some of the responsibility from the player who is, just like a TTRPGer, playing a role.

[89] Much like "The One Ring" in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, this artefact causes the wearer to become invisible, allowing them to act with a degree of impunity.

out suppressed violent and sexual fantasies. The same trend is evident on un-moderated internet bulletin board systems (BBSs) like the /b/ channel on www.4chan.org (whose only rule is: no child pornography). /b/, commonly referred to as "the asshole of the internet" (Douglas, n.p.), is notorious for being a source of all things foul and depraved, since posters on the forum are not required to log in or provide any information about themselves and are therefore relatively anonymous.[90] The results of this sort of anonymity are relevant to character creation in TTRPGs where the mask of the character provides the player with a means for manipulating the narrative underpinnings of the gamic space by literally creating the antagonists (and thus to an extent the diegetic context) in the story that is about to be told. As Nephew points out:

> Because the player is empowered to do more than just interpret the "text" of a role-playing game – because the player has a hand in shaping his character and the game's narrative based on his own experiences and desires – he becomes an active manipulator of the text (Nephew, 120).

This element of choice is important in situating TTRPGs within Turner's theory. The behaviour of player characters in TTRPGs has some notable parallels to the behaviour of initiates involved in the liminal phase of certain rites of passage. 'Betwixt and between' as they are, Turner argues that initiates are afforded specific privileges and:

> In other ways … the novices [are] also conceded unprecedented freedoms – they make raids and swoops on villages and gardens, seize women, vituperate older people. Innumerable are the forms of topsy-turveydom, parody, abrogation of the normative system, exaggeration of rule into caricature or satirizing rule. The novices are at once put outside and inside the circle of previously known (Turner, 42).

However Turner is also quick to note that "one thing must be kept in mind – *all* these acts and symbols are of *obligation*" (42). The initiates do not choose to perform these acts of

[90] For more information on this topic see Joseph M. Kayany's paper *Contexts of Uninhibited Online Behaviour: Flaming in Social Newsgroups on Usenet*

inversion, they are a requirement of the ritual process in which they are engaged. These are not acts of societal subversion, they are acts of submission, they are done because it is required that they be done and they therefore fit well in the category of liminal activities described in the previous chapter.

The same cannot be said for the playing of video games and TTRPGs. They are leisure activities popular in post-industrial societies, they are by definition *not* requirements, but rather activities engaged in through the active volition of their participants and, as Nephew notes above, the element of choice is evident throughout the process of gaming. In fact one might argue that gaming represents a notable form of leisure activity in this regard, since not only is the choice to engage in the activity solely up to the whims of the player, but that element of choice extends into the activity itself. In fact in some ways TTRPGs are primarily games of choice. Players *choose* a character, they *choose* what attributes to ascribe to that character, and then they *choose* how that character will behave and interact with their environment, and how they will progress through the narrative laid out by the GM. It might be argued that TTRPGs are fun precisely because they allow players to *choose* to be someone else for a while. They provide them with choice in areas that are typically fixed in real life. In reality you cannot choose to be taller or a member of the opposite sex, but in a TTRPG you can. In this sense TTRPGs seem to neatly fit into the category of liminoid phenomena as defined by Turner, since the act of personal choice is central not only to the activity itself but to play as well.

This connection is not without its problems though. Certainly the element of choice in TTRPGs is ever-present, however it should be noted that this element is bound

within the framework of a set of rules that define play. The free associations that Turner implies in his definition of liminoid phenomena, evident in much contemporary art and fringe culture, are therefore held in check in a somewhat systemic, normative way in TTRPGs. The assumptions inherent in these rules sets therefore become important, since they inform what might be termed the 'margins' of play. This delineation is typical of games of all sorts: as Sutton-Smith notes play is "experimentation with variable repertoires" (in: Turner, 52). One would then expect that the specificities of the repertoire would be important in defining the activity as liminoid or otherwise. Various 'avant-garde' movements within game design[91] have often stressed the need for simple rule structures that do not get in the way of role-playing. Typically these are framed in opposition to more 'commercial' systems like *D&D* which are often quite 'rules heavy', meaning that more time is spent during play engaging with and interpreting the rules. Arguably the structure that this implies leaves less 'space' for free interpretation, experimentation and player choice. Essentially, the more that is defined in the rules, the less choice the players have in dealing with the situations that may arise in play. Thus there is an important distinction made between systems that emphasise rules as an integral part of the game and those that emphasise role-playing, viewing the rules as a somewhat obtrusive necessity of play. The prescriptive nature of the former makes them harder to categorise as truly liminoid forms of play, while the latter fit more neatly with Turner's definition.

Further complicating the issue is the fact that players may modify the rules of a game to suit their particular style of play. As previously noted, the addition of 'house rules' to games is common enough, however, it is just as easy to strip rules away. Most

[91] The indie gaming and avant-garde LARP school mentioned earlier for example.

contemporary commercial games rules systems are based around a core mechanic that is often very simple. The rest of the rules are then extrapolated from this core mechanic. This means that many rules are essentially optional and can be done away with without greatly affecting the play dynamic. In this way a group of players might take a 'rules heavy' system like *D&D* and make it 'rules light', thus wholly changing the play dynamic of the game. Once again player choice becomes an important factor in the categorisation of TTRPGs according to Turner's theory.

Similarly, the very nature of choice can become problematic when discussing an activity as subversive. It has already been argued that TTRPGs such as *D&D* might be characterised as supportive rather than subversive of contemporary Western consumer culture through their emphasis on the accumulation of in-game capital, and the means by which these assets are typically acquired. It might be further argued that the emphasis on choice present in many systems is indicative of a more general trend in Western culture towards offering consumers choices which, although superficially distinct, mask a deeper uniformity of production. Similarly, indie developers at The Forge have recently been critical of the fact that many TTRPGs today offer minimal variation in terms of the actual play experience, being little more than re-workings of a popular and well established theme.

Furthermore, the rules elements of many games offer players few options in the way of actual choice. While character customisation is central to the play dynamic of many contemporary games (such as *D&D* 4th Edition), many of the options available to players (powers, weapons, magic items) are simply variations on a theme, and the characters in these games are all strongly defined by, and aligned to the central assumptions present in

the rules themselves. For example, characters in *D&D* are almost always 'adventurers' (of one type or another), who go on quests and battle monsters. It would be difficult within the structure provided by the rules and the suggested style of play to create a character who is a pacifist for example; the rules simply do not cater to this style of play. LARPers, with their massively simplified rule systems, arguably have more scope for the development of unique and interesting characters than the typical TTRPG player. In fact, the assertions of game designers, that players need many, varied options (a stated aim of the *D&D* 4th Edition design documents) would seem to be predicated on the same assumptions that inform marketing executives selling zippy little hatch-backs and myriad flavours of ice-cream. This is not particularly subversive, nor does it seem to be indicative of the qualities ascribed to liminoid phenomena provided by Turner.

Beyond the subversive potential of liminoid phenomena Turner specifies other characteristics that delineate the liminoid from the liminal. He argues that liminoid phenomena tend to be generated beyond the normative structures of society by small, self-contained groups "'schools', circles, and coteries" (54) that often compete among themselves for status and recognition. This characteristic is notably different from liminal activities which exist as symbols with a "common intellectual and emotional meaning for all members of the [society]" (54). In this sense TTRPGs seem to be very much liminoid phenomena. The ethnographic data collected by both Fine and Dyszelski suggest that role-players tend to be members of a somewhat marginalised sub-culture, often at odds with the norms of the broader societal paradigm (Fine, 45- 47; Dyszelski, 73). Players are required by the nature of the games to organise into small groups[92] that can become quite insular. While it is true that many TTRPG groups do not actively 'compete' with one

[92] Coincidentally *Vampire* actually refers to groups of players as coteries.

another for status and recognition it should be noted that significant institutions have developed in and around the hobby for precisely this purpose. The most notable is the RPGA (originally known as the Role-Playing Game Association), a members' only group that sanctions role-playing tournaments at conventions and over the internet. Interestingly the RPGA has existed for almost as long as TTRPGs and bears a strong resemblance to the societies that war-gamers commonly organise themselves into. The RPGA provides an equal footing for gamers who would like to play TTRPGs in a more competitive fashion than is typical in the hobby, with players normally competing over a number of short games held at conventions, in categories ranging from role-playing proficiency to the amount of treasure gathered and monsters slain. It should however be noted that most gamers do not play in this way and there is often a great degree of fluidity between TTRPG groups (as noted by Fine: 73-123), with players joining and playing with multiple groups, utilising different rules and various styles of play.

There is a stereotype associated with TTRPG gamers (amongst those who are even aware of their existence as a distinct subculture). "Gamers are often perceived as lacking social skills, being deviant, immature, strange, obsessed, 'nerds', 'geeks', and 'wierdos'[sic]" (Dyszelski, 107). Fine has noted that gamers may show "disregard… [for] many of the normative requirements of conventional society, feeling a need to concentrate on [their] own interests without regard for the expectations of others" (47). These perceptions are substantiated by the informants interviewed by both ethnographers. Dyszelski focuses on the experiences of female gamers and one informant, Ally (a "Female Gaming Professional"), notes "[i]t's sad but true that gamers still tend to be what we professionals so fondly call 'socially challenged'" (108). Dyszelski argues that a

further explanation for the "isolationism of gaming subculture is that gamers, having been subjected to marginalisation by society as a whole, hold tighter to the sanctity of their haven through exclusion and xenophobia" (108). All of these factors serve to widen the perceived gap between gamers and normative society, thus ensuring the idiosyncratic quirkiness that Turner ascribes to liminoid phenomena and their participants. In this regard TTRPGs and the people who play them would seem to fit the bill, however, it should be noted that this analysis is based on a stereotype that is being challenged more and more by gamers themselves. Dyszelski's study in and of itself demonstrates that one gamer stereotype, namely that all gamers are male, is patently false. T. L. Taylor who wrote an ethnography entitled *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*, detailing players of *Ever Quest* (an online computer role-playing game), has noted that "[*Ever Quest*] draws a more diverse fan base than often is imagined. … there are men and women, teens, the twenty-something contingent, and a fairly decent number over thirty" (3). The data gathered on TTRPGs are less conclusive[93] as to the constitution of the demographic, however it is not unreasonable to suppose that the reality may in fact not fit the stereotype. Fine makes it clear in his work that it is impossible to quantify what characteristics constitute the personality of the typical gamer, and that care should be taken when making broad, sweeping statements (47). Nonetheless TTRPG gaming most certainly exists within the ludic sphere of society and often sets itself apart from its normative structures, in this sense it certainly conforms strongly to the criteria laid out by Turner for defining phenomena as liminoid.

[93] Online computer games are by their nature easier to gather statistics for since all players are connected in a communal world whereas TTRPGers are spread over many, much smaller groups worldwide.

Similarly Turner notes that liminoid phenomena "May be collective … but are more characteristically individual products…. [that are] not cyclical, but continuously generated ... in times and places apart from work settings assigned to "leisure" activities" (54). In this regard TTRPGs seem once again to be more closely associated with the liminoid than the liminal which is "collective, concerned with calendrical, biological, social-structural rhythms or with crises in social processes" (54). Although TTRPGs are never individual products they are, as just mentioned, the products of small groups, operating in a mostly autonomous fashion. Within the games themselves players other than the GM take on the roles of individual characters who are almost always distinct in some way from the characters of the other players, even if they do follow certain implicit or explicit guidelines inherent in the rules of the game being played. In this way the group structure manages to encourage individualism to some degree amongst players since each plays a unique role in the narrative being constructed. This is in stark contrast to the homogenising of subjects typical of liminal rituals, where individuality is actively suppressed.

Choice is a central aspect of play and characterisation, even if it is within the bounds of an overarching gamic structure. Certainly TTRPGs exist almost purely as a form of entertainment; they are never described as work. In both these regards they conform far more strongly to the category of liminoid than to that of liminal, however it should still be noted that exceptions are sometimes evident. TTRPGers often organise themselves into large groups (the RPGA is one example and other notable communities exist on the internet), and certain psychologists[94] have argued that TTRPGs might be used as tools in

[94] Keith Hurley in his essay *Uses of Role-playing Within Psychology and Psychotherapy*, published in the first issue of *Inter*Action* magazine (1994), Also see: *On the Transmutation of Educational Role-play: A*

the mental health professions, thus crossing the line between work and play. Once again the classification of TTRPGs as liminoid phenomena is imperfect.

The final classificatory dichotomy provided by Turner is somewhat more manageable. He states that liminal phenomena predominate in pre-industrial societies while liminoid phenomena tend to be the products of post-industrial, mechanised societies. Evidently TTRPGs belong to the latter category, having only come into existence in a clearly delineated form in the mid 1970s in North America. However, as discussed in Chapter 1, their origins are not clear, and they are directly related to other forms of human activity that have a long history dating to before the industrial revolution. The tradition of storytelling, so evident in many 'traditional' societies, is the most obvious antecedent of TTRPGs. As mentioned earlier the format of a GM presenting a narrative to an audience of players who play an active role in how the story unfolds shows close parallels to the traditional storytelling format.[95] While the typical storyteller does not hand over control of the protagonists to his audience, storytelling is in fact an interactive medium insofar as there is an emotional connection between the storyteller and his audience, and the whims of that audience may influence the way in which the story is presented. This emotional connection is an ancient tool that has to a large degree been lost in many other modern narrative forms due to their dissemination through an impersonal media machine.[96] In an age where more and more people interact predominantly with machines rather than other people, TTRPGs retain a strong connection to more traditional narrative formats, not only because they require direct

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Critical Reframing of the Role-play in Order to Meet the Educational Demands by Thomas Heriksen for a discussion of the uses of role-playing in a pedagogic context.

[95] In *Vampire* the GM is in fact referred to as the 'storyteller', and *Vampire* is part of a line of games that belong to White Wolf Publishing's *Storyteller System*.

[96] Jamie Wilson, *The History of Storytelling*.

human interaction, but also in the mythological themes that dominate many of the narratives that are constructed through their auspices. Though TTRPGs are most certainly products of our post-modern era, they have roots that stretch back to the very beginnings of human culture.

The distinction between post-liminal and liminoid is not entirely clear even in Turner's own writing, as he points out in *Liminal to Liminoid* (55). Various factors influence classification and they are not set in stone, therefore it is hard to consider the work of an individual as specifically liminoid though that tendency may be evident. Liminoid phenomena are less a category, more an area of production, like artistic movements (which have been the sites of many liminoid phenomena) they are defined not so much by their boundaries, but rather by specific examples which codify and identify a broader tendency. Like ideas and dreams, liminoid phenomena are by their very nature fleeting, transient. They are a point of momentary focus within a broader cultural context, which itself forms a segment of an even more vast and complex cultural discourse. To locate TTRPGs within the sphere of liminoid production is a slippery prospect, in this chapter I have examined some of the evidence for this potential within these games, and will now, in closing, attempt to negotiate the validity of such a stance.

Chapter 4: Conclusions

In the previous chapters I have endeavoured to examine TTRPGs with the goal of being able to discuss the efficacy of their classification as liminoid phenomena. This argument was motivated through an examination of the existing literature on TTRPGs, some of which employ Turner's theory of liminoid phenomena to situate role-playing games within the context of a broader cultural discourse, and to suggest certain functional apparatus within the activity.

Some role-players display a tendency or desire to view themselves as existing on the limen of society, apart (and possibly above) the multitudinous human throng of many complex post-industrial societies. However the validity of this judgmental stance does not hold up well to scrutiny. Mark Schulzinger mentions that "[p]layers flatter themselves by claiming that they are more intelligent than the general population" (5; in: Fine, 41). However there is little hard evidence of this tendency in Fine's ethnographic data. Dyszelski argues that gamers as a subculture have been subjected to marginalisation by society as a whole, and have reacted by becoming insular, exclusive and xenophobic (108). They may fancy themselves as artists, storytellers and explorers of the vast untapped reservoir of human potential. The view of role-playing games as subversive liminoid phenomena fits well with this self image of the role-player as unappreciated genius, however, it is also highly problematic when employed broadly to define the games categorically.

It is not my intention here to discredit the work of other authors, far from it. Their research has been invaluable in the construction of, and ultimate stance taken by this

paper. Rather my aim is to highlight the complexity of the subject at hand, to draw attention to the sublime non-uniformity that exists within this activity, and within gaming as a broader category of action.

As with most forms of gaming, the analysis and classification of TTRPGs is problematic because it represents a process rather than a specific object that may be examined bereft of context. While this may be true to an extent of all subjects of academic inquiry, it is particularly obvious in the study of games. Espen Aarseth suggests that "[g]ames are both object and process, they can't be read as texts or listened to as music, the must be played" (1)

> A game is an activity defined by rules in which players try to reach some sort of goal. Games can be whimsical and playful, or highly serious. They can be played alone or in complex social scenarios (Galloway, 1).

TTRPGs are particularly curious in this regard since they are not only played by the players, they are also to some extent created by the players, with the game (D&D for example) providing an underlying framework that facilitates play. In this sense the rules might be thought of as resembling the rules that govern the real world, social contracts, societal norms, the requirements of reciprocity, though the rules in TTRPGs are arguably more focused on a specific outcome than those of day-to-day life. The co-dependence of authorship here, between the author of the rules and the authors of the game (the players) is at the heart of the problem. While the rules provide a framework for defining the boundaries of play, what exactly is contained within those boundaries, and how close it strays to the edge is largely up to the players. I have chosen to examine the rules in the previous chapters because they represent a solid, referable foundation upon which to judge these games. If the rules of a game system allow for, and perhaps even encourage

liminoid play then there is a case for regarding TTRPGs, at least in some instances, as liminoid phenomena. Therefore this is an argument for or against a potential within these games, rather than a direct attempt at an all encompassing classification.

Mary Strine, Beverly Long and Mary Hopkins, in their article *Research in Interpretation and Performance Studies: Trends, Issues, Priorities*, observe "that performance is 'an essentially contested concept'", citing W.B. Gallie's *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding*, they argue that "certain concepts, such as art and democracy, [have] disagreement about their essence built into the concept itself". They suggest that:

> Performance has become just such a concept, developed in an atmosphere of "sophisticated disagreement" by participants who "do not expect to defeat or silence opposing positions, but rather through continuing dialogue to attain a sharper articulation of all positions and therefore a fuller understanding of the conceptual richness of performance" (in: Carlson, 1).

I argue that TTRPGs can be seen in a similar light. Attempts by scholars such as Ericsson and Dyszelski to apply Victor Turner's theories to these games represent a single thread within a wider discourse seeking to adequately describe them. The validity of this form of analysis must ultimately be predicated on its usefulness as a tool for investigation.

Much of the argument in Chapter 3 centred on violence and the interpretation of its use as a means of subversion within certain TTRPG rules sets. Some games, such as *Violence*, seem to exhibit strongly liminoid tendencies within their rules and in the how they are presented to players. Greg Costikyan seems to be doing more than just providing an easy form of entertainment with his game. He is questioning the moral underpinnings, not only of TTRPGs as cultural artefacts but more importantly, the assumptions of those who play them and the choices they make when they choose to tell stories. He problematises the tendencies of players to simply mimic the morally ambiguous violent

content that plays out in the popular narrative formats of the mass media. This highlights a unique potential within TTRPGs. Their aforementioned participatory quality makes them a useful site for the performance of liminoid activities. Since they are not codified to the same degree that other contemporary media often are, existing as they do in the moment of play and tied deeply to subjective experience, they are ripe with the potential for experimentation.

Mike Pohjola, in his essay on LARP entitled *Autonomous Identities: Immersion as a Tool for Exploring, Empowering and Emancipating Identities*, has suggested that the space occupied by a LARP session has the potential to become a portal for the exploration of radical new culture.

> The game master makes up rules for the society. She can decide on a new language, new style of clothing, or change the laws entirely. She temporarily changes one set of arbitrary rules to another.
>
> This can be compared with Hakim Bey's anarchistic concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ): In a TAZ, willing participants agree on a new set of rules that are in effect within the Zone. The Zone is independent of any outside state or law, and is supposedly dissolved as soon as it is discovered by the establishment (92).

Though the degree to which this "new" culture is *performed* is arguably greater in a LARP than a TTRPG, the same crucial elements are present in both. In fact in some ways TTRPGs have an advantage here; their reliance on imaginative rather than physical performance means that potentially any form of behaviour may be explored using the basic structure of a TTRPG. It would be difficult for example, to act out many of the situations encouraged by Costikyan in *Violence*, however, these things are possible when the experience is limited to the imaginative faculties of the players. In this sense the TTRPG becomes a creative space; a place beyond places, balanced precariously on the transient limen, suspended momentarily between what is and what might be. Ideas born

in this place have the potential to pass from the realm of mere fantasy into the light of a more concrete reality.

> Larpers [and TTRPGers] are not doomed to play in temporary pocket realities (no matter how autonomous) inside the "objective reality", but they can change their reality for good. Identities can change and so can realities (Pohjola, 92).

The experiences of Dyszelski's informants seem to support this view of gaming as a transformative space.

> Christine points out … that through gaming, despite the struggle to set aside part of herself to play the character of Kai Tilanne, she forms a bond with the character. Christine acknowledges that a gaming group that supports such characterization can facilitate that kind of bonding as well as stir deep emotions for players. She notes that through her experience of playing Kai Tilanne, she has to act and react differently; by engaging in that difference of perspective, her own views on many subjects are challenged (Dyszelski, 237-238).

Christine does point out that it is necessary for the gaming group to support this style of play, and that the willingness to engage in (possibly subversive) play must be present at the gaming table. Once again highlighting the complexities and ambiguities of analysis associated with a collective endeavour.

While the ethnographic data provided by Dyszelski seem particularly supportive of the argument for TTRPGs as transformative spaces, the data provided by Fine are less conclusive. As discussed in Chapter 3, Dyszelski stresses the importance of the player's engagement with the 'other' as a primary mechanism through which transformative knowledge may be gained and used. While the informants in Dyszelski's study stress a more or less rigorous immersion in the persona of their character, showing a strong consideration for the individuality and uniqueness of the other's character[97], the informants interviewed by Fine show less interest in this regard. Discussing gaming as an extension of the self, Fine remarks:

[97] See in particular the accounts of Christine and Jennifer, pg. 237-240.

> One motivation for gaming … is the desire to immerse oneself in a strange environment and test oneself to determine if one could have survived in that perilous time. This approach implies that one will use all of one's personal abilities, even though they may go beyond the traits or knowledge of one's character. This type of gamer does not separate the information which he (as a player) possesses from that known by his character – the pretence awareness is a smoke screen that disguises the open awareness between player and character.

This identification with the character, contrary to the experiences encapsulated in Dyszelski's work, shows a lack of role-distancing by the player, in this example there is no 'other', rather the character is a temporary mask assumed by the player, becoming an avatar, puppet or perhaps a mere tool through which the player gains new (presumably desirable) experiences.[98] This example highlights an issue common to both Dyszelki and Fine's examples of play, namely the problematic intersection of fantasy and reality.

While Dyszelski argues that the vicarious experience of the other in role-playing can facilitate a deeper understanding of ones own subjectivity, one must question the validity of these experiences. Certainly they are not the same as the experiences of the ethnographic researcher who travels to a foreign land and immerses herself in an alien culture. I would argue that they have more in common with the experiences of a person watching a television programme presenting the merest glimpse of that foreign culture in a format rife with the tropes and implicit assumptions of a typical Western audience, tailored so as to be easily digestible and understandable within their specific cultural context. In a game that takes place in the imagination of the player, how can they truly escape their own subjectivity in any meaningful sense?

Similarly one might query the efficacy of a game such as *Power Kill*, attempting as it does to bring about a questioning in players of the roles that they choose to play by placing them in the position of psychiatric patients and doctors, roles that they may in

[98] Fine does go on to clarify that this type of player "is goal-directed – orientated to succeeding in the game scenario rather than role-playing" (207).

fact be totally unfamiliar with. How valid are the revelations acquired through this mechanism, and do they truly subvert the paradigm of play evident in many games such as *D&D*? Do they in fact simply reinforce it by providing an illusory sense of realness to what is essentially still a game, albeit one that relies on the socially accepted validity of psychiatry to add weight to its attempt at producing a moral argument?

The temptation to classify TTRPGs as liminoid phenomena may in fact be couched in a desire to see the games as more than a form of entertainment. Both Dyszelski and Fine contend that role-players have typically been a marginalised sub-culture whose interests have not been taken seriously by mainstream culture. Much work has been done to change this attitude in the last decade, with a growing body of academic literature from various fields starting to provide serious analysis of the activity. The emergence of video games (particularly computer role-playing games and massively multiplayer online RPGs) as a popular form of entertainment have served as a culturally validating element through a process of association. There have also been several other attempts to resituate role-playing in the popular consciousness.[99]

In some ways the attempts of scholars such as Ericsson, Mackay and Dyszelski can be viewed as part of this broader trend, they represent a valid (and valiant) effort at drawing attention to the connections between this fascinating activity and the broader body of academic knowledge. These scholars demonstrate that TTRPGs can be viewed as more than just frivolous pastimes and that the games can be situated within, and related to the spheres of ritual, performance, psychology and art. They highlight the fact that scholars outside the field TTRPG studies might find interesting material for their own

[99] One of the most bizarre examples being an attempt to produce a prime time TV series in which famous internet porn stars play *D&D*. See: http://dndwithpornstars.blogspot.com/ for regular updates on the progress of this particular endeavour.

endeavours in the play dynamic of the TTRPG. As with other gamic forms, they offer the opportunity to study the process of men and women alive. TTRPGs may thus be thought of as a useful addition to the dictionary of cultural symbols that Turner describes when he points out that

> Each culture, each person within it, uses the entire sensory repertoire to convey messages: manual gesticulations, facial expressions, bodily postures, rapid, heavy, or light breathing, tears, at the individual level; stylized gestures, dance patterns, prescribed silences, synchronized movements such as marching, the moves and 'plays' of games … at the cultural level (9).

TTRPGs represent a fascinating site for the decoding and study of these culturally symbolic systems of meaning that resonate with the echoes of a broader societal paradigm.

These are valid points that need to be addressed, there is however another side to the argument. TTRPGs defy easy classification, and while some role-playing games have the potential to fit neatly into the category of liminoid phenomena described by Turner in *Liminal to Liminoid*, it should be borne in mind that many do not. Numerous games are rife with examples of mechanics, systems and implicit biases (such as the accumulation of in-game capital in *D&D*) that make it nearly impossible to categorise the games that are played through their auspices as liminoid phenomena, assuming that they are played according to the guidelines set out in the manuals. Furthermore, the ethnographic data provided by Fine confirms that players do not necessarily engage in the subversive, self-questioning behaviour that Turner demands from liminoid activities and cultural artefacts. Fine points out that for many players, militarism, misogyny and escapism are part and parcel of the TTRPG experience (42-45, 54-57, 62-71).

It is important to understand the potential of TTRPGs as sites for the creation of new culture, mechanisms of individual transformation, and ritualistic activities that present the possibility of subverting the implicit assumptions of contemporary culture. It is also important to recognise that, as with so many other pop-culture mediums, they are also played in ways that demonstrate a strong complicity, and sometimes explicit support for the institutions and structures of society. We must realise that they are games existing in the moment of play, with no more substance than the breath of those who play them. They are tied inexorably to their players, to their words, their desires, beliefs and thoughts about themselves and about the world. The games themselves, their rules and systems, are an interface, a mechanism through which play becomes possible, and upon which play is based. They form an point of collusion between players, and while the content of play may encourage a certain dynamic, a proclivity which may be obvious or implicit, it is still the players who are primary, it is through the act of play that the games live and breathe, becoming more than mere static artefacts, they are incorporated into the greater scheme of existence. In the words of Victor Turner, they are the ephemeral evidence of men and women, alive.

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Figure 1

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Figure 5

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