

# **Writing Scenarios for Role Play Gaming - a Paradigm for Interactive Narrative?**

Stephen Bell  
1997

This paper was first presented at 'Media Waves' in Brighton in 1997. It was then used as part of lecture series delivered by Bell at the National Centre for Computer Animation, Bournemouth University. The original lecture was accompanied by html slides. This edition is in a format prepared in 2000 and was produced in 2018.

## Introduction

### *Prologue*

You are at a conference in Brighton, sitting in a theatre with other people, waiting for a lecture to begin. The weather is good/bad so you would rather be out on the beach/are happy to be inside.

Suddenly you hear a loud explosion outside - it sounded pretty close - perhaps in the same block. The sound of the explosion is still ringing in your ears when you hear a heavy thudding on the wall of the theatre, as if something very big is trying to break through. A giant crack appears in the wall and as rubble crashes into the auditorium an enormous tentacle, perhaps forty feet long, bursts through and begins to thrash around, curling and uncurling, grasping for victims ... What are you going to do?

---

Good afternoon. My name is Steve Bell and I am going to talk about Fantasy Role Play Gaming.

---

What would you have done if a giant tentacle-wielding monster had actually burst into the auditorium?

If you were a leather-clad axe-wielding barbarian warrior then you would have leapt across the seats, hefting your mighty battle-axe, and started heroically hacking at the monsters flailing limbs.

If you were Captain Jelp Tharblefuster of the Magellanic Star Empire you would have drawn your blast gun and emptied a clip of neutron plasma ammunition into the monster.

If you were Endira the mystic from Yroon you would have made use of your arcane powers and cast a powerful magic spell, shrinking the monster to the size of a small kitten.

---

Just who is in the audience?

It might be useful for me to get some idea of how to pitch my talk if you could let me know, by raising your hand ...

Are there any Role Play Gamers in the audience?

Any Live Role Play Gamers?

Any Actors?

Writers?

Any representatives of the Magellanic Star-Emperor?

---

My intention in this session is to make a contribution to the discussion about so-called interactive media, interactive movies and so on.

When I first heard David Furnham talking about the idea of Media Waves - that it would be dealing with the impact of certain technological developments on the media, and that interactivity would be one of the topics addressed - It occurred to me that it might be a suitable occasion to discuss whether storytellers and others with an interest in using the new 'interactive' media might be able to learn something from those who have been using an existing form of 'interactive' storytelling, namely Fantasy Role Play Gaming.

I think that it might be of interest to scriptwriters considering writing for computer games or 'interactive movies', multi-media and network authors, and authors for interactive media still being developed. It may be of interest also to anyone considering commissioning a work, or who is going to be participating in some other way in the production of such a work. The common element in the emerging media I wish to draw attention to is the effect on story-telling, and perhaps authorship, of so-called interactivity - when the audience are afforded a greater degree of control over what they are presented with and experience. (I first proposed that existing forms of interactive situation be considered as models for the analysis and composition of interactive works of art in my PhD thesis (Bell 92).

During the course of my presentation I will be making a number of observations and relating some anecdotes based on my experience as a player and writer of scenarios

and rules for Fantasy Role Play Games. Making suggestions, where it seems appropriate, as to how parallels can be seen with other narrative forms. I will make some connections but I hope that you will be able to make more.

In a sense I will be presenting some clues in a mystery - a mystery to which I do not have a complete solution. In the best tradition of Fantasy Role Play Gaming you, like the players, are invited to participate in the task of solving the mystery.

---

I have structured my presentation to follow in some respects the stages in a typical Role Play Game.

- Background – introducing the world
  - The Characters
  - The Scenario
  - The Adventure
  - What Next?
- 

## **Background**

### ***History of Fantasy Role Play Games***

The rules for Dungeons & Dragons were officially first published in 1974. Developed by a group of war-gaming enthusiasts led by the pioneers Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson the rules began a new hobby that rapidly attracted a large number of enthusiasts.

How does fantasy Role Play Gaming work? Well I sketched the basic idea in my introduction; One player describes an imaginary situation to other players and they describe what they would do in those circumstances. The first player continues to describe what happens when the other players say that they are going to try to do something ... and so it continues. Between them the players develop a story in a shared imaginary world populated by their imaginary characters.



The first player - the one describing the imaginary world - may be called the Game Master or GM. In Dungeons & Dragons this player is called the Dungeon Master or DM. In the case of the monstrous creature invading the auditorium I played the role of GM. If any of you actually began to imagine what you would do in the circumstances I described you began to get involved in the game.

I described afterwards the typical actions one might expect of certain types of character. If you had told me what you would do if a monster crawled through the wall then we would have been *on the way to* starting a Fantasy Role Play Game. If you had instead told me what you would do if you were an imaginary character like one of those I described then we would *really* have started Fantasy Role Play Gaming.

This kind of imaginary play is the sort of thing that children have done for who knows how long; playing Mummies and Daddies; Power Rangers; Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. It used to Cowboys and Indians - fantasy role play is not new. Role play has been used in military exercises, training, psychological analysis and treatment. The innovation of Dungeons & Dragons was that it was presented as a game, what's more a game for adults. And it began to give adult players guidelines as to how to construct a consensual imaginary world that could be explored and developed by a group of players for pleasure- as a hobby activity. The rules gave guidelines as to how to resolve conflicts among players; how the occupants of the fantasy world might behave; the likelihood of a given player's character succeeding in a given task; in short - how a group of people could explore a consistent fantasy universe.

The D&D game provided guidelines for designing and exploring a pseudo-medieval fantasy world that consisted initially simply of subterranean caverns and tunnels (called dungeons) occupied by creatures that might be helpful but more likely malevolent. The players' characters were 'adventurers' set to better themselves and they did so by moving around the 'dungeons' defeating monsters and finding treasure.

Since the introduction of D&D different genres to medieval fantasy have been used as inspiration for RPGs (SF, Westerns, Horror, Star Trek, Star Wars, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Cartoons!). Different Approaches to rules have been developed.

Whatever the genre or specific rule system, all these games tend to share a basic format where a Games Master or GM oversees the game; describing the fantasy world as it impinges on the players' characters, acting as referee and general arbitrator, and the other players take on the roles of the main characters: the 'adventurers', more generally referred to as player characters PCs or party (of adventurers).

### ***History of my involvement***

My first experience of D&D was a game I went along to when I was a postgraduate student at The Slade School of Art and secretary of The University College London Science Fiction and Fantasy Society. One activity that members of the society were engaged in was arranging RPG sessions. I felt that as secretary I ought to go along and see what it was all about. I was already interested in board games, but had no idea what RPGs were about. I remembered that in 1974, a friend and I had decided not to buy D&D for the hostel we lived in, as knights in armour fighting monsters in dungeons sounded silly and unconvincing to us. Anyway, at UCL I went along to a game and was immediately hooked; I walked home from that game fired with enthusiasm and occasionally looking over my shoulder to check that a monster wasn't going to sneak up behind me! I started playing D&D and then trying different games; Traveller, Space Opera, Chivalry & Sorcery, Bushido, and several more.

A few years later, when I was Artist in Residence at The University of Kent at Canterbury Computing Lab., I fell in with a group of people who had set up an LRP group called RETROS (Real Time Role Play Society). I had for several years played the role of a Saxon in The Dark Ages Society, an historical re-enactment group, and I had become interested in developing rules for Fantasy LRP. Meeting the RETROS group at UKC gave me the chance to join in with them testing what rule systems worked and what didn't. After leaving UKC I was approached by a couple of the friends I had made there who had the idea of continuing RETROS but making more of it. So it was that I became a founder member of the Fools & Heroes national LRP society.

### ***Example plot backgrounds***

When I first started playing D&D I became fascinated with the possibility of creating an imaginary world that other people could share. I set out with the intention to create a world for my players as convincing and enchanting as that of J. R. R.

Tolkien's Middle-Earth. I developed a fantasy world and ran games based in it for over twenty years. Although my friends and I haven't played a game based in it for several years now, I still find myself inventing stories based in it and thinking wistfully about what might have happened if we had kept playing.

As well as writing scenarios for my D&D world I ran adventures based on other game systems. Using 'Space Opera' (Simbalist 80) rules I ran several 'campaigns' (series of connected scenarios), one campaign involved a space detective agency – which I will come back to later. I ran a cyberpunk game where all the characters were artificially intelligent programs but didn't know it. I also wrote scenarios for Fools & Heroes and the Dark Ages Society.

One scenario pack of mine, called 'Takishido's Debt', was published commercially as a supplement to Fantasy Games Unlimited's 'Bushido' game system, which is based in a fantasy version of Medieval Japan.

---

## **The Characters - Character Generation**

### ***Characters in general***

The fantasy worlds of RPGs are populated by two types of character:

*Player Characters and Non Player Characters.*

Non Player Characters or NPCs are those that the Games Master has to play in the course of describing events in the game.

Player Characters or PCs are those characters played by the other players.

### ***Player Characters***

The roots of the idea of PCs can be identified in children's play, where favourite toys, e.g. toy soldier generals, teddy bears, dolls, action men etc.. are given personalities.

Role Play Gamers design their player characters using different techniques depending on the game system being used.

Basic types of character played depend on the game genre, for example, in Advanced Dungeons and Dragons there are the basic classes of Fighters, Clerics, Magic-Users, Thieves. Characters have specific skills that are associated with these classes. Then there are sub-classes which share some skills with the basic ones but have additional abilities; for example Rangers are Fighters with skills associated with the 'Strider' character in Tolkien's Lord of The Rings.

'Cyberspace' (89), based on Gibson et. al's cyberpunk writings has the following classes: Sleazes, Sneaks, Killers, Net Junkies, Jockeys and Tech Rats. 'Traveller' (Miller 77) includes the interesting class of Jack Of All Trades, or JoAT. Some players prefer not to restrict their characters to classes however, preferring to develop characters with unique profiles.

Often the characters include non-humans - elves, goblins, dragons and other mythological beasts in medieval fantasy, various aliens in SF.

One of the values of using a system of rules is that the various non-human creatures and fantasy elements can be given a consistency which can ensure that the game is not a continuous legal wrangle over rules. However there are some players to whom the rules are more important than any pretence at creative storytelling and others who will deliberately choose to make rules secondary to the story being generated.

### ***Methods of generating characters***

This bit may seem a bit technical, but it does give some insight into game mechanics, it also signals how some aspects of RPGs can be incorporated in computer programs.

A player needs a certain amount of information to know how to play their character; how he, she or it would be likely to behave in a given situation. What would they do if a giant multi-tentacled beast burst into a lecture they were attending? Are they heroic or cowardly? Wise or stupid? Skilled or ham-fisted? Part of the player's skill is to weave their character's actions into the group story in a convincing manner. To help them do this there are rules that in table top games determine the probable outcome of a given action based on the character's personal characteristics. The player chooses from experience in previous events of the kind (or if they are a 'rule-player' based on what the tables imply), whether the character will try to attack the monster, hide, run away, or something more imaginative.

Different rules systems choose to determine the result based on different characteristics. A character's scores in these 'characteristics' determine their ability to successfully undertake particular tasks. The degree of randomness in determining scores varies with different games.

In AD&D characters have characteristic Strength, Intelligence, Wisdom, Constitution, Dexterity, and Charisma. Each characteristic will have value ranging from 3 – 18, the sum of three six-sided dice rolls.

Bushido players have 60 points to distribute over Strength, Deftness, Speed, Health, Wit, and Will choosing which to emphasise and which to limit.

An AD&D character with a STR of 18 is much more likely to be able to kick a door down than one with a STR of 6. A 'Cyberspace' character with a high Empathy score is likely to be more streetwise than one with low Empathy.

An important part of RPGs is that in most game systems characters can learn or otherwise improve their abilities so that as the characters take part in further games they get better at doing things. Players are rewarded for making their characters 'do the right thing'. This is an important way to encourage players to make an heroic wizard or a cowardly warrior behave appropriately.

### ***Non-Player Characters***

NPCs, or non-player characters are the characters, human or otherwise, that the PCs may encounter in the course of a game; the giant tentacle beast of my introduction is an example NPC. The Game Master will act out the parts of these Non-Player Characters, describing their actions and determining how well they succeed in their goals.

Depending on the importance of the non-player characters they will be more or less well developed in terms of characteristics, description of personality and so on.

The example on the next page is from a supplement for the "CyberSpace" game (Bouton 90).

16

## BOB HEALEY

### PROGRAMMER

CyberRogues

PERSONAL DATA	
<b>Age:</b> 34	<b>Sex:</b> Male
<b>Eyes:</b> Grey	<b>Race:</b> Caucasian
<b>Hair:</b> Blond/Grey	<b>Origin:</b> Chicago Sprawl
<b>Build:</b> Thin, lithe	<b>Demeanor:</b> Soft spoken
<b>Height:</b> 195 cm	<b>Dress:</b> well-worn generic clothes
<b>Weight:</b> 58 kg	<b>True Attitude:</b> Loves information, dislikes the corporate system

STATS & SPECS	
<b>Co:</b> 30/ 0(+25+)	<b>Profession:</b> Tech Rat
<b>Ag:</b> 81/ +5	<b>Level:</b> 9th
<b>SD:</b> 52/ 0(-25+)	<b>Social Class:</b> Middle Corp
<b>Me:</b> 87/ +5	<b>Fire:</b> <i>Mirage XR-12 Laser</i> 55
<b>Re:</b> 98/ +20(-5+)	<b>Melee:</b> [Brawl 45]
<b>St:</b> 21/ -5(+20+)	<b>Missile:</b> —
<b>Qu:</b> 30/ 0(+25+)	<b>Hits:</b> 38
<b>Pr:</b> 35/ 0	<b>AT(DB):</b> NoA(0, 25+)
<b>In:</b> 90/ +10	<b>Ap:</b> 36
<b>Em:</b> 79/ +5	<b>CIRS:</b> 9

SKILLS
<b>Primary Skills:</b> Soft Tech 105 [123]; Elec Tech 103 [122]; Cyber Tech 101 [121]; Mech Tech 86 [111]; Elec Bypass 55; [Enviros 71]; Equipment 54 [79]. <b>Secondary Skills:</b> Advanced Math 45 [84]; Medical Practice 40; Quick-Draw 35; Media 35 [80]; Astr/Biol/Chem 25 [76]. <b>Languages:</b> English D5; Magnebubble Biobasic D5; Magnebubble NACComm D5; Magnebubble NACComm/MA D5.

BACKGROUND
<p>Bob is an old hand at Austin Biolabs, and the company lets him have a fairly free hand in the projects assigned to him, which he works on slowly and with reluctant brilliance. He finds most standard programming tasks to be hopelessly mundane, and his real interest lies in Neurosofts. This ties in with his other consuming interest, Martial Arts. His department administrator has given up trying to stop him from watching Martial Arts competitions while in his office. Considering that Bob recently turned out one of the most efficient MA Neurosofts in Austin's history, the Suits aren't complaining too much.</p> <p>Bob's real ambition is to write a better language for MA Progs, and he keeps close track of Black Market developments. He uses his own Neurosoft program in Martial Arts competition, constantly revising minute aspects of its operation. Any Black Market MA Progs will fetch a high price at his office, and the street people in the know refer to him as "Judo Hacker".</p> <p>Recently his pervasive boredom at the job has led him to practice his MA Progs in the corridors and elevators, much to his co-worker's consternation. He can sometimes be found in higher-class bars playing complex reaction games like UltraPong.</p>



EQUIPMENT
<b>Cyber Systems:</b> Mk12 Magnebubble NAC with Concentration Rtg12, a Magnebubble DECA to Magnebubble NACComm Translator. Memory Format Rtg5, Data Acquisition, Input Blocking Rtg10, Pattern Cognition Rtg5, Assimilation, Biostatus Monitor, a Rank 20 Martial Arts (Melee), and Enviros Neurosoft. Eyes with Microvision Mk10 and Antiglare Rtg6. DNI to NAC. Retractable Toolhand (Voltmeter and Solder Gun). Electronic Detector Mk50. Adrenal Booster Rtg5. Datacard Player Nervelinked to NAC. <b>Items:</b> Mk10 Superchip Microcomputer with Modem, Data Acquisition, User Recognition, and 5 units of Archives. <i>Mirage XR-12 Laser Pistol</i> . DNI Cellular Phone. ID Card. Standard electrical and mechanical tools. 10 Utility Cells. <b>Assets:</b> ~\$100,000. <b>Cash:</b> \$35.

Character description from 'CyberRogues' (Bouton 90)

But hold on a minute - what are we doing discussing characters before we discuss the plot?

## **The Scenario - Introduction to adventure - 'Will you join in?'**

I had originally intended to produce a comparative study of narrative in film and in FRP gaming. I realised quite quickly that to do so in the time I had available was unrealistic. Instead I have tried to identify, if only in a rather ad hoc way, differences and similarities where they appear.

The rules of the game are one thing. The descriptions of the places and characters in the world, the politics, the places of mystery and so on are another. As well as having a set of rules to govern events in the fantasy world it is necessary to have something for the player characters to do and somewhere to do it. This is where the scenario writing of my title comes in.

The RPG games that have been most successful commercially have been those that have had scenarios and other supporting material published to accompany them. Those games whose publishers have skimped on this, although they often have small groups of enthusiastic followers, have rarely lasted as commercially viable products.

My main interest in Role Play Gaming has been in writing scenarios and running games as a GM. I have had one scenario published, most of them have been written for a small group of friends.

One thing that is special about writing scenarios for Role Play Gaming is that you do not know who all the characters in the scenario are going to be - sometimes you do not know *what* they are going to be. Even if you are writing an extended scenario, sometimes called a campaign, for a group of characters who have been played in your world before you can't guarantee that they will do what you expect them to – a PC's behaviour is determined by the player of that character.

The unpredictability of the way the characters will behave and hence how the plot will unfold is, to me, one of the essential qualities of Role Play Gaming. For traditional authors, however, it presents a problem. It is important to the feel of the game that the players get the impression that they have a considerable degree of control over the behaviour of their characters and that the choices they make will have an effect on the outcome of the game. The sense of a 'linear' story, where the actions of the characters are effectively pre-determined is not what most players want.

How is this sense of freedom achieved?

The introduction to the rules of the game 'Bushido' states:

No two sets of gamers will play in exactly the same way. Characters, especially player characters, are all different, and the adventures designed by one Gamesmaster will rarely resemble those set up by another.

(Charrette 81)

As a consequence of this characteristic of Role Play Gaming I can really only describe the process from my point of view, but there have been many magazines dedicated to Role Play Gaming which have included advice for players and scenario writers. I will be quoting from some later.

One of the main things that I have found, which may have implications for attempts to create interactive works for mass-market entertainment, is that there are different general approaches to playing. If you do not enjoy playing with one group you try moving to another. If a player does not like your way of running a game he or she will not want to play again. As Thomas M. Kane wrote in a 1995 edition of 'Dragon Magazine':

Over time, gamers have come to expect certain things from their role-playing games. We expect games to provide a fair challenge, to include interesting NPCs, to give PCs something to do, to follow consistent rules, to have an exciting background and history, and more. However, different gamers rank these values in different orders, and emphasize different ones in their games.

(Kane 95)

He goes on to describe the following styles of gaming which have emerged as a consequence of these differences. Quotations in this section are all from the same source.

"High-power" Games where players know all the rules and use them to advantage. The adventures tend to be full of powerful opponents and monsters, characters with god-like powers and egos to match.

Such games may be serious "The game becomes a no holds-barred contest of strategy and game knowledge." It may also lead to games that include powerful magic and monsters for the sake of dramatic effect and "...have the same appeal as B-movies. They let players get away with crazy, exciting stunts, and where they are bad, they are bad enough to be funny."



In "Deep role-playing"

... the players devote all their time to portraying their characters' moods and personalities. The DM does the same with NPCs, and with the plot itself. Furthermore the game's outcome hinges on this role-playing and story-telling as well. Entire game sessions can pass without the use of dice. PCs can and must solve their problems by negotiation, intrigue, impassioned argument, and similar tactics. These games unleash the creativity of all involved. Since most role-players have active imaginations, it is no surprise that deep roleplaying games often catch fire and turn into the most intense, memorable campaigns of all.

According to Kane,

... The secret to running a deep roleplaying campaign lies in keeping the players' trust. ... the moment players start to feel manipulated, the illusion of reality starts to falter.

Kane's article may sound a warning note here to potential scenario writers with bonafides won in more traditional forms of writing when he writes,

The same creativity that allows a DM to spin a wonderful role-playing campaign can cause him to fall in love with a certain plot line or certain NPCs. Players, however, do not like to be bound by the GM's preferences. If the game always goes the way the DM plans for it to, they do not see any reason to play at all. ... This is the true test of a deep roleplay game. A superior GM allows the party [of adventurers] to make its own choices, gives them a reasonable chance of success and allows the story to develop in a new direction, while keeping the new plot as alive with detail as the old. DMs who cannot let a party guide the game's story line from time to time are sure to end up with frustrated players, although they may have a future in writing novels.

Kane also points out that there are responsibilities for the players in this style of play especially regarding not breaking the necessary suspension of disbelief.

Another game style Kane calls "Dr.Quizzler" This game emphasizes "puzzles, riddles, traps and magical puzzles of the sort the original AD&D game called 'tricks' ". In its

extreme form the pure style, Kane suggests, the players of this style "views the campaign setting as strictly artificial and the business of role playing as strictly a game, as opposed to a form of storytelling".

In what Kane classes as a "Rules-Bound" game, "the DM and players try to play the game strictly according to the rules. The chief danger of this style ... is that the game can get bogged down in lawyerly arguments or in simple confusion caused by complex game systems." Often referred to as 'Rule Play Gamers' the players may spend a lot of time getting their character into positions of advantage 'according to the rules'. The GM becomes more of an opponent than a collaborator. "DMs must play by the rules ... they must expect PCs to challenge their interpretation of the rules. ... the DM has to plan their battles with the express intention of defeating the party." Kane notes that carefully planned rule-play gaming can enhance the storyline and drama of a more 'artistic' game.

In the "Artistic" style of game the players " ... see themselves, not as gamers, but as creators of art." They will cooperate with the DM to make the story better even if it is to the player characters' disadvantage. "The DM takes fewer precautions to keep the adventure plot secret from the players because he does not expect the players to try to 'beat' the opposition, he expects them to try to explore their characters' reactions to the situation. Artistic gamers, " ... often insert a theme of social awareness or artistic irony into their work." The advantage of artistic roleplay gaming according to Kane is that it frees the entire gaming group to develop " the most dramatic story possible, without creating tension between the players and DM. ... The disadvantage is that it tends to take the 'game' out of the role playing."

According to Kane, the players of this artistic style, unlike those of the other styles mentioned, have consciously defined their way of playing and have founded games companies to publish game systems that support it.

Kane wrote his article to promote a compound style which he refers to as 'naturalistic'. I will not go into detail here, as my purpose is to indicate the wide range of possible approaches to playing that may be encountered. But Kane makes one point that I would endorse. He writes,

When DMs decide to give players a greater decision-making role they occasionally assume that they no longer need to give the party something to do. This is a mistake. The party cannot make decisions unless it has something

to make decisions about. Therefore the DM always should give the PCs a 'hook' to get them into an adventure - and possibly more than one.

To give an insight into the setting up of a hook I will describe the introductions in a couple of adventure scenarios:

The first is from a basic adventure described in an early AD&D rulebook:

Assume that you have assembled a group of players. Each has created a character, determined his or her race and profession, and spent some time carefully equipping these neophyte adventurers with everything that the limited funds available could purchase. Your participants are now eagerly awaiting instructions from you as to how to find the place they are to seek their fortunes in. You inform them that there is a rumour in the village that something strange and terrible lurks in the abandoned monastery not far from the place. In fact, one of the braver villagers will serve as guide if they wish to explore the ruins! (This seemingly innocent guide might be nothing more than he seems, or possibly an agent of some good or evil power, or a thief in disguise, or just about anything else. In this case, however, let it be a thief, for reasons you will discover soon.) The party readily agrees, and so the adventure begins.

You inform them that after about a two mile trek along a seldom-used road, they come to the edge of a fen. A narrow causeway leads out to a low mound upon which stand the walls and buildings of the deserted monastery. One of the players inquires if the mound appears to be travelled and you inform the party that only a faint path is discernible – as if any traffic is light and infrequent. You describe the general bleakness of the bog, with little to relieve the view save a few clumps of brush and tamarack sprouting here and there (probably on bits of higher ground) and a fairly dense cluster of the same type of growth approximately a half mile beyond the abandoned place. Thus, the party has only one place to go – along the causeway – if they wish to adventure. The leading member of the group (whether self-appointed or elected, it makes no difference) orders that the party should proceed along the raised pathway to the monastery, and the real adventure begins. (Gygax 79, p96)

The second is from a recent AD&D scenario called, *The Eternal Boundary*, set in a city which hangs 'between worlds' populated by a collection of strange types who are all aligned politically to different factions. Gameplay is based around the competing philosophies of the various factions - the factions have exotic names. The whole style

of the scenario pack reflects the nature of these exotic factions as does the style of writing. The GM is given different pieces of text to read out to help set the scene depending on whether the PC is or is not in a faction.

Faction Start ...

It's curious, but you've been summoned to faction headquarters. It's a gray and cold morning, with a miserable drizzle falling. Inside you get sent to see Bendan Marl, a high-up man who's next to the factol. Bendon's a sharp cutter who made his name as a hirespell in the Outlands before coming to Sigil. A tiefling with coal-black eyes and pointed ears, he has a bit of the fiend in him, but you know – or at least you think you know – he's a trusty blood. Bendon shows you into his chambers and shuts the door. "Here's the chant," he begins. "There's this barmy named Eliath wanderin' about in the Hive. He doesn't know it, but he's got the dark of something we want. He holds the key for a portal that's said to lead someplace real interesting. Can you have a lookabout for him? You'll be cut in on the profits."

...

Nonfaction Start ...

On a cold, gray day, you are sitting in a tavern known as the Sign of the Crooked Sword, trading tales by the fire to pass the time until something interesting happens. A broad-shouldered dwarf in the colors of the Signers approaches and introduces himself as Gedramak Ironfist. "I hear ye're lookin' for some jink," he says quietly. "Well, I got a job as needs doin'. I'm lookin' for a barmy, name of Eliath, who might be found int the Hive. Bring'm to me an it'll be worth yer while." (Baker III 94, p7)

I have pre-written such descriptions myself when designing adventures, they can be fun to write in advance and save effort when trying to manage a game. It can generally be taken for granted that the players will want take part, but they need to be given the feeling that they have chosen to.

Now that we have dealt with getting the characters into the game what can we look at next?

---

## **Getting into The Adventure**

Once the players have decide to take their characters into the game that the GM has offered to them they start to get more details of the situation. This information gathering exercise may even constitute the main part of the game. The game may continue for a significant time, by the way; An individual gaming session may last 12 hours or more. I ran an AD&D campaign with one group of players from 1978 to the present. One of the characters that started in the game then is still being played. Most of the other characters have been played for almost ten years.

But what might happen in a game?

The answer is - just about anything that may be described and fits in the genre. It sometimes seems strange that a group of players can sit around and although each must has a different vision as to how things or characters must look they are able to cooperate in developing the story.

From my point of view as a scenario writer, an interesting thing that often happens is how the players can radically change the direction of the campaign.

For a game, inspired by a grand ruined house that I had visited I had designed what to me was a wonderful potential component in an adventure. I had lots of descriptive prose written about a magnificent house and interesting characters in residence. The players decided that their characters would not bother to visit the place.

Sometimes the players can have a radical effect on a campaign's character

I mentioned earlier the detective agency game. How it happened was I had designed a science fiction game where all the player characters started as they arrived at a vast space-station after leaving various service jobs. As the characters arrived and passed through customs checks someone asked me to describe the surroundings. Among the things I described were posters on the walls promoting various things, one of which was a detective agency, which I passed over to describe

other things. "Hold on, what was that about the detective agency?" asked one of the players and his character read the poster. Immediately the game took a new direction as the player decided his character would immediately get in touch with the owner and the adventurers very quickly became employees of the agency. That choice had shaped the direction that the game would take for several weeks to come. To be able to program a computer to respond in this way to the unpredictable is not a trivial problem. And yet, if the technology is to enable interactive storytelling rather than putting users in the position of actors with pre-written scripts the qualities of a GM must somehow be built into the technology.

Another innovative aspect of role-play gaming that used to be very difficult to explain is that there are no winners or losers in the sense that an ordinary game has winners and losers. The players do not compete with each other (except perhaps in their ability to develop interesting characters). As we have seen they more often than not do not compete with the Gamesmaster as such as with the Non Player Characters and problems encountered in the game world. The players cooperate to overcome these challenges - in a similar spirit it must be said to the groups of characters in Tolkien's Lord of The Rings and The Hobbit. Much of the humorous episodes in games revolve around inter-player character disputes and the consequences of taking on a particular role.

This suggests that any product based on emerging 'interactive' technology - whatever it might be - if it was intended to capture the spirit of Role Play Gaming would also have to be delivered to a small group of people who could cooperate together and who could be sure that their decisions are having an effect on events in the story. The danger I see at the moment is that a mass-market product for individual participants is likely to be developed, which would give participants no more sense that their actions really matter than they get from voting a political election.

One of the things about Role Play Gaming is that it is not elitist - in the sense that the materials needed to play are relatively inexpensive. The group need only a few rule books and dice and some pencils and paper...

At this point it seems appropriate to consider another form of Role Play Gaming – Live Role Play Gaming or Live Action Role Play Gaming.

Inspired by playing games like D&D people soon came to want to act out their characters in appropriate costume. I first became aware of Live Role Play in the UK

when I read about 'Treasure Trap', which was set up in 1982 at a castle in Cheshire which gave people the chance to live out their games for real. Historical re-enactment had been around for a while (The Society for Creative Anachronism and The Sealed Knot since the nineteen-sixties, for example). Over the years Fantasy enactment societies and rules have been revised, extended and re-introduced just have those for table top RPGs.

When John Naylor and David Southgate decided to recruit more people to the cause Fools & Heroes was born. John's initial intention was to get some sort of convention of Live Role Play gamers organised. We developed the rule system so that players from all over the country could get together occasionally and act out adventures. The plan was successful and large gatherings of Live Role Play Gamers have become a regular event. I am pleased to say that when I came across a Fools & Heroes web page the other day. It is still going.



Fools & Heroes Summerfest

Although sometimes it is hard to get historical re-enactment groups to admit it there is something in common between LRP gamers and historical re-enactment groups. There are however differences between both Live Role Play and Historical Re-enactment and the basic round-the table Role Play Gaming which are worth considering.

In Live Role Play and Historical Re-enactment what a character can do depends largely on the player's ability to actually do it - if they wish to play a character who is skilled at arms they must be able to wield a weapon convincingly. If they want to play a charismatic leader they must be a charismatic leader.



Fools & Heroes Summerfest

Round the table Role Play Gaming, however, relies on the players' imaginations to picture what is happening. If a player wants to play the role of a tough warrior, as the outcome of combat is determined by dice-rolling against probabilities based on how tough the imaginary character is meant to, they can be a tough warrior even if they are actually a wimp. (It is interesting to note here how, when playing Monopoly, the quietest people can get quite stropky). What I am suggesting I hope is that there is more plot potential in this type of Role Play Gaming and rather like in radio drama the 'pictures' can be more impressive than on TV or in film.

A debate which arose in RPG rule design quite early on was how 'realistic' the rules should be. Some wanted the statistics to simulate the probabilities of success that could be expected in actual real life situations, others were more concerned with game-balance and quick ways to determine the outcome of conflicts. The debate continues and in the final analysis you pay your money and take your choice.

---

## What Next? - conclusion

At the end of a game there are usually some sort of conclusion - this may be the solving of a mystery or the defeat of a foe, the retrieval of a missing person (yes damsel in distress plots and their variants are not uncommon). The players may just have achieved a self-set goal. (One character in a game I played wanted to build a temple to his god).

To the writer, interactive media presumably offers the ability to write something that could not otherwise be written - what is it?

The answer suggested by Role Play Gaming, which I would argue is perhaps the most successful interactive art form developed so far, is perhaps not that it offers existing



writers a new vehicle for their stories but that it offers players the chance to become writers by contributing to the evolution of a group story - it is surely the prospect of encouraging masses of people to start writing their own unmediated stories which is the most attractive aspect of the new emerging technologies if they are going to be truly interactive.

I believe that in Role Play Gaming we see the re-emergence of communal storytelling in the oral tradition which faded with the development of writing.

If the developers of new media technologies are interested in making them genuinely interactive they could do worse than play a few non-computer based Fantasy Role Play Games to see what interaction is really about.

---

## **bibliography**

- Baker III 94      Baker III, L. Richard, *The Eternal Boundary*, 1994, TSR Inc.
- Bell 83            Bell, Steve, *Takishido's Debt*, A Role-playing Mini-adventure for use with 'Bushido', 1983, Games of Liverpool, UK
- Bell 92            Bell, S. C. D., *Participatory Art and Computers: Identifying, analysing and composing the characteristics of works of participatory art that use computer technology*. PhD Thesis, 1992, Loughborough University of Technology, UK
- Bouton 90        Bouton, Steve, *CyberRogues, Character Compendium #1 for Cyberspace*, 1990, Iron Crown Enterprises, Charlottesville, VA, USA
- Charrette 81     Charrette, Robert N and Paul R Hume, *Bushido*, 1981, Fantasy Games Unlimited, Jericho, New York, USA (1<sup>st</sup> Edn, 1979, Tyr Games)
- Foley 89          Foley, Ted, *Cyberspace*, Iron Crown Enterprises, Charlottesville, VA, USA
- Gygax 79         Gygax, Gary, *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons Dungeon Masters Guide*, 1979, TSR Games, Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, USA
- Kane 95           Kane, Thomas M., *What style of game do you play?*, Dragon Magazine, Issue 215, VXIX, No 10, March 1995, TSR Inc., Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, USA
- Miller 77          Miller, Marc W, Frank Chadwick, John Harshman, Loren K Wiseman, *Traveller*, 1977, Game Designer's Workshop, Normal, Illinois, USA
- Simbalist 80      Simbalist, Edward E, A. Mark Ratner & Phil McGregor, *Space Opera*, 1980, Fantasy Games Unlimited, Jericho, New York, USA

## Appendix – Selected key slide texts

---

Fantasy Role Play Gaming is an existing form of interactive storytelling

---

Existing forms of Interactive Situations

- Play
  - Sport
  - Conversation
  - Ritual
  - Drama
  - Social and Sexual Intercourse
- 

The players develop a story  
in a shared imaginary world  
populated by imaginary characters

---

Development of different games

Medieval Fantasy: Dungeons & Dragons, Chivalry & Sorcery, Runequest, Hârn

Science Fiction: Traveller, Space Opera

Japanese Medieval fantasy: Bushido

Lovecraftian Horror: Call of Cthulhu

Cyberpunk: Cyberspace, Cyberpunk

TV & Film Spin-Offs: Star Trek, James Bond

Cartoon worlds: Toon! Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles

Satirical SF: Paranoia

---