2006

Push

NEW THINKING ABOUT ROLEPLAYING

VOLUME 1

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INTRODUCTION

EMILY CARE BOSS 13
COLLABORATIVE ROLEPLAYING: REFRAMING THE GAME

JOHN H. KIM 37
IMMERSIVE STORY METHODS FOR TABLETOP ROLEPLAYING

SHREYAS SAMPAT 53
MRIDANGAM

EERO TUOVINEN 69
AGAINST THE GEEK, CHOICE

JONATHAN WALTON 85
WAITING FOR THE QUEEN/ TEA AT MIDNIGHT

PLANNING VOLUME 2

作者

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BRAND ROBINS eats puppies. No, really. He also doesn't believe that anyone is reading this.

ANNIE RUSH was suprised to find her name on the cover of *Run Robot Red*. Likewise with mindspawns *Alien Summit*, *The Secret Lives of Gingerbread Men,* and *InTERRORgation*. Annie will be attending Savannah College of Art & Design to study sequential art (comics!). She is also a rock star.

PAUL TEVIS is a software engineer on either the northern edge of Southern California or the southern end of the Central Coast (depending on who you ask). Perhaps best known for hosting the *Have Games, Will Travel* podcast, Paul will play almost anything and then tell you what he thinks about it.

MOYRA TURKINGTON is not missing out on her opportunity to shill C*rime & Punishment*, her Game Chef-winning procedural drama game (soon to be released by spaceanddeath games). She spends her days pretending to be an IT analyst, but she's really constructing the ultimate doomsday device.

先

INTRODUCTION

JONATHAN WALTON

First things first.

Many attempts to examine this medium begin by asking *what is roleplaying?* Regardless of how many times that question is asked, we will never develop a true definition. "Roleplaying" is a category which has changed dramatically and continues to change as different creators, works, and audiences bring different perspectives to bear on established concepts. Every published game text and every instance of play has the possibility of forever changing our conceptions of roleplaying. A more interesting issue then, in a medium whose boundaries are constantly being negotiated, is not *what roleplaying is* but *what roleplaying could be*. This transforms the process of definition, of putting limits and restrictions on roleplaying, into a process of discovery.

This journal exists to be a forum for new thinking about roleplaying, a place to allow a more thorough and less ephemeral exploration than what occurs on Internet bulletin boards or in the blogosphere. I also hope that this journal will constantly strive to reveal unexplored aspects of roleplaying, and continue to expand the envelope of possibilities. That why it's called *Push*.

AR: Yes, first thing. Hello, and welcome to our show!

BR: Defining roleplaying is like defining cool.

JH: Wittgenstein used "game" as his example of a commonly understood category which does not need an explicit definition to contain and convey meaning – and I imagine he could have used "roleplaying" in much the same way.

JH: What roleplaying could be – and to whom!

EXCUSES & ANCESTORS

This is not what I initially had in mind. *Push* began as a column for *RPGnet*, a more practical, hands-on sequel to my discussion of

aesthetics in *The Fine Art of Roleplaying*.

But that was soon interrupted by another project; Chris Lehrich and I decided to co-edit a roleplaying handbook. We planned to recruit a bunch of intelligent, fun people to describe, discuss, and theorize about all the various and sundry ways in which people roleplay. But the handbook project, in turn, fizzled.

Wanting to try my hand at a more modest undertaking, I imagined a progressive roleplaying journal, published as often as we could manage, modeled after several notable ancestors:

BR: I love it when Jonathan talks about all his edgy influences. It makes me feel all warm and old inside. And all cold and old outside, because I don't know who half these people are.

McSweeney's: Dave Eggers is a post-modern Kerouac with delusions of grandeur. Aside from writing the quirky, self-conscious, and bestselling memoir-of-young-adulthood, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, he also founded *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, a literary journal originally intended for pieces too odd, experimental, or emo for traditional publications. The result is something akin to She-Ra and Salman Rushdie co-hosting an NPR program, but in book form. Brilliant.

Flight: Kazu Kabuishi edits an annual anthology of all new, full-color comics written and illustrated by Canadians, art school kids, and 20-somethings (sometimes all three at the same time). Flight continues to build a following, gaining the attention of comics readers of all stripes (superheroes, indie, manga, webcomics) as well as people who are not normally comics fans. It did this by just being really good.

Beyond Role and Play: The largest roleplaying convention among the Nordic countries is called, in various languages, *Knutpunkt* (Swedish), *Knudepunkt* (Danish), *Knutepunkt* (Norwegian), and *Solmukohta* (Finnish). Each year, the roaming convention produces a book of articles on roleplaying, and 2004's volume was *Beyond Role and Play: Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination*, edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros. Once I got my hands on a copy, the pieces began to come together.

Daedalus: Matt Snyder is my hero and, also, the creator of *Dust Devils* and *Nine Worlds*. *Daedalus* is his periodic PDF 'zine, devoted to publishing whatever's been submitted since the last issue. Matt proved that a regular publication about independent roleplaying games and progressive roleplaying thought was both possible and strongly needed. *Push* is forever in his debt.

PT: The people demand more *Daedelus*!

If you want to know what *Push* is about, check out one of these other publications. You'll be glad you did. Or just continue reading.

THE FORMAT

Push contains several different kinds of content, the most obvious being 1) articles describing newly emerging or less well known varieties of play and design, 2) articles describing new opportunities for play and design within existing roleplaying traditions, and 3) complete and playable short-form games that demonstrate new play possibilities. The contributors who created our content were invited to participate, wrote proposals, listened to preliminary suggestions, wrote drafts, received feedback, made changes, expanded certain sections, presented final drafts, approved my final edits, and participated in the proofreading process. *Push* is a group effort and everyone shares the credit for making this happen.

Each issue also features running "guest commentary" in the margins. Our Guest Commentators are hand-selected by me, the Lead Editor, for their previous contributions to roleplaying, as well as the intelligence and clarity of their writing. They also have to be really fun people! Additionally, I've made an effort to invite Guest Commentators from outside *The Forge*, the online community where the idea for *Push* began.

VG: Comments looks like this.

AR: Or like this :)

BR: You also have to be willing to tongue-kiss a gecko.

MT: And just between you and me? Brand really liked it.

PT: How did I make the cut?

JH: Fortunately, we don't also have to juggle. I can't juggle.

Finally, each volume of *Push* features a cover image by an up-and-coming visual artist, preferably one who supports *Push*'s progressive values in their own medium. For this initial volume, we

are lucky enough to have a fantastic cover image by Clio Chiang, whose portfolio of comics and illustration work speaks for itself. Artists contributing to *Push* retain complete creative control over their work, just like any other contributor.

THIS VOLUME

Aside from Clio's cover and this introduction, *Push* Volume One contains the following:

Emily Care Boss, in *Collaborative Roleplaying: Reframing the Game*, provides an overview of games which seek to distribute control of the play experience more evenly among the players involved and speculates on the future of this type of play.

John H. Kim, in *Immersive Story Methods for Tabletop Roleplaying*, describes his own experiences planning an on-going game in which each player's character was the protagonist of their own story and offers advice on how others can do the same.

Shreyas Sampat's game, *Mridangam*, draws on the vocabulary of classical Indian dance, handling all out-of-character negotiations and narrative structuring through the silent exchange of gestures between players.

Eero Tuovinen, in *Against the Geek, Choice*, expresses his concerns about the rampant Americanization of Finnish tabletop roleplaying and explains how his small publishing operation is working against the current trend.

Finally, there's me, **Jonathan Walton**, and my game, *Waiting for the Queen/Tea at Midnight*, which is inspired by early computer games of the "get lamp" variety and strictly limits character choices while not limiting a character's ability to express themselves.

MT: Alright, I'm salivating, and I haven't gotten past the introduction. As you should be. There should be drool marks all over this page, bitches.

The end notes feature what other journals dub a "Call for Papers," encouraging clever, witty folks like you to propose content for Volume Two. The next book will indubitably be twice as exciting as this one, featuring many new friends with bold new ideas.

A DIVERSITY OF PERSPECTIVES

I hope the practice of inviting less familiar faces to participate in *Push* continues in subsequent volumes, so that our circle of comrades will never become too comfortable and the *Push* community will continue to grow in size and the diversity of backgrounds. Additionally, I hope that *Push* will quickly expand its focus beyond the boundaries of tabletop roleplaying to examine how other communities are roleplaying. That will, of course, require people doing other kinds of roleplaying to come write for *Push*, so one of my major tasks before the next volume is to begin tracking likely candidates down.

JH: Consider how *Oprah's Book Club* got people to identify as readers rather than as readers of a particular genre of book. How can we, too, get people to identify as roleplayers rather than identifying with a particular format or style of play?

I CAST MAGIC MISSILE ON MO

Push had been in the works for a year and a half when Moyra Turkington, now one of our Guest Contributors, published a blog article which categorized different kinds of player interactions as "Push" or "Pull." That wouldn't have been a problem except that Mo, being a very intelligent gal, said some really great things and the terms *actually began to catch on*. This, again, wouldn't have been a problem except that I'm personally much more interested in exploring Pull-oriented play techniques, which renders the title of this journal *completely antithetical*. Sigh.

PT: This is why you need to get these things out faster, Jonathan.

MT: I told you I was a troublemaker.

But instead of hating Mo forever or changing the title of this journal back to the one I originally proposed ("Magic Missile"), I decided to get over it. So if you see mention of "Push/Pull," whether in these pages or elsewhere, don't be confused. *Push* was here first. Mo is the imposter.

MT: I am, in fact, really Jonathan Walton in Canadian drag posing as Mo so I can cast Magic Missile on myself.

BR: This gave me a nightmare where I went to kiss Mo and she ripped off her face, revealing that she was Tom Cruise.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Over the past few decades, media forms that were traditionally marketed towards male youth – comics, video games, cartoons, martial arts films, roleplaying – have begun to stretch their legs,

transcend genre limitations, and find a more diverse reception. This is partially due the audience for "boys' media" growing up and forming part of the next generation of creators. Another major contribution come from media forms being transformed by their development in other countries (Japanese comics and cartoons are a great example). However, these general trends are largely the result of individual creators and small enclaves honing their craft and taking these media forms in unexplored directions.

Roleplaying is not unique in going through a rocky, transformative period. Twenty years from now, roleplaying and the community that supports it will have changed dramatically, but the details of these coming changes are largely up to us. Despite all the forecasts of doom, I couldn't be more excited. It's a great time to be playing.

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COLLABORATIVE ROLEPLAYING: REFRAMING THE GAME

EMILY CARE BOSS

In the United States, roleplaying games have historically placed many more tasks and responsibilities in the hands of a "Game Master" than in those of the other players. However, the rules of some "collaborative" games attempt to create a more even distribution. Games may be collaborative in part or in whole. The examples provided describe specific ways in which rules and mechanics can encourage increased collaboration among players.

Roleplaying is, by its very nature, a collaborative venture. Simultaneously a social activity and a creative exercise, roleplaying deals with bringing together the ideas and interests of a group of people. A story is told, an imaginary world is created, and people are entertained. To this end, each person brings their own personal experience – of fiction, of history, of life. Each person who plays contributes to the adventure unfolding and has the potential to bring as much to the table as anyone else involved.

However, the vast majority of roleplaying games in the United States have been designed with a very different starting point in mind. They have rules that down-play the cooperative aspects of play, making the lion's share of responsibilities and creative tasks rest upon one person: the Game Master, or GM. The GM describes the world that the other players explore, keeps the action moving and, ideally, provides relentless yet impartial adversarial

VG: The situation in Western Europe is identical, as the roleplaying culture here is dominated by the big American publishers. The few European games that gained lasting popularity are all very traditional, *D&D*-inspired games.

PT: Our wargaming heritage.

opposition. Few other options have been offered. However, in the past five years, game designers and play groups have begun to change the way we look at roleplaying by exploring what has been called "collaborative play" (Millington).

In "collaborative" games, rights and responsibilities formerly held solely by the GM have been extended to all the players. This may be done in select parts of a game, or incorporated throughout. Players may be given more input about the background and setting, play multiple characters, be responsible for creating situations, invoke rules, resolve outcomes and more. With these features, collaborative roleplaying games take advantage of the multiple viewpoints people bring to a game. Instead of primarily utilizing one person's ideas – those of the GM – they find ways to intentionally weave together the many creative strands that are present. The historical GM/Player split is but one possibility along a continuum of collaboration, and new games that incorporate ways to make gaming more of a team effort capitalize on the inherent potential of gaming: the creativity of the *entire* play group.

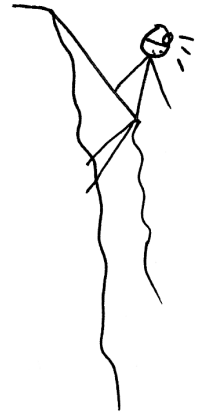
VG: The traditional GM/Player split does not necessarily leave the creativity of the group untapped. Rather, when implemented successfully, it directs this creativity towards specific aspects of play. In these "traditional games," players will generally be more creative concerning the solving of puzzles and the expression of character through subtle traits and actions; whereas in "collaborative games," the creativity of the players will be directed towards things like creating dramatic situations and moving the story in the direction they want.

JH: In practice, though, these boundaries have been fluid for many groups. Roleplayers break and bend rules, and the rules about task coordination are no different.

A LEGACY OF GAMING

The division between GM and Player is deeply embedded in the history of the roleplaying game in the United States. The idea of having a GM arose simultaneously with the concept of recreational roleplaying. The 1973 publication of *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax & Arneson), brought roleplaying into popular consciousness. The success of this game made it a template for games that followed. The Dungeon Master, who created an adventure for the other players, has been born anew in countless guises, as the Game Master, Referee, Storyteller, Hollyhock God, and others. For thirty years, having players who are each responsible for a single character and a GM who supports the rest of the game environment & the rules has been the primary method of coordinating the many tasks necessary for gaming. So what,

precisely, makes up this enduring institution? What does it mean to be a "GM", what are the responsibilities of a "Player"?



VG: *Paranoia* can be read as a political commentary on exactly this kind of rules – although this doesn't seem to have been a major concern of its publishers.

AR: *Paranoia* even encouraged the GM to be the antagonist and try to cheat the players.

How Deep the Divide

Being a Player or a GM has historically meant taking on responsibility for specific tasks associated with each role. These tasks are the avenues through which both Players and GMs provide their creative contributions (Banks), and it is the rules of a game, as they are put into play, that allocate these tasks. Despite wide variation in other aspects, games ranging from industry giants like the Storyteller systems of White Wolf (Rein-Hagan) to smaller press hits like *Paranoia* (Gelber, Costikyan, Goldberg) have had rules that distribute tasks in ways that are virtually indistinguishable from the *Dungeons & Dragons* template, the "traditional" Player/GM divide.

This traditional division of responsibility involves the "Players" (non-GMs) focusing on their proxies in the game world, the Player Characters or "PCs." Each Player creates a history for the character, describes its physical appearance, its personality and mannerisms, and often creates a numerical representation: its "stats" (quantified representations of attributes such as Perception, Strength, etc.). During the course of play, the Player associated with a given PC will describe that character's thoughts, words, & actions, also describing how it responds to the world around it and events that occur during the game. The Player may also roll dice or invoke stats on the part of the PC if a situation occurs which, according to established rules and guidelines, requires such actions.

PCs are often seen as being analogous to protagonists in a novel, with the GM being responsible for the environment in which they exist (Padol). In the traditional Player/GM split, although the whole play group may have input in deciding which game texts will provide the foundation, it is the GM who chooses the specific elements of the imagined game world to describe and incorporate

BR: For what type of novel? The *Icewind Dale* series? *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*? The "PC vs. GM" division has allowed for teamed-up protagonists, but not single-protagonists or never/rarely interacting protagonists.

into play. Traditionally, the GM plays all additional characters, creates situations where PCs interact with other characters and events in the world, and is responsible for understanding, applying and interpreting the rules of the game. The GM may also be given other roles such as energy monitor or social arbiter, but only tasks directly affecting the in-game events will be considered in this essay.

This gives us the following break-down of standard tasks assigned to Players and the GM:

Traditional Player & GM Tasks

Player	GM
Describe and quantify history of Player Character (PC).	Describe and quantify in-game world.
Describe appearance, words and actions of one character (PC).	Describe the appearance, words and actions of many characters (NPCs)
Describe response of PC to in-game events.	Create in-game situations and events.
Create stats for character. Use mechanics as they apply to Player Character.	Invoke rules, apply mechanics, & resolve conflict: for world, all events, and characters.

AR: Depending on the play group, some of the GM's descriptive duties are given to source material, and both the GM and the players can cite the source as a higher power.

VG: Interacting with the rules is very often a process that involves both players and the GM. It is relevant to note that in traditional games, this involvement is asymmetrical: the GM controls all unset variables, interprets the rules, and has the power to invent new rules or override existing ones. There is thus more going on than specialization.

Looking at these activities, much overlap between Player tasks and GM tasks can be seen. Both Player and GM must provide description, create background and setting, play character(s), deal with specific situations and interact with the rules of the game. The differences between the roles lie in the in the scope allotted to each. Players specialize in doing these tasks as they relate to their own Player Characters. The GM does them with respect to almost everything else.

These tasks correspond well to the five elements of roleplaying,

as described by Ron Edwards ("GNS and Other Matters") : Color (description and tone), Setting (background and history), Character, Situation (interaction between character and setting) and System (rules and mechanics governing all). These are common-sense categories which interpenetrate and overlap with one another: a given mechanic may affect Character, but be part of System. The tasks that comprise the roles of Player and GM fall within these areas. Taking a second look at Player/GM duties as they break down among the five elements of role-playing, a distribution can be discerned:

Player/GM Tasks & the Elements of Roleplaying

Element	Player	GM
Color	(Descriptions of character)	Describe world, events, characters, objects, etc. Set tone of game.
Setting	(Character history)	Choose & describe world.
Character	Describe appearance, words and actions of one character (PC).	Describe the appearance, words and actions of many characters (NPCs)
Situation	(Character actions)	Create in-game situations and events.
System	(As affects character)	Invoke rules, apply mechanics, and resolve disputes: as applies to world, all events, and characters.

Text in grey boxes denotes area of substantial influence.

This is the traditional GM/Player divide. Players have some responsibilities in each element, but always with respect to their character. Character is the only area where Players may contribute

meaningfully and extensively. GMs, on the other hand, have significant tasks and responsibilities that span all the elements.

A Different Approach

AR: Another struggle here (for players) is when the GM makes decisions that directly or indirectly shape, reshape, invalidate, or override player decisions.

MT: This can cause a disparity of skill. People used to Player or GM roles may have trouble making the transition. A wise designer accounts for different abilities and tastes, and a wiser one playtests, pushing people out of their regular grooves, to see if the material supports undoing as well as doing.

AR: Playgroups changing the published rules is not a new idea, but has been included in game texts since the '80s. However, the use of the rules-trap escape-hatch is now more frequent, drastic, and acceptable.

But this is just one possibility, one way to distribute these tasks. Many other functional divisions are possible. A growing number of games give players much more responsibility in the other elements. In some games the tasks of roleplaying are distributed so uniformly among all participants that the GM's unique role is abolished. In these games, all players essentially become co-GMs, equals among peers. In other games, certain players are given the ability to make critical contributions in one or two more areas, changing the dynamics of play drastically.

The best way to understand how games create such innovative distributions of tasks is to look at examples of their rules in action. To this end, the rest of this paper describes specific guidelines and mechanics which give all players equal opportunity to contribute meaningfully in all the elements of roleplaying. However, each play group may choose to implement rules differently than published texts describe. For the sake of discussion, it will be assumed that rules are applied as written, unless otherwise indicated. Also, of the five elements of roleplaying, Color is the most difficult to separate from the others. Most tasks have some element of Color, and few rules address Color and no other element. For this reason, these examples of different ways to divide tasks within the elements of roleplaying will focus on the following four of the five: Setting, Character, Situation, and System.

COLLABORATIVELY CREATING SETTING
2, 3 or even 4 Heads are Better than One

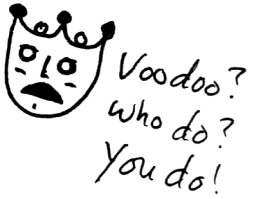
Setting is perhaps the easiest of the elements of roleplaying to make collaborative. It certainly has the most immediate payoff: players who create their own setting are much more likely to

become invested in it than those required to read 200+ pages of background material before they can meaningfully contribute to a game. The challenges are in creating a seamless whole out of what could be wildly disparate ideas, and in keeping track of all that may arise. Let's look at how various game systems structure collaboration to help players overcome these obstacles:

PT: Player investment is perhaps the single most important determinant of the success of a game.

JH: The deep commitment of, for example, fanfic writers (and their online roleplaying cousins!) suggests that having to be familiar with a canon isn't necessarily a block to investment. Sometimes that commitment to the setting is precisely the point.

> **Jenn, Charles and Phil are playing *Primetime Adventures*** (Wilson). Their campaign will be in the style of a television series, and together they are choosing the type of show they want to play. Phil suggests a gritty police drama like *NYPD Blue*. Jenn says she'd like to set it in New Orleans, LA in the early '90s – call it *Murder City, USA* – against a backdrop of Mardi Gras Carnival and dark Voodoo rituals. Charles objects that it would be easy to demonize Creole traditions and to avoid this, suggests that the main character be a police detective whose mother is a Mambo, a Voodoo priestess. The detective is torn between the rational world of the precinct, and her family's religious heritage…



These players are using the guidelines in *Primetime Adventures* to cooperatively create a setting. This game does have a GM, called "the Producer," but the GM is on equal footing with the players with respect to initial setting development. Neither Jenn, nor Charles, nor Phil has the final say in this example. Together, the players and the Producer must brainstorm and negotiate the type of show they want their game to resemble until they find something agreeable to all. With standard setting development only one of these ideas might have been put into play. With this more collaborative process, the setting of each campaign will be wholly unique since it incorporates the interests of the particular people playing the game at each place and time.

JH: But even in groups that don't explicitly work collaboratively, the satisfaction of all players still matters. If the outcome is really unacceptable to one or more players, they can use social negotiation or just plain leave.

Players of *Primetime Adventures* benefit greatly from the use of its underlying metaphor, the television program. The shared cultural references of television make it very accessible to those with similar experiences. Players can describe what kinds of

JH: Building shared mental models lets people make meaning from actions, which do not themselves contain meaning. See *Mental Models*, Johnson-Laird, 1983.

stories they want to tell, what kinds of characters they want to play, and what kind of world they want to create, by referring to favorite TV shows. This creates a common terminology which helps the play group coordinate their choices. Each person gets to have input up-front about what kind of world they'd like to have their game take place in, and, because all the players are involved, they have the opportunity to give feedback about elements they are less interested in exploring, or even those they find offensive, such as Charles' objection to the possible stereotyping of Vodoun. The television show motif helps the Setting gain relevance to the players by supporting their integral involved in its development.

BR: It's like how our group gets to shoot Mo whenever we play a game set in a school and she tries to name the principle "Skinner."

JH: It's not just the opportunity, but the structured opportunity and the invitation to participate. Players can always chime in on their own account, but collaborative setting creation gives them a coherent way to do it, particularly for players who might not feel comfortable bucking the group to express their own needs.

AR: Remember that three second music bit that they always play with the outside shot of one character's apartment in that one TV show?

In addition to creating the overall background, players of *Primetime Adventures* create specific locations and describe their characters' surroundings during scenes. Locations are created as "personal sets" associated with the player's character. This place – like Fonzi's "office" in *Happy Days* or Hawkeye Pierce's tent, "the Swamp," in *M.A.S.H.* – gives insight into the character while simultaneously creating a place for action to take place. When events occur within these sets, and other locations created by the GM, players are encouraged to describe sequences in visual terms. Scenes are framed as if they were cinematic shots, invoking the images of television. Throughout *Primetime Adventures*, the broad powers given to players to describe setting are facilitated by the television metaphor.

Other games use different principles to organize setting development among the players. The game *Sorcerer* (Edwards) uses an approach similar to *Primetime Adventures*, but the role of the GM is to synthesize the players' suggestions. In *My Life with Master* (Czege) the creation of the Master, the primary villain of the piece, is up to the group. This character's home and environs determine most of the setting of the game. *Universalis* (Mazza & Holmes), the quintessential collaborative game, begins the game with a round of "tenet" creation. Tenets are base assumptions about the game

that guide the rest of the play experience. And throughout the game, all the players of *Universalis* can create objects or places as new "components." *Dogs in the Vineyard* (Baker) uses two concepts called "dials" and "switches" to allow players to determine the level of supernatural they are interested in experiencing in the game. A switch determines whether something is present or not, while a dial gives a scale of effect or intensity.

AR: Notice that in these game examples, setting control does not end as soon as play starts. Players can feel gypped if the setting they help to build takes on *only* the GM's imaginative vision once the real-time story-telling starts.

For groups that desire more intensive setting development, the multiple GM approach found in *Ars Magica*'s (Tweet & Rein-Hagan) "troupe style" play may be of use. Players may take turns having all the powers of a standard GM, allowing each person who wishes to have input in turn. Or, as has been done in play groups I've been involved with, areas of the world can be divvied up by geographical or cultural divisions and different people be given full authority to create setting in their area. Creating "turf" like this can help players coordinate their efforts with out reduplicating or conflicting with one another. The principles for world development to be found in *Aria* (Moore & Seyler) would be an amazing resource for anyone interested in fleshing out a roleplaying game world as a group. Aspects of the societies are quantified and mechanics are provided that enable different players to "act out" the interactions between cultures and groups. For any group, use of maps and written materials can greatly enhance the communication of what each individual has created. Wikis and other online information organizing resources have been used for games such as *Age of Paranoia* (Genest et al), a variant of *Shadows in the Fog* (Lehrich), and free-form games (see Ingason).

PT: *Ars Magica* has been around for how long and it's still seen as revolutionary?

AR: This can also be integral to play: besides the common PC, each player controls a deity, ruling god of a territory. When characters are in that territory, they may have to observe certain cultural and game play rules.

EXPANDING THE ROLE OF CHARACTERS
More Complex, Not More Confusing

Players are accustomed to using characters as their primary creative vehicle. As such, this is a natural avenue to expand upon, allowing players to have greater impact on the game world and

broadening their experience of it by allowing them to play more than one character. This may intimidate players, due to pragmatics – such as what to do when your characters have to talk with one another – or fears that those with more characters may get more time and attention. However, with a clear structure and a common understanding, these challenges may be easily resolved.

BR: This can also cause a division of focus that conflict with some folks' roleplaying goals. As with all tools, being aware of its affect on play is key to making it work.

> **Meg, Vincent and Emily are playing an *Ars Magica*-derived game using an improvised system.** In the game, an emergency Tribunal, a gathering of wizards, has been called to address the recent fiery destruction of a wizard's Covenant, or keep. During the Tribunal, the players will be responsible for a dozen or more characters *each*, many of which they are encountering the first time. In order to learn more about the wizards in the Tribunal and what kind of political machinations they may be up to, the players decide to run a session at each involved Covenant prior to the Tribunal, fleshing out each group of mages in turn…

This example is from one of my own play group's campaigns. For many years, we played using free-form negotiation instead of an established set of mechanics. There are many other groups who use free-form negotiation to establish much of their play. Since free-form techniques are rarely published, techniques developed often stay localized to individual groups and discussion of them is lacking in public discourse about roleplaying. Individual groups' play styles are likely to vary greatly. This description is meant to reflect a small part of the rich and varied field of free-form play, not to represent usage of free-form techniques as a whole.

PT: Exploration of freeform techniques is, in my opinion, the next frontier in RPG theory.

Ars Magica remains one of the few games that gives guidelines for playing more than one character. Each player is encouraged to make two or three characters, one each of various types of characters that occupy different levels of the society in the game: mages, the primary characters of the game, their companions, and their servants, or "grogs." These differing levels have two effects: they allow each player to have one character to send into a given

AR: While this is a technique of storytelling, it can also be found in video games in which the user controls a party of characters, such as *Final Fantasy* and *Golden Sun*.

situation, minimizing how much a player has to act out their own characters interaction, and it also balances the screen time and influence each player is likely to enjoy. If one person played all mages, and another plays all grogs, their impact on the story would be likely to be uneven.

The campaign from which the example above was taken was inspired by *Ars Magica*. However, influenced by other play groups, our three-player group took *Ars Magica*'s responsibility distribution guidelines to their natural conclusion. This meant not only playing multiple characters and taking turns being GM, but equally sharing responsibility for all game tasks. As an outgrowth of the fact that all players simultaneously fulfilled the tasks of a GM, there was no cap on the number of mages or characters played. In large part, this entailed playing out the members of our home Covenant, as well as neighboring mages and normal folk. In order to create more opportunities for inter-player interaction, we found it useful to play the dependents of each others' characters: the mage's apprentices, their masters and so on. If two characters controlled by one person have to interact, it was easier to simply paraphrase what went on, rather than trying to carry on the conversation. But once the destruction of a neighboring Covenant made a Tribunal imminent, this brought us to the point of having to play a large number of the other mages in the region. In order to figure out how to handle so many characters at one time, we had to take stock and figure out a strategic approach.

This challenging situation turned out to be an opportunity for further development of the game. Taking time to play a session at each individual Covenant allowed us to flesh out the other mages of the region, of whom we had known very little before. The number of characters to be played at each Covenant was manageable: ranging from three to seven. These preparatory sessions for the wizard's Tribunal gave us clear ideas about many of the characters, as well as more events to propel the plot. Once we reached the

BR: I never wanted to play my mage when I'd do *Ars*. I only wanted to play the grogs, the poor, ugly, lower class grogs who no one loves, the slovenly, dorky fellows who have to live a hard life in a hard world without any magic to help them out. That's something I can identify with.

AR: If it happens in private, who needs to know? If it's public and important, write out a script or guidelines and loan out one character for the scene or part of the scene.

PT: This applies to traditional games as well. There's nothing worse than listening to a GM talk to themselves.

BR: People insisted I play both sides of a conversation. The co-operative solution we worked out was punching them in the face until they stopped.

JH: See Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point*. While people can track social groups of up to 150, in an imagination game, that number may be significantly decreased because the players don't have visual and auditory cues.

Tribunal itself, we used visual aids, maps and counters for the characters, to help us keep track of who was present and what they did. Most scenes had a small subset of the whole complement of dozens of mages and other characters present, and in ones where all or most were present (meals, Councils), we focused on our primary characters or others who were central to action going on. In the end, we were able to follow many interconnecting threads which helped us create new tangles of plot to grapple with and enjoy.

VG: I once played a game of *Universalis* that was about the doomed attempt of a group of about 60 men, women and children in the sixties to create a perfect society on a remote Pacific island. What is great about the system is that it allows you to allot more screen time to characters based on narrative considerations. You don't have to choose one character to play beforehand, hoping that this character will generate the most interesting story; you can choose to play whichever character turns out to be the most interesting during play.

For play groups interested in simpler ways to play multiple characters, other games have mechanics that can be to facilitate this. In *Universalis*, characters are created as "components" purchased using the currency of the game, called "coins." All elements of the game world are created this way, and Traits may be added to them at the cost of one coin each. The more coins invested in a character component the more difficult it is for someone else to change or destroy it, but it may switch hands and be controlled by someone else. The only limit to the number of components a player may create is the number of coins a player accumulates to invest in them. Multiple characters can be created very easily, and can be utilized by many players, not just the one who created a given character.

Players concerned about how much time is devoted to different characters might be interested in a rule from *Primetime Adventures* that deals specifically with this issue: "screen presence." Returning to the television metaphor, each campaign is thought of as a "season" of shows. Each character will have one episode that is their spotlight episode, in which their issues are highlighted and their character will most likely take center stage. In other episodes, the characters may have supporting parts, and in some they will play merely a token role. Representing this, each player will assign two 1s, two 2s and one 3 to the episodes. The episode with 3 is where their character will have their highest screen presence for

the season, and so on down. This allows everyone to know that their character will be assured of having time in the sun, and clear the way for everyone to collaborate to help one another explore the issues of particular importance to each character. Although players of *Primetime Adventures* are intended to control just one character, this principle could be usefully adapted to other games in which multiple characters are controlled by a single player. Recent games such as *Polaris*, *Capes* and *Breaking the Ice* offer new ways to expand the role of character in play.

AR: Also if one's primary character is not present for much of an episode/session, it allows one to take on an NPC cloak for some scenes.

SETTING THE SCENE TOGETHER
Making the Invisible Visible

Situation is probably the least discussed aspect of roleplaying, even though it may well be the most important. Situation is where conflict lies, where struggle arises, and where we prove ourselves as players. In the overwhelming majority of roleplaying games, Situation is the sole province of the GM and, furthermore, few guidelines are given beyond suggestions for modules and scenarios. Details of how to begin and end scenes are omitted, and practical principles of pacing and providing adversity are left for the GM to learn by trial and error. However, many game designers have found that very simple rules and guidelines can empower players to more productively frame action and create conflict:

VG: Yet what is situation but the illustration of character? The character creation process is flawed unless (1) the game always uses the same kind of situation – like old-school *D&D* or *My Life with Master* – or (2) the creation of situation is part of the creation of character – as in *Sorcerer* and many other recent indie games. Character and situation cannot be conceived of independently.

PT: Here there is truth.

BR: Many existing RPGs are about mission completion: using resources and teamwork to overcome a preset goal. *D&D*, *Shadowrun*, *Spycraft*, and *Paranoia* are all very explicitly set up on this model. So when we try to use these games to deal with issues besides finishing the mission, we need different rules to make it work.

> **Barry, Matt and Kim are playing *Soap*** (Bazelmans). Kim begins a scene where her character Valencia, the super-villain seductress of the piece, plans to reveal that she is carrying the love-child of Barry's very-married, upstanding head-surgeon character, Dr. Bradley Underkopfler. Since Kim initiated the scene, she becomes the "Author" of it. She decides whether other players will have to pay her a coin to enter the scene. She invites Barry to have Dr. Brad enter for free, but wants to "ban" Matt's character, Dr. Brad's wife Patience, from the scene. Matt wants Patience to enter so he bids 3 Coins to pay for her entry. Kim does not have enough Coins to match the bid, so Patience storms onto the set…

AR: Allowing players more direction in events cuts down on the potential for playing a scene in which nothing interesting happens. For example: twenty play minutes of running mundane errands in town without bumping into trouble.

JH: See Bal's *Narratology* for some useful theoretical background on the difference between story and plot, and how the actual presentation of the text can change perceptions of both.

Soap, another collaborative game, does an admirable job of outlining clear guidelines for the two major aspects of Situation: scene framing and adversity. Scene framing, describing when and where action takes place in a game, is an activity that has gotten little attention in traditional games. The point in the story at which a transition is made from one scene to another can have great impact on story and plot. Beginning the scene described above with Dr. Brad knocking at the door, would set quite a different tone from starting play with him in Valencia's arms. Who makes decision such as this, and on what basis, can shape the whole game. Designers have only recently begun to publish guidelines or mechanics for establishing this fundamental aspect of play.

In *Soap*, rules for creating a scene are also cleverly combined with determining who has responsibility for maintaining it. As in the example above, the initiating player becomes the author of the scene. Thus, Kim would be the person who describes elements of the setting and may influence who else takes part. In this example, Kim uses this power to ban Matt's character from the scene, trying to create space for her character to spread mischief uninterrupted. This process in turn creates an opportunity for adversity, or conflict, to be provided. When Matt's character, Patience, was banned from the scene, he bid to allow her to enter, using coins similar to the currency used in *Universalis*. This process clearly demarcates the bounds of a scene, and since anyone can initiate, it makes ability to set a scene available to all players equally.

PT: Someone (believe Jesse Burneko) once described *Capes* as "an exercise in shared empathy." With no GM, everyone becomes responsible for realizing what conflicts matter and for making them meaningful.

Other games have specific mechanics for framing scenes. In *Universalis*, the players bid coins to see who will be able to frame a scene. Coins bid are then used to pay for narrating and creating elements of the scene. *Primetime Adventures* also has a specific mechanic for making scene framing explicit and collaborative: players take turns requesting scenes, stating the location, the type (character- or plot-focused) and the "agenda," what they want to occur. In the improvised play of my group,

we sometimes systematically frame situations that will occur each session over long arcs of the story. The example of play given for collaborative character elements also serves as an example of this kind of framing. For several months, each session focused on a council meeting in a different Covenant, preparing for the Tribunal of wizards. Other examples might include beginning each session when a visitor came to the Covenant or having several play sessions which describe a dragon-hunting party's encounters with successive dragon-spawn and then with the dragon itself. Long-term frameworks like this provide a skeleton of plot which provides guidance for the players, but one that can be fleshed out in a different way each time.

JH: For roleplayers who begin with abstract concepts and whose most difficult challenge is how to play them out in concrete plot events, these kinds of long-term structures can be particularly valuable.

To return to the issue of adversity, how may it be provided and what, precisely, is meant by it? Adversity refers to conflict or struggle experienced by characters in the game world which forces the players to respond. This provides the players with an opportunity to step up to the plate and overcome the in-game obstacle. Adversity is one of the key elements of roleplaying, where a lot of the fun comes from, and a game that does a bad job of providing it is likely to be a boring game. One of the primary tasks of a GM in the standard contract of play (see Kim) is to introduce villains and challenging events that test the mettle of both players and characters. Not having a GM means that someone else has to take on this pivotal role. If the game is to be wholly collaborative, rules must be crafted that assign these tasks to participants. In *Soap*, players provide adversity to one another by contesting "sentences," the bits of narration that have been contributed by other players. This creates a structure where players are able to thwart each other and a clear process by which adversity may be provided.

AR: Hear! Hear! My personal struggle with free form play is finding conflict that is *not* with my co-players/PCs. That's not fun for me.

Adversity can be made the pumping heart of a game, or be simply the outer edge of collaboration. In *Universalis*, along with the process, a strong incentive is given for players to provide in game

adversity to one another. When someone initiates a "complication" with another player, a contest is initiated that will result in the ideas of one person or the other being accepted in to play, and the winner gaining a large number of coins. This creates an atmosphere where players are drawn to place obstacles in each other's paths, providing needed tension and drama in play. Another extremely collaborative system, the one used by *Engle Matrix Games* (Engle), takes a very different approach: an extremely attenuated form of the GM is employed whose primary purpose to arbitrate adversity. The players may establish whatever they wish with respect to all the elements of roleplaying by making "statements." The role of the GM is to determine whether statements made by players about the game world are in conflict. If they are, the GM then assigns relative strengths to arguments made to support these statements. In contrast to *Universalis*, *Engle Matrix Games* put little emphasis on creating conflict. Adversity only arises when ideas about what is being created diverge too greatly. This can create a very different dynamic between the players. Different decisions about how adversity is handled can create great differences in the overall experience of a game.

PT: Situation arises from Setting, but they are not the same. Many published RPGs conflate the two.

Both aspects of Situation can arise from the other elements of roleplaying. In free-form roleplaying or games using improvised system, Setting is a great source for potential conflict. Everyone can give suggestions for what might go wrong or collaborate through discussion about what aspects of a situation would give rise to further complications in the characters' lives. From conflicts between organizations or cultures to natural disasters and disease, many story elements can be used to create tricky situations which make players scratch their heads. The "kicker" in *Sorcerer* provides an excellent example of a mechanic that both sets the scene for action and gives players input about adversity. This aspect of Character is chosen by each player during the final step of character creation. The kicker must be some situation or event that has just occurred as play begins, something that impels their character into

action. This sets the scene for how the character enters play, as well as providing the seed for future events in the character's life and continuing challenges to be faced.

ALL HANDS ON SYSTEM
Easy Ways to Make Mechanics Accessible

System is the *piece de la résistance* of all GMing. It is the Gordian knot that many free-form collaborativists simply cut through to release the bonds of restricted player creativity. However, mechanics and guidelines are tools that can help any group collaborate more effectively. It is the rules used in play that determines whether play is collaborative or not. On the other hand, players being introduced to collaborative play may balk at being asked to understand and apply the rules of the game. It may be intimidating to be expected to know what may seem an arcane science which GMs are employed to make clear. However, there are many ways to create mechanics and rules that are inclusive and easy for anyone to use. For example:

PT: But restricted creativity is good!

> **Sarah, Tony and Kip are playing *Universalis*.** During her turn, Sarah pays one coin and narrates how her character, Lexy, a spy for the United Federation of Inner Planets, flees Jupiter by spacecraft with information he stole from the Jovian capital building. Kip goes next and pays a coin to introduce a new rule, or "gimmick." This particular gimmick defines differences in the maneuverability of ships types in the 400-mile-an-hour winds of the Jovian cloud bands. On his turn, Tony pays one coin to initiate a "complication," and two coins to introduce new world elements, called "components": narrating that, as Lexy's skimmer dives through the thick ammonia clouds of Jupiter's upper atmosphere, two Royal Guard fliers come screaming through the airstream, hot on his tail…

As this example shows, *Universalis* establishes powerful and flexible ways for all players to contribute via System and actively

implement the rules and mechanics of the game. First and foremost, all of the mechanics of *Universalis* may be invoked by any player. There is no specific set of tasks that one player is responsible for. Instead, every player has equal access. To facilitate this, the rules of *Universalis* are clear and simple enough to be easily applied by anyone. Mechanics like the coin currency provide a universal process for doing things: most tasks, such as narrating an event or creating an object, cost one coin.

JH: Nonetheless, there is always a final arbiter of authority – if only in the sense that there are usually one or more players without whose cooperation the game will fail.

The rules of *Universalis* address all four main types of System tasks: invoking rules, applying them, resolving outcomes, and creating new rules. All of these, except resolution, occur in the example above. As the players take their turns, they both invoke and apply rules by paying coins to take actions. In this example, Kip creates a new rule governing atmospheric flight that can be used throughout the rest of the game. Contrast this with many games in which the only time a Player deals with the rules and mechanics might be when they are told to roll some dice by a GM.

Universalis has three rules that deal with conflict and its resolution: "complications," as seen above, "challenges," and "fines." Complications are used when a player wants to affect a component they do not control. In the example above, Tony is trying to affect Lexy's skimmer, a component Sarah is controlling. Complications are resolved by rolling dice allocated to each side of the conflict. All players who take part in a complication gain coins from doing so, with the most going to the winner. Challenges are used to resolve differences of opinion between players. For example, if Tony had felt that Kip's rule gave Sarah too much advantage in the atmosphere of Jupiter, Tony could have initiated a challenge to remove the gimmick, the new rule. Challenges are resolved by negotiation, or by bidding coins. Fines may be suggested by a player to censure another. However, all the players vote on the issue, and if the vote goes against the person who originally suggested the fine, they have to pay it instead. These

rules allow every player to resolve in-game as well as meta-game, social conflicts and also give every player the same base ability to affect disputed outcomes. Individual players may gain advantages based on skillful use of all the rules, but everyone begins in the same place and has the same opportunity to acquire a similar level of ability and power.

Few other games give players the full gamut of abilities to be found in *Universalis*, but many games utilize specific mechanics that encourage player participation. Even simple guidelines can facilitate a larger amount of player input: in *Sorcerer*, any player may call for a roll, giving everyone the power to invoke mechanics as a GM traditionally does. In *Donjon* (Nixon) certain aspects of System are customizable; for instance, players choose what size dice are used for resolution, and what process they use to create their character. The central thematic mechanic in *Sorcerer*, "humanity," is also customizable. The player group determines what it means for Sorcerer characters to gain or lose humanity, causing reverberations throughout the Setting and entire course of the game.

JH: Many groups already practice this technique, even in traditional GM-centric games. Nonetheless, officially giving all participants this ability and prompting them to use it does make a difference, particularly for groups that are strict about following the official game rules.

Other mechanics give players a way to comment on each others' actions. "Fanmail" in *Primetime Adventures* and "trust" in *The Mountain Witch* (Kleinert) are mechanics that allow players to help or hinder other players' characters during conflicts. In both games, this creates dynamics between the players that greatly enhance play. Fanmail allows players to give each other "high five"-like positive feedback. Trust creates a shifting atmosphere of loyalty to and fear of one another that helps the players enact the fates that have been dealt to their characters. *Great Ork Gods* (Aidley) gives each player the ability to determine the difficulty of certain character actions. For example, the player who controls the God of War, "Slashings and Slayings," must be consulted whenever anyone else's character takes a warlike action. This feeds into the free-for-all, out-for-yourself competitive atmosphere of *Great Ork*

AR: For a more epic scale god/mortal game, check out *Enemy Gods*, in which players (playing a god and a mortal each) create blessings and worse to bestow on other characters.

Gods, tapping the players to provide adversity for one another.

But, far and away, the most prolific types of mechanics that encourage player involvement in System have to do with resolution. Resolution refers to determining the outcome of a conflict or a disputed event. A ground-breaking game in this respect is *The Pool* (West). When a player has a successful resolution outcome in *The Pool*, they may achieve a "monologue of victory." When this occurs, the player, rather than the GM, narrates what in-game events constitute the success. Following in this vein, many games give players similar latitude. In *Trollbabe* (Edwards), players narrate what occurs when they have a failing outcome. The resolution mechanics in *Trollbabe* incorporate many options for players after a first failure. They may call upon other characters, items or other things to give them the possibility of succeeding after all, but at the cost of risking the character or item, and at increased risk to the trollbabe character herself.

Dogs in the Vineyard is another game that makes resolution collaborative. Despite placing setting development and adversity in the hands of the GM, the resolution mechanics put the players and GM on equal footing. Each player has a pool of dice they roll and then put forward as they narrate actions and responses during the interplay of a conflict. When dice are used up, each side has the option to escalate, continuing the conflict and calling upon character traits to provide more dice. This, along with a guideline requiring the GM to "say yes [to the players] or roll dice," removes a large part of the GM's *de facto* privilege to override player contributions.

JH: Or, depending on the group, it may instead shift that privilege from a low-level, mechanical one onto a larger, narrative scale.

A final, very innovative approach to opening up resolution to players may be found in *Shadows* (Arntson). This simple and extremely collaborative game asks players to describe two possible outcomes for any given conflict, before the conflict has been resolved. Two dice are rolled to determine outcome: one die represents what the character wants to happen, one die represents

what their shadow wants to happen: a negative outcome or one in opposition to what the character wants. If the shadow's die has the higher result, what the shadow wanted occurs. This mechanic, reminiscent of a similar "shadow" concept in *Wraith: The Oblivion* (Rein-Hagan, Chupp, Heartshorn), cleverly drafts the players into providing adversity for themselves, while allowing them to take part in resolution.

THE COLLABORATIVE REVOLUTION

The collaborative potential of roleplaying is finally being realized. There are many ways – be they simple or comprehensive – to increase collaboration among all the players by tapping into the creativity of everyone involved. Games such as *Sorcerer*, *My Life with Master*, and *Dogs in the Vineyard* utilize collaborative techniques in one or two areas, especially System and Setting. They retain most of the usual powers of a GM while greatly enhancing the collaborative nature of play. Other games – such as *Donjon*, *Engle Matrix*, *Shadows*, and *Primetime Adventures* – change the experience of roleplaying radically by opening up several other elements to player input. A final group – including *Universalis*, *Soap*, and the experiences of various free-form play groups – has done away with the idea that any player should have more or less access to contributing in any of the elements. Many independent games such as *Capes* (Lower-Basch), *Scarlet Wake* (O'Neal), *Polaris* (Lehman) and others, build upon these ideas and develop them in new ways. These ideas are reaching a wider audience through the broad powers of world creation given to players of *Nobilis* (Borgstrom) , and mechanics like "conviction" in *Blue Rose* (Kenson et al). There is a veritable flood of collaborative innovation in roleplaying game design going on right now.

PT: What if players don't want to be empowered? Collaborative play is a very different type of experience than "traditional" play, and it has different strengths and weaknesses.

This influx of collaborative techniques gives gaming groups a wide variety of new tools and choices. Whether a group picks up a new system with collaborative elements, selects some useful techniques

to use in their existing play, or chooses time-honored divisions of gaming tasks, the options available have greatly increased. These techniques comprise of a wealth of ways to empower player choice and creativity, the true heart of collaborative play. At every level it is possible to empower everyone, distributing the tasks that make up a roleplaying game. Whether as players or designers, a whole new set of techniques for collaborative play is available to us right now. These are tools that have been added to the already rich palette of roleplaying. The horizons of roleplaying games have been expanded, and this is just the beginning.

JH: While collaborative roleplaying can be a powerful technique, it can also displace game conflicts into social conflicts, particularly unspoken ones. See Jo Freeman's fantastic essay, *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*, for some thoughts about how equality under the rules does not always translate into equal participation. This is not to say collaborative roleplaying is a bad idea – but like any other style of play, it carries its own set of difficulties along with it.

BR: The coolest thing about a lot of these tools and techniques is that they can be used in GMed games too. One of the most common ways to get players to buy-in to a situation, for example, is to have the GM give up a bit of power and let a player frame a scene to draw their character into the GM's plot. Rather than the GM having the burden of hooking or suckering everyone into the plot, she can give it over to the players and let them suck themselves in. This is an excellent thing, since players always suck.

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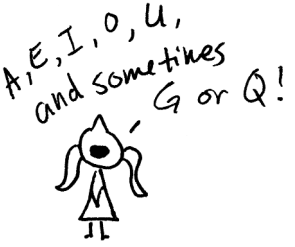
AR: Are we going to run a gag reel in the credits? :)



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2

IMMERSIVE STORY METHODS FOR TABLETOP PLAY

JOHN H. KIM

This is an outline of methods of preparing for tabletop play, based around a particular style of play. There are many functional styles of play, but this is a specific prescription based on my concept of "Immersive Story" (see Kim). In brief, that analogy suggests that each player sees the game as a dramatic story with her own player character (PC) as the protagonist. This includes all events seen, including those of other PCs. Because the player also controls the actions of her PC, this results in a deepened emotional identification.

This is a deceptively simple concept with many consequences. The most striking difference from traditional dramatic forms is that the player is not required to externalize her PC's inner conflicts. That PC is not the protagonist to anyone except the player in question. As such, the other players need not be drawn to emotionally identify with it. However, that PC is a *supporting* character in the perceived stories of all the other players. Thus, play should be structured so that these supporting roles are strengthened.

The concept of a singular protagonist is a limited and even simplistic model of drama, going back to Aristotle. There are many more advanced drama concepts that I do not cover here. However, at a broad level I believe this is a useful approach. Roleplaying theory is at an early stage, and we first need to emulate Aristotle before we can have a Brecht. Following the singular protagonist

PT: John Kim is the greatest under appreciated RPG theorist of the last decade. Like Shannon Appelcline on the board gaming side, John writes about roleplaying with clarity and insight, and his attention to the craft of roleplaying is second to none. Just sayin'.

JH: This radical decentralizing of experience considers the game as a player (rather than a GM or designer or observer) would see it. In other words, the player is the point of play.

PT: Along with freeform techniques, immersion is the great unexplored territory in RPG theory right now.

JH: Rather than externalizing them in character, meta-game discussions, out-of-character talk, and post-game storytelling can (and do!) provide access to these inner conflicts for those who are interested in sharing them.

BR: This is harder than it sounds. Imagine getting a group of prima donnas to share the last lipstick before recieving their lifetime achievement award.

PT: Actually, we could learn a lot from Brecht, but let's not get ahead of ourselves.

model, we can define other styles of role-playing which contrast with Immersive Story as I have defined it. I will suggest three:

- **Party Protagonist** play attempts to create a single narrative line similar to traditional drama. The group of player characters functions as a single protagonist. As a result, there is an adventure that – as a whole – is structured in acts, where, in each act, the party faces a threat and overcomes it. However, its plot is not very personal. The advice for *Torg* (Gordon) has an ideal similar to this.
- **Serial Protagonist** play attempts to create a set of interwoven stories, one for each PC. At any given time, one player is in the spotlight, externalizing his PC's inner conflicts for the others to identify with. Thus, an individual player will see a cycle of changing protagonist figures during a session. There will be many interesting scenes, but no continuous emotional identification. The game *My Life With Master* (Czege) has an ideal similar to this.
- **Explorative Immersive** play has no structural goal for the individual players experience. The PCs may wander and interact, but there is no ideal for the narrative that is produced. The game *HârnMaster* (Crosby) has an ideal similar to this.

These differ not only in methods, but also in the ideals that they try for. The ideal in Immersive Story is different. It is for each player to come out of the session having consistently identified with their own PC, and felt that PC go through an interesting dramatic arc.

I will give a hypothetical example first, to illustrate. Assume a traditional medieval fantasy game. Take a scene where a medieval fantasy hero is rescuing a princess, with the forced help of a scoundrel. The player of the hero views the game as something most like a traditional heroic narrative. To the player, this scene is a climactic conflict. The player of the princess views the game

as something like a modern feminist re-telling, perhaps like Mary Stewart's *The Crystal Cave*. To her, this scene may function as a shift, which is the start of an arc about her reintegration and/or romance. The player of the scoundrel, who is a rival of the hero, views this as a satirical twist, such as John Gardner's *Grendel* or Gregory Maguire's *Wicked*. To him, this scene builds tension towards a future confrontation. The overall result is that none of the players will experience a well-structured story in the dramatic sense, but this is balanced by the power of their interaction.

JH: Or they may! But that's up to them, and how they perceive the events of the game. The story exists primarily in their *perception* of it.

In this essay, I want see how this theory implies concrete suggestions for game preparation. I will draw some examples from an actual tabletop campaign in which I served as Game Master (GM), the Water-Uphill World campaign. In that game, the PCs were schoolchildren from the modern world who find themselves in a bizarre fantasy world where water literally runs uphill. The world is rocky and has scattered "geysers" where water falls in jets up into the sky. There were four kids: Noriko, Kate, Martin, and Steve. They were wandering in the basement under their school, and then inexplicably found themselves in a tower of the Royal Palace. The Palace was a floating island – a huge upside-down bowl of rock with a reservoir of water underneath holding it up. I will describe more of the campaign as I consider different parts of preparation.

BR: Different players also desire different by-products of the game experience: cathartic emotional outpouring, a web of delectably entangled literary irony, an episode of escapist challenge. Paying attention to what we like about what we like (in addition to just what it is that we like) can be pretty darn revealing.

STORY SOUP

The ideal of Immersive Story is inherently chaotic. Because each player interprets the scenes differently, nearly any formal structure is unworkable. There are as many different goals for the scene as there are players, and thus there is no best way to handle or resolve it according to traditional dramatic principles. This multiplicity of function makes story planning essentially impossible, and even judging a single scene based on dramatic logic is difficult. However, there are methods to increase the chances that as a whole, the

JH: Each player may have powerful dramatic goals and motives that they are trying to represent through action. Combining immersive story with giving players more authority might be one way to move back toward dramatic resolution, as each player takes charge of their own arc.

scenes will have impact for all the players.

BR: I also like the mosaic analogy. Stand too close and all you see are colored rocks plastered into a wall. It's only with some distance that you can make out the emerging patterns and finally discern the picture. Of course, in this type of roleplaying it's even more complicated, because everyone in the game may look at the same events and come out with a different story.

One analogy for this approach to play is making a stew. Rather than trying to arrange ingredients in some sort of structured narrative, you as GM toss them all into the pot and see what comes out. The dramatic direction should not come from what the situation is, but rather from the PCs. In this approach, the GM is responsible for the balance of ingredients, and occasionally stirring the pot, but not how it is arranged.

In game terms, this can be broken down into several pieces:

- **Scope:** This is the stewpot – a narrow physical or conceptual space that the game is centered on. The narrow space keeps the PCs and key non-player characters (NPCs) bumping into each other, just as the pot keeps the ingredients in contact.
- **Factions:** Factions are the stock of the stew. They are generalizations that can be used to think about the scope at a high level. On a practical level, there need to be such generalizations to keep track of events.
- **Player Characters:** These are the main ingredients of the stew. The player characters should be dominant to the action of the game.
- **Relationship Charts:** Player character relationships are particularly vital in this, because all of PC will be on-stage at once. They need to be distinct, and yet mix well each other. By analogy, in a structured meal you can have ingredients that don't mix well. But in a stew, the mix is of primary importance. This doesn't mean the characters need to work harmoniously together. It means, if characters are regularly in scenes together, they need to have interesting chemistry.

JH: In other words, this is not quite the same as the traditional "party sticky" goal. The narrowed scope may provide much of the impetus to keep the party together, so that the focus of character interactions can be on making them interesting rather than productive or useful.

- **Symbols:** Symbols are the peppers of the stew. The character relationships and primary actions are a morass which can be indistinct at times. Consequently, the narrative will not be well-structured thematically. Having a scattering of symbols can

provide landmarks for thinking about meaning. By analogy, these are distinct chunks within the mix that give it texture and variety.

The purpose of these preparations is to give a foundation from which to run your game. At any point in the game, you as GM should be able to give an answer that both maintains continuity and continues the action. Having a narrow scope means that it is possible to prepare all the elements in that scope. I have earlier work that discusses the use of background (Kim 2003). However, the narrow scope also means there is much greater demand for continuity.

PT: This seems like it draws heavily on larp (live action) traditions.

AR: John! You tease!

Note that I am emphasizing the role of the GM. However, players can be involved in the design of all the background elements. Play in this style is powered by interactions and developments, not revelation of secrets. So even if the players know and/or designed the elements, they can still be engaged by interaction with them. In Water-Uphill World, Liz (who played Kate) was involved in the world design.

SCOPE

The first key is defining a Scope. This is the boundary line of the stew pot – the set of locations and characters and objects that the GM has prepared. The scope needs to be small enough that the GM can have it adequately detailed, while still large enough to be interesting. As a rule of thumb: consider the PCs and perhaps a dozen key NPCs. The scope should be small enough that they are required to keep bumping into each other regularly. By keeping the game within the scope, the relations become deeper and more meaningful. The limited scope means that the games are more static in location, rather than being about constantly wandering adventurers.

AR: Also, scope should be large enough to hold surprises for players/characters who are already familiar with it.

The scope could be a limited physical location: such as the small

JH: Scope may account for the "specialness" factor in many traditional roleplaying genres. Why are the PCs vampires, mages, or possessors of secret knowledge? Because that radically restricts the scope of the game.

AR: For conceptual scopes, try thinking in terms of political factions, secret societies, members of a circus or other group. These can give PCs things to do and reasons to stay together.

PT: Constraint good!

JH: Making the role of notes or other non-ephemeral resources particularly important. This may be a natural match with online play.

BR: Scope also depends on how much players are willing to bend believability. A city can be fine if you're willing to constantly have characters meeting with no rhyme or reason. Some players love this. For others, this ruins needed verisimilitude.

AR: There is a balance (for GMs creating worlds) between what can be grasped by players (alien) and what can be refuted by facts. An otherwise agreeable player can get up in continuity arms when their favorite culture is misused or misrepresented.

home village of the PCs, or a covenant and its surroundings in *Ars Magica* (Tweet). A city is too large to be an adequate scope; characters can live in the same city without regularly bumping into each other. However, the scope may also have conceptual boundaries rather than just physical ones. For example, the scope could be restricted to a particular set of characters, such as an extended family. In my Vinland campaign, the scope was a set of five extended families, each with their own homestead. Alternatively, the scope could be established around some unusual feature or event in history. With conceptual boundaries, you need to be able to improvise setting details, since you won't be able to define them all beforehand, as with limited locations.

The scope needs to be highly detailed. Because the people and places in it will keep getting re-used, there are much greater demands on continuity – compared to, say, a wandering quest. Each element in the scope may be looked at repeatedly from different angles and under different circumstances. In a single-story model, you can selectively detail an element because you know that element's purpose in the story. Within this more chaotic model, there is no singular purpose. For example, an NPC who was at first a negotiator turns out to be a romantic interest of a PC. Now, how does courtship work within her culture and social class? Because of the need for detail, it can be easier to design from a modern-day, historical, or alternate-history setting. These typically have a wealth of reference material for detail.

The familiarity of the elements is also important. For example, the Holy Roman Empire of 1802 is reasonably well documented by historians, but it will be difficult for players to internalize the details. Familiar elements take on an iconic value, which is a useful shorthand. In my Water-Uphill World campaign, this was actually a difficulty in getting started. The game was in the style of children's fantasy stories such as C.S. Lewis' *Narnia*, but the setting was quite alien. In contrast, my following campaign mixed two

familiar historical elements – the Vikings of the Icelandic sagas, and Northeastern Native Americans of early contact. Although it was an alternate history with many altered details, the use of familiar, iconic elements made the latter campaign easier for the players to get a handle on.

In order for the scope to work, play needs to actually stay within it. Over time, the scope may widen or shift, but that should be a slow and gradual process. Thus, you need to design in strong reasons that keep the PCs' interests within the scope. For example, you might have a campaign based around two warring cities, with PCs in the military of one city. You would need to detail the two cities, focusing on their military culture and capabilities.

In Water-Uphill World, the scope of the game, at least initially, was the Palace. It was a big place with over a dozen buildings and lots of factions. As a floating island, though, the PCs had no immediate means to leave it, which inherently prevented the scope from creeping too much. After six or seven sessions, the PCs left and went to an underground city. I tried to detail that as well, but it was sketchier in the end.

FACTIONS

I generally divide the scope into Factions – these can be formal organizations, clans, or just ideological groupings. The factions might be as simple as the two opposing sides in a war. There should probably be at least four factions, but no more than ten. These may include sub-groupings within a larger unit (like vying political blocks within one side of a war). Factions are necessary because if you are going to keep a handle on ongoing events, you need to have some abstraction larger than individual characters. You need to be able to generalize with things like "This PC action will outrage members of Faction X", rather than relating the action to each individual NPC.

JH: These numbers are very non-arbitrary, and hit the "sweet spot" for what humans can easily comprehend and remember. See George Miller's classic essay, *The Magic Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two*.

You should be careful about developing individual characters

within the factions. Characters in practice often take on a life of their own, especially as they are influenced by the surrounding players. It is more stable to prepare in advance the broad tendencies and relations of the factions, and fill in more details about the individuals only once they have entered play. By having the framework, it becomes easier to write up individuals. So when I write up an individual NPC, I am not just creating out of nothing. I am creating them within the known framework of relationships. This tends to give the NPCs a sense of grounding in the fictional reality. They are not created merely to be opponents or allies to the PCs. Instead, they are derived from questions such as "What would the second-in-command of X faction have to be like?"

JH: Players must be able to reason convincingly about other characters in order to predict or even understand their actions, particularly when characters reappear. No matter what the "agenda" of the game, if the GMing isn't coherent, the players can't make useful predictions.

You should make sure that the factional conflicts run deep and are difficult to resolve. For potentially violent campaigns, this means coming up with reasons to restrict open killing. In short, you don't want a little push to bring the conflict to armed battle that results in the immediate elimination or subjugation of one side. However, as long as the factions don't violently eliminate each other, interaction is fine and helpful. Two factions may negotiate to resolve a particular disagreement, but there will remain underlying differences that divide them. Restricting violence also gives some stability to both PCs and NPCs. The PCs as a whole should not constantly be in danger of dying. Similarly, important NPCs should not frequently be killed off. Such characters are difficult and time-consuming to develop. They should die under the right circumstances, but the context should be designed to make it less likely. Such stabilizing forces can also mitigate the effect of a "loose cannon" among the PCs.

More generally, there is a balance between the setup being too rigid and too unstable. If there is too much stability, then the PCs will be unable to effect change, which can be frustrating. On the other hand, if it is too unstable then you may have a bunch of carefully prepared characters killed off in rapid succession, or

scattered to different parts of the world. In short, your preparation becomes quickly invalidated.

In the Palace of Water-Uphill World, there were three major factions and three powerful independent individuals. These were the Regent, the Nursery, and the servants & artisans (not important politically, but vital to Palace life). The independent individuals were the princess, an unusual warrior, and a giant spider. These last three were not developed within the established factions. In practice, the players avoided the Regent and the Nursery, but remained in other parts of the palace interacting with the artisans and individuals. Effectively, this shrank the scope more, and they left the Palace sooner than I would have liked. The individuals were generally liked, but understanding them didn't contribute to comfort or familiarity with the Palace as a whole.

AR: When you have individual NPCs outside factions (politically free or whatever), keep them intertwined with a faction or three to push PCs into action therewith. This also works in a Romeo/Juliet way.

In retrospect, this was not well planned out. In my next campaign, I ended up having very strong and well-defined factions – there were a small number of tribes and clans. Each clan had a family tree, and the players all had a sheet of the family trees. This meant that an individual had a distinct and easily displayed position within the faction. I felt this worked much better for giving both the players and myself an understanding of the scope.

PT: Never underestimate the power of family. In my post-Roman Britain game, the most important meta-game object was the family tree. It covered my entire dining room table.

THE PLAYER CHARACTERS

The PCs, then, are created by the players and set loose within this scope. The PCs are by far the most important ingredient in the soup. Each other PC is generally far more prominent to a player than any tabletop NPC or short-term character, so there are a few important things to consider. The PCs should be powerful relative to the scope. As a rule of thumb, at least one PC should probably be on the top ten list of most powerful individuals within the scope of the game, and the PCs should be a major concern for those with the most power. The PCs may or may not be an integrated part of the scope. They might fit within the existing factions, or they might be

JH: As the PCs change in power level, the scope of the game can change as well.

VG: Notice that this does not mean that the PCs should be powerful: it means that the scope must be chosen in such a way that the PCs are meaningful within it.

AR: PC power is a style choice. Consider humans escaping a land of giants.

external to them. However, if they do not start out as members of various factions, they should quickly develop relations. Each faction should eventually seek an alliance with or make enemies of them.

AR: This, the PC umbilical cord, is a very personal issue to me. I struggle when I don't have a reason to keep my PC interacting with other PCs. GMs do good to ask players to have common background elements or intertwined histories.

PT: Binding the characters together (even as antagonists) == interesting play.

The group should design the PCs to have an overall bond that keeps them together. Given the chaotic approach, it is important to have ties that are difficult to break, more than simple friendship or common interest. Relationships can and should take unexpected turns in play. You might intend two PCs to be friends, but they soon experience a terrible rift over some incident. Particularly in pre-modern societies, I am fond of using blood relations. Friends can split, but a brother is always a brother even if you don't like him. Alternately, the PCs could all be officers assigned to a particular ship. In Water-Uphill World, the PCs were the only people they knew from their world, which forced them to depend on each other.

For individual PCs, the most important issue is that they be proactive. This involves the attitude of both the players and the PCs. Good PCs should have ambition. This need not be selfish ambition – it could be ambition for a cause. However, what this amounts to is an unwillingness to settle for the status quo (Kim, "Proactive PCs").

RELATIONSHIP CHARTS

In a given set of PCs, the relationships among them are the most vital. However, in practice, their relationships are outside of the GM's control. The GM can plan and suggest relationships, but play results can and will vary. One tool for charting out the relationships is to create a chart. The chart cross-indexes characters, so if there are 8 characters it is 8 x 8 for 64 boxes. Each row represents a character, and specifically that character's story. Each column represents a supporting character in that story – one of the other PCs. What is being documented here is what potential impact the column character has on the row character's story.

JH: Letting the players maintain and change this chart after each session can help the GM – particularly as the chart tries to represent the players' perceptions of what matters to their characters in the story.

So, for Water-Uphill World, we might have:

Protagonist	Story	Supporting Cast			
		Noriko	Kate	Martin	Steve
Noriko	taking responsibility	X	impractical bookworm	irresponsible adventurer	
Kate	learning an adult world	irritating	X		
Martin	finding passion	lacks vision	fellow explorer	X	
Steve	getting power	goody two-shoes			X

The important part for me was filling in the blank spots. The ideal here would be that each PC has an important supporting role in each story (except, of course, his own), but this isn't an exact guide. All the stories and roles going on are bound to clash with each other – so you're just trying to maximize your chances rather than nailing each one.

EXTERNALIZATION & SYMBOLISM

One criticism of immersive story is that without clear cues from traditional single-protagonist story structure, the players' attention can become lost in minutiae. The multiplicity of conflicts and themes can be overwhelming. To offset this, you can try to build in clarifying elements – symbols that externalize the conflicts within the setting. In keeping with the principles of the style, a symbol should be:

1. **Intra-diagetic:** The object needs to speak for itself, not be the result of external description or emphasis.
2. **Discrete:** The symbol should not be construed as leading in a particular direction, or require a particular arrangement to look right.

The point here is that symbols should not be guides. They are directionless, part of the soup that the players manipulate. When the players pick a direction, they take on new meaning by proxy.

AR: What if a game has no GM? Without a story leader it is many times more important to communicate character arcs and goals between players. If cohesion is a struggle, try setting aside a few minutes before and/or after play sessions to assess story progress.

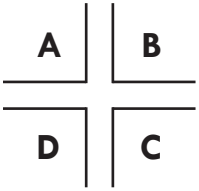
PT: I've found that relationships to NPCs are almost as important as relationships to PCs in this type of game.

AR: In this vein, I find GM/Player interaction vital. The more questions asked and answered about PCs, the better that character is known to her player and the story's overall author, the GM.

AR: John's Magic is one implementation of symbols, but what are others? Cut scenes with metaphors, omens, and dreams. Or NPCs (that the characters see but are never able to contact) who are the avatars of things like Luck, Martyrdom, Power, Compassion, and Wisdom.

Within Water-Uphill World, Magic served this function. I had conceived of Magic as a place. The PCs would concentrate deeply, and then find themselves in a maze where there were certain unusual objects that they could carry. Each unusual object represented a magical power that the character would have in the normal world. So, for example, Kate in Magic found that she had a bag, which contained things that she touched in the real world and came to Magic with. This was a sort of eidetic memory. At any time she could go to Magic and read a book that she touched.

The maze started in the middle of a four-way intersection. Secretly, I had determined that each direction was a branch of Magic. Magic was divided by social types rather than physical. I had a four-way branching corridor, and there were four signs, but rather than labeling the four directions, each sign was exactly in-between two directions. The signs were:



MT: This is a neat take on magic.

A) "This way to higher understanding."
B) "This way to ultimate dominion."
C) "This way to your heart's desire."
D) "This way to fulfillment."

So the AB corridor represented political or social power, the BC corridor represented material wealth, the CD corridor represented love, and the DA corridor represented knowledge. In principle, along each branch of the maze, they had opportunities to get more objects, but also to lose or trade objects they had.

In practice, all four of the kids were most interested in the

knowledge direction at first. In short, they were curious rather than greedy. In that direction, there was a dead end with a hole in the wall, which gave a periodic grinding sound. There were no clues here -- whoever comes seeking must put their hand inside the hole to go further. The wall turns once a hand is placed in, letting them into the room beyond where further puzzles awaited.

One of the most interesting twists of the game, though, was when Noriko went down the AB path. That had a clear explanation of what it was. The hall ended in a stone door, beside which was an alcove where an iron rod stood on a pedestal. A sign beside it explained:

> *This is the First Rod of Power, which conveys to the wielder authority in arguments. With it, when you pressure them, others are influenced to concede to your arguments not only on the surface, but also in their true belief. It will also open this door. However, once grasped it may never be put down.*
>
> *As it is magical, it will not encumber you physically outside of this place. However, its power will be felt and can never be turned off or discarded.*

The symbolism for political power should be fairly clear. But I had not arranged at all how or even if this would work into the plot. It was just an inherent power. During the campaign, Noriko was at first a constant voice of caution to the others. At some point, when the others had split up, she impulsively went into Magic and picked up the rod. She would use it on others to protect the group. However, from that point on, she would never speak when the others discussed what they wanted to do, since she didn't want to use the power on her friends.

THE GAME IN PLAY

How the game should be run goes beyond the scope of this essay. There are enormous variations of techniques – including systems

used, means of negotiation, and so forth. However, there are a few principles that I should mention specific to these preparations. The GM should work with the players to provide starting motivations or motivating events for the PCs. However, the intent is that the preparation should be flexible enough to work even if those initial goals change. You are not preparing for particular plotlines, but rather developing a collection of elements, which can be used for a variety of plots.

JH: This can strongly support collaborative play.

So you prepare the scope and factions, and create the PCs. Within this context, it should be relatively easy for either the GM or the players to generate plots. Given sufficient information about the scope, the players can make proactive plans to do things within the scope. Alternately, the GM can consider the factions at a higher level to come up with what would reasonably happen, which may spur the PCs to activity. At the beginning, the game may be started by pre-planned plots by the GM. Over time, however, the players should become more confident of actions within the scope and create their own plotlines.

PT: The burden here is on each player to create his or her own character's story.

AR: If your philosophy is to have players drive action, make sure they know this and are not sitting back, waiting for the GM to give them something to do.

There will still be times where the action is slow. These are often useful and good. The players should drive the action, which means that at times they will choose to sit back. Particularly for a tabletop game, it is useful to be able to fast-forward in time. So, between sessions or during a session, the group can agree to skip days, weeks, or months ahead in time. The GM should project future developments which come as consequence of prior play. So, for example, after the PCs inform one faction of a secret, you might skip to a time when the consequences of that occur. The abstraction of factions is important here to simplify such projections. Simply consider what would happen with each group.

As GM, one should be wary of adding results or encounters based on dramatic logic. It is possible to inject interest by having well-timed or unexpectedly exciting outcomes. However, over time this creates a visible pattern of having exciting parts as a result

of GM resolution, rather than as a result of player choices. In such cases, players often come look at events and encounters as things that the GM feels are supposed to happen -- and indeed they are correct. Within story soup play, the patterns should arise from PC choices, and not from GM-planned coincidences.

CONCLUSION

Roleplaying has often been characterized as a clash, with story and drama on one hand, and game and simulation on the other. Story is thought of as requiring pre-planning of the plot, themes, or issues. However, within roleplaying games, the dramatic identification is very different than in traditional stories. I would argue that story-based games all too often naïvely imitate other narrative forms, and ignore what is different about roleplaying. They frequently dismiss methods that do not imitate static media fiction.

The heart of roleplaying is in the identification between player and character. This is fundamentally different from static media such as movies, where every audience member has the same relation to what is portrayed.

I have outlined one broad model for exploiting that difference. This is a prescription, but it is not intended to be exclusive. There are and should be other models and methods that are unique to roleplaying.

JH: A more accurate imitation of static media might not be entirely bad. Even when reading a book, readers actively construct their understanding of what is going on in the text. All the more so here!

BR: They also often ignore the way that static media is created, focusing on what it's like to read a book rather than to write one, for example.

VG: Surely, roleplaying games can (and do) exist in which the identification between player and character is very weak or even strongly discouraged.

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MRIDANGAM

SHREYAS SAMPAT

Editor's Note: *Last February, I was sitting in a Hong Kong coffee shop with Rich Forest, discussing long-term goals for Push. My plan was for the second volume to consist of short games written as if roleplaying had developed from something besides wargaming. We joked that Shreyas' entry would describe rival groups competing in performances for the hand of the Sky-Dwelling Maiden. And then Shreyas showed us up by actually writing this game.* – JW

In the city of Srikakulam, it was once the tradition that the Rikha and Sibarat theatre dynasties would engage in a competition for the firstborn princess's hand in marriage. Before the Sky-Dwelling King, the finest storyteller of each line would oppose the other in an improvisational performance that began with the seed of a myth.

The loser of the contest would be given as tribute to the barbarians of the eastern plains, who demanded the stories of Srikakulam in exchange for their fatted yaks and protection from the silver-faced pirates of the distant north.

In time, this competition became a meaningless charade; the gestural language of dance-drama fell into disuse, and soon the laity forgot its meaning. Rather than using the gestures to communicate messages to their audience, the dancers began to use them as a secret sign language, to communicate amongst themselves while they performed.

BR: For those who do not speak Shreyas, I will attempt a running translation. Of course, it is a running translation into Brand and may not be helpful to those of you who actually speak English.

PT: This 'what if' scenario was related to me by Ken Hite:

"Basically, Fritz Leiber and Harry Fischer co-created Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser in what we today would recognize as play-by-mail 'simming,' with each writer taking on one character (Leiber was Fafhrd) and recounting their actions and adventures.

"The 'what-if' comes when Leiber and Fischer bring their buddy Fletcher Pratt into the game, in his spare time from inventing naval wargames. He says something like 'What you really need here is a conflict resolution engine, and maybe some characteristics' and hey-presto, 'hero gaming' (or something like that) is invented in 1939."

BR: If you win, you become a princess; if you lose, you get to be a bride of the royal eastern mounted yak men.

In 1956, Rachana Melwani created the first roleplaying game, when she realised that she and the other dancers were telling stories that only they could fully understand. She pared down the gestural language, reducing it to a simple system that could easily be understood by the laity. This is her creation.

Additions made to Rachana's text, such as this one, are italicised. Rachana refers to all dancers as female; in her time, they were. The editors do not view this as restrictive, so in their notes they refer to dancers as masculine.

JH: The gesture-based resolution system allows dancers to have one language for game, and one for meta-game.

AR: Hand signal dictionary starts on page 57!

BR: Ardhachandra = thought bubble.

PT: By combining a prohibition on out-of-character dialogue with a silent resolution system, Shreyas has designed my pulp-era radio drama game for me. Thanks!

BR: Musti = a fist. You punch your open hand and hold it. Shut up. This game is fun.

VG: These rules control the narration, instead of the fiction, an area that has been under-explored (but see *Polaris* for rules that control narration and fiction at the same time.)

PLAYING MRIDANGAM

Each of the dancers in *Mridangam* takes on a heroic persona. A dancer may only speak in her character's voice. To indicate that she is speaking the character's thoughts rather than his words, a dancer may hold the palm of Ardhachandra toward her face and look into it, as though examining herself in a mirror. If a dancer wants her character to do something besides speak, this must be stated as something the character thinks or says. For instance, if she wanted her character to climb into a chariot, she may say, "Now I must climb into my chariot."

If a dancer simply must state something which has nothing to do with his character – that he must visit the WC, for instance – then he must hold out Ardhachandra and slap Musti into its palm, and maintain this gesture for the full duration of his statement. This addition is an attempt to account for the busy lives of modern dancers, without damaging the aesthetic of the game.

At the beginning of a story, the dancer with the longest hair, or the eldest dancer if there is some dispute on the first condition, should speak first. It's her responsibility to introduce her character briefly and set the scene. Depending on the troupe's custom, this may be drawn from a plan the dancers have made before play, or it may be something she has developed independently.

Any dancer may draw others into a scene via dialogue, or a dancer may enter a scene through her narration of a threat or blessing. She may also use this narration to cut to another scene, saying something like, "Mahishasura's axe falls into the sea! Meanwhile, at Dvaraka..."

AR: Be aware that a lack of GM and non-character-speak means that NPCs may be difficult to control and interact with.

THREATS & REPLIES

No statement simply occurs; it must be stated in the form of intention and result. If a character states some intention, and some dancer objects, then the objector must display one of the threatening gestures. Now the original dancer must stop speaking, and indicate her response with one of the replying gestures. If no one displays a threatening gesture, the dancer may describe the result as she chooses.

BR: Note that the middle finger is not one of the recognised gestures in this game. However, when first learning the rules, you may find the temptation to use it nearly overwhelming. Resist it. *This is the Law of No Lingam.*

Threats have several uses. A threat may be used to dissuade a dancer from a particular course of action, or to delay her from obtaining what she wants; more subtly, a less severe threat is useful for an objector to introduce elements she wants to be present in the story, or to alter who is present during a scene. It's reasonable to expect that a dancer is more likely to accept a threat without question, if it is less severe.

MT: On behalf of all our readers, I would like to display the mudra of Lingam to Brand.

> For instance, Nirali has vowed to slay her maternal uncle, the corrupted king Bhimajata, with the terrible matted hair. She cries, "I must take my horse to Jatagiri and slay Bhimajata!"
>
> Kavita remembers that Bhimajata owes her a favor, so she tries to delay Nirali, indicating this with Kartarimukha: some social responsibility will delay Nirali. Nirali replies with Paasha, accepting this complication, and Kavita mimes writing a letter, saying, "Dear Nirali, our grandfather is very ill. You must come home to Chhayanagri at once; I am afraid he does not have much time left. Your dear sister, Kavita."

It may be expedient to discuss with the other actors what sort of statements can be made that will not usually be threatened, and

then in the future these statements may be made as flat declarations, requiring no indication of intent. This will make it easier to describe environments and so on.

Likewise, make it clear what statements are simply disallowed unconditionally. There are topics some dancers may be disinterested in or uncomfortable with, and the system does not provide a safety net for these; the responsibility for the dancers' comfort and entertainment lies in the hands of the troupe.

AR: This game text is rather short and contains all you need to know about the system. But there is a physical and interactive quality much more esoteric than rolling dice. Consider gathering your co-dancers and playing practice scenes to function as live play examples before starting your main story. This can minimize the form detracting from the function later on.

BR: Blessings are bribes or solicitations. Threats are blocks or objections.

BLESSINGS & REPLIES

At any point, one dancer may display one of the gestures of blessing, turning her head to indicate the recipient, who must then respond with one of the replying gestures. Notice that the responses have different meanings for blessings than they do threats.

Blessings have less coercive power than threats do, but they are still useful to capture narration and introduce new elements. They are also a social tool; by offering blessings to another dancer, you remind her that you are members of a troupe, not opponents, and this will incline her to accept your threats more willingly as well. Since accepting a blessing carries with it the tangible award of a valuable flower, they are quite enticing, and this may help in initially gaining the other dancers' trust, if your blessings please them.

> For instance, Narali has encountered Kapittha, a physical impediment delaying progress. She laments, "A river? Oh, if only there were some way for me to circumvent this dangerous current!" Kavita indicates Alapadma, which Narali accepts with Paasha. Kavita says, "I am here, Narali, in my boat! Perhaps I can take you across?"

BR: Social, emotional, and material threats are all created equal. Permanent emotional scarring is more of a threat than a temporary kick in the shin. *This is the Law of I-Punch-Her-in-the-Spirit.*

THE THREATENING GESTURES

The threats in each series are listed in order of increasing severity. Pathaka is equally as severe as Sarpasirsha and Musti, and so on.

Social Threats

Pathaka, the Flag

Hold all the fingers together and press the thumb against them. Attaining this goal causes you to suffer disgrace or embarrassment.

Ardhachandra, the Half Moon

Extend the thumb away from the fingers of Pathaka. One of your enemies gains some social advantage, such as a new alliance or a favour owed him.

Ardhapathaka, the Tattered Flag

Fold the third and fourth fingers of Pathaka. Your quest for this goal will be slowed by some social impediment that affects all the characters in the story, such as a yajna, a festival, or a courtly dispute far too interesting and unstable to leave unattended.

Kartarimukha, the Scissors' Blades

Make an angle between the first and second fingers of Ardhapathaka. You encounter some unexpected social duty you must discharge before resuming your quest.

Tripathaka, the War Banner

Fold the third finger of Pathaka. While you are seeking this goal, you lose access to some social advantage you have, as your quest offends an ally or transgresses social boundaries.

Mayura, the Peacock

Join the third finger and thumb, and make angles between the remaining fingers. This goal will cost you your social station or the love of someone you care for, never to be regained.

Emotional Threats

Sarpasirsha, the Cobra's Hood

Curve the whole hand of Pathaka slightly. Attaining this goal will be unsatisfying to you, or cause you to come to some upset.

Hamsapaksha, the Wing of the Swan

Extend the fourth finger of Sarpashirsha. One of your enemies experiences some great, reaffirming joy.

Mrgasirsha, the Deer

Bend the first, second, and third fingers of Ardhachandra. Your quest for this goal will be slowed by some continuous emotional tension that affects all the characters in the story, such as news of invaders from the north, a tyrannical lord who over-taxes his subjects, or some familial schism that cannot easily be reconciled.

Simhamukha, the Lion's Mouth

Join the second and third fingers to the thumb and extend the first and fourth. You have some surprising emotional reaction to an event; you must work through this before returning to your original activities.

Hamsasya, the Swan's Face

Join the first finger of Pathaka to the thumb. While you are seeking this goal, you suffer from some emotional remoteness or malaise, or you will be surrounded with darkness and fear.

Bhramara, the Bee

Bend the first finger, join the second to the thumb, and hold the third and fourth at an angle. The train of events that lead you to this goal cause you some irreparable damage; you are banned from some source of happiness, or afflicted with some infirmity.

Material Threats

Musti, the Fist

Make a fist. Your quest to this goal causes you some injury or destruction of property.

Bana, the Arrow

Stretch the fourth finger of Musti. One of your enemies gains a physical boon, such as a mantra of strength, a chariot, or a sacred weapon, or he recovers from some injury.

Kapittha, the Rose-Apple

Wrap the first finger around the thumb of Musti. Your quest toward this goal will be slowed by some physical impediment that affects all the characters in the game, such as nightfall, a torrential monsoon, a plague of locusts, or

the characters' being trapped in a besieged fortress.

Katakamukha, the Betel Leaf Offering

Join the thumb and first two fingers. Extend the third and fourth at angles. Alternatively, simply extend the third and fourth fingers of Kapittha at angles. You encounter some physical obstacle that you must overcome to continue your journey; perhaps you have become poisoned or the bridges to Lanka have been washed out by rains.

Suchi, the Sun

Extend the first finger of Musti. While you are seeking this goal, you lose some physical advantage, for the remainder of the story. Perhaps your quest requires an oath of poverty and you may not claim your warrior inheritance, or one of the gods has withdrawn your privilege to use his spiritual weapon.

Chandrakala, the Finger of the Moon

This goal will cost you the life of one of your retainers, or destroy your profession, or something else that permanently diminishes your material wealth.

MT: *Mridangam* makes me think really hard about the usage of non-verbal cueing as a tool for protecting the in-character stream of action during play: sliding the dice across the table to signify my raise in *Dogs* or the cross-armed "obfuscate alert" in *Vampire* larps. Cues and other wordless mechanics can preserve one's emotional connection to the game rather than forcing players to toggle between thinking and feeling.

THE BLESSING GESTURES

Alapadma, the Blooming Lotus

Extend all the fingers at angles. The course of events leads you to a new ally or new position of authority.

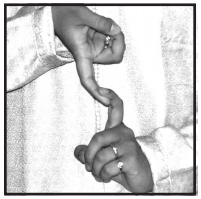
Chatura, the Four-Fingered Hand

Touch the base of Pathaka's third finger with the thumb, and hold the fourth finger at an angle. You encounter something fulfilling, or some tension in your heart is eased.

Mukula, the Waterlily Bud

Join all the fingers at the tips. You come upon some material boon – a spiritual weapon, a business opportunity, an inheritance, etc.

THE REPLYING GESTURES



Paasha, the Chain

Join the tips of Suchi's fingers. You accept the objector's threat or blessing, and the objector describes the result. If it was a blessing, both sides gain a flower. If you are responding to a threat made with Pushpaputa, gain a flower.

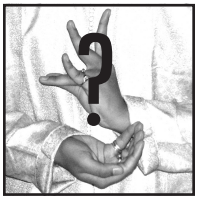
Karkata, the Tangled Branches

Interlace the fingers. You accepts the objector's offer, and you describe the result yourself. If it was a threat, you discard a flower, unless the threat was made with Pushpaputa. If it was a blessing, you give a flower to the objector.

PT: And here, in the replies, we see what makes the game work.

BR: Flowers are coming up. They are tokens used to progress in your story. To move forward to new phases you need a certain number of flowers, so controlling how many flowers you have is important. *This is the Law of Do Not Bogart the Flowers.*

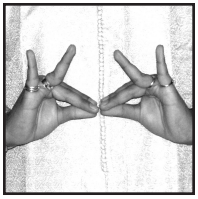
Pushpaputa, the Offering of Flowers



You offer a different threat, displaying Sarpasirsha with one hand, wrist upward and palm extended, as though cupping a handful of water, and the proffered threat with the other. Pushpaputa cannot be used to reply to a blessing. You ask the objector to trust that this new threat will be better, and discard a flower. Now you are the objector, and the original objector may respond with this reply, or either of the two above. If she, in turn, uses Pushpaputa, she must also discard a flower. If she replies with Paasha, she gains a flower. If she replies with Karkata, she need not discard a flower as normally required.

The dancer pictured is offering Mayura.

Shakata, the Demons



Display two Katakamukhas, palms facing one another. Alternatively, cross two Katakamukhas at the wrist. You ignore the objector's suggestion. If the suggestion was a threat, you describe the result without including any threats, and discard all your flowers. If it was a blessing, you simply continue speaking, without discarding any flowers.

BR: *These are the Laws of the Two-Fisted Dancer.* I, being one-fisted, have a hard enough time doing the gestures with one hand. Hopefully you have more grace than I.

MULTIPLICITIES

When two or more threats are offered, any objector may defer to the others by withdrawing her gesture, or stating that she will not defer by repeating her threat with the other hand. Once only one threat remains, or all objectors refuse to defer, then the original

dancer may respond. Her reply addresses all the threats offered; she may not offer Pushpaputa unless she has sufficient pairs of hands with which to counteroffer each threat. When performing Paasha, the dancer turns towards the objector to whom she gives the responsibility of describing the ensuing events.

Refusing to defer in this way has its cost. In addition to whatever happens to the original dancer, each objector's hero suffers from the threats offered by any other objectors. She is responsible for describing these fates herself, as though she had accepted them with Karkata.

To signal her approval of the threat offered by another dancer, a dancer may echo a gesture briefly.

When offered multiple simultaneous blessings, a dancer chooses one to respond to; the rest are rejected as though she showed Shakata.

FLOWERS & THE TEMPLE

AR: See page 68!

In the dance tradition, a story is to have the same shape as a temple. In *Mridangam*, this is shown to be true, since the game is performed at a temple site. *Mridangam* need not be performed for an actual audience. The chambers of the temple represent different points in the story. All the dancers begin outside the temple, which may have more than one entrance. While a dancer is speaking, she may move to a door, indicating her intent to pass through it at the conclusion of her statement.

Alternatively, dancers without access to a real temple may use a temple map, with markers indicating their positions in it.

Generally, entering a new chamber signals a new stage in the dancer's performance and, likewise, in her character's story. Each chamber has two marks flanking its door. The first mark is a flower; the number of seeds in its centre indicates how many flowers a dancer must discard to enter the chamber. There is no cost to

exit a chamber. The second mark indicates a threat. This threat simultaneously serves several purposes.

First, upon entering a chamber, the door issues the threat it depicts against the dancer. She must use the replying gestures to answer the threat; when she chooses not to narrate a threat, she indicates another dancer to do so. The threshold will only accept Pushpaputa if the counteroffer is more severe than the original threat. The dancer may not use Shakata. A chamber that indicates no threat is not dangerous to enter.

BR: You cannot destroy someone's life until they are far enough along in the story to merit such a kick in the teeth. *This is the Law of Not Blowing Up the Earth in the First Act.*

Secondly, the depicted threat is also the most severe threat that may be performed by a dancer in that chamber. Any other threat in that chamber must be less severe; if the chamber indicates Pathaka, then that is the only threat that may be performed there, because no other threats are less severe; even the threats of equal severity, but of different category (Sarpasirsha and Musti, in this case) are disallowed. A chamber that indicates no threat permits all threats. When using Pushpaputa against a threshold, the threats a dancer may counteroffer are not restricted.

Finally, the mark forms a limit on the threats that can be issued against dancers in that chamber. To threaten a dancer with something more severe than the room permits, the objector must give that dancer as many flowers as it cost to enter the chamber.

Notice that this is only possible in the first place if the objector is in some more permissive location. Also notice that the restriction on threat use can help new dancers become comfortable with the gestures, as they can learn them a few at a time, rather than all at once.

Some of the temple chambers have a red diva or shiva lingam in the centre. At the beginning of the game, the actors should define a crucial turn of events that occurs when the first dancer enters each of these chambers. This is often the climax of a long exploration of a large temple. When all the lingams' and divas' events have been triggered and all the dancers have stepped out of the temple, the

story comes to a close.

Rachana's temple maps are usually constructed with one shiva lingam in the innermost sanctum, and divas in various other rooms; the divas represent less climactic events than the lingam does.

PT: I thought getting my group to play *Polaris* was a hard sell, but this could be even tougher. It don't doubt it will be worth it, though.

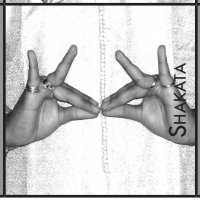
AUTHOR'S NOTE

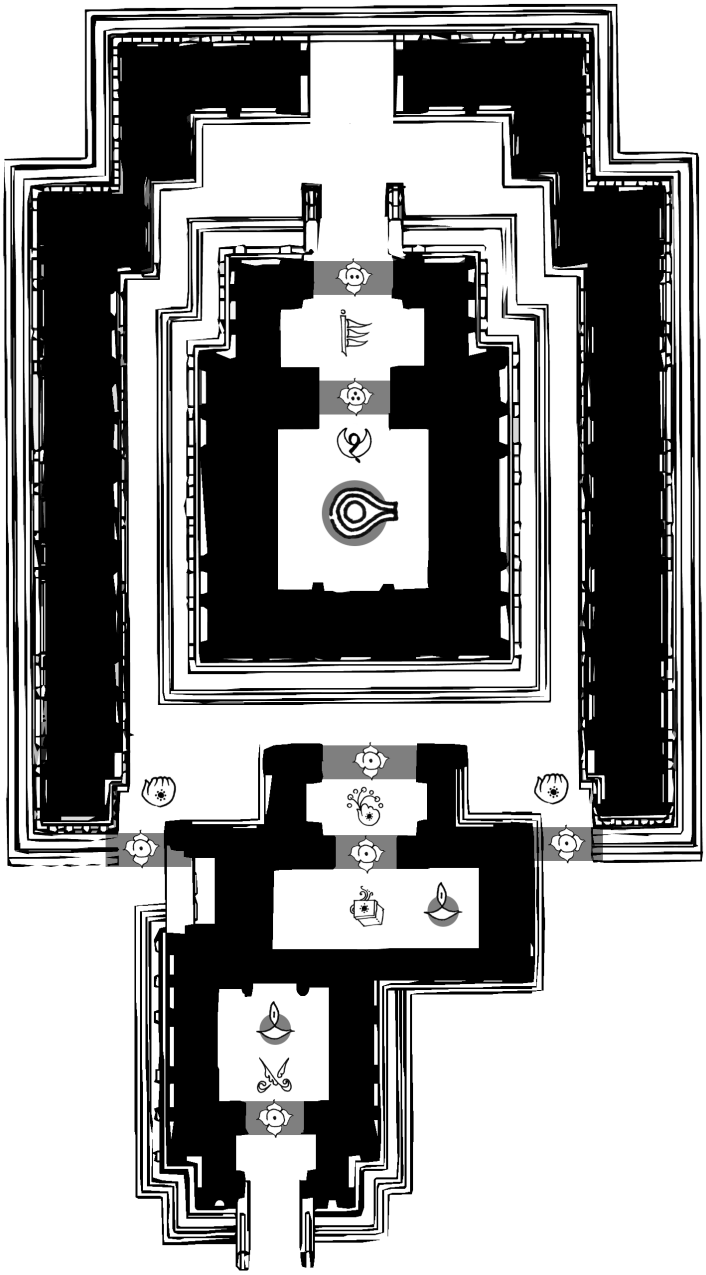
The introduction above is fictional; there are no Rikha or Sibarat peoples, though there is a city Srikakulam; it is the home of the Kuchipudi dance tradition. The Rachana Melwani mentioned in the text is not a real person.

BR: *Commentator's Note* – The author is fictional. Shreyas is actually an AI from the future trying to take over the present by sending viral memes back in time to infect our brains.

Significance	Social	Emotional	Material
Threat: Minor Loss or Difficulty	Pathaka	Sarpasirsha	Musti
Threat: Enemy Gains Advantage	Ardhachandra	Hamsapaksha	Bana
Threat: Slowed By Impediment (affects all)	Ardhapathaka	Mrgasirsha	Kapittha
Threat: Pressing, Unexpected Situation	Kartarimukha	Simhamukha	Katakamukha
Threat: Lose An Advantage	Tripathaka	Hamsasya	Suchi
Threat: Only At Great Cost	Mayura	Bhramara	Chandrakala

Significance	Social	Emotional	Material
Blessing	Alapadma	Chatura	Mukula

Significance	Reply	to Threat	to Blessing
Acceptance: Objector Describes	Paasha	if responding to Pushpaputa, gain a flower	Both Sides Gain a Flower
Acceptance: Dancer Describes	Karkata	Discard a Flower, unless Pushpapua	Give a Flower to Objector
Counteroffer: Another Threat	Pushpaputa	Discard a Flower	
Rejection: Continue Unaffected	 Shakata	Discard ALL Flowers	



7

AGAINST THE GEEK, CHOICE

EERO TUOVINEN

English is now the language of choice for the Western world. We are all Us, connected by a common tongue. Furthermore, roleplaying is an American art, with its past and present firmly embedded in the English language. What are the consequences of this historical situation? When language carries culture, what does it mean to accept the American parley?

Have you ever considered culture to be a choice? Each person's headspace is formed out of countless cultures and subcultures that connect in unique ways, while those cultures themselves are merely the summation of those very same headspaces. We exemplify our culture, in our opinions and actions, every day. In roleplaying, there are also multiple cultures, all intermingling in our heads. There's MET players and dungeon hackers, otherkin and wargamers. Each has various connections to youth culture, commercial ventures, other games, our games, their games, no-games. All these subcultures belong under the umbrella term of "roleplaying."

BR: With my own kind permission, I'm going to include excepts of "Marxism for the Gaming Dummy," from my *M&M Superlink* adventure, *Church & State*.

JH: Well, depending on who you ask...

Roleplaying differs between countries. Although the form was invented in the United States, it has spread all over the world. The early '80s was a time of internationalization for roleplaying, when it spread among industrialized nations. Since then, local roleplaying cultures have evolved their own unique features. Roleplaying will likely be the last art form to develop in this way, since the Internet era will trascend national borders.

Everything you know about roleplaying depends on how the basic idea connects to aspects of your own culture: the popularity of fantasy, say, or the penchant for active-passive disjunction in player roles. This is an article about those connections and how they can change. To be more exact, I will tell you about how American roleplaying affects a country across the ocean and about the choices we face as a consequence. You see, with the Internet and globalizing markets, European roleplaying cultures are confronted by the need to adapt to how roleplaying is understood in America. These are choices, like I mentioned at the beginning: the roleplaying cultures of entire nations will adapt through individual choices, until a global roleplaying culture is created through compromise.

BR: *Structuration* – a theory that the repeated acts of individuals are what create social strucure, and that social structure then reinforces the acts of individuals. This stance also says individuals can make a change simply by not repeating the actions that shape society. So if you want to change the world, you start by changeing yourself and your relation to the culture around you, which will inevitably lead to social change. Giddens, who isn't really a Marxist, is the big name behind this little theory.

GEEK, YOUR NAME IS AMERICA

There is one overarching problem with the globalization of roleplaying and that is the way American roleplaying is embedded in the geek culture. This is specific to how roleplaying developed, historically: it sprung forth from wargaming culture, developing slowly, under huge assumptions.

American roleplaying's geek heritage affects everything: regular campaigns, the need to master complex rules, a willingness to dwell on spurious detail, fetishes over genre cliches, high "kewl" factor, Campbellian notions of content, abnormal social expectations, gaining esteem through proficiency, suspicion of art culture, and tribal affectations, to name several aspects. These are all features of American roleplaying, but what's more important, they are features that do not manifest in independent roleplaying cultures.

AR: "Kewl" is sometimes called "crunch" or "twink."

AR: While there are strong traits in geek/role playing culture, they are not always true. Perhaps 25 years ago these held true, but roleplaying and geek culture have grown independently and diversified, especially over rules and art.

There's no doubt that there are positive strengths in this heredity, but likewise it's clear that there's much that could be elsewise. After all, the nerd is hardly viewed as a paramount of perfection in the larger society. While the American roots have given our art a strong background for handling complex mechanics, the taboos

against artistic motivations also tend to drag it down.

The geek heritage cannot be ignored. Ever since roleplaying originated in America and there has been a constant stream of games originating there, it's no wonder that a great majority of the world already shares, to some degree, the geek culture features which dominate American roleplaying. Global communication and market convergence will make certain of this development.

BR: *Cultural Determination* – There is no inherant human nature. Rather, man creates the world he lives in and that world in turn shapes the nature of man. So if we create a society based on greed, then people will be greedy. But if we can break the vicious cycle and make a culture based on cooperation, then people will become cooperative.

However, it would be unconscionable for us to simply accept this situation. Culture is a choice, remember? There is value in the plurality of ideas that the first decades of roleplaying created. Without conscious decisions from roleplaying's participants, there's little doubt that active currents of the majority culture will dominate the future of the hobby. "Active currents of the majority culture"? That's d20, man, and all the other deliberately commercial forces in the roleplaying field.

JH: This may be why so much roleplaying (American and otherwise) is stepping outside the commercial, such as into fandom-based online play. As it's difficult to know how many such players there are, it's a good question whether these online, non-commercial players actually constitute something of a "silent majority" in roleplaying.

You see, the reason for the kind of expansion we've seen in recent American enroachment is simply that not all cultures act the same. The most ruthless culture always has the greatest impact, and there's not many that surpass the "mainstream" of American roleplaying. While American roleplaying culture is much more than just the "mainstream," the greatest influence in foreign countries has naturally belonged to those forces which are actively expansionist. Thus, the big corporations are the façade that America shows the rest of the world. Names are easy to name; they are in my local gaming store. The kings of the hill seem to currently be Wizards of the Coast, White Wolf, and Steve Jackson Games if my retailer is to be believed.

VG: Dutch retailers concur.

And it's not really that this cultural expansion only affects Europe and the rest of the world. Clearly, the same forces are at work in the United States, where the roleplaying field has, for a long time, been defined primarily by the major publishers, and only secondarily by any other interest. Players are taught to aggressively champion the commercially developed geek model of roleplaying,

AR: What Eero calls "players" here I would probably call "interested consumers." Not all who own books play the games, and not all who play like it.

JH: Which is doubly sad because of roleplaying's immense potential to let everyone be an author.

JH: Part of the problem may be a certain hostility to the notion that there's anything in roleplaying that can or should be taught. But if we don't teach roleplaying, and teach it thoughtfully, who will?

BR: *Marx* – The grandfather of Marxist theory (bet you couldn't guess), Marx argued that our culture is driven by greed and the desire for material wealth and that the dominant society makes an ideology to legitimate their domination. In other words, everyone wants lots of stuff, just for themselves, and the rich make up rules that let them have the most stuff.

wherein, sadly, many of the best aspects of American roleplaying are downplayed: geek virtues of innovation and intelligence, for example, are de-emphasized in favor of consumerism and strong audience stance.

So, the point of this argument is pretty simple: when we learn and teach the essence of roleplaying, it's our own choice what that roleplaying will look like. It doesn't matter whether you're American trying to find players for *Dread* or an European trying to find a non-d20 game in the shop. What you confront is the American "commercial geek," and he wants you to play like he does.

In truth, this discussion is already an old one, and it applies to all things, not just roleplaying. There are always expansionist cultures in all areas of life - and they can be good, for they bring change and dynamism to the world. However, when the expansion is accepted without thought it becomes assimilation and people no longer make their own decisions. There's no reason why the changes in roleplaying culture cannot be likened to currents of language, say, or the evolution of folklore – it's all about the cultures we choose to espouse and adapt for our use.

SCENE II, ENTER FINLAND

That was all pretty abstract, and perhaps not that relevant to your average gamer. Let's dive amongst some particulars. Particularly, let us take a look at how roleplaying fares in Finland (it's a country in northern Europe, doofus). Finns are particularly noteworthy for being a cornerstone in the Nordic movement of roleplaying, one of the more public alternative roleplaying subcultures. Finland is a good example of how an independent roleplaying culture develops and disappears. Let's start with some history.

Roleplaying came to Finland at the start of the '80s through individual hobbyists who got their games straight from America. At first the new hobby spread mainly through word-of-mouth, slowly gaining adherents. The trailblazing phase ended in the latter

part of the decade with media coverage in computer magazines, the opening of specialized retail outlets, and multiple game translations published in quick succession. The years at the end of that decade and start of the '90s were the first golden age of Finnish roleplaying, when an estimated five to ten thousand players came into the hobby in a few short years.

AR: In relative terms, 5000 Finns would be like 300,000+ people in the US turning gamer. Or about the entire population of Miami.

Games translated during this period include *Dungeons & Dragons* (1988), *Runequest* (1988), *Traveller* 2300 (1988), a collection of *Fighting Fantasy* books (1987-88), *Twilight 2000* (1989), *Battletech* (1991), *Cyberpunk 2020* (1991), *Call of Cthulhu* (1992), *Stormbringer* (1992), *Paranoia* (1993) – in a word, almost all the central roleplaying games of the decade. The most successful were perhaps *Runequest* and *Cyberpunk*, which became the baselines of their respective genres. Those two and a dozen lesser successes garnered a multitude of translated source books as well.

PT: It's interesting to watch this phenomena go the other way in board gaming, with the "German invasion" of the US, starting with *Settlers of Catan* in 1995 and continuing to this day.

Translated games played an important role in developing the hobby, as they became an investment for the massive public library system of Finland, which in it's turn supplied these games to practically the entire Finnish population of potential players. Consequently the number of roleplayers has continued to rise slowly but steadily, even after the golden years.

AR: The Dewey Decimal system has role playing games (next to the *Prima* strategy guides) under 793.93, a subsection of *Indoor Games and Amusements*.

During this early period, Finland sported, at best, five simultaneous roleplaying fanzines and a number of gaming stores. Games were also sold in bookstores all over the country. Roleplaying resided in a curious zone of commonality coupled with obscurity, as every small town had a couple play groups, yet mainstream media hardly noticed the hobby at all. This was not to last.

In the middle of the '90s came a sort of a backlash. The core of Finnish roleplayers had matured through elementary school and gained proficiency in languages and the Internet. The roleplaying scene quickly internationalized. The effect was compounded by the evolution that American roleplaying was going through at the time. While slow and imperceptible from inside the culture, the

changes were near revolutionary for Finns whose roleplaying was largely based on the classic games of the '80s. The time-jump from *Runequest* to *Vampire: the Masquerade* was instant, and has left a clear bias in the "second generation" of Finnish roleplayers, who currently form the core of the scene.

The internationalization process was a boon for the small gaming business, as consumption jumped through the roof via imported games, the CCG craze and all that. However, this also meant death for the fanzines and game translation. Neither was needed when the barriers suddenly disappeared, and the hobby could instantly respond to American developments. Even libraries started to invest in English language products, although most simply stopped stocking roleplaying books when Finnish publication trailed off.

The middle of the '90s was also the time when live action roleplaying (larp) became fashionable in Finland. The mode of play came to the country at the end of the '80s, and for the first couple of years it followed a path similar to the development of roleplaying a decade earlier, but the divergence was unavoidable. To this day there is no satisfactory avenue for large scale commercial publishers to profit from live action play. Thus there never was a commensurate push for conformance with the American game industry.

The second golden age of Finnish roleplaying happened in just a couple of years, when, between 1995-1997, the number of larpers jumped from a couple hundred to a couple thousand. At that point larping became media material, which roleplaying had never been. A couple television documentaries later, the number of (at least) occasional larpers has risen to rival the number of tabletop roleplayers, which had slowly increased to maybe twenty thousand strong.

MT: This phenomenon wasn't limited to Finland or America. In Canada (Peterborough) many of our local larp groups brought folks from an amatuer theatre tradition into gaming. In my case, I was larping on stage for a live audience before it ever occured to me that I could larp just for fun. This was long before coming back to tabletop.

The revolutionary effect of the live action awakening to the Finnish roleplaying scene is best understood by noting that by and large, *these were new people*. A majority of these new roleplayers

had never rolled a ten-sided die, but instead came from a background in amateur theatre, literature, history or simply enjoyed hanging out. There was and is a clearly perceivable culture gap between live action and tabletop roleplaying, much greater than their purely practical differences.

Live action roleplaying is an extremely young and vibrant form in Finland, still seeking it's place in the cultural field. In recent years it's become a part of the Nordic movement of roleplaying and has also built connections to state-support systems and the mainstream art scene by skirting the line between theatre and roleplaying.

Meanwhile, the live action renaissance has largely passed tabletop by. The last decade has been a time of slow maturing and stagnation of Finnish tabletop roleplaying. The currents of influence flow mainly from the American mainstream, which is in a simmering cultural conflict with Finnish "old school", based on the late '80s ethos of roleplaying. The latter is nowadays represented by original Finnish games and legacy play of old favorites. The main example of the "old school" culture is the most significant Finnish roleplaying game, Ville Vuorela's *Praedor* (2000), which is nigh indifferentiable from *Runequest* itself as far as subject matter and approach go.

JH: Tabletop games have smaller, more consistent groups than larps, which can gain and shed players rapidly. This may mean that larpers learn from other larpers during play, allowing ideas to spread quickly through the community, while tabletop players come upon most new ideas through books or conversations. In Finland, these books are mostly American commercial products, which may account for some of this. Distributing new types of books, as with *My Life With Master*, could expose tabletop players to ideas they might not otherwise encounter.

A WORLD WITHOUT GYGAX

Consider: although the American influence has left its mark on the Finnish scene, although the majority of the games in the store are the same, the differences are momentous as well. The "old school" plays stuff like *Silver Age Sentinels* or *GURPS*, correctly recognising them as essentially similar to games of the '80s. Meanwhile the new crowd, of which half are also larpers, plays GM-controlled freeform. Nobody plays exclusively *D&D*, and two thirds of roleplayers consider it silly. Larps employ rapidly developing minimalistic systems you haven't even heard of, while *Mind's Eye Theatre* is practically unplayed.

BR: *Culture Industry* – This theory says that mass media (movies, radio, television) are all part of the velvet glove which makes the masses (that's us) stay happy, sappy, and pliable while bilking us of all our money. This leads to pseudo-individualism, when people start defining themselves by the mass market. So if you think you've cooler for liking *D&D* and not *GURPS*, you're really just a pseudo-individual. Adorno is the name to toss when talking this talk.

For the majority of Finnish roleplayers, roleplaying is not the cultural extension of nerd stuff. Some estimations place 20-25% of tabletop roleplayers as women, while they are a majority among larpers. It's normal in Finland to play roleplaying games without watching *Xena: the Warrior Princess*, and the average roleplayer actually dares to ostracize or pity the most visceral geeks with their massive piles of gaming stuff and stupid monty haul stories. Usually only the GM owns the rulebook for the game at hand and most roleplayers only own a couple of games. Roleplayers are normal in a weird way, like they were just ballet enthusiasts or something.

On the other hand, what Finnish roleplaying lacks in cultural connections to general geekery, it supplements in other ways: Finnish libraries stock roleplaying books (they are a form of art, after all), game designers are considered authors, the media and the state both recognize roleplaying as equal to other arts, and there are rapidly developing connections between theater and roleplaying communities. It's almost a truism in Finnish discussion that roleplaying is art, not just a meaningless pastime.

The public roleplaying culture in Finland is centered mainly on the national level larpers' association and a cluster of roleplaying clubs in the university towns, as well as the Ropecon association, which gathers roleplayers from all over the country in a perennial convention. These are all voluntary organisations. The commercial structures are simple, with no distributors or non-indie publishers. Lately, Finnish roleplaying games have been published by regular publishing houses through the regular channels.

In general, although there is a clear correlation between, say, fantasy fans and roleplayers, it's not as pervasively axiomatic as it is in the United States. For example, the most recent Finnish roleplaying publication was *Roolipelimanifesti* (Roleplaying Manifesto), a book about Nordic roleplaying by the established larpsmith Juhana Pettersson, which advocates a style of gaming that is concerned with normal, everyday people.

Meanwhile, the signs are startlingly clear: English is the lingua franca of Finnish roleplaying, and although you can play without knowing it, you certainly won't be able to read the rulebook unless you're playing a GM's homebrew or *Praedor*. Consequently the more nerdish roleplayers, who generally play heavier systems, have widely developed jargons that can ruin a game's eloquence. This is especially common among avid *D&D* players, who will use strange contortions of English terminology while playing, making the game nearly incomprehensible to outsiders. For example, if Finnish was English and English was French, it might sound like this: "Did you roll *le preservatif*? I'd have put *globe incendie* on *les squelettes*!"

PT: One of the most powerful works on language and culture I've read is Brian Friel's *Translations*, a play about the first British Ordnance Survey of Ireland. The parallels with this situation are worth considering.

MT: I think I heard this exact conversation at an RPG store in Montreal.

Because of the increasing focus on English, game retailers have worked to improve their relationships with American and British distributors, while the stores themselves have begun following the American model, serving a wide range of geek paraphelia from t-shirts to comics. The inventories of the stores are practically identical to what you'd expect in US. The only roleplaying games that are sold outside these hobby stores are native Finnish games.

BR: *Hegemony* – the process of control and education that makes people see the current power structure as not only right, but as a matter of common sense. So people not only think that Bill Gates deserves to have 32 billion dollars, but that there is no other possible way the world could work if people couldn't get that rich. Gramsci is the name to drop to give this word some theoretical respectability.

And it's working. While only marginally known in it's previous editions, the latest version of *D&D* has been very successful in gaining adherents. The same holds true for other big American games, each in rough proportion to it's popularity in the United States. The current situation is actually very dynamic and difficult to analyse. Players conditioned in the commercial forms of roleplaying tend to be invisible in the larger cultural field, as they rarely participate in the general roleplaying scene, unlike more traditional players.

It's actually pretty easy to see the dangers of letting American companies teach their brand of roleplaying culture to Finnish roleplayers. Apart from the inherent problems like compulsive consumerism and spreading of geek values, uncontrolled change could signal the early demise of the numerous roleplaying societies of Finland, as well as the hobby conventions, as both are replaced by American style, industry-organized analogues. The form of

JH: Is commercial American roleplaying really so dangerous that it isn't possible to have two (or more!) cultures of roleplaying that coexist? Are the people playing *Dungeons and Dragons* really the same ones who would be larping *Anna Karenina*?

roleplaying endorsed by American companies is not conducive to the kind of community effort that's typical in Finland. In the long run, the results of America-centered roleplaying culture are clear – roleplaying will marginalize itself, as its language and interests conform to the strange model of hack'n slash that is the sublime kernel of the commercial interests behind mainstream roleplaying.

BATTLELINES AGAINST THE MONOCULTURE

Sounds intriguing, no? Ever wanted to meet a gamer who thought that *Anna Karenina* would make a great game? Ever met a gamer who thought so, took twenty friends and made a larp out of it? There are real differences between different roleplaying cultures, and if there are no good answers to the clash of cultures, at least the decisions should be made consciously, not because some company wants to sell you its product.

That's something we can learn from the example of Finland: human choices will mold culture, but the cultures will also mold humans. The kind of roleplaying that Finns will enjoy in ten years time is ultimately dependent on what current roleplayers pass on to their culture. Will they still play *Runequest* in ten years? Or will they run after the latest splatbook just like Americans? Or will tabletop play lose its significance, since larp culture is so vital and impervious to commercialism?

Now, personally, I'm for multiculturalism as far as cultural politics go. Obviously this makes me a tiny bit suspicious of game companies, which, after all, are after our money. That doesn't really engender high art, you know? And it's pretty well established that there's good business in acculturating people. The guy who tells you what to think can quite easily slip you his own products while he's at it – definitely a motivation for pushing your own brand of gaming, regardless of what you're replacing.

But what's one to do about it? It would be rather simplistic to start ostracising American stuff just because it's American. That kind

JH: Gamers like this actually do exist in the United States; they just aren't part of the visible gaming culture or the roleplaying mainstream.

AR: Here I am wishing Finland had the clout of numbers to reverse-culturize America with their acceptance of freeform and willingness to dump bad reputation and keep good story-play!

MT: Ah, but will Americans still do what they do in 10 years? Perhaps they'll be making freeform larps about *Anna Karenina*.

BR: *Iron Fist & Velvet Glove* – The "iron fist" refers to obvious methods of control: the police, military, and the courts. The "velvet glove" refers to more subtler methods of control: media, education, and the church. Althusser is the name most associated with these terms.

of closemindedness will backfire for a culture pretty quickly. It'll be no time at all before its proponents are more like outmoded idiots while the rest of the world passes them by. No, better to learn and develop the strengths of Finnish roleplaying culture, rather than try to stop people from getting their d20 fix. If there's something true in there, it will prevail.

That was the spirit when we decided to publish the first game translation in ten years. After the middle of the '90s there have been no new games translated into Finnish, as players have grown accustomed to using the newest English rulebooks. Finland is a small country, and thus one can expect only half a dozen native roleplaying games per decade to make it all the way to publication. Thus the number of current Finnish roleplaying games verges on zero overall.

What's worse, the tabletop scene is on it's way to petrification, thanks to the American mainstream roleplaying material pushed into game stores. The extremely conservative marketplace coupled with Finnish consumption habits has the unfortunate effect of narrowing the horizons for Finnish hobbyists. When you buy only one game every year or two and it's usually some lukewarm rerun of ideas first introduced in 1987, you'll quickly decide that's all there is to it. As a result, the majority of Finnish tabletop roleplayers has little experience with contemporary developments in game design and tends to express themselves through the freeform aspects of play. "System doesn't matter" is the standard notion. This is an unfortunate situation for a country that's currently doing some of the world's most sophisticated larps, and it's clearly starting to affect the live action side of things, too.

AR: As an Internet-centric American (culture-wise) it's sometimes hard to grasp that there are many gamers who lack my exposure to indie efforts.

This being the situation, it was clear that the best way to advocate Finnish roleplaying culture was to introduce it to another unique subculture. We'd translate an American indie roleplaying game to increase Finnish language options while drawing attention to the real innovative stuff. In recent years, the American indie scene has

published several high-caliber games in quick succession, and more importantly, demonstrated the latest methods of play. The things these games do are completely unknown to many in Finland and are just what's needed to shake people from complacency.

An indie game translation serves two purposes: 1) it broadens the horizons that the commercial mainstream has curtailed and 2) it supports play in the Finnish language. These dual effects, when combined, strongly support Finnish roleplaying culture.

After careful consideration, we chose Paul Czege's *My Life with Master* to be the representative game of the American indie scene. It's an unyieldingly artistic and experimental piece of work, so far out-there that the dullest proponent of yet another skill-based adventure game would have to take notice. It's also solidly non-"kewl," with no powers to enable super-heroic player characters, which would assure it some constituency in Finland, as well as a serious assessment.

Our hope was to create discussion of tabletop play techniques and interest in developing the intellectual tools and structures for local work in the tabletop form. Currently, the Finnish scene, while doing many things well, creates truly horrible tabletop games. Finland's premier tabletop designer, Ville Vuorela, has publicly affirmed that he doesn't really feel that system matters at all in roleplaying design, and that it's much more important to get the setting right. To date, attempts to apply the Nordic style of larping to tabletop play have failed horribly, as *Myrskyn aika*, the recent game by Mike Pohjola, demonstrates. Perhaps butting heads with the gems of indie design would help?

FACING THE CROWD

To tell the truth, the translation itself is not that big a deal. This might be a surprise for the monolingual reader, but the fact is that American straight prose is an easy language to translate, with

little to agonize over if you know what you're doing. The rough draft took two days of work, editing a week. In principle there's nothing stopping the translation of games, which takes relatively little effort.

MT: Learning that the effort to translate is not as much as some might think, Western indie designers should perk up their ears. Bilingual Finns (or folks from other countries) and indie designers have an opportunity to build lucrative partnerships across the pond.

On the other hand, it was clear we were just in time with our translation work. When dice pool mechanics became really popular in the early '90s, Finland was still firmly playing *Basic Role-Playing*. As game translation ceased right then, the concept 'dice pool' has *no word* in Finnish! This exemplifies the need to continue to cherish our language – abandoned, it will quickly become moss-grown. Our translation of *My Life with Master* has perhaps rejunevated the language somewhat. In the future, the word we chose, "noppakuppi," might do some good for others as well.

Much more important, however, was the response Finland had to the translation. In July 2004, the game was unveiled for the public during Ropecon, the biggest nordic roleplaying convention. The overall reaction was an enthusiastic "yes," with numerous people investing in the game just because it was in Finnish. What's better, the game has now found good homes all over Finland. In years to come it will germinate and carry fruit, perhaps inspiring better play for all. Already it's a conversation piece that can hardly be ignored, since the game flouts so many of the assumptions all our native traditions bring to the gaming table. And libraries like it too, with many already ordering copies. Oh, the name of the game? It is *Kätyrin osa*, which would re-translate as "The Minion's Due."

You see, culture is not something you just live in. It's not even an either-or choice of acceptance or denial. It's a journey, and the steps you take define the world you live in. For us, *Kätyrin osa* has been a step of such a journey. Perhaps it will, for its part, support a living, innovative roleplaying community in Finland in the years to come.

QUOTES ABOUT *KÄTYRIN OSA*

AR: Wow, doesn't *someone* sound like a pro Hollywood film director talking about an art house piece…

Speaking of indie games, Arkkivi focuses on translating pretty strange stuff that certainly has a lot of innovation and artistic value, but in my opinion does not really appeal to the masses. *Kätyrin osa*, whatever that is in English, is a perfect example. Some people apparently get a better kick out of it than they would from cocaine, but that is a very narrow customer segment. If indies are to become a major factor, they will have to take on wide-spectrum games and genres, feeding the masses with what the masses want, while retaining enough innovation and edge to separate themselves from the old games and take the hobby forward, even if in small steps.

– Ville Vuorela, the premiere Finnish game designer

MT: It would be interesting to set up a project in which the same game and situation were played in many different countries and cultures, with as much diversity in playgroups as possible, and the sessions recorded and posted on a single site for comparison. Take one *Dogs in the Vineyard* town, cooperatively created by a panel of GMs, and play it in Provo, New York, Toronto, Paris, Helsinki, Aukland, and São Paulo, just to see what things we could learn from each other.

MLwM was a chillingly wonderful play experience. As a long-time cyberpunk my characters have never been any good-deed heroes, but rather ruthlessly selfish bastards. The case of Catalina was different: I got to acquaint myself with how one can do unscrupulous deeds – not for her own benefit, but because of her environment, because of desperation and darkness. Cold shivers ran through my back multiple times during the game, when I really felt my character's desperation: I don't *want* to kill the poor guy, but still I have no choice. No doubt about it, I want to play this game again!

– Noora Huhtanen, the artist of *Kätyrin osa*

Personally I'm not a big fan of Narrativist roleplaying, but I still intend to GM *My Life with Master*, because it's chock full of interesting techniques and design claims I want to see in action. The goal of the game seems not to lie in actual character immersion, but rather in creating interesting scenes. But because those scenes become interesting through the emotional life of the characters, I could imagine that the game could strongly support immersion as well.

– Mike Pohjola, Finnish RPG theorist

Consider: Nothing need deter one from opting for a Master of Goodness, a kind of Anti-Master... Companions, keen knights instead of Minions... Villagers in all their ignorant (Reason) Humanity striving against the moral superiority of the Master... Loyalty instead of Weariness, Conscience instead of Self-Loathing... And when the time comes, what is the force to cast down the Master? What would dispose of King Arthur or Jesus Christ? Instead of Love, Envy growing among His Companions and bursting against (Fear) Love... Question: Is the moral of this story even that different?

– Eero Tuovinen, "Master in Us All" from *Kätyrin osa*

The bond between Master and Minion, it's important to us because it's the same thing we struggle with in our own lives. Offering love always holds the risk of pain. We can't know whether the target of our love is a Connection or a Master before it's too late, and we're ourselves are held in thrall... *My Life with Master* offers a fundamentally optimistic answer, claiming that true love exists and that love can set us free & allow us to shed our past mistakes. It speaks of redemption.

– Eero Tuovinen, "Master in Us All" from *Kätyrin osa*

The task of justifying his loyalty to the Master falls squarely on the player of the Minion... The Minion should always be designed with a ready explanation for why he is in this unnatural situation. The player should not expect the GM to proffer excuses for him to stay in the game... This principle holds for all matters of rulescraft, really: the rules will tell the players what happens, but it's up to them to decide the how and the why of it. Should your minion's Self-Loathing go up, it's up to you to decide the psychological reasons for and depictions of it. The GM is not there to hold your hand and ensure that the story withstands your every decision. You all share responsibility for the game in equal measure.

– Eero Tuovinen, additional play advice from *Kätyrin osa*

AR: Similarly, Eero, do you plan to translate some Finnish larps for curious Americans? :)

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WAITING FOR THE QUEEN/ TEA AT MIDNIGHT

JONATHAN WALTON
with JOSHUA KASHINSKY

A short game for two players, reverse engineered from early text-based computer games of the "get lamp" variety.

I knew all along that I didn't want *PUSH* to resemble most roleplaying publications and this meant going with a very non-traditional cover image. No big battle scenes. No cheesecake. No iconic figures striking dramatic poses. No monsters. What about just a girl and a boy, meeting in some awkward fashion?

When I commissioned the cover from Clio, I was writing an article on "arthouse wuxia," an emerging sub-genre of Chinese filmmaking (*Ashes of Time, Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon, Hero, House of Flying Daggers, The Promise*) and co-writing a game for emulating those movies with Shreyas. At that same time, Shreyas, Josh, Thomas Robertson, and I were collaborating on a "young adult wuxia novel" and I was hoping to use excerpts of our work-in-progress as examples in the game. But the game never materialized.

Nevertheless, the cover depicts a meeting between two of the novel's main characters, Ruhi Nankachema and Gai Zheng, on the steps of Zu Mountain. Gai Zheng has just lost a bucket.

Even thought it seems pretty appropriate for this journal's cover to have nothing at all to do with the contents, considering all the other wacky problems and delays we've had getting it published,

VG: These computer games are generally called "interactive fiction," and there is actually a rather small but very active community still writing them. Many interesting parallels between this community and the indie RPG scene can be drawn, and both communities could benefit from more interaction.

BR: I like cheesecake. I like RPGs. But the two don't always go together like chocolate and peanut butter. Unless your game is specifically about sex (few are, which is too bad), you have to ask why you are using sex to sell it. Second, most RPG cheesecake is horribly, appallingly bad cheesecake. I love me some Betty Page, but what graces the cover of most RPG books is embarassing not because it is sexual, but because it's adolescent, poorly executed, and puerile.

part of me just wasn't willing to let it go. So I wrote a neat little two-player game based on the scene from the cover.

OVERVIEW

This is a short game for two players which builds on two earlier designs, *Heavenly Kingdoms* ("the game of drunken Taiping exegesis!") and *Kazekami Kyoko Kills Kublai Khan*.

Each player takes on the role of a single character, either Ruhi Nankachema (warrior maiden from the Country of Daughters) or Gai Zheng (determined son of a former Shaolin monk). The game takes place in two phases:

AR: Short can be a relative term. Give your play partner time to feel comfortable reading three pages of text aloud.

During the first phase, each player selects one of the following short passages to read aloud. These passages are small stories that will help introduce the characters. After both passages are read aloud, the players should decide who will play Chema and who will play Gai Zheng. The choice of who-plays-which-character shouldn't necessarily reflect who-read-which-passage.

PT: I'm on a big constraint kick right now (as you might have guessed from my previous comments), so this idea really excites me.

During the second phase, the players will verbally enact a single scene, telling the story of Gai Zheng and Chema's first meeting and trying to resolve a problematic situation that the characters confront. They do this by taking turns selecting actions from a limited list of potential options, which, in turn, describe what their character does. Performing certain actions allows the characters, in turn, to perform new types of actions. One of these "unlockable" actions (The End) brings the game to a close.

STORY TIME

The passages for the first phase are printed below. Notice how Chema's story is about her birth and how she was named while Gai Zheng's story is about the last practice session with his father. Both these stories define their respective characters, but they are very different kinds of stories that reflect some of the differences

between the characters.

If the game is being played over email or using a chat client, players can either exchange audio recordings of these stories or simply read both passages in advance.

RUHI NANKACHEMA'S STORY

It was eight days into the Lesser Cold when my Ama began screaming. Labor had begun at dawn and darkness was falling quickly. She pushed with her whole heart, but I remained unwilling to enter this world. Infatuated with the glories of the Time Before – the stars dancing in eternal twilight, the pillars of lama flame that refined souls towards their buddha nature, the glittering palaces of the Celestial Sisterhood – I clung to the hinges of the Reincarnation Gate. I was too pure, too perfect, and would not descend into a place of misery and death.

Once I was finally coaxed from the star land, my own screams quickly drowned out my Ama. The birthing women were amazed. What lungs I had! What vigor! The eight lamas in attendance blessed me, gazing deeply into my cloudy eyes, and knowing me to be a child of destiny, perhaps even a bodhisattva, a saving angel, one come to liberate all souls-in-tyranny with my transcendent compassion. The lamas didn't dare to name me. This was too important for rural clerics. And so I was called the Blessed Child for the first month of my life, until my Ama regained her strength and could journey to the capitol.

The Queen Mother's city is quite distant from my small mountain village. My Ama, strong as a she-yak though she was, desired for me to be named quickly, child of destiny or not. Then she could return home in time to harvest the winter squash.

MT: I'm beginning to suspect that Jonathan and Shreyas conspired to create games with yaks. In fact, "tea at midnight" is code for "The *bos grunniens* revolution is at hand!" Beware their cunning wiles.

Along the road to the capitol lies Rambulatta, the holiest lamary outside of the Western Paradise. My Ama stopped there and offered me up to the Abbott. Diligently, she recited the circumstances

of my birth, watched them examine me for signs of a developed buddha nature, and asked if, indeed, I could only be named by a grand lama of the temple mount. The Abbott looked upon my Ama with his sparkling, childlike eyes, saw the weariness that remained from a difficult birth, and took compassion on her.

"Though your path does indeed lead to the Queen's city," he said, "it will not keep you there for long. Once you pass under the Eastern Gate, turn and question the next person to enter. They will name the child and you will be free to return to your squash."

Thanking the lamas for their indulgence, my Ama proceeded upon her journey. She had not been to the Queen's city since she was a young woman, so my Ama found it a bit tragic to stand just inside of the Eastern Gate, watching patiently for the next traveler, unable to catch a glimpse of the shining alabaster temple of the Queen Mother and the Sisterhood-in-Life. But she thought of her current lovers, Yisso and Ache, trying to clumsily manage the harvest without her. She sighed. No, the sooner she returned home, the better.

Just then, my Ama heard the sound of a dozen yak-horn trumpets, signaling the arrival of some important personage. Gazing into the distance, she recognized the fluttering banner of the Queen herself! Her Majesty rode at the head of a victorious hunting party, returning to her city with a train of suitors, lovers, and former lovers riding at her coattails. My Ama was suddenly ashamed. How could she ask the Queen herself to name a peasant child, even one born under such fortunate circumstances?

However, when Her Majesty rode through the Eastern Gate and saw my Ama holding me, looking up with wonder and apprehension, the Queen Mother reigned in her horse, dismounted, and gently took me from my Ama's arms.

"And what is the name of the newest daughter to grace those-in-life with her presence?" the Queen asked.

My Ama quickly found speech, explaining the circumstances that brought her to the capitol.

The Queen nodded sagely, but shook her head. “I am not the one who will name this child,” she said.

My Ama was crestfallen. If not the Queen, who else? Perhaps I would remain nameless forever.

“There is one who rides before me,” Her Majesty continued. “She scouts ahead, along my path, dispersing ghosts and demons with her radiant fury. She is our strongest vanguard and most best protector: the mountain goddess Seggenamu, White Princess of the South. Though you did not see her, it was the goddess who rode first through the Eastern Gate, exhausted from protecting me on the hunt and happy to return to her temple. Come with me. We will visit her and beseech Seggenamu to name my youngest warrior.”

And so the Queen Mother and my Ama rode side by side to the temple of the White Princess. Offering up fresh snow, a bowl of icy mountain water, and wine made from last year’s winter squash, they thanked the goddess for protecting the Queen and all the Sisterhood-in-Life. Then, the Queen lifted me up above the twirling streams of incense and asked the goddess to name me, predicting that I would become the greatest warrior in ten-thousand years, bringing honor to the Sisterhood and, through them, our patron Seggenamu.

The next morning, my Ama rose from her luxurious guest room in the temple mount, attended morning prayers with the Queen, and prepared to depart for home. She was accompanied to the Eastern Gate by one of the high priests of the White Princess. The priests are Seggenamu’s mortal lovers, who keep her happy between epic trysts with the gods of neighboring regions. The White Princess whispers divine secrets to them in the darkest hours of the night, amid bouts of lovemaking, and this is the source of their great wisdom.

"The young warrior's name," the priest said, "is Nankachema, 'Snowflakes in Martial Array.' Seggenamu blesses her with a strong heart and a brave destiny. I only regret that I will not live to see the glories she will bring forth into this unworthy world."

Once I grew old enough to understand, my Ama instructed me that, upon entering any gate, I should always turn and introduce myself to the next person to pass through, for you never know when you may be followed by a goddess.

GAI ZHENG'S STORY (original text by Joshua Kashinsky)

"Gai Zheng!"

The water pot on my left elbow shifted slightly, I had to lean to keep it from falling.

"Gai Zheng, where have you run off to?"

My right leg began trembling. It took all of my concentration not to drop any of the pots. I began, achingly slow, to lower them onto the railing I was perched on. If mama found me...

"Gai Zheng! How many times have I told you never to practice those forbidden teachings?"

Mama's voice, right behind me, was a surprise. I tumbled off the railing and onto the floor. The sound of breaking ceramics was followed closely by the splash of water. I sat in an expanding pool of water, clutching my bruised knee as my mother stood glaring at me.

"Look at the mess you've made! You know that your baba has given all that up. It's dangerous to practice these training methods. If anyone ever found out who your father was, we could all be killed! They could burn the inn! What do you think the women in town would say then?"

Mama kept going for a few minutes, and I accepted it silently. Father said that a true master is like a pond that does not ripple

when a stone is dropped into it. I'm not quite sure what he meant, because whenever I dropped something into our well there were always ripples. I just tried very hard not to let my face show the shame I was feeling. Mama stopped with a sigh, and told me to sweep up the broken bits of pot and mop up the water.

I was busy the rest of the day, tending to my chores. Mama's family had owned the inn for generations and, after father married her, he worked as the cook. At mealtimes it was my job to serve everyone their food and to clean up afterwards. Other times I swept the rooms and hallways. The work was hard but simple. The inn was right next to the bridge over the river, so we got a lot of different people coming through. Sometimes in the evening, I would listen to the stories of travelers. It sounded like great fun: going from place to place, having other people clean up your room and cook your food. The evenings helped compensate for the boring days, but I really lived for nighttime.

That night, as with many nights, father could not sleep. He would leave his room and stand in the courtyard, bathed in moonlight. Often, he would then move into the standard exercises of what mother called the "forbidden teachings." The lunges and kicks would take him around the yard. Soon he would advance to more complex movements, blurry circles of motion. He was no longer a tired innkeeper, he was a warrior monk of Shaolin! Even across the darkened courtyard, I could see the joy on his face.

Mama claimed his sleeplessness was because he was so full of energy. She didn't know how he spent those midnight hours. I knew that every time he slept he would dream, and every dream was filled with fire. The destruction of the temple had scarred him deeply, and he spoke of that time with a bitterness and despair I knew mama had never seen. Night was our time together, when he would speak to me of Shaolin and things that have now perished. He taught me those forbidden secrets which mama feared would destroy us, and he did so gladly.

"Gai Zheng," he said, "You are my future. Your name means 'to return to the proper way.' This is your purpose. I have taught you these techniques so you can continue my legacy. What your mother says is true, to a point. If you continue to flaunt your skills, you will be identified and the hunters will come."

I was surprised. Usually father supported me, though he never did so in front of mama. "But you told me that constant practice is the only way I will become as great as you."

"I did tell you that, Gai Zheng, but you must only practice here, with me. Now defend yourself!"

Father picked a weed from the ground, and lunged at me. I danced back, laughing. We often played these games. I plucked some stones from the ground, and began throwing them at father. He moved his weed slightly, and the stones flew off as if parried by a sword. I picked up the broom I had used earlier, and began a slow advance. We fenced thus for what seemed like hours, father deftly evading my attacks and occasionally launching some of his own when I had overextended myself. Whenever I ran out of breath, he would stop and lecture me on Shaolin principles.

Tonight seemed different somehow. Usually father would teach one or two things, and then we would practice them. Not all were as fun as combat. Most of the time the exercises involved me holding very still for a long time or breathing in a certain way. Tonight, father was harsh, bruising me whenever I made a mistake. It was almost as if he was testing me for something. Finally he held up his hand.

"Gai Zheng, you are very dear to me. Soon, everything will change. Your mother and I will no longer be here for you. I wish I could teach you more, but there is no more time. Listen, you must follow their commands as if I had given them to you."

"Whose commands, father? I don't understand."

"I know you don't, but you will in a few days. Now, get some rest. Tomorrow you will have to get up early and go into town to replace the pots you broke."

I sighed deeply, but returned to my room, leaving father alone in the courtyard. When I looked back, he was staring at the sky, his hands trembling. That was the last time we practiced together.

THE SITUATION

To summarize the situation in a single sentence: Chema is waiting for the Queen; Gai Zheng is making tea at midnight.

JH: A double situation for two characters? Story soup!

Chema has recently arrived at Zu Shan, the temple where she will train to be a true warrior maiden. After crossing the stream at the base of the mount, Chema arrives at a large gate. It stands imposingly in front of the stone steps which lead up to the temple compound. Obeying her mother's teachings, she sits near the gate and waits for the next person to arrive, so she can greet them and proceed up to the temple. However, no one arrives. The sun sets, it begins to grow very cold, but Chema, being stubborn and proud, continues to wait.

Gai Zheng arrived at Zu Shan a few days before, having left his family and been placed in the care of Master Black Wind. On the evening of Chema's arrival, the Master wakes Gai Zheng around midnight and orders him to fetch two buckets of water from the stream and make tea. Black Wind ignores all protests about the lateness of the hour and pushes two empty buckets into his student's hands. Tired and miffed, Gai Zheng grabs a carrying pole and trudges down the steps, through the blistering cold outside, towards the stream.

As Gai Zheng nears the bottom, he slips and loses one of the buckets, which rolls down the hill. The lost bucket ends up resting against the feet of Chema, who is still waiting beside the gate.

This is where our story begins.

DURING YOUR TURN

In the second phase of the game, the players take turns making statements which describe what their character does. Making a statement is the player's primary task during their turn, but they can also do two other things: make comments and ask questions.

Comments are just remarks about what's going on in the game that don't necessarily influence either player's view of "what happens." Players might say "Wow!" or "That's so cool!" for instance, or "Ouch, that was cold! Gai Zheng's gonna go cry now..." The player doesn't mean that Gai Zheng actually will go cry, but is making a comment about the way the game is going.

PT: Pull, pull, pull.

VG: In interactive fiction, the command used most is undoubtedly "examine...", which generally doesn't affect the state of the game, but gives more information to the player. It is cool how this game mimicks that behaviour, having the other player take on the role of the computer program.

Players can also ask each other questions about details of character, setting, or other aspects of play. For example, Gai Zheng's player might ask, "Where is Chema standing now?" or "Is the snow still falling hard, or has it let up a bit?" Chema's player might ask, "How many steps are there, leading up to the temple?" Questions are a way of getting more information about the situation at hand when you are preparing to make statements. However, note that this information is contributed by the other player when you ask them for it. Players can freely answer any question they are asked by their partner. Neither player is allowed to say "there are 167 steps from the gate to the temple." That is not a statement (at least not a valid one), a comment, or a question.

Asking questions can be helpful for making sure you're not doing or saying something that doesn't make sense. For instance, if you've forgotten if one of the characters is holding a bucket, you might want to ask, "Is Chema still carrying one of the buckets?"

EXPRESSIONS

There are two types of statements: expressions and actions. Actions alter the kinds of choices that can be made later. In taking an action, a character is actionally *doing* something. Expressions

are the character saying or indicating something (Chema points at the moon; Gai Zheng shouts, "Who's there?"), but do not affect the kinds of actions that can be taken. Expressions are still critical to the game, however, since they provide color and context. They may not be actions, but they make character choices make sense.

JH: In fact, one could read this game as an exploration of the notion that it is not the events of a story but rather their emotional content that matters.

Expressions are likely to constitute the majority of play and can include any combination of speech, facial expressions, body language, positioning (Cheme stands a few feet from Gai Zhang), or even simple activities (Gai Zheng makes a snowball; Chema splashes Gai Zheng, "Take that!"), but they con only affect real actions to the extent that they prepare for them or encourage another player to have their character perform an action.

From the examples above, you can see that expressions generally take the form:

Chema/Gai Zheng + expression(s) + , "dialogue" (if any)

ACTIONS

Action statements are made by selecting one of the actions from your character's table (see the action charts on pages 98-99) and making the statement in the following form:

Chema/Gai Zheng + adverb + selected action

For example, if you are playing Chema and selected the action *picks up a bucket*. You might make the statement: "Chema reluctantly picks up a bucket." Once you get comfortable with the basic form, players should feel free to not be quite so exact, placing the adverb after the action or adding short descriptive phrases to the statement.

Note that the action chart is arranged in several different ways. The most basic way is location. There are some actions that can only be performed in certain places. These actions are written in

boxes labeled with specific locations. The actions in the "OPEN" box can be performed no matter what location a character is in. A character can change locations by choosing an appropriate action from their current location box. For instance, if Gai Zheng is on the stairs, making a statement such as "Gai Zheng carefully climbs down to the gate" would move him to the gate. Expressions and actions are generally only visible and/or audible from the location in which they originate, unless the description ("Chema yells at Gai Zheng..."; "Gai Zheng strains to hear...") would seem to change things. Snowballs, sadly, cannot be thrown into adjacent locations.

PT:
>get ye flask
Ye cannot get ye flask.

Secondly, some actions are arranged in little trees, such that the indented actions below are only possible after completing the action above. For example, you can't select the action "sets down the bucket" before your character has performed the action "picks up a bucket."

Furthermore, some actions are preceded by a plus sign (+). These are actions that the other character must perform in the same location as your character before you can select the actions listed below. You can't "accept the bucket" unless a nearby character has handed a bucket to you. Many of Chema's basic movement actions are marked with a plus (+), due to her not knowing her way around the temple and not being able to climb up to the temple before someone else comes through the gate. Once she has witnessed Gai Zheng perform the required (+) actions, Chema can move freely to the new location whenever and as many times as she wants.

Finally, there are some things on Gai Zheng's action chart that are in brackets [like this]. These are conditions he must meet before proceeding to the indented actions below. Notice that these create a series of things that Gai Zheng has to do before he can get to bed. In order to climb into bed he has to have already rung the tea bell; in order to ring the tea bell, he has to have boiled two buckets of water; in order to get the water, he has to have filled both buckets at the stream.

In the "OPEN" box, both players have access to the stopping and continuing actions. These enable situations in which one character expresses something or takes an action, but then an expression or action by the other character causes them to stop or reconsider what they are doing. Having stopped a previous statement, they can then continue it, if they so choose. For example, consider:

– Gai Zheng slowly picks up a bucket.
– *Chema objects, "Hey, that's MY bucket!"*
– Surprised, Gai Zheng stops picking up the bucket.
– *Chema grins and holds out her hand, "If you don't mind..."*
– Rolling his eyes, Gai Zheng continues picking up the bucket.
– *Chema smiles in triumph.*
– Gai Zheng exasperatedly hands the bucket to Chema.
– *Chema accepts the bucket, kissing Gai Zheng on the cheek.*
– Gai Zheng, red-faced and baffled, flees to the stream.

That also illustrates the power of expressions, which may not be immediately obvious. In the exchange above, Gai Zheng makes only action statements and Chema makes 3 expression statements leading to a single action. Chema has a much shorter list of potential actions than Gai Zheng and many of hers are contingent on Gai Zheng doing certain things, but this does not necessarily mean that Gai Zheng has an advatage. However, it is certainly possible and even desirable for Chema to be *more talk* (and gestures and body language and teasing) while Gai Zheng is *more action*, wanting to finish this idiotic chore so he can return to his warm bed.

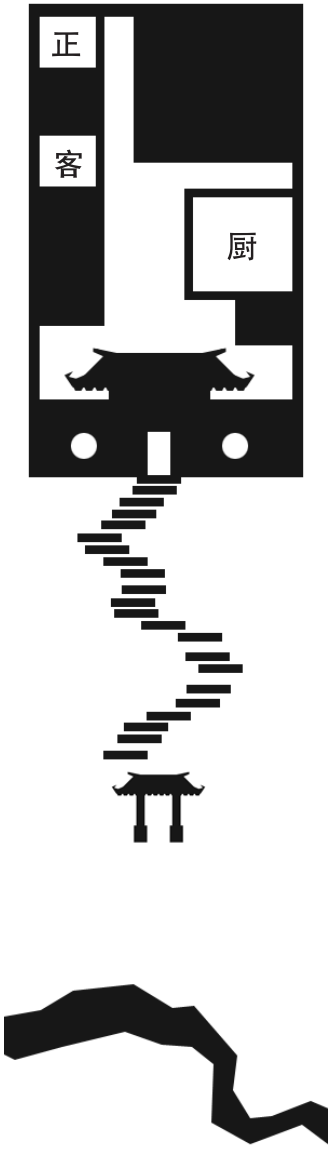
Stopping a movement statement ("Gai Zheng suddenly stops trudging to the stream") means that the character is still at their original location. Continuing a stopped movement statement ("Gai Zheng reluctantly continues trudging to the stream") changes that character's location.

The following pages provide a chart and map that each player can easily reference, giving all the actions available to each character:

MT: Constraint is a fascinating thing. By not only constraining the number of players but also strictly limiting and scripting the pool of actions that a character can take, Jonathan, in *Yak 2: The Reckoning*, has shoved the emphasis of the game on expression. I'd be interested to see how folks who mainly socket into games in a thinking (as opposed to a feeling) mode would do in this situation.

AR: I think I'm going to redraw the map to fit my apartment, distill the rule phrasings a bit, and play this live action with my play-partner.

MT: Hell yeah! Rework the map and customize the expressions/actions into a seduction scene – instant romance (or at least sex)! You could call it *Come See My Etchings/Casbah Until Breakfast*.



	GAI ZHENG...

OPEN	- EXPRESSES
	- picks up a bucket
	  - sets down a bucket
	  - hands the bucket to Chema
	+ *hands a bucket to Gai Zheng*
	  - accepts the bucket
	- stops (previous statement)
	- continues (stopped statement)

stream	- trudges back to the **gate** [has a bucket] - fills a bucket with water

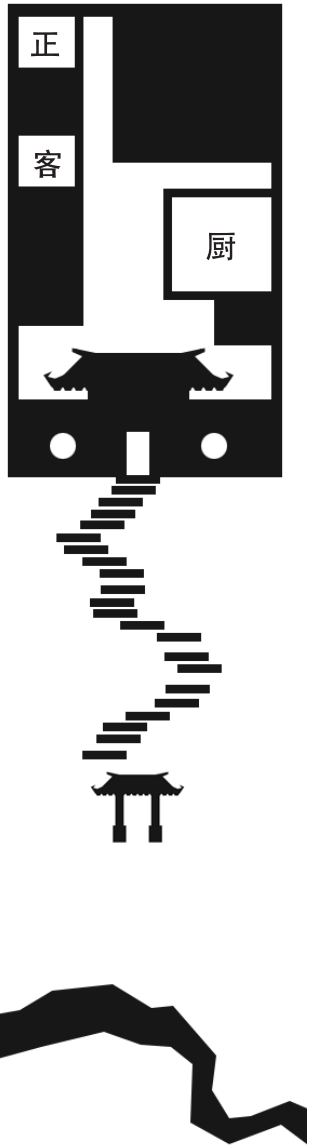
gate	[arrives from the steps]
	  - climbs back up the **steps**
	  - exits through the gate
	  - trudges to the **stream**
	[arrives from the stream]
	  - trudges to the **stream**
	  - enters through the gate
	  - begins climbing the **steps**

steps	- climbs down to the **gate** - reaches the **temple**
temple compound	- heads down the **steps** - walks to the **kitchen** - walks to the **guest room** - walks to **his room**

kitchen 厨	[has two buckets of water]
	  - puts the water on to boil
	  - fixes a tea tray for the Master
	  - rings the tea bell
	- walks back to the **compound**

guest 客	- walks back to the **compound**

his room 正	- walks back to the **compound**
	[has rung the tea bell]
	  - climbs into bed
	  - falls asleep
	  - THE END



	CHEMA...

OPEN	- EXPRESSES
	- picks up a bucket
	  - sets down the bucket
	  - hands the bucket to Gai Zheng
	+ *hands a bucket to Chema*
	  - accepts the bucket
	- stops (previous statement)
	- continues (stopped statement)

stream	- trudges back to the **gate** [has a bucket] - fills a bucket with water

gate	+ *enters through the gate*
	  - begins climbing the **stairs**
	+ *trudges to the stream*
	  - trudges to the stream

steps	- climbs down to the **gate** - reaches the **temple**

temple compound	- heads down the **steps**
	+ *walks to the kitchen*
	  - walks to the **kitchen**
	+ *walks to the guest room*
	  - walks to the **guest room**
	+ *walks to his room*
	  - walks to **Zheng's room**

kitchen 厨	- walks back to the **compound**

guest room 客	- walks back to the **compound**
	- climbs into bed
	  - falls asleep
	  - THE END

STARTING POSITIONS

When the second phase begins, Chema is at the gate and Gai Zheng is on the stairs. There is a bucket lying on the ground near each character (i.e. in the same location).

And you're off! The story is yours to tell!

BR: I have noticed a tendency in recent designs, and not just by the indie crowd, to move boards and other boardgame elements into RPGs. I think this is a fascinating thing and want to see it developed even further. Sometimes our divisions give us focus. Sometimes they just divide us.

INSPIRATION

While the setting of this game is inspired by our young adult wuxia novel project, *The Ashes of Shaolin*, the game system owes major debts to Ben Lehman's *Polaris* (2005) and Emily Care Boss' *Breaking the Ice* (2005), the first roleplaying games to strictly limit the number of players that can play at one time. Additionally, this is the third game in a series of short, 2-player games about China and owes a debt to its predecessors, especially *Kazekami Kyoko Kills Kublai Khan*.

JH: Nick Montfort's *Twisty Little Passages* is a great exploration of the narrative power of text-driven interactive fiction, for those who want to read more on the topic.

Finally, this game would never had been written if I hadn't spent more than a few hours beta-testing Skotos Tech's multiplayer chat game, *Castle Marrach*, or thinking about important issues first raised by Mo Turkington and Thomas Robertson (who also playtested this game with me). Special thanks go out to Josh Kashinsky for allowing me to edit and reprint his work here.

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后

PLANNING VOLUME 2

Next time, Gadget. Next time.

This is an invitation. God willing, the next issue of *Push* will be two or three times thicker than this one. And that requires the help of people like you, people who care about what roleplaying might be becoming.

Push is primarily looking for the following:

1) articles describing newly emerging or less well known varieties of play and design (which also includes, at least for the time being, just about any variety of roleplaying disconnected from traditional or indie Anglo-American tabletop roleplaying),

2) articles describing new opportunities for play and design within existing roleplaying traditions (since there are always opportunities to do what we already do differently),

3) complete and playable short-form games that demonstrate new play possibilities (especially those written as if roleplaying evolved from something other than historical/fantasy miniatures wargaming),

4) something else that pushes the boundaries of roleplaying while remaining fun, informative, and not overly academic,

5) you. We want you. Enlighten us; surprise us; delight us. Tell us something we don't know. Make us want to play *right now*. We are your peers and your audience. We are hungry. Feed us.

JH: And you still don't have to know how to juggle!

Push is not an academic journal, though we have a fair number of graduate students and PhD candidates among our contributors and commentators. If you want to write a paper about Foucault and roleplaying, I definitely want to read it, but unless you can make it accessible and exciting to people who are more interested in fun stories than discourse analysis, it belongs in a publication other than *Push*. We have a different mission and a different intended audience.

Likewise, *Push* is specifically intended to be a progressive publication, interested in pushing boundaries and speculating about the future of roleplaying. We are appreciative of roleplaying's heritage, but this journal is about looking forward and the content reflects that. Draft your proposals accordingly.

That said, write about what excites you. What are you most looking forward to? What can you see hints of in the play experiences you've had recently? What is roleplaying in the process of becoming? There is no correct answer to any of these questions. There is no single answer either. Roleplaying is blossoming in many different directions at once and in the process of becoming things we can't even currently imagine.

AR: Rock star awesome, Jon. Rock star awesome.

How awesome is that?

PT: Thanks, Jonathan! That was fun! We should do this again some time.

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