

**Living Pedagogies of a Game-Master:
An Autoethnographic Education of Liminal Moments**

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If a thesis were a monster, it would be hideous, with at least a dozen eyes, oozing, slime-filled pores, and terrible, unnatural strength. It would be talked about as the one creature capable of defeating even the most skilled and powerful—whose ranks I am not yet worthy of joining. This monograph was not an adversary taken down alone. Special thanks are extended to the members of the groups in which I have acted as game-master, for providing the fun and fodder on which this research stands. This thesis would not have been possible if it were not for the love, support, and encouragement of my family and friends, especially Catia, who kept an encouraging hand on my shoulder even through the toughest moments.

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Abstract

This study presents the concept of the pedagogy of the game-master. Written from a bricolage of autoethnographic perspectives, a fractured narrative was (de)composed out of the author's dual experiences as educator and game-master of fantasy tabletop-role-playing games. The narrative seeks to evoke the blurred boundaries of what it means to occupy each role, dwelling between fantasies, (teaching) realities, and player/person/persona identities (Waskul & Lust, 2004), constructing and remaining in the middle of a bridged pedagogy which spans education and tabletop role-playing. From the narrative, the latter section of this manuscript presents a discussion of how the liminal duties of the game-master might help draw educators to and beyond the boundaries of what is possible in education.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ii
<i>Abstract</i>	iii
<i>Contents</i>	iv
<i>Terms and Abbreviations</i>	vi
<i>Space 1: Front Matter</i>	1
<i>Episode 1: Introducing characters</i>	2
<i>A Game</i>	3
<i>A Pedagogy</i>	4
<i>An Approach</i>	5
<i>Episode 2: A worked-frame of histories and philosophies</i>	8
<i>You Find Yourself at a Table</i>	8
<i>Protracted (in)actions</i>	10
<i>Rhizomes and Role-playing</i>	11
<i>Humble, Corrupted Beginnings</i>	13
<i>The Role of the Unheard: Aoki’s Attunement</i>	14
<i>Attuning as a Participant-Listener</i>	15
<i>A Liminal Space of Play</i>	16
<i>The Curriculum of Gameplay</i>	17
<i>Episode 3: Game Manuals and Playing Spaces—A Literature Review</i>	18
<i>Definitions and Features of a Tabletop Role-playing Game</i>	19
<i>Why Play?</i>	20
<i>Tabletop Role-playing Games, Liminality, in-betweeness, and tension</i>	23
<i>Game rules: Strict Adherence or Willful Ignorance?</i>	24
<i>The Aesthetics and Narrative Possibilities of Tabletop Role-Playing Games</i>	26
<i>The Game-Master</i>	29
<i>Episode 4: A Methodological Campaign</i>	33
<i>Introduction</i>	33
<i>Autoethnographic Fragments</i>	34
<i>Autoethnography in Practice</i>	37
<i>The Events</i>	38
<i>Writing the Autoethnographic Narrative</i>	40
<i>Leavy and Fiction as a Research Practice</i>	41
<i>Limitations of this Methodology</i>	42
<i>Space 2: Narrative</i>	45
<i>Preface—Cast of Characters</i>	46
<i>Salazar</i>	47
<i>Perrin Darkcloak</i>	48
<i>Naeris</i>	49
<i>The Game-Master</i>	50
<i>Encounter: Beginning; Stuck</i>	52
<i>Mark</i>	62
<i>Encounter: The Hellback Caverns</i>	65
<i>Aidan</i>	65
<i>Encounter: Preparation / Hesitation</i>	66
<i>Encounter: The Incident</i>	74
<i>Russell</i>	78

Encounter: The Never-Ending Story.....90

Space 3: Implications for Education.....94

Touring a Bridge Under Construction: Introduction.....95

Conceptual Spaces and Creativity.....98

Conceptual Spaces and Teaching.....98

A Rhizomatic Diffusion of Control.....102

Gaming the Role of the Teacher.....104

Legitimizing the Curriculum-as-lived: A Non-ending.....109

A Game-Master asks, what is the point?.....110

A Game-Master asks, what do you do?.....113

Reference List.....115

Terms and Abbreviations

ADVENTURE.....	<i>A story of quest developed for player-characters to endure</i>
CAMPAIGN.....	<i>A series of ongoing adventures completed by the player-characters</i>
CRPG/ERPG.....	<i>Computer/Electronic-based role-playing game</i>
CRITICAL FAILURE / CRIT FAIL.....	<i>The worst possible roll of a die; a 1</i>
CRITICAL SUCCESS / CRIT.....	<i>The best possible roll of a die; e.g. rolling 20 on a d20</i>
dxx.....	<i>A reference to a die with xx number of faces, pronounced “dee-” e.g. “d20”</i>
DM.....	<i>Dungeon Master; other term for game-master</i>
ENCOUNTER.....	<i>A specific game event that characters must resolve</i>
GM.....	<i>Game-master</i>
INITIATIVE.....	<i>The order in which a player-character acts, usually determined by a dice roll</i>
PARTY.....	<i>A collective noun used to represent the group of player characters</i>
PC.....	<i>Player-Character</i>
NPC.....	<i>Non-player/playable character, usually controlled by the game-master</i>
OOC.....	<i>Out-of-character</i>
RPG.....	<i>Role-playing game</i>
SIDE QUEST.....	<i>A mission that occurs alongside the central mission of the game</i>
TRPG.....	<i>Tabletop role-playing game</i>

Space 1: Front Matter

Episode 1: Introducing Characters

When I was thirteen, I agreed to be the thief in a small organization. I was thrust into the streets to pick pockets, deceive, and become the crowd... a nobody, a stranger. It feels like a lifetime ago. I still deceive, but I have also learned to inform, create, judge, and decide. I have learned to improvise. I pick through the pockets of many identities to help bear and feed the creatures, peoples, and narratives that need feeding. A game-master is what my party needed, and so a game-master I became.

Game-master... is a strange name. I never expected to amount to a master of anything, let alone a group of players. What does that make the players? Underlings? Slaves? There's the unsettling contradiction between the two hyphenated words. Mastery seems to imply a position of strength and authority, power, and control over others ("master"). But game, game brings to mind amusement, fun and light-hearted exploration ("game"). Is treading the line between the two positions possible or will I always lean one way or the other? It is a question that helps exemplify the position of the game-master, one that both game designers of tabletop role-playing games and their scholars do not seem to agree.

Defining the role often seems to emphasize the game-master's (GM) blurry nature. They are sometimes called a referee (Fine, 1983) or a judge (Ford & Liebler, 2012), which seems to heighten their mastery and authority. Yet they have also been described as the "creative force behind a game" (Crawford, Perkins, & Wyatt, 2014, p. 4), and the "heart of the game world" (Christopher, 2012), suggesting a role governed as much by emotion and the spontaneity that it precludes than the responsibilities of being a guardian of rules. This reading seems more open to improvisation and collaboration, not authority.

The purpose of this project is not to answer which is the "true" leaning of the game-master, but rather to dwell in the hyphenated space between the words, to evoke and to shed light on the liminal space they are situated within from the perspective of a curriculum researcher.

There are semblances between the role of a teacher and the game-master that have led me to this

research project, beginning with a passionate question drawn out in separate instances, yet intersected two parts of my life, teacher and gamer: *How do I keep these people engaged?* This question opened up many hours of thought about my practice as a game-master and as a teacher. In both respects, there was a resistance to the path of least resistance, a resistance to what was understood as common practice—worksheets, detailed plans, prefabricated events—all of which de-individualized and standardized involvement with my players and students. In the struggle to personalize, I unknowingly was heeding curriculum scholar Ted Aoki, trying to balance on the bridge that spans the space between the planned and lived curriculum. What could one learn from the other?

A Game

A fantasy tabletop role-playing game and the game-master's part in it is easily described, but not easily played out. After conceiving of a narrative fitting of the fantasy genre, the game begins with the game-master describing the environment in which the player-characters (PCs) find themselves. A conflict—in other words, a reason for the characters to become adventurers—quickly ensues. The players then express how they wish for their characters to engage with that environment, and finally, the game-master narrates the results of the characters' actions.

This pattern occurs and recurs throughout the course of a game, but its simplicity is continuously disrupted. For one, participants are forced to improvise and negotiate their characters' actions with each other and with the game-master, challenging the story as planned in what Aoki (2000) calls elsewhere, the "curriculum-as-plan" (p. 322). For another, the multiple identities that participants embody around a gaming space evoke blurred boundaries between who is who as one player identity slips in and out of the other (Waskul & Lust, 2004). Dice rolls, which indicate the chance of a character succeeding an action they wish to take, can be contested, hidden from view, and lied about. Typical rules and patterns of play are bent and

broken. Actions and interactions are resisted and negotiated, but are simultaneously part of a fluid conversation between players as they describe what their characters do or say. All of this suggests that the game-master must constantly submit to the unpredictable.

A Pedagogy

From the perspective of a game-master, I see the tabletop role-playing game as a site of generative possibilities. I hear Aoki (2000/2005) imploring me not only to submit to the unpredictability of my position, but to dwell there, to linger in the contested spaces, between what I plan and what is lived through around the gaming table.

According to Aoki, this is where pedagogy is located. It is a tensioned space between lived and planned curricula. The curriculum-as-plan is the conventional: it is the set of implemented procedures and mandates which can divide learning into subjects, subjects into lessons, and lessons into learning activities that teachers bring to each class.

[Pedagogy] is located in the vibrant space in the fold between curriculum-as-plan and live(d) curricula, at times a site of both difficulty and ambiguity and also a site of generative possibilities and hope. (Aoki, 2002/2005, p. 322).

The curriculum-as-lived is that which is *experienced*. Much of it is “unplanned and unplannable” (Aoki, 2000/2005, p. 322), and unpredictable. This curriculum exemplifies the learning moments that happen in between the scripted moments of the plan, the events that teachers and students live through by interacting. Aoki (1993/2005) believes that this kind of curriculum is not only to be acknowledged, but legitimized.

I feel there is a curious intersection between the role of the game-master in a fantasy role-playing game and the Aokian understanding of pedagogy. The game-master fills a whole world with detail and complexity, striking a balance between a realism and fantasy, a familiarity that enables players to easily immerse themselves with the possibilities of that world, but that also evokes wonder and the chance to act creatively in a setting they would otherwise never encounter. Not only does this require planning, but also a willingness to cede to the

unpredictable and ambiguous. If what makes this game unique is its ability for players to act as living, breathing, protagonists in a narrative that evolves as they make choices, then a game-master's plans can never be set in stone.

An Approach

This project uses an autoethnographic approach with artistic leanings. I do not attempt to reproduce an “accurate” representation of the lives of game-master or role-player, nor do I want to “portray the facts of what happened to [me] accurately... but instead to convey the *meanings* [that I] attached to that experience,” in order to “tell a story that readers could feel a part of” (Ellis, 2004, p. 116). In essence, I engage the auto- (my own experiences as a game-master), with the ethno- (inside the culture of role-players and role-playing games), through the -graphy (the writing of a narrative exploring liminal spaces). This artistic bend allows me to evoke the liminal nature of the game-master of a fantasy role-playing game. Sameshima and Irwin (2008) remind me that the arts themselves are liminal pursuits, they are a kind of border work that offer “spaces to quest for meaning making [...], they offer ways for individuals to understand their own liminal spaces of experience” (p. 8).

What began with providing players with quests has evolved into a quest of my own. Situating myself as the game-master/curriculum-researcher, I am in-dwelling in the pedagogic-fold between what I consider to be the lived and planned curricula of the tabletop role-playing game, a quest that I refer to as pedagogies of the game-master. To that end, I compose the following research questions:

- What emerges from the space between the curriculum-as-lived and curriculum-as-planned in a fantasy role-playing game, from a game-master's diffraction of his experiences?
- What does a game-master do in the in-between moments of planned and lived role-playing pedagogy?

- What implications could looking at the game-master of a tabletop role-playing game from the Aokian perspective of pedagogy have for teaching, learning, and education in general?

To answer these questions I will uncover past junctures where, as the game-master for three separate groups, I was responsible for leading players and their characters through a tense, evolving landscape. From notes, memories, and stories from our sessions, I will write through diffractions about these experiences by crafting a narrative that evokes pedagogies of the game-master, and delve into what they may mean for education and teaching.

This way of composing ethnography eschews traditional notions of objectively-composed science where the researcher is completely removed. Instead it “moves beyond the stance of knowing how others make sense toward a consideration of how reflexivity can be practiced when making sense of oneself is understood as occurring through the construction of the other” (Britzman, 1995, p. 231). This study aligns Britzman’s use of the word reflexivity with Haraway’s (1997) notion of diffraction, in that making sense of oneself is a displaced action, not a mirror of the same elsewhere. Haraway writes,

Reflexivity has been much recommended as a critical practice, but my suspicion is that reflexivity, like reflection, only displaces the same elsewhere, setting up the worries about copy and original and the search for the authentic and really real. Reflexivity is a bad trope for escaping the false choice between realism and relativism in thinking about strong objectivity and situated knowledges. (p. 16)

As part of Haraway’s looking back, she seeks to interfere, disrupt, or displace. Like Haraway, this study does not wish to find the same somewhere else. When I look back on moments of gaming experience, I do not hope to find exactly what I had planned, or arrive in the place I once was. Rather, I break up and blur the beam of my past experience as I hold it to the aperture of my chosen research questions. This produces a kaleidoscopic dance of light and shadow across floors and walls. Similarly, I hope to evoke both the positive and negative spaces and ideas emerging from this project.

This manuscript is divided into three parts, which I refer to as Spaces. Spaces fold over each other in ways that parts cannot. They remain unfocused whereas parts have clearly defined edges and borders. As we will see, this lack of focus helps to set the stage for the investigation of the tabletop role-playing game, a hobby that defies boundaries.

The first Space is the front matter, written in four episodes, each highlighting a particular foundation of the study. Episode 1 is this introduction. Episode 2 describes the conceptual framework for the study, beginning with the research context and growing outward to showcase the central philosophies at play. In episode 3, methodologies blend and blur as I describe a bricolage of autoethnographic leanings and why a patchwork method was desired for this research. In episode 4, I provide a review of relevant literature on tabletop role-playing games.

The second Space of this manuscript is the autoethnographic narrative. It is broken up into separate encounters, heeding the structure of a typical session of a fantasy tabletop role-playing game. Each encounter offers a unique experience, written from the field notes of my own games, that evoke the experience of the game-master and how s/he experiences the space between lived and planned pedagogy. It is written in fragments which do not necessarily follow linearly, enduring pauses as the identity of the teacher and game-master weave in and out.

Encountering creatures.
If the [GM] determines that the adventurers encounter other creatures while they're traveling, it's up to both groups to decide what happens next. Either group might decide to attack, initiate a conversation, run away, or wait to see what the other group does.
 (Crawford, 2014, p. 183)

The third Space opens to a discussion of the implications of this research for education which emerged from the fragments of the narrative. In this section I play with the pieces of the game-master and teacher narrative fragments, arranging and rearranging them next to each other to see how they can possibly fit and not fit together. Closing remarks, which confront limitations of this research and possibilities for future research, will also be made.

Episode 2: A Worked-Frame of Histories and Philosophies

You Find Yourself at a Table...

...Noise is born in this place. Boisterous talk, the thud of tankards hitting the table, dinnerware scraping plates, and from some corner a fiddle laments the dying season. You're drunk, you think, or under some spell that has inebriated your good sense.

How did I get here? Around this table? All these dice? A story in my head? How many came before me? Games without boards? Stories without endings?

I trace my history with this hobby back to its beginnings. A basement, friends, and a desire to bring a touch of the fantastic to their favourite war games. *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) emerged from that environment as the first tabletop role-playing game, created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in 1974 (Ewalt, 2013, p. 98). *D&D* creatively wove two passions of its creators: traditional war-gaming (typified in games like chess or *Warhammer*), and elements of fantasy narratives similar to those found in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series (Ford & Liebler, 2012; Cover, 2010). This weaving created a game with a certain resemblance to its predecessors, but that was functionally unlike anything experienced before.

In a wargame, players controlled entire armies. In *D&D*, players create and are responsible for only a single character, one that develops through an ongoing game narrative. In a wargame, two armies and usually only two participants are pitted against each other in combat to determine who wins a war. In *D&D*, combat exists, but participants also work to solve puzzles, converse using personas, and ask questions in order to navigate the ever-evolving game story. They do this cooperatively, as a team of adventurers (often referred to as a *party*) to fulfill goals and advance the story (a *campaign*) over time (Bowman, 2010, p. 18; Crawford, 2014). In a wargame, there is a referee or umpire who receives the tactical commands of players and armies, and determines the outcome of each encounter (Fine, 1983, p. 8). In *D&D*, the referee role was adapted and called the game-master, who still arbitrates over rules and resolves combat

encounters, but also “describes the environment and controls the enemy characters” (Ford & Liebler, 2012, p. 54). More than only enemy characters, however, all characters not represented by the players (called non-player characters, or NPCs) are controlled by the game-master, meaning that the game-master is an ally, giving hints to puzzles or other useful information that could help players on their quests. When players are successful at accomplishing a quest, the game-master is also responsible for providing the in-game rewards.

As previously stated, these are guidelines for typical game-play, not strict rules. The TRPG resists strict categorization and definition. Cover (2010) has questioned the situatedness of the tabletop RPG’s definition, asking “to what degree is definition and classification a necessary prerequisite to studying games?” (p. 12). To Cover, and to me, no definition can accurately describe or capture every complexity of the TRPG, which casts aside the question of definition. It is content to create a space for itself somewhere in between game and collaborative story.

Wittgenstein (1958) enables this resistance in his work *Philosophical Investigations*, where he challenges a traditionally held assumption about language,

the individual words in language name objects—sentences are combinations of such names.—In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands. (p. 2)

Wittgenstein provides examples for where this assumption is untrue, not insignificantly writing at length about the word *game*. He maintains that the word *game* encompasses too many activities to be defined. At best we can refer to a set of *family resemblances*, the structural similarities that overlap from one game to the next. This

It is as if someone were to say: "A game consists in moving objects about on a surface according to certain rules..."—and we replied: You seem to be thinking of board games, but there are others (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 3).

ambiguity suggests a tension between what is and isn’t a game, such that attempted to delineate between the two is difficult. As such, this in-between space can be considered another of Aoki’s

(1988/2005) sites of generative possibilities. The tabletop role-playing game embodies this ambiguity whole-heartedly.

Waskul & Lust (2004) summarize:

“The game” is not competitive, has no time limits, is not scored, and has no definitions of winning or losing. Unlike card games, board games, games of chance, or organized sports, the point of fantasy role-playing games is neither merely to play well nor to “win” (Waskul & Lust, p. 336).

To play the TRPG is therefore to be present and immersed in those ever-forming possibilities by “collectively engage[ing] in protracted storytelling” (Williams, Hendricks & Winkler, 2006, p. 3).

Protracted (In)Actions

Not only does the TRPG protract in its refusal to be classified, playing the game requires participants to put aside traditional notions of beginnings and endings. Ewalt’s (2013) chapter title is a standard example of the first thing a game-master might say when a group of players begin an adventure: “You’re All In a Tavern” (p. 3). The game-master begins a game by simultaneously introducing the environment and reminding participants that they join their characters in the midst of their existences. When a participant creates a character, they begin the game as novice adventurers, not newly-born creatures. They might already know how to fight, sing, or persuade, but they have never had to hone these skills for some larger cause. Their story begins as a bridge between stories, between lives. In between past and future persona lives there is a player, looking to engage with possibilities of a fictive character they wish to embody and learn more about. And when the last fight has been won (or lost), the game does not typically *end*, in the traditional sense. While one story arc might finish, the characters who have survived months and years of real-time gaming simply linger for the next story to begin, the next call to prove their worth. They span the *here* and *there* but are neither. Characters always linger in between.

The DM might describe the entrance to Castle Ravenloft, and the players decide what they want their adventurers to do. Will they walk across the dangerously weathered bridge? Tie themselves together with rope to minimize the chance that someone will fall if the drawbridge gives way? (Crawford, 2014, p. 5)

As they linger, player-characters answer a game-master's call to advance a story, usually by responding with the prompt "what does your character do?" These creative decision-making moments which call for discussion between players, and improvisation as descriptions are spoken into the game narrative, both of which have a direct influence over game events. The agency that players feel, the

sense of purpose they receive, and the community that is built in these in-between moments of improvisational conversation have been a large part of the success of tabletop role-playing games (Fine, 1983; Dormans, 2006; Bowman, 2010; Montola, 2008; Moser & Fang, 2014).

Rhizomes and Role-playing

The lack of beginnings and endings calls to mind Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of the rhizome. The rhizome is a description of theory in retaliation of hierarchal models of knowledge. It moves away from "the tree" as "the image of the world" (p. 5)—which roots and grows only in one direction—to the rhizome, which grows horizontally and infinitely outward in all directions. The tabletop role-playing game adheres to several principles outlined by Deleuze and Guattari, including principles of connection and heterogeneity, stipulating that "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be" (p. 7), as well as the principle of multiplicity, which states that "there is no unity to serve as a pivot, or to divide in the subject" (p. 8).

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) illustrate their point with the example of puppeteering. While common wisdom suggests that the puppet can only follow the directions of the puppeteer, as a rhizome the puppet is tied to a "multiplicity of nerve fibers, which form another puppet in other dimensions connected to the first" (p. 8). These move through the puppeteer, but are also connected to other puppets, other puppeteers.

The relationship between game-master, player, and story function in much the same way. When a group of participants decide to play a tabletop RPG, nodes grow from an already-established connection of gamers, game systems, narratives, and histories. With each decision that a player-character makes, the rhizomatic structure continues to move outward as the story develops. Disruptions to this structure can also occur, for example, when a participant chooses an action that was otherwise unprecedented, unexpected, or unplanned by the game-master. Instead of retracing steps, the game adapts, growing a new node on the rhizome. In this way the game is connected and ever-moving outward, creating a complex mapping that is always in progress.

Other researchers have alluded to multiplicities present in the tabletop role-playing game. As discussed later in the literature review, Waskul and Lust (2004) present how a multiplicity of participant identities enables game play, and Kociatkiewicz (2000) demonstrates how the multiplicity of power, its uses and formations in a role-playing game without rules serves as a testimony to “the arbitrariness of all ‘natural’ or ‘obvious’ divisions, concepts, or understandings” (p. 84) of game play.

Perhaps, for these reasons, amid past controversies with misaligned connections to Satanism (Pezzeca, 2009), through the technological sweep of computer and video games, tabletop role-playing games have continued to spread. Over forty years and many iterations, *D&D*, the first game of its kind, has recently released its newest edition to wide praise (Gilsdorf, 2014). Because a principle of multiplicity is built into its fabric, the game resists rupture. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) remind us, “a rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines” (p. 9).

Humble, Corrupted Beginnings.

I was a thief. Modeled after a David Eddings character—a dextrous and heavily sarcastic elf named Silk. In my youth, his wit and charisma were something I admired. What would it be like to get away with those traits and still be called a hero?

As a teenager, I was drawn to fantasy tabletop role-playing games, and eventually to taking on the role of game-master, directly because of the sense of community and friendship I developed from being in a space and with people that allowed me to possess all of the qualities that would otherwise be punishable in middle-school hallways: imaginative, silly, vengeful, stealthy, wise, dextrous, clumsy. Fine's (1983) ethnography on fantasy tabletop role-playing games supports the importance of community-building in the TRPG, citing that "interactional opportunities," the "recognition of common interest" and "social networks" are large motivators which bring new players to the game (p. 51). That first adventure as a player did not last long, and it was a decade before I would play again with friends as vaguely familiar with the game as I was. The current research project picks up here, tracing the path between my first and most recent instances as a game-master.

In-between, I chose a career in teaching. All too often throughout the four-year teacher training program, teacher candidates like myself received explicit instruction about the merits of teaching, how we would be working to make differences in the lives of children, how teaching was a vocation, a calling, not work. But it did not take long after I was given a key to a classroom—head swimming with possibility—to conclude that those instructions were a matter of opinion, and that for many, school was neither calling nor a place where everyone could learn. I left many school days feeling wounded knowing that I was not helping. In my praises and reverence of education, in communion with my students, education placed on all of us twisted metal cilices, pulled tight, cutting off the life-blood of learning, motivation, and biting into our perseverance with jagged teeth, each time we endured an "experience of compliance and faulty

justice that [was] central to experiences of education” (Olsen, 2008, p. 39). Privately, I atoned to education as a flagellant, hitting my head against the wall asking how we can, in one breath, tell to our students that school is salvation, and in another have it cut out all desire to learn from these children who are innately curious and enthusiastic about it.

In this sense, like they had been in middle-school, role-playing games were an escape into a world where those thoughts could not harm me, with others who embraced fantasy and role-play as a calling of the imagination. At least, as a game-master, I would be able to craft games that would work with the strengths and desires of my players, instead of apologetic hymnals about how life will be better once you just get out of high school.

The Role of the Unheard: Aoki’s Attunement

The party began negotiating immediately.

[Russell]: *We should leave this place.*

[Aidan]: *No way. I say we stay and fight alongside.*

[Mark]: *Do we really want to trust this guy? I feel like he’ll abandon us at the first opportunity.*

[Russell]: *Do we have a choice?*

Players speak to each other in and out of character to resolve problems and advance the game narrative. Conversation is central to the experience of playing, but I question whether conversation can be understood only as the back-and-forth communication of information. Aoki (1981/2005) speaks of conversation as no less than a matter of attunement to participants as they engage in a reciprocity of perspectives. This attunement means moving beyond what can be seen and heard to what is *unseen* and *unheard*. In this unfound space, conversation is more than a tool for recording thoughts into words. It is a “bridging of two worlds by a bridge, which is not a bridge” (Aoki, p. 228). In a mutual exchange of perspectives, what is unsaid becomes just as important as what is as participants listen to an ideological dialectic, where “the meaningfulness

of one understanding comes into view illuminated by the whole context; and the meaningfulness of the whole comes into view illuminated by a part” (Aoki, p. 228).

As the referee and lead storyteller, it often falls on the game-master to attune himself to this reciprocity in the game context, to remain in the middle of the bridge between worlds, between negotiations, and to recognize the meaningfulness of each player perspective as it contributes to the meaningfulness of the whole exchange. In this way the game narrative evolves, one moment to the next. As it does, characters cross cities and countries through the conversations that occur around a table. They are literally trans-versing by conversing, moving across fictive spaces through the conversations and negotiations that occur in them.

Attuning as a Participant-Listener

It is crucial that a game-master attunes his ears and thoughts to his players. Given that so much of the tabletop role-playing game is listening—both to the game-master’s descriptions of his world, and to the other players as they make decisions that impact the rest of the game—a more attuned position for a game-master/curriculum research to take is that of the participant-*listener*. The auditory is fundamental to the present research context. As one game manual reminds us, the fantasy role-playing game is “driven by imagination” (Crawford, 2014, p. 5). With no game board, there is focal point for the eyes. The action takes place in the players’ heads, shifting the focus away from observation and more towards attentive listening. In this way, becoming a participant-listener and not a participant-*observer* is crucial for creating the kind of autoethnographic text I desire. Here, traditional understandings of the participant observer, the one who is *there* and observers what is *there*, are questioned in what Britzman (1995) calls a “site of doubt” (p. 232). The participant-listener, in contrast, listens for what is both said, unsaid, and even unsayable, to the in-between spaces of

It’s about picturing the towering castle beneath the stormy night sky and imagining how a fantasy adventurer might react to the challenges that scene presents. (Crawford, 2014,p. 5)

experience. The evocation of the auditory suggests of a role that moves beyond just being situated in a culture, since, as Britzman reminds us, “‘being there’ does not guarantee access to ‘truth’” (p. 232). It is in the middle, amid blurry borders that the game takes place, and as a researcher my goal is to attune myself to these liminal spaces throughout the study.

A Liminal Space of Play

This study underscores the fantasy tabletop role-playing game as a liminal space of play. I understand liminality as the threshold space of experience between two others, whether social, cultural, political, or educational. James Conroy (2004) writes that liminality, “is to be found between categories, on the margins, neither at the centre nor on the outside” (p. 8). Liminality offers a powerful educational metaphor for attitudes, pedagogies, practices, and even whole institutions “that escape the confines and constraints of the center” (p. 8). Not being subject to the constraints presupposed by those practices, placing ourselves in liminal spaces enables us to offer up new ways of seeing and knowing that which was previously thought of as accepted and standard. We “hold to account our established conceits” (p.8) to reconcile and negotiate their worth. TRPG participants uphold this understanding of liminality by playing at the thresholds of identities and imaginations. By acting as player/person/persona, participants are free to move in between identities during gameplay, in imagined, threshold environments that change and shift depending on participant action.

Even the word *play* can be liminal. Far from light-hearted, play engages and seeks to transform. As Lewis, Tsturumaki, and Lewis (2008) remind us,

Play is not a frivolous act of secondary importance, but a way of creatively working that calls for rigor while insisting upon perpetual critique and inquiry. Play is the active manifestation of curiosity, operating from a position embedded within the world. To play or to put something in play requires action and commitment, in seeking a goal through transformation and change. (p. 10)

By adopting that play is a serious endeavor that hopes for change, participants of the TRPG commit to dwelling in and widening boundaries, whether those boundaries are found in the persona-identities that they embody, or the environments that they navigate. Playing the TRPG “can be described, explained, and understood as an activity that exists in the unique intersections between persona, player, and person” (Waskul & Lust, 2004, p. 337), where participants need to negotiate the liminal spaces in between these identities. The *person* suggests an identity that encompasses the “variety of statuses and roles they play in everyday life” (p.337) outside of the game, from student to parent to employee. Next, the *player* is the participant identity who “must know and understand the rules of the game” (p. 337), the identity who brings his or her knowledge of the game to the table. Lastly, they are *personas*, the identities of the fantasy characters that they embody during the game.

To Waskul and Lust (2004), role-playing is understood as border-work, done as players navigate the fluidity of their changing identities through fantasy, imagination and reality. These three elements “necessarily blend and blur to such an extent they are often difficult to convincingly separate into mutually distinct categories” (p. 339). As an example, the *player-character* exists as the hyphenated, marginal role occupying the space of two separate realities. Likewise, the game-master works at the borders of the identities of the control-bearing planner and the creative, a blurred role representing at-once a certain omniscience and a improvisatory story telling. Of course, the GM also shifts identities between any character not played by other participants, fitting into the different voices and motivations of many species of fictional creatures, while holding on to as his own personality which lives outside of the game reality.

The Curriculum of Gameplay

As players march their characters through the evolving narrative landscape, their encounters take place in the liminal spaces between identities as they quest for meaning making.

Sameshima and Irwin (2008) write that “liminal spaces are dynamic spaces of possibility where individuals and cultures come in contact with one another creating interstitial conditions for new communities of learning” (p. 7). Through the borderwork undergone at the threshold of different identities, the TRPG “offers ways for individuals to understand their own liminal spaces of experience” (p. 8). Yet, the authors remind us, through the process of growth and learning, the liminal “becomes the evidenced curriculum [...] the liminal, once encountered, is curriculum” (p. 2). Player actions, conversation and negotiation in moments of liminal gameplay become, once encountered, the curriculum of the game. Participants do not “straddle between two or three roles, but are constructing the liminal space by articulating and traveling the borderlands” (p. 7). They eliminate the liminal through their construction of an evidenced narrative, the curriculum of the game.

This is the intersection of the present study, in between the game, liminality, and education. The space where the curriculum researcher and the game-master meet is the space I will summon in my autoethnography.

Episode 3: Game Manuals and Playing Spaces—A Literature Review

Through the lens of these games, we can [...] entertain the possibility that we are all players located at the liminal margins between the people we believe ourselves to be and the personas we perform in situated social encounters. (Waskul & Lust, 2004, p. 333)

To fit in with a mood, situation, or with other people, we are adept at manipulating our personality to heighten some traits over others. These shifts are fluid and sometimes unconscious, and cannot be contained to neat categories of time, place, or circumstance. I begin with this quotation from Waskul and Lust (2004) as it helps to situate the literature of tabletop role-playing games and the game-master in the same liminal, in-between space, where at some point or another we all find ourselves. Before continuing this liminal work, I report on current

research examining definitions and features of the tabletop role-playing game and why players choose them. Then, after describing research connecting liminality to TRPGs, I look at research into game rules, aesthetics and narratives, and finally present research centered on elucidating the role of the game-master.

Definitions and Features of a Tabletop Role-Playing Game

Role-playing as an activity and what is traditionally thought of as a role-playing *game* are two different things. Shapiro and Leopold (2012) remind us of the difficulty of defining role-play: “Yes, it involves some kind of *role* and some sort of *play*, but this only raises additional questions: Are the roles actual, imitational, or completely fictional? Are they spontaneous or scripted? How structured and extensive is the play itself?” (p. 121). I keep these questions in mind as I write through this review.

Curran (2011) provides a general definition of the role-playing game from which to depart:

A Role-Playing Game (RPG) is a game in which the participants assume a character role and determine that character’s actions, within a specific scenario, with agreed rules, played individually or in a group, with or without a mediator, and where the outcome is without definite limits of duration or amount. (Curran, p. 45)

Dormans (2006) cites four generally-accepted categories of RPGs (1) tabletop, also called “pen-and-paper;” (2) live-action role-playing (LARP), in which the game is often played in costume in wide-open spaces; (3) electronic or computer-based role-playing games (ERPGs), where a single player controls one or more characters through a simulated environment or gameworld; and (4) the massively-multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), where thousands of players connect through the internet to a simulated gameworld.

Features and traits of the tabletop role-playing game are often discussed without consensus. Hitchens and Drachen (2008) specify six features that need to be present in all tabletop role-playing games: (1) the game world; (2) participants; (3) characters; (4) the game-

master; (5) interaction, and (6) narrative. Cover (2010), meanwhile, contradicts Hitchens and Drachen by specifying that the game-master is not essential. In these kinds of TRPGs, everyone is a player and game-master, each with a shared responsibility for facilitating the rules. She also mentions other features of a TRPG, including how character information is written down; and how dice, sometimes polyhedral, are used to resolve in-game choices and decisions that rely on chance or degrees of success (Cover, p. 6).

Why Play?

This question offers a doubling. It asks why players reach for tabletop role-playing game amid so many other choices, but it also asks a more subtle question when we stress play. Why *play*? Why, of all the hobbies one can choose, would an individual choose play? Why not create something? Or does playing the TRPG allow its participants to create something?

The ability to play as a protagonist in a favourite literary genre suggests one reason why players choose tabletop RPGs. Lortz (1979) elaborates by writing that the players' characters "operate with some degree of freedom, providing a certain sense of player agency" (cited in Hitchens & Drachen, 2008, p. 6). This allows the player and their character to make choices which influence the game direction. Compare this with the very limited choices offered by board games or computer games. In the TRPG, participants act as protagonists in an ongoing co-created story (Ehrett & Worth, 2012; Dormans, 2006; Bowman, 2010; Montola, 2008; Moser & Fang, 2014). They do not so much read a script that is given to them as they create the script through improvisation and a reflection on their character's attributes.

Fine's (1983) seminal ethnography on fantasy tabletop role-playing games and their players discusses different motivators for playing, including educational benefits, "gaming as an escape from social pressure; games as aids in increasing one's sense of personal control or efficacy; and games as aids in dealing with people" (p. 53). Fine found that, as a means of

escape, these games provide a leisurely way of leaving the confines of a participant's current reality, whether it is escape from the self or an escape from conventional behavior, "the game offers cathartic benefits" (pp. 55-7). As a means for a sense of control or efficacy, TRPGs enable players to learn about themselves in "situations of controlled danger, producing psychological growth and insight" (p. 58), giving them power over their environment in ways that every day life cannot provide. Lastly, as a means for sociability, the game fills their need for a community, friendship, as a way of gaining or improving one's social skills (pp. 60-2).

These results show us several positive reasons why players choose to play TRPGs, however, his study offered a limited ethnographic scope. A lot has since changed. For one, Fine (1983) reported that in 1979 an estimated "500,000 individuals" took part in the hobby (p. 27). Yet Jones (2012) has reported that according to market research done in 1998, "2.5 million people between the ages of 12 and 35 played a tabletop RPG monthly in the U.S." alone (p. 88). Ewalt (2013) further cites that "over thirty million people have played [*Dungeons & Dragons*] since 1974" according to research conducted by the current publisher, Wizards of the Coast (p. 32). These statistics do not take into account the explosion of independent game-makers who have created and shared their own tabletop role-playing games, in genres spanning the literary spectrum, from fantasy to science fiction, romance to western. Ultimately, Jones (2012) mentions that how players privilege parts of the experience might guide them to deciding why they play.

Some players privilege the story above all else, seeking to be co-authors of a fully developed narrative containing literary themes and coherent plots (Narrativism), some players enjoy the challenges and puzzles presented by the game, seeking to successfully master them and "win" (Gamism), some players are most interested in creating or exploring the world of the game, immersing themselves in the time period and setting, or character they are playing in the game (Simulationism). Recognizing that these different preferences exist, and that they shape the way players experience RPGs, challenges a monolithic explanation of "why" people play RPGs. (Jones, p. 97)

Other researchers have found still more reasons to play. In one study, Chung (2013) tested whether those who play tabletop role-playing games were more creative than their

computer-based RPG-playing counterparts, what he calls electronic or ERPGs. He gave a cross-sectional analytical survey to 170 participants, and analyzed their data using Wallach-Kogan Creativity tests. Results demonstrated that in all treatments, TRPG players scored higher in divergent thinking than non-players and ERPG players, suggesting that TRPGs could be used as an activity to promote creative thinking, as these games, according to Chung, are primarily a form of structured improvisation. He concludes by suggesting that because of their ability to promote creativity, “the TRPG deserves the attention of educators and researchers” (p. 69).

Meriläinen (2012) reports on his study investigating the self-perceived effects of the TRPG hobby on personal development. Using survey data of 161 Finnish role-players, he set out to answer what connection exists between the role-playing hobby and empathetic intelligence, and how do differences in gender, age, and experience with the hobby show in role-players views on the game. Results indicated that role-players see the hobby as a generally positive part of their personality. The majority reported that TRPGs have increased their ability to empathize in some way. He concludes by suggesting that TRPGs could potentially have a positive effect on the development of “both intra- and intersubjective skills” (p. 65) but cautions that potential doesn’t mean actual, and advises careful planning to maximize positive effects on these skills.

Lastly, White’s (2011) study of the discursive notions of masculinity as experienced by players within his own gaming group as they encountered female characters provides us with yet another positive outcome of playing TRPGs. White witnessed how his players did not simply *prescribe* their own masculine ideologies onto their characters, “rather they were enacted in play dynamically,” such that their characters were “the medium as well as the instrument of that enactment, changing in response to each player’s play” (p. 28). Players do not impose their ideological beliefs about masculinity on their fantasy personas, they allow their characters the freedom to change, dynamically, while playing. In this way, each character experiences

ideological growth. From this, White concludes that to some extent players are both “author and witness” to their own play, which moves the game into the aesthetic “rather than purely *expressive* activity” (p. 28). In that sense, White discovered that a game that has been previously misidentified as misogynistic can actually be a space for ideological development.

Tabletop Role-Playing Games, Liminality, In-betweenness, and Tension

Heeding the quotation that opens this literature review, Waskul and Lust (2004) well describe the blurriness of playing a fantasy role-playing game, whether from the perspective of the game-master or of the player. Their symbolic-interactionist interpretation of the game draws on work from an ethnographic study, but then reaches into a discussion suggesting wider thoughts about the connections between the TRPG and reality.

Waskul and Lust (2004) explain that the liminal nature of the game can be attributed to the blurriness and tensionality of what it means to play. Participants’ identities fall into three categories: person, player, and persona. The *person* suggests an identity that encompasses the “variety of statuses and roles they play in everyday life,” outside of the game, from student to parent to employee (p. 337). Next, the *player* is the participant identity who “must know and understand the rules of the game” (p. 337), the identity who brings his or her knowledge of the game to the table. Lastly, the *personas* are the identities of the fantasy characters that participants embody during the game.

Overall, the experience of playing, “can be described, explained, and understood as an activity that exists in the unique intersections between persona, player, and person” (Waskul & Lust, 2004, p. 337), where participants need to “negotiate these symbolic boundaries” between different identities (p. 333). Despite seeming separate, the authors write that these identities intermingle. They “necessarily blend and blur to such an extent they are often difficult to convincingly separate into mutually distinct categories” (p. 339). The authors note that

participants do this both inter- and intra-personally, the inter- demarcating borders among themselves and the other players, and the intra- often suggesting the personal border work participants do to ensure that non-game related identities do not interfere with game-play.

Altogether, Waskul and Lust (2004) maintain that the very nature of the fantasy tabletop role-playing is a framework allowing for the multiplicity of identities, where it is “not always clear which one is being evoked” (p. 347). To them, role-playing is border-work, accomplished as players navigate the fluidity of their changing identities through fantasy, imagination and reality. If we choose to locate “people in the liminal threshold between illusion and reality” (p. 352), playing in the cracks of the in-between becomes distinctly possible, and paves the way for an understanding of self and other that is more accepting of contestation, more accepting of the possibility that to some extent, we are all role-players in some fantasy game.

Game rules: Strict Adherence or Willful Ignorance?

How do rules, usually present in game manuals in large numbers, stack up against the blurry borderwork of the role-playing experience? There is no doubt that rules are an important part of the TRPG, as the literature testifies. Rather than provide boundaries to narrative experiences, rules tend to help explain and support them, by operating as guidelines for interaction. For example, by rolling a die to see if a desired action fails or succeeds. As Bateman (2012) writes, they operate as “a means of prescribing what’s to be imagined and only secondarily in the normative sense of regulating conduct” (p. 225).

Dormans (2006) localizes the rules of a tabletop RPG in the *paideaic* rather than the *ludological*. This means that their rules are often more freeform and set by the players themselves rather than having strict definitions of winners and losers or strict codes of participant behaviour. Where ludus-dependent games “work towards a certain final state,” games centered on paideaic play usually have “no goal that ends the game” (par. 20). Playing is more important

than gaming. He cites childhood play, typically with toys, as an example of paideaic play. Dormans is more convinced than Cover (2010) or Helio (2004) that the role-playing game is indeed a game, strictly because of “its use of rules to define gameplay and its reliance on dice-rolling as core mechanic” (Dormans, 2006, par. 37). To him, rules are important for several reasons. They “form the main interface onto the fictional game world, [...] provide the player with agency” and “determine to a large extent the style and disposition of the game system” (par. 38).

Neuenschwander (2008) comments that “instructional simplicity” within the game rules of a TRPG is “unattainable,” (p. 189) because of the near-infinite possibilities that one could use them in, and points out that “much of the role-playing experience is a set of problem-solving challenges” (p. 194). Learning how to play, then, is done *through* and *because of* participant negotiation, contestation, and trial and error, in order to advance the game story. The game rules provide “only an incomplete framework for structuring the actions of the players, and the expectations and mores of a given group will add other, unspoken rules that discourage or reward certain patterns of behavior” (p. 189). To him, rules function as a “means of achieving consensus, and for separating character from player” (p. 198). While Waskul & Lust (2004) might debate the latter argument, many researchers who believe that the TRPG is a paideaic kind of gaming would agree that consensus about the actions that participants take is important in substitute for no clear goal.

In an ethnographic case study of his own gaming group, Kociatkiewicz (2000) provides an example of what would happen if rules were, for all intents and purposes, removed, so that they could no longer be depended to resolve conflicts. He writes that when participants argue over “conflicting ideas about reality,” tension is inevitable, but it was also important that the game-master not interfere with this tension (p. 73). Limitations and rules that a game-master

would typically impose were left to a bare minimum, which provided insight into a game focused only on story-building through the tensions of participant co-construction. The researcher built his own game world instead of using one that was already-published, in order to concentrate "on the free play of the collective imagination, using the role-playing session as a tool for social creation unrestrained by any pre-set rules" (p. 74).

Still, Kociatkiewicz (2000) keys into the power the game-master holds in this kind of game, by, for example, including some rules and not including others. For one, he kept the playing group size between three and five players, because, from his experience, these numbers account for "the most interesting [gaming] sessions" (p. 76). The author reflects on the lack of power distribution between the player characters, leading to the negotiation of the assumed powers of characters that could be considered holding privileged positions. Rules of the game's reality, then, were created not in advance by the game-master or by depending on a published ruleset, but in those moments of negotiation between players.

Players used their characters as a way of vying for power in their attempts to build reality. For Kociatkiewicz (2000), the multiplicity of power, its uses and formations in this game served as testimony to "the arbitrariness of all 'natural' or 'obvious' divisions, concepts, or understandings" (p. 84).

The Aesthetics and Narrative Possibilities of Tabletop Role-Playing Games

Several scholars have written about the uniqueness of the TRPG from an aesthetic or narrative context. Mackay's (2001) book *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art*, employs a theatre studies framework to provide the argument that playing a TRPG is like an improvised, dramatic performance. He holds that the comparison can be made in four ways: the "drama" itself is the game setting, the "script" is the narrative plot prepared by the game-master, the "set" is the described game environment, and the "performance," what is witnessed by the

players and the game-master as both audience and actors (p. 60), is the ensuing performance by the player-characters.

Helio (2004) underscores this point in an argument about whether role-playing games act as narratives. She writes that games, despite arguments for the contrary, typically do not offer narrative experiences since “narration always requires a narrator and someone for whom the story is narrated” (p. 68). But in TRPGs, there is a “deliberate pursuit” (p. 72) of storytelling experiences where “all players participate in the action of the narration and also form the audience at the same time” (p. 68). So while the TRPG contains narrative experiences, they cannot be labeled narratives themselves. Helio (2004) concludes her article by writing that the degree by which a TRPG is a narrative experience depends on the group that is playing: “games can be more ‘game-like,’ more action-oriented, or more narrative-oriented, which depends on the participants and the game system itself” (p. 71). She also writes that role-playing is a specific “mindset” (p. 71), and that it could be used “when a player wants to embed narrative motives into game-play,” not just in other TRPGs, but in all games (p. 72).

Rosenblum (1994) asks whether role-playing games can be considered storytelling events. Similar to Waskul & Lust (2004), she relates how there are different frames of social selves which influence how narrativity is experienced. For example, as a group of friends, participants may “refer to the narratives they created together in the games as something that actually happened or as a story they heard,” but in the social frame of game play, “the person adopts the social role of a player and becomes the audience or co-authors of the narrative event” (p. 32). Any tensions experienced during game conversations creates a story that “collapses and conflates the narrative event and the narrated event into a single moment. Under this rubric, stories both occur and are told at the same time.” (Rosenblum, 1994, p. 32). There is a blurring of narrator and audience here that point to the messy borderwork that occurs during each game.

Cover (2010) argues that the TRPG offers a strange occurrence of narrative. It is possible, she demonstrates, for a clear chain of events to occur in an unusual form of narrative. She cites an example from her own game, showing how narration occurs “in present tense and addresses the narratee in second person,” as in the example, “*You start getting confused and then everything goes black*” (p. 85). Cover agrees with Monik Fludernik, who writes that second person narratives like the episodes that occur in the TRPG are post-modern, as “they reformulate the relationship between narrator and narratee from traditional and structuralist terms” (p. 85). To Cover it is clear that “no single perspective can account for the multiple layers of the game. [...] Although the TRPG cannot be excluded from narrative status on the grounds that it does not have a narrator, it also must not be limited to only studying this one aspect” (p. 86).

As an aesthetic experience, the tabletop role-playing game can be considered distinct from reading novels, painting, or watching films, in that it mimics the dynamic nature of how we make sense of the world better than these other avenues. Wolfendale & Franklin (2012) write that, unlike artforms such as novels, movies, and paintings, “only role-playing mimics the *friction* we encounter in bumping up against an autonomous reality” (p. 222). Fantasy role-playing offers not just immersion in a fiction, like a novel, but “the ability to be your own protagonist, to meet other protagonists, and to have a bit of control over what kind of narrative develops” (Ehrett & Worth, 2012, p. 205).

White (2011) is quick to respond to Mackay and others who consider it to be an aesthetic or artful experience by suggesting that it “can sustain that classification only insofar as it is *available for reflection*—to the extent, that it permits itself to be read as a text” (p. 28). However, White concludes by stating that, if we *can* consider the TRPG to be more than just a game, if it can be an artful, “thoughtful role-playing gaming, that may be both *experienced* and *reflected*

upon as a thought-provoking exercise,” there exists an “intriguing possibility for further research, design, and play” (p. 29).

My understanding of White (2011), Helio (2012) and others, is that they suggest that we must open up the game to an in-between space. It is not quite a game, experience, nor is it quite a narrative experience. It is a performance that sometimes adheres to game rules. And it is here that the borders of the liminal make themselves present.

The Game-Master

Thus far, I have reported on research that relates to the fantasy role-playing game and to how players play. This section of the literature review sheds light on research concerning the game-master position. While I have found very little academic research specifically highlighting this role, many articles and books reference it. I draw on these to fill the following paragraphs.

Firstly, Kociatkiewicz’s (2000) article calls into question the position of privilege of the game-master. While most TRPGs have someone to occupy this role, Kociatkiewicz’s work suggests a frivolity that could potentially be removed should participants understand and wish to cede to their game to the extended negotiations that can happen around a table.

Other players simply refuse to accept that game-master has “god-like” or “omnipotent” power to control the game, as Fine (1983, p. 72) has suggested. For example, Wolfendale and Franklin (2012), believe

The DM [game-master] *guides* the creation of a story, setting constraints, negotiating options, and ruling on outcomes, but the *process* of creation is bigger than him. The contribution of the players and the rules they play with are indispensable to flesh out the game world and create the story that unfolds within it. It is the *collaboration* of the DM, the players, and the rules that mean things happen that no one could plan in advance. (Wolfendale & Franklin, 2012, p. 218)

This unpredictability, however, certainly depends on how much freedom the game-master *allows* in their game. With that in mind, Christopher (2012) has defined four archetypes of the game-master and how each measure success in their game.

Christopher (2012) writes that it is the degree by which the game-master maintains authority and control, in effect withholding agency from his/her players, which advises the archetype that suits their position. The *guide* archetype is represented by a game-master who attempts to share control between himself and his players evenly. This game-master does not care to exercise absolute control, but rather uses it only when it is necessary for the progression of the story. Next there is the *host*, the least controlling archetype, who treats the game as a co-authorship between himself and players, and “exists simply to facilitate the adventures of the other players” (Christopher, p. 259). According to Christopher, measures of game success for these two GMs rely on “how happy the players are with the experience of the game world” (p. 261). The main difference between the two, he notes, is that the guide game-master personally has more “direct investment” in the outcome of the game (p. 261). Third is the *arbiter*, who maintains complete control over game rules and world, but gives the players every freedom over the actions of their characters. Their measure of success is often “inversely proportional to the number of times the [GM] had to ‘improvise’ due to unexpected player actions” (p. 261), signaling that success is how well the GM is able to control their players without them noticing, while still maintaining player interest. Lastly, there is the *puppet-master*, who exhibits the most control, effectively meaning that the game-master has a pre-made story and characters in mind, and wants the characters to “act it out” for him (Christopher, p. 260). The puppet-master is successful when he can tell his story from “beginning to end with as much co-operation from the players as possible” (p. 261-2).

Christopher (2012) makes it clear that understanding these archetypes and being able to communicate them to players is an important part of playing, since all participants could then agree to “the kind of relationship those players would prefer to have with the GM,” which can minimize “friction between the Dungeon Master and players” (p. 262). Why a lack of friction is

desirable is not discussed, however one can assume that Christopher comes from the position that the ultimate goal of the game is fun, and to intrude on that fun with potential fighting is not wanted, however much this might conflict with Kociatkiewicz's (2000) conclusion regarding the arbitrariness of the game-master position.

Ewalt (2013) cites a powerful source of what makes a good game-master and game. In an interview with early employee of TSR Inc., Frank Mentzer, Mentzer tells him that the game master and players must communicate above all else.

Find out what they want from the game, what rules ... what level of interaction... find out what grabs people and cater to it. The ideal game is a player-driven game. They are not acting in a play that you wrote. You are presenting a setting, you are doing the stage dressing and letting *them* come up with the play.

Remember, the game-master is part of the group. It is not an adversarial situation ... the game master has to be able to transcend his own desires and evolve. (Ewalt, pp. 236-7)

Ewalt (2013) takes away that to be a successful game-master requires "knowing yourself" (p. 242). If the game-master is not having fun, neither will his players. "Play what you know, and love what you play" (p. 242).

A lot of the responsibility for how game challenges are resolved falls on the position of the game-master. Neuenschwander (2008) comments that some game-masters let players roll dice to see if they, for example, solve a riddle, or use their charisma to persuade others. Other GMs might decide to "leave the players to flounder helplessly until they figure it out, with no assistance from any source" (p. 195). As the arbiter of rules, then, a game-master's position is one that traditionally holds considerable power and authority over the tensions that exist in a game.

The game-master's duty as main storyteller has an integral role in ensuring the positive experience of their players. For example, a character may be faced with a moral dilemma that could negatively affect the rest of the group. Weighing options is crucial, and discussing with the

group important in the spirit of cooperation. But while some groups work well cooperatively together, “in other situations, the characters clash with regard to their motivations and paradigms” (Bowman, 2010, p. 117), forcing the game-master to help dwell in the friction with the characters, ultimately collaborating to generate a richer narrative. Again, in game-play, this was and still largely is a unique experience to the tabletop role-playing game. As Brackin (2012) highlights, even now, in the age of complex virtual worlds and astonishing computer graphics, only the TRPG offers the chance for both players and game-master to creatively improvise their dilemmas:

This is the fundamental difference between any CRPG and a tabletop game. A computer simulation will always be controlled, enclosed, and constructed environment. This closed-system model by definition denies the player the same types of choice as an open system and also denies the DM the opportunity to spontaneously create a mysterious ‘something’ behind the next tree if the players need (or perhaps deserve) it. (Brackin, p. 249)

Cook (2009) refers to this as “flexibility in action” (p.101). While TRPGs are serialized like some television shows, “the television series scriptwriter does not have to react to the unplanned actions of his or her characters” (p. 101), thus the planning that a game-master does is always ongoing, being modified continually. While spontaneity is important, a game-master is responsible for creating an entire game setting. Cook writes that the GM needs to “know a setting well enough that when a player asks a question, there is a ready answer” (p. 98). This could be an answer known or one made up, but the GM must feel confident in its consistency with the game setting either way, since “the players make decisions for their characters based on their knowledge of the world. If the information they receive does not make sense in the context at hand they cannot make meaningful decisions” (p. 98). And while the game-master might be making these planning decisions only seconds in front of the players’ perspectives, Cook writes that it is crucial that they do not know it. “This would imply that their actions have no

consequence—that the game-master can merely rearrange the world to suit his or her ultimate goals no matter what the players do” (p. 102).

Episode 4: A Methodological Campaign

Introduction

This project seeks to evoke thoughtfulness from readers as they encounter moments during a narrative where, as a game-master, I dwelled in in-between spaces of planned and lived curricula. What did I do in those moments? What happened? How did my players react? And what could those reactions mean for teaching and learning?

As a methodology, autoethnography attempts to evoke multiple facets of a story. It is postmodernist in that it demands to put to task forms of social science that claim to be objective, ones in which, as Norman Denzin (1992) tells us, “privilege the researcher over the subject, method over subject matter, and maintain commitments to outmoded conceptions of validity, truth, and generalizability” (p. 20). Defining it as “a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts” (p. 710), Spry (2001) maintains that this form of writing “resists Grand Theorizing and the facade of objective research that decontextualizes subjects and searches for singular truth” (p. 710). Decentering the researcher’s position through an evocation of the cultural, autoethnography does not work to glorify the experience of the researcher, the researched, or the culturally situated in its practice. Its goal is to practice “an artful, poetic, and emphatic social science” (Ellis, 2004, p. 30), providing the readers with the deepest sense of the “complexities of lived experience” (Ellis, p. 30). Russell (1999) reminds us that the complexities of lived experience of the autoethnographer are not used to make “grand scientific or totalizing claims,” but as the autoethnographer folds and entangles their own life stories in with the life stories of others, the *I* in autoethnography is always “uncertain, tentative and speculative” (p.

277). In doing so, they “blur the usual distinctions between self and other” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002, p.71).

As a game-master and role-player I am surrounded by stories in progress. Ones that I help prepare but ultimately only contribute to with the rest of my players. I value that I am only a piece of a whole, and that the stories that players and I create together become, like many cultural traditions where stories are integral for learning, something more for someone else. As Holman Jones (2005) summarizes nicely,

Autoethnography is...

Setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections among life and art, experience and theory, evocation and explanation... and then letting go, hoping for readers who will bring the same careful attention to your words in the context of their own lives. (Holman Jones, p. 765)

Autoethnographic Fragments

I recognize as a method, autoethnography is as fragmented as many of the narratives written under its name. It is at work and in tension with itself, and in that respect this project acknowledges and works through autoethnography’s liminal nature. In order to create a narrative that aligns with the liminality and multiple realities of the fantasy role-playing game, I needed to borrow from a collection of post-modernist approaches of textual representation, arranged purposely for this project, using the best suited methodological materials. In essence, I needed a bricolage. Bricolage is understood “to involve the process of employing [...] methodological strategies as they are needed in the unfolding context of the research situation” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 316). Just as autoethnography seeks to hold to task the complexities of lived experience, Kicheloe and McLaren remind us that bricolage “exists out of respect for the complexity of the lived world” (p.317). Because qualitative inquiry unfolds, sometimes in unpredictable ways, the tools needed to conduct the inquiry unfold with it. The researcher-as-bricoleur becomes the inventor, the methods of research become the invention,

...and the telling of the tales—the representation—becomes the art, even though, as *bricoleurs*, we all know that we are not working with standard-issue parts and we have come to suspect that there are no longer any ‘standard issue parts’ made (if ever there were) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 1061).

To create my narrative, I borrow the following from the woodpile of autoethnography: Ellis’ (2004) notion of the reflexive ethnographic narrative, Lincoln and Guba’s (2005) understanding of messy texts, Ronai’s (1995/1998/2002) layered narratives, and Denzin’s (2013) approach of mystory.

Ellis (2004) writes that reflexive narrative “focus on a culture or subculture and authors use their life story in that culture to look more deeply at self-other interactions. This approach offers insight into how the researcher changed as a result of observing others” (p. 46). When the researcher uses their own experience being a part of that culture, the emphasis is on “the ethnographic dialogue or encounter between the narrator and members of the group being studied” (p. 48). I am particularly motivated by creating a narrative that highlights changes that I endured as I learned from the other players in my game, and how those changes might be said to be useful to an educational discourse.

Lincoln and Guba (2005), demonstrate how post-modernist textual representation can work to confront and dismantle the illusions that traditional texts are in danger of inscribing in us, that lived experience is simpler than it really is and that if not careful, they can reinforce old stereotypes and discriminations. One way around this is through the use of a *messy text*.

They are texts that seek to break the binary between science and literature, to portray the contradiction and truth of human experience, to break the rules in the service of showing, even partially, how real human beings cope with both the eternal verities of human existence and the daily irritations and tragedies of living that existence. (Lincoln & Guba, p. 184)

Messy texts get that way by breaking down the structures of established textual norms. They are often non-linear, written instead in a way that better reflects the realities of the research context. They require researchers to wear many hats, from poets to storytellers to performers, all

with the intent of deconstructing “the forms of tyranny embedded in representational practices” (Lincoln & Guba, p. 184). One researcher who employs a kind of messy text, that she calls a layered text, is Carol Ronai.

Ronai (1995) understands how more traditional narrative forms of science “force-feed a particular understanding of the world masquerading as *the* understanding of the world” (p. 396). Instead, through layered paragraphs, Ronai’s (1995/1998/2005) approach juxtaposes first-person narrative with theoretical information that informs and supplements the study she is conducting. These paragraphs are not necessarily linear, or occurring with a traditional conception of beginning, middle, and end. She writes,

If I am communicating self to self with readers via the written text; and if I consider the structure of the self [...] not to be a linear experience but a fragmented, self-adjusting one [...]; why should texts be limited in a linear format? (Ronai, 1995, p. 399)

She invokes memories of the research subject in detailed paragraphs that cast emotion, experience, and introspection onto the reader. From the smaller stories, a larger narrative appears, highlighting the life experiences of the research subject. The resulting text is an impressionistic account that “appeals to the authority of the readers’ own experiences of the text” rather than the structure of traditional ethnographic accounts that perpetuate the myth of the silent researcher and/or create hierarchal structures with the researcher at the very top (Ronai, 1995, p. 399).

Denzin’s (2003) description of the mystory draws from me a partial purpose of this study: “the writer of a mystory seeks a form of writing and performing that opens new ways of presenting the plural self in its multiple situations” (p. 42). As a planner, a player, a person, and multiple personas, I see the mystory, coupled with a layered approach, a way of framing each of the pluralities of the game-master in unique moments. Denzin writes that the mystory is, above all, a performance. The current study does not hold to that aesthetic, however many of mystory’s

traits as a post-modern method have been used in the production of my own narrative. The mystory is a text made up of epiphanies, with the goal “to produce a sudden awakening on the part of the viewer” (p. 42). These epiphanies—“critical biographical experiences” (p. 34), Denzin notes—are liminal in that they often represent experiences that are detached from daily life, characterized by periods of intensity. They are “ruptures” in daily life “connected to moments of breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration or schism, crossing from one space to another” (p. 34). The mystory begins with these ruptures, and works through them with the audience present. Denzin is careful to note that they are “true in experience, but not necessarily true *to* experience” (p. 37), providing the author/researcher with the freedom to craft an evocative text that operates “in the liminal spaces of culture” (p. 37).

The writer of a mystory offers an appropriate tangent to the game-master of a tabletop role-playing game. Unlike a traditional textual representation that has an author and a reader, or the presenter and the presented to, the audience of a mystory “co-performs the text, and the writer, as narrator, functions as a guide, a commentator, a co-performer” (Denzin, 2013, p. 133). Like a game-master who may plan a narrative but needs other player participants for it to exist, the mystory dismantles traditional binaries of when to listen and when to speak, and instead makes each member of the audience participatory in a cultural exchange, moving them to “reflective, critical action, not just emotional catharsis” (Denzin, 2003, p. 37).

Autoethnography in Practice

This bricolage of post-modernist, theoretical materials will be used to construct my autoethnography. The fragmented nature of the layered autoethnographic narrative, while difficult, is something I desire. The effect pulls readers in different directions, always asking that they form and question their own interpretation, creating a tug-of-war reminder that while there are multiple perspectives to be drawn to, the unsettling tension between them can be a third

space of possibility. What remains unwritten between each layer? What is unwrite-able?

Morawski & Palulis (2009) remind us that, “the slopes of auto/ethno/graphy offer intervals for breaks and gaps and swerves” (p. 9). Between my experiences as a game-master, the tabletop role-playing game, and the writing, are the unrealized slopes in which this study climbs and falls, as well as the wading valleys in-between. Through these treks, the game-master engages in a performance with his participants.

The Events

This autoethnographic project draws from three distinct events where I acted as the game-master, each of which casts light on a particular experience of in-dwelling between the tensions of the curriculum-as-plan and the curriculum-as-lived.

Event one. We’ve been friends since grade eight, selectively secluded from the rest of the school as the smart kids in the academic stream. Knowing this, I wonder whether the decision to take up tabletop role-playing games later in life was inevitable. But after I returned to Montreal after two years of teaching in Ulaanbaatar, we decided to combine our mutual tendency for seclusion in dark basements into a role-playing game. We chose the dark fantasy role-playing game *Dragon Age*, by Green Ronin publishing. A couple of us had played the computer game of the same name and loved the lore at it contained. The tabletop version promised the same rich fantasy lore, similar character types, dark storylines filled with tension and danger where it was always unsure whether characters would have the edge over their enemies. We started in person, playing once a week. I decided to lead the group as the game-master. When I made the move to the Ottawa to pursue a Masters degree, we continued playing online. Even though each of us faced a computer screen instead of each other, the protracted storytelling continued to occur in the imaginations of the players. The overarching narrative we followed was one I wrote myself, weaving in the magic and lush settings that playing the video game had given me. As the game-

master I created narratives, characters, and encounters for players, writing extensive plans prior to each session, and notes about the actions of players and their characters as the game unfolded. Using computer software, it was also possible for me to record our sessions for the purpose of review. All of these artifacts will be used in order to craft the necessary field notes for my narrative. By the fall of 2014, our game petered out. I was busy with work, school, and another opportunity for a different role-playing game arose, represented in event three.

Event two. In the cold, early months of 2014 my mind raced with how and what changes could be made to how we educate. Through my program supervisor I had heard of a newly-formed learning center. This place offered a democratic model where teens could learn according to counter-culture education movements. I wasn't ready for the amount of freedom I would be given when the program coordinator asked me, "so, what could you teach?" That was not a question I was prepared to answer, nor was it ever asked of me in the traditional education system. I offered to lead two classes, one of which was a class centered around a tabletop role-playing game. Of the three events in this study, this moment is unique in that it represents an instance where my intention was to explicitly use the TRPG as a teaching tool. The official title of my class was *Role for Initiative, Development, and Identity: TRPGs to Define YOU*, where I wish to create the possibility of using the TRPG as a way of allowing teens to learn about themselves and the world through a role-playing lens. There were nine regular players, absences notwithstanding. Again we used *Dragon Age* as our game system. With nine players, this was a large and difficult game, and adjustments to the rules and to the narrative were needed to I was to keep it entertaining. This time, I borrowed a narrative directly from the manual rather than creating my own. Our sessions were each one hour, once a week, lasting approximately four months. It was a difficult game not only because the average TRPG group is half that size and plays for usually double the time, but, as I quickly found out, the energy and imagination of a

group of teenagers playing a role-playing game was boundless. Again, session planning notes were written and kept, and notes were kept after each session. These notes about individual sessions as well as the experience of volunteering will be the artifacts that I draw from to create my narrative.

Event three. The fall of 2014 brought many changes. The *Dragon Age* game between my three friends was waning. I was transitioning into independent research for my thesis, and hoping to work more as a supply teacher. Not insignificantly, I was also offered the chance to play in a different game setting, that of *Dungeons & Dragons*, on the condition that I would uphold the approach they take to their gaming group: each player would game-master their own campaign, and multiple campaign stories would be ongoing concurrently. Since October, we have played mostly once per week. We are six players altogether, most of whom have decades more experience with the *D&D* system than myself. I have been the game-master of this group for approximately six months, running the adventure supplement published by Wizards of the Coast called *Hoard of the Dragon Queen* (Baur & Winter, 2014). Again, even though the story is pre-written, there are many planning requirements, all of which have been recorded and kept. Notes have been documented during and after each session, and reflections on the experiences have been kept. Furthermore, there have been plenty of opportunities for the players to surprise me with how they tackle game situations. While this game remains ongoing, I cull data specifically from events between October 2014 and April 2015.

Writing the Autoethnographic Narrative

I am cognizant that a section that could effectively be titled “how to write a story” should be written cautiously. However there are certain principles of story-writing and autoethnographic writing that help guide this research. Firstly, I follow the autoethnographic goal of evoking a particular situation so that it might call others to consider and to act (Ellis, 2004). Even

implications for education are sometimes storied, not simply told, such that the reader might draw their own conclusion and not accept my own as fact. Knowing this, I collect information that will drive my story.

In her methodological novel *The Autoethnographic I*, Ellis (2004) writes that, after the researcher chooses a culture or subculture that they wish to study, they should always experience the culture under study, such that the researcher can “use their life story to look more closely at self-other interactions” (p.46). From these interactions, the researcher composes “autoethnographic field notes” (Ellis, 2004, p. 113), keeping in mind that a story is a desired outcome. These field notes demonstrate thoughts, emotions, situations, and anecdotes that could be woven into a larger narrative, and are always gathered keeping research questions in mind. In the current study, this means that I reflect on my experiences as game-master as they are located in the artifacts of these sessions. Once field notes are written, Ellis suggests written drafts of the larger narrative that adhere to the traits of autoethnographic texts by constructing details, dialogue, setting, and other narrative elements that help to best situate the narratives as localized and specific to the inquiry.

Leavy and Fiction as a Research Practice.

Narratives require characters. In this study, I draw from my own recollections and scribbles of events that happened, around shared spaces with other individuals. But since I do not intend to publish interviews or direct transcriptions of what was said around those playing spaces, I need a way to fictionalize the participants, to protect their anonymity. Leavy’s (2013) work on fiction as a research practice is important here. Noting that the “lines between fiction and nonfiction, and writers and researchers, have long been blurred” (p. 25), she justifies fiction as a tool for exhibiting the “complexity of lived experience” (p. 37). Leavy offers four guidelines for fictionalizing individuals while ensuring that the complexity of their humanity remains intact.

Verisimilitude and Particulars. Verisimilitude is the quality of portraying the lives of people and their settings realistically. Leavy (2013) writes that not only does this help to capture the person or event with believability, but that qualitative researchers have an “ethical obligation” to promote verisimilitude for the sake of achieving “multidimensionality and [to] provide context” (p. 39). A way of achieving verisimilitude is by capturing the idiosyncrasies of individuals and settings. Illuminating the finer details of the research context provides a way of applying a “focused reflection and analysis on what otherwise escapes our attention” (Leavy, 2003, p. 42). By capturing what would otherwise escape our attention, we are drawn into lives that are not our own, not only making visible a line between *me* and *you* we did not previously see, but, in seeing that line, make the decision to step over and experience life on the other side of it.

Inner Voice and Narrative Point of View. Both of these tools help to demonstrate the occurring thoughts of participants in a study and help to emphasize their lived experience. Leavy (2013) writes that the ability to use first and third person narrative to “shed light on what people do and why, on how they feel and act” is exactly what makes fiction and fiction-based research powerful and distinctive (p. 44). Point of view and interiority makes evident that the narrator of fiction has their own thoughts and beliefs that are different from the other characters. Furthermore, it helps to “weave complexity and nuance into our writing, and provide social, political, or other commentary as a context for understanding individual characters and character types” (p. 45). Ultimately, all four of these techniques will be employed as I construct my narrative to ensure that, while fictional, they exhibit the humanity of my participants.

Limitations of this Methodology

For many, validity in post-modern research is questionable. But in the loss of modernist frames of reference, the post-modernist researcher seeks only to invent. I follow Lather (1993)

and others who position validity as “a space of constructed visibility of the practices of methodology” (p. 676). By recording my methodology, I make it visible to the public, and make myself vulnerable to the discomfort of a social science community. Further, I suggest that this study’s methodology falls under one of Lather’s four frames of validity, that of rhizomatic validity. Rhizomatic validity, and a rhizomatic methodology does not seek to grow in a particular structure, but rather encourages “anachronistic growth” (p. 680), growth that is non-linear and is more of a “journey among intersections [...] through a multi-centered complexity” (p. 680). This understanding mirrors the complexity and liminal nature of the tabletop role-playing game as well as the complex range of thoughts, imaginations and interventions that a game-master deals with during his games.

It also appeals to an inquiry that occurs *through* the writing, which as Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) remind us, should be considered rhizomatic work. Writing is a method of inquiry in and of itself, a form of data collection and analysis that happens in the moment. Especially when the study focuses on a narrative, not only could data potentially escape the researcher’s grasp if it is not written out first, but in writing, we “make accidental and fortuitous connections [we] could not foresee or control” (p. 970). In this sense, I anticipate the messiness of my text. I want it to challenge the boundaries of the pedagogy of the game-master. I want narratives that “move from the center to the margins to comment upon and decenter the center; that forgo closed, bounded worlds for more open-ended and less conveniently encompassed” (Lincoln & Guba, 2005, p. 184). But I also want to bring a sense of humanity to these margins. Telling friends and family that part of my leisure time is devoted to fantasy, is intimidating. There is a vulnerability in announcing that, as an adult, I play role-playing games, despite findings that suggest that the image of the gamer does not always fit the stereotype (Curran, 2011). Like Pelias (2013) I “persist in believing in the power of allowing a vulnerable self to emerge” (p. 388). As a

teacher and researcher I believe in the importance of a vulnerable self in education. Lest we forget, vulnerability can be integral to developing and maintaining of the art of learning and teaching, and requires us to “relinquish a focus on control and mastery, relinquish a focus on an enclosed and controlling self” (Dale & Frye, 2009, p. 123).

This relinquishing contributes to “a social science about human life rather than *on* subjects” (Lincoln & Guba, 2005, p. 184). Lincoln and Guba (2005) and others reject modernist research that attempts to provide the “‘real’ objective details of a ‘real’ person’s life” (Denzin, 2014, p. 14), which is why autoethnography begins by recognizing that while there is a *real* person who exists, they have also entangled themselves in the lives of others, with the range of human emotional experience. “This feeling, thinking, living, breathing person is the ‘real’ subject” of autoethnography” (Denzin, p. 12). To write autoethnography is not simply to make sense of this real person nor is it to describe how this person makes sense of the world. In crafting their narrative from the experiences of their lives, the researcher works reflexively toward “a consideration of how reflexivity can be practiced when making sense of oneself is understood as occurring through the construction of the other” (Britzman, 1995, p. 231).

Lastly, while I keep using the term “tabletop” as the kind of role-playing game being played, it does not escape me that two of three sources of game data occurred over the internet and not a table. I submit that the difference is negligible. The site of the action is not the table itself, nor is it the computer screen. As manuals will attest, the game happens in the imagination of the players (Pelias, 2011; Crawford, 2014). The extent of how the distance between each of our imaginations and how that may have affected the actions of each player as well as the game-master is little cause for concern.

Space 2: Narrative

Preface–Cast of Characters

Before most fantasy role-playing games can begin, each player is asked to create a character. The character's name, backstory, personality, ideals and flaws, as well as their ability statistics that help them navigate the game, are written on a character sheet. These ability numbers help to define how strong, agile, or charismatic the character is at the beginning of the game. These numbers are used in conjunction with dice in order to determine the degree of success of a particular action the player wishes their character make. As the game progresses and the characters change over the course of their adventure, so too do the abilities and traits listed on the character sheet, providing a character that develops and changes over the course of the game.

To that end, and to immerse the reader in the world of the game, I have created a condensed character sheet for each character in my narrative, including the game-master. Included at the end of these character sheets are brief rationales for these characters, whom they represent, and how they were brought into being.

<h2>Salazar</h2>	
<p>Player Name: Aidan</p> <p>Race: Human</p> <p>Class: Barbarian</p>	<p>Personality Traits: <i>I bluntly say what other people are hiding or hinting at. I ask a lot of questions, and I'm not ashamed of it.</i></p>
<p>Character background: Urchin <i>Urchins grew up poor and alone, learning to provide for themselves. Many of them are wise beyond their years because of their hardships. Most folk believe that the urchin will never make it, and mostly they are right, but there are still a select few that rise above their struggles and survive. You are one of them.</i></p>	
<p>Inventory List:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A maul • Two hand axes • 4 javelins • A chainmail shirt • Explorer's Backpack • Thieves' tools • A disguise kit • A small knife • A pet mouse • A map of the city I grew up in • A leather pouch with ten gold pieces. 	<p>Ideals: <i>The children of this world are suffering at the hands of misguided adults, and the world needs to learn that young ones are equally capable at contributing to a functioning society.</i></p> <p>Flaws: <i>It's not stealing if I need it more than somebody else!</i></p>
<p>Character backstory: <i>Salazar was born and raised on the streets. He never knew his parents. As soon as he could escape the orphanage, he did, and because of fights that he was all too happy to start, nobody stopped him from leaving.</i></p> <p><i>Salazar prefers a weapon as blunt and to the point as he is, and swears to make everyone aware of the terrible conditions bemoaning youth... if by force, then so be it.</i></p>	
<p>Character rationale: Salazar is the character I have created to embody the group of teenagers I worked with at the learning center. During our gaming sessions, these teens exhibited two overarching personality types: those motivated by combat, and those motivated by the game narrative. To resolve these two personality types, Salazar is a human barbarian. Barbarians by nature are motivated by fighting, but as humans, they can sometimes be tempted into sensibility and curiosity. As the <i>D&D Player's Handbook</i> suggests, "whatever drives them, humans are the innovators, the achievers, and the pioneers of the worlds" (Crawford, 2014, p. 29).</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div style="width: 45%;"> <p><i>Barbarians come alive in the chaos of combat. Their courage in the face of danger makes barbarians perfectly suited for adventuring. Wandering is often a way of life for their native tribes, and the rootless life of the adventurer is little hardship for a barbarian.</i> (Crawford, 2014, p. 47)</p> </div> <div style="width: 45%;"> <p><i>Whatever drives them, humans are the innovators, the achievers, and the pioneers of the world.</i> (Crawford, 2014, p. 29)</p> <p>Salazar's personality combines those of the teenagers who played in this game, including those who were inquisitive, frequently questioning the game, those who loved everything about the fantasy genre, and those who wanted nothing more than to spend time with their friends.</p> </div> </div>	

Perrin Darkcloak

<p>Player Name: Mark</p> <p>Race: Halfling</p> <p>Class: Rogue</p>	<p>Personality Traits: <i>I am always calm, no matter the situation. I never raise my voice or let my emotions control me. I always plan first, act second.</i></p>
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Character background: Criminal pickpocket
The pickpocket has the swiftest hands you're likely to meet, but be glad if you haven't shaken them or you've likely lost your watch, too. Some criminals steal because they have to; others steal for the pleasure of it, because they can. Most criminals avoid the law, if not fear it, since they are well-known and looked for in many large cities.

<p>Inventory List:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A rapier • A short bow and quiver of arrows • Leather armor • Two daggers • A pair of dice (loaded with lead) • Thieves' tools • A crowbar • Dark clothes • A leather pouch with 15 gold pieces. 	<p>Ideals: <i>I am fiercely loyal to my friends, not to any ideals, and everyone else can take a trip down the Styx for all I care.</i></p> <p>Flaws: <i>As good as I want to be, I can't escape my own desires and often make a selfish choice when faced with an opportunity to be a good person. It's something I'm working on, quietly. Just don't mention it.</i></p>
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Character backstory:
 Perrin is a classic thief with a twist. While he often gets himself into situations that require quick decisions, he often takes too long to make them, and often resolves just to serve himself rather than helping others. It's a bad habit that he's trying to break.

He was cast out of a community of thieves for precisely this mistake. Once prized for his small size and nimbleness, one summer, at the height of tourist season (and high prices for food at the market), he decided to withhold some of the money he had appropriated. Himself and the band of thieves he worked with suffered dearly from his superiors as a result. All money for the following month needed to be split up amongst the rest of the thieves, Perrin and his group receiving none. The shortage of food led to his abilities suffering even more. Ultimately, he was left to wander the streets alone. He vowed never to let his friends down again. Of course, mistakes do happen...

Character rationale:

Perrin is the character I chose to represent the first group of players that I led as game-master. These are three close friends, all of which who have had experience with role-playing games. For their character, I have chosen the Lightfoot Halfling race. Halflings are creatures tempted by creature comforts. Friends, stories, delicious food and drink. While many live sedentary lifestyles in agrarian communities, there are even those who desire the open road. Perrin is one of these.

Keeping with the nature of the three participants, I have chosen the *rogue* class for Perrin. The rogue is adept at versatility, which is important for any party of adventurers.

The diminutive halflings survive in a world full of larger creatures by avoiding notice or, barring that, avoiding offense. Standing about 3 feet tall, they appear relatively harmless and so have managed to survive for centuries in the shadow of empires. (Crawford, 2014, p. 26)

Rogues rely on skill, stealth, and their foes' vulnerabilities to get the upper hand in any situation. They have a knack for finding the solution to just about any problem. (Crawford, 2014, p. 94)

<h2>Naeris</h2>	
<p>Player Name: Russell</p> <p>Race: High Elf</p> <p>Class: Warlock</p>	<p>Personality Traits:</p> <p><i>Sarcasm and insults are my weapons of choice for those who don't know me well.</i></p> <p><i>I can persuade almost anyone to do almost anything, with a sharp tongue and keen wit.</i></p>
<p>Character background: Acolyte</p> <p><i>Acolytes typically spend their life in service to a god or gods, whether good or evil. Perhaps you were the leader of a cult, or the priest of a small church? In whichever way you choose, you have decided to follow instead of lead. But, of course, things do not always stay the same...</i></p>	
<p>Inventory List:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A cloak • Arcane focus • Leather armor • An astrological map • A quarterstaff, made of hard and twisted wood. • A leather pouch with 35 gold pieces. 	<p>Ideals:</p> <p><i>I am charitable to those who need it, when they need it, however, you must be able to prove your need.</i></p> <p>Flaws:</p> <p><i>I'm convinced that no one can fool me as well as I can fool others.</i></p> <p><i>Cross me and find yourself with a rap on the head... or worse.</i></p>
<p>Character backstory:</p> <p>Naeris is a warlock. This means her magical ability is defined by a pact with an other-worldly being. In this case, Naeris has made a pact with Tharizdun, the Chained God. Tharizdun offered an apprenticeship to Naeris, knowledge in exchange for small favors and occasional tasks.</p> <p>Naeris has always been interested in reading and speaking to the stars. One night, while laying in the tall grasses of the south, the blinking of the stars sped up, twinkling faster than she had ever seen. Naeris found that she able to communicate directly with them. The swirling bodies promised her immeasurable power in exchange for her service. Over the years she has learned much about the world simply by looking up above it. She has been tested by the deity revealed to her as The Chained God, her ultimate overseer. The knowledge bestowed on her came in the form of magical study. Judging the vastness of outer space as the only truth that matters, she makes her way in the world by letting opportunities come to her, mistrusting everything until a sign is revealed.</p>	
<p>Character Rationale:</p> <p>Naeris embodies the most recent group that I have GMed, a group of veteran role-players. As such, I have made her a warlock, the only player in the party that uses magic to cast spells. Generally, spellcasters represent more advanced characters. They require keeping a list of spells at the ready, and knowing which spell is tactically best to cast at any given time.</p> <p>As a <i>D&D</i> class, the warlock is unique. Unlike other spellcasters for whom magic is innate, the warlock can only cast spells because of a pact with a patron. This relationship offers the possibility for sophisticated narrative development, with which most novice players might not be comfortable.</p>	<p><i>Warlocks are seekers of the knowledge that lies hidden in the fabric of the multiverse. Through pacts made with mysterious beings of supernatural power, warlocks unlock magical effects both subtle and spectacular. (Crawford, 2014, p. 105)</i></p>

The Game-Master

<p>Player Name: Graeme</p> <p>Race: Bard Class: Human</p>	<p>Personality Traits: <i>I am committed to advocating for learning alternatives.</i> <i>I can see and put into place creative solutions to difficult problems, and do not shy away from hard work.</i></p>
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Background: Education Researcher
The education researcher knows that no answer comes easy, and that sometimes no answer comes at all. The more the education researcher studies, the more complicated he understands learning to be. His research helps to better inform how and what knowledge is collected and passed on through the generations, and also who decides what that knowledge is.

<p>Inventory List:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A bottle of black ink • One fountain pen • Two notebooks (labelled “research” and “GM Notes”) • A thesis proposal with three research questions I have yet to be able to answer • Commoner clothes (well-worn) • A reusable water bottle • One week’s rations • An acoustic guitar (bought used) • A pad of looseleaf paper • Hooded sweater and backpack. 	<p>Ideals: <i>I uphold a good story over all else. I will do what is right to create a satisfying narrative experience. Crafts take practice, no matter what they are. A good part of everyday shall be dedicated to mine. Hard work is to be celebrated.</i></p> <p>Flaws: <i>I have been known to overlook obvious answers to complex situations, favouring instead making things difficult for myself.</i> <i>I follow the motto “the obstacle is the path” too closely.</i> <i>I find it difficult to adhere to linearity and structure.</i></p>
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Character backstory:
 The Game-Master is a sucker for punishment at the promise of an opportunity to be the forefront of a good story.

From a family who dedicated their lives to children, his father provided counsel to many that were struggling. As a young man the game master discovered that he had particular knack at delivering information in front of an audience, and the desire for social change, imbued from his father's struggles.

The obstacle-ridden path often requires stopping on the wayside for a few short breaths. During this downtime, he leads and attempts to engage others in fantastic tales of adventure that help steady his breath. Sometimes he bites more than he can chew, but he remains steadfast in believing that his players can weave as much into a story as he can. The responsibility is shared.

Character rationale:

The game master does not usually create a character sheet for himself, since he is responsible for many more than one character throughout the game, and since the game master isn’t a game persona itself. However, I think it is an important exercise to think about how my personality as TRPG player, researcher, and game-master translates into the various categories and boxes listed on the character sheet describing ideals, flaws, and abilities. In some ways, by filling out these boxes I have created a character of myself. In others, this information is a way of confronting and making evident my biases as a researcher and gamer.

In bringing RPG scholarship to the 21st century, Jones (2012) invites RPG scholars to “be more reflexive about not only their sampling but also their own biases as RPG players and members of the subculture,” since “all researchers have biases that they bring to their research” (p. 103). Doing so “makes our research conversant” (p. 105) to those both familiar and unfamiliar, in this case, with RPGs. In that light, what is written in this character sheet is in part a refraction of my biases that I feel are important to emphasize as a game-master.

A bard weaves magic through words and music to inspire allies, demoralize foes, manipulate minds, create illusions, and even heal wounds [...] Bards say that the multiverse was spoken into existence, that the words of the gods gave it shape, and that echoes of these primordial words of creation still resound throughout the cosmos. The music of bards is an attempt to snatch and harness those echoes, subtly woven into their spells and powers.
(Crawford, 2014, p. 51)

If I were to apply the same character creation rules that I have to the other players, as a game-master I would belong to the bard class. I may not be able to cast spells, but if magic is understood as the power to influence the course of events through mysterious forces, then the game-master indeed wields magic. The bard is more than just a singer. He or she is a versatile performer, capable of influencing and inspiring others with words, calling others into action. As a game-master, these two abilities are of the utmost importance as he tries to engage and motivate his players to push their characters forward.

The greatest strength of bards is their sheer versatility [...] They have a wide-ranging knowledge of many subjects and a natural aptitude that lets them do almost anything well.
(Crawford, 2014, p. 51)

As an educator, this resonates as well with me. I attempt to motivate and challenge my students, calling them to act on the lessons of the class rather than passively absorb knowledge. I do this by, in a sense, performing, inspiring, snatching and harnessing some of the most influential words of humanity and weaving them into my performances.

To suit the study, I have created the *education researcher* background for my bardic character, one that I created to further emphasize my vocation.

 **Encounter: Beginning; Stuck** 

Of all the monsters, demons, hideous beasts and heinous villains that come to life in a tabletop role-playing game, I have yet to be confronted by anything more disgusting than the dreaded blinking cursor. One faces me now, sitting on the cold and empty terrain of my blank word document. It blinks, a silent but crippling reminder of my failure. *No words yet? Fine. Blink. Still nothing? Mm. Not to worry. I'll be here.*

It isn't my adversary. This is not a fight to bloodshed, but the cursor's lack of judgment, its apathetic condescension forces a cold bead of sweat to trickle down by back. *Oh, still not a single word written? How was that YouTube video, though? Funny? Good. That's good. Okay, well, I'm going to keep at it. You'll get there. I'll wait.*

In four hours, three friends will knock on my door, happy to be finished work and ready to escape into a story they've helped create, and I have no fuel to get that story going. I have yet to prepare a single encounter for them. No conflict, riddle, puzzle or role-play, even after pouring over my notes from last week's session to remind me where we were. Ah, where we were... after a lot of humming and hawing over what to do about it, we were staring at a small hole in a rock wall, no bigger than the largest gemstone. From the hole was a sorrowful weeping, one that, ultimately, got the best of the party's curiosity. They decided to widen the small hole, enough so that they could crawl in and investigate. And then the worst happened.



“One at a time you slowly crawl through the stonework, first Perrin, then Naeris, then you, Salazar. For what seems like hours you keep to your hands and knees, scraping your shoulders and hitting your head as you squirm through. All the while the sound of a crying girl keeps you going.”

“Uh, I'm pretty sure it would be easy for Perrin to crawl through, being a 3-foot halfling and all.”

“Yes, of course he would.”

“Perrin barely has a scratch on him. In fact he feels right at home, navigating this tight space. Salazar, you and Naeris are pretty uncomfortable though, as a giant barbarian and

human warlock would be. But Perrin, suddenly you hear a rumbling sound and underneath your palm you feel a crack. The ground underneath you starts to crumble and fall away, taking you with it. It starts to recede backward—

“—Holy shit.”

“—Cracks form underneath Naeris and Salazar and split, turning ground into rubble and powder, and all three of you begin to cascade downward—”

“—I guess today's the day our game-master's finally going to kill us. Whelp, better roll up some new characters, boys—”

“—quickly, into darkness.

“And that's where we're stopping this week. We'll continue next time.”



I remember narrating that part with a smile on my face. It is incredible to catch the players in a moment, out of their seats and gripping the edge of the table like that one had them. I knew it as soon as I heard Mark say *kill us*. Not *kill our characters*, Mark said *us*. That's what I'm looking for in my games. A commitment that runs so deep they misplace the fact that they're playing a game. When their player identity merges with their character identity, they've stopped cracking jokes and are concerned only with the fantasy world created around the table. A reality that isn't.



I exhale, loudly, thinking about the six hours of work I put into creating everything leading up to that moment. How will I get there this time?

It's times like these, stuck in my cramped apartment's cramped office, surrounded by books, game manuals, dice, notes, and a looming deadline, that the burden of planning for this past time oppresses me. Outside, the October sky is compelling. I could go anywhere right now. I could have chosen one of innumerable hobbies, more practical and that would have provided something tangible to hold up to the light and admire. Instead I have opted to tell a story, in a made up world, with made up people and made up magic, and spend hours of my precious time doing it.

It is difficult to describe just how much work is involved when a game-master attempts to plan a successful fantasy role-playing game from beginning to end. Not *the* end, but *an* end. Let's say this is a hobby you want to get into. Assume you already enjoy the fantasy genre and its medieval, feudal societies and technologies peppered with magic, wizards, dragons, and quests, set in an imagined land where these things are possible. You can tell a gnome from a halfling, a wizard from a warlock, a forest elf from a dwarf. All that is great, but you still need to craft an adventure. Of course you can rely on tried and tested conventions—the creature in distress, the politically corrupt king, the protagonists-as-defenders of the realm, the espionage... But it needs to be original, too. Your group will meet once a week if you're lucky. Once a month if you have lives outside of the game. So you begin to plan already feeling disjointed, knowing your story will be told episodically, in chapters and subchapters that could, if you find the right players, stretch on for years. And you, the game-master, need to be the one to write it. Do you have the right story to keep players invested? Do you have *enough* story?

With me so far? Now you need a game system to help propel your story. *Dungeons & Dragons* is a popular choice, but there are many others, some tailored for specific genres and each which offer different mechanics for playing the “game” part of the story. These manuals, packed with rules that make an ambitious attempt to account for literally every conceivable situation a game could present, can stretch into the hundreds of pages. If you're the game-master, you need to be at least familiar with all of them, if not have every one of them memorized. If a player wishes to tie a letter to an arrow and fire it through an opened castle window, you need to know if she can do it: is the character proficient in archery? Does she know how to write? Can the attendant read, and if so, read the same language as the character? Does the arrow make its target or does it bounce off the castle wall? Do you succeed in getting it through the open window, but then accidentally bulls-eye the attendant? Do any of these questions matter or are

you going to allow the action to succeed or fail from the start? Depending on the system, each of these questions can be resolved differently, in literally endless ways, and it is up to the game-master to know rules well enough to be able to make it happen—or not happen—in an entertaining way.

Still here? There's also combat. Fights *will* break out. You might need to draw a map using a grid to indicate how far away each creature is from the other so that a character knows with certainty that when they swing their mace, they will hear the satisfying thud of a cracked skull. You also need to know the different combat actions that each creature can take. And don't forget tactics. You want to make your combats challenging—nobody likes a fight they can win too easily. You'll need to be organized so that the NPCs fight well, meaning you should know each of their attacks as well as anticipate the possible attacks of the players so that you can effectively post rejoinders. You want a combat which includes the five player-characters and twelve enemies, each with seven attacks and rules dictating how, when, and where they can move? Know them all. And did you account for the combat environment? Since most fights don't happen on a flat surface, how will your combat account for shifts in terrain?

Of course once you know the rules, you need to know when and how to break them. This is a story-building game, and if you and your players find yourselves in a situation where the rules would otherwise interfere with how entertaining an encounter could be, you might consider disregarding them in favor of what makes the better narrative experience. But this part of the game-master's role has more of an artful flavour. It will take time, practice, improvisation, and many mistakes.

I think about these things and pick up several plastic, polyhedral dice. I begin rolling them on the table absent-mindedly, over and over again. Yeah. Luck. Luck is exactly what I need right now. Four hours. What the hell am I doing? *Blink.*



Seven-thirty and the cool air whispers that it's nearly time to begin. I've set the table for a banquet, but in place of wine glasses and silverware there are pencils and erasers, looseleaf and character sheets, and my station is at the head of it all. This is strategic only in that it offers me the most room for what I need and allows me to scoop my vision around to look at the players when needed. There's a screen that obscures what's behind my place setting, a piece of hardboard with four bendable panels that stretch across the table, like a small voter's booth, that conceals everything in front of me up to my nose.

On the side facing the players is a mural of monsters advancing in battle. The sky is black and a vein of lightening spans its width. There are skeletons in heavy metal armor, creatures with faces that look like twisted and sadistic versions of their former selves, a dragon—of course—dark grey with protruding dark scales and glowing red eyes. And a beast like a large bear with unnatural spikes pierced right through its flesh, gobs of spit dripping from needy incisors. This is a scene depicting overwhelming odds that our heroes, the players, could one day face.

On the reverse side of the screen, each of the four bent panels contain boxes with statistics and rule reminders, divided into tables and bullet points that are sectioned like a wide cheat-sheet that I can use to keep the game going. Behind the screen, out of the players' view, a couple sets of dice. There's the standard six-sided die, called a "d6," but there's also a pyramid-shaped die, called a d4, a d8, two d10s, used separately or together to calculate percentages, a d12, and a d20, the fabled twenty-sided die. I remember taking a lot of time to pick these dice among other sets in the game store. Like I was making a significant choice about myself. The molded plastic is translucent, a cloudy grey with swirls of black and red. The numbers are engraved on the face in white for easy and quick reading. The successes and failures that these dice predict will be my responsibility, so they had better feel comfortable in my palm.

Under the dice are more papers scribbled with quickly-written notes. I have a small stack of cue cards, each one representing a different creature. There are three with the players' names on them, and then others with enemies' names on them, the weapons they wield, how much health and armor they possess, and a box with an "i" in the corner of the card to mark initiative.

Initiative determines the order of turns during combat. When combat starts, every participant makes a Dexterity check to determine their place in the initiative order [...] from the one with the highest Dexterity check to the one with the lowest. (Crawford, 2014, p. 189)

On a small, nearby coffee table I have my laptop open and facing my seat. A page is open with more notes, a description of the how I see the story progressing tonight, and a bullet-pointed list of if-statements.

- If the characters try to stand up, roll a d8. On a 4, they succeed. On a fail, they take 1d6 damage.
- If the characters don't announce that they want to walk sneakily, have them roll a stealth check. DC 15. If 2 of them fail, the player with the lowest roll trips over a stone in the ground, creates a large echo that alerts nearby goblins cooking over a fire.
- If the characters do nothing...

*The target number for an ability check or a saving throw is called a **Difficulty Class (DC)** (Crawford, 2014, p. 7).*



These are my tools. This is a game-master's battle station. I'm still scrambling to arrange everything when I hear the knock on the door.

And there they all are, cramped on my second floor landing.

"You guys carpool here or something?" Russell thrusts a large iced cappuccino in my hand before stepping in past me. Mark, still on the landing, chimes in.

"Shit, Grae, it's about the dog turds scattered by the door."

"Yeah... Sorry. I didn't have time to clean up."

"Everyone have a new character sheet to replace the one I killed last week?" In a fleeting moment I think about how comfortable I am with the word killed and taking life, even in jest.

"Aw come on," Aidan says.

"Yeah I swear if I need to roll up a new character tonight I'm going to be pissed" Russell says. "I spent hours working on Naeris' backstory. I already planned out the spells she's taking all the way to eighteen."

"You guys are level *three* right now. Level eighteen is like, years away. You really think she's going to survive that long?"

GM Note—
He means eighteenth level. As the game continues, characters accrue experience points for their actions. As they reach certain checkpoints, their character increases in level, unlocking new abilities and advantages.

“Well, we’ll be at fifth by the end of tonight, right?” Russ grins and prods at me, always trying to get more, more out of the game, out of me, the next achievement, the bonus, the better spell and power.

“Never gonna happen. Get in here you idiots.”



Aidan smirks and makes his way inside. He’s wearing his lucky t-shirt, olive green with bold cream-coloured text that stretches top to bottom and yells

**THERE AIN’T NO
PARTY LIKE A
D&D PARTY
‘CUZ A D&D PARTY
DON’T STOP**
Until the healer
is dead and we’ve
used up all our potions

He got it a few weeks ago and has worn it to each session since. By the looks of it he’s probably worn and washed it a few times outside of our sessions, too. I’ve got on my own nerdiphernalia, a navy blue shirt that looks like a craft beer label but reads “Sauron’s Dark Ale. One brew to rule them all.” It wears a bit small and my stomach more than sticks out, but it’s Friday night and I’m among friends. I’m more concerned about them judging my game than my gut.

Just a few years ago we wouldn’t have been so proud to dawn this kind of clothing. Between the *Satanic Panic* and the terrors of high school socializing, I did whatever I could *not* to show people that my interests included card magic, Japanese cartoons, and dragon slaying. But it seems like nerd culture has since emerged and thrived. These days, you’re weird if you don’t catch the latest comic book movie or watch *Game of Thrones* with religious fervor. I write this as the July 2015 edition of *Entertainment Weekly* hides tucked away under a nearby coffee table, the cover of which features Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman, headline boasting

about having the “definitive 2015 Comic-Con Preview.” When did comics become synonymous with popular culture’s idea of entertainment?



Russ puts down the cardboard drink tray and pulls out his dice bag from his backpack, setting it on the table to mark his territory. It’s a purple, faux-velvet bag that originally housed a certain Canadian whiskey which developed a cult following with tabletop RPG players. It’s big enough to hold a morass of multicolored dice, tokens, place-markers, and creature miniatures, and also because, you know, you get the added bonus of a bottle of whiskey when you buy it.

I pass around the donuts and chips and we talk shop. Russ is upset that the color paint he chose for the living room dried darker than expected. Aidan is fighting the rigors of trigonometry. Mark’s just happy to have a job to come home from. As the guys continue to talk I make last minute additions to my notes. I’m getting anxious about not having started the session. Are they feeling it too? Should I interject? I exhale deeply instead and take some time to think about the party, the kind of team I’ve seen these guys become.



As a game-master I try and feed into each of the personalities of my players and their characters. Every game encounter is fragile. I try to keep each player entertained and engaged, hoping that the urge to pull out their phones doesn’t become too much.

Grognard. *Label for veteran wargamer.*
(Emrich, “grognard”)

From the French grogner (‘snarl, grunt, growl, grumble’). (“grognard”)

I’ve been at this hobby for a few years now. I’m still new. There are grognards hiding behind their screens having spent the better part of forty years refusing to cede their place at the table. Some of them made the transition from wargaming with Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson and

have adopted a very specific style of running games reminiscent of that era: little role-playing opportunity, lots of fighting, accuracy, measurement, and sticking to the rules as written. But

there has been a shift in momentum. More and more, game designers are creating games that favour story creation and narrative experience over tactics and rules-lawyering. Even the latest edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* has either pulled back on a lot of the rules of the previous edition or simplified them to focus on what they understand as the core of the *D&D* experience, a flexible and customizable game that appeals to many different styles of play. I know myself well enough to know that I fall into this latter category. My games offer a lot of role-playing and story-building. I really believe that combat tactics, mechanics, and rules, while important, should not get in the way of the story. As I plan for our encounters, I ask myself what would be the most entertaining? I'm not subtle about it, either. The players have noticed where my biases lay, and so over time I have had to make adjustments to ensure that I am entertaining their preferred style of play, as well as my own.

“Of course, different people seek out different experiences. [...] To address that, the new edition was being conceived of as a modular, flexible system, easily customizable to individual preferences” (Ewalt, 2013, p. 205).

There is a lull at the table. The players are ready.



The party is in Lockinge, the capital of the Dalefields, a collection of towns that scrawl the south-eastern coast. They have been individually hired to travel to a hostile stretch of land in search of remnants of lost town of Windtrip, specifically, the lost tomb of Lord Onyxarm. They do not know that last part.

Rumors and legends say that Windtrip was once a prosperous city, led by the blacksmith turned-warlord Lord Gerrond Onyxarm. Having harnessed the energy of his craft, like the metal he worked, he bent and shaped an army to control the nations surrounding the Dalefields.

As the scrolls have it, Onyxarm died unceremoniously. Overseeing the Raid of Dunscreek, a village north of the Dalefields, he was struck in the abdomen by a stray bolt. The wound became infected, and he was dead before his hair fully greyed. He had left specific instructions about what to do with his remains. A hole—fifty feet deep by some interpretations—would be dug deep in the ground at the base of a mountain somewhere in the Dalefields. At the base of this hole a simple tomb, built of sand and clay from the shores of the nearby lake Iberien, without markings of wealth or finery. The only items he would take with him ground were his armor, still wrapped around his frame, his anvil, and his hammer, each one a source of strength, resolve, and a symbol to the people of the Dales of how persistence can yield even the strongest material. With these tools at his side he might continue to guide future generations with his craftsmanship from the darkest reaches of the Netherrealms. Once laid, the wooden beams that supported the massive rock chasm were to be broken, swallowing the hole and trapping the tomb in a long

darkness. All 40 000 of his cavalry's horses would trample the ground for miles in a dizzying array of patterns leading from one city to the next, so that no one would be able to determine where Onyxarm was buried.

The Greenband, mercenaries who prowl the Dales for work and riches, have been searching for the location of this grave since it was safe to do so. But without success, interest eventually waned and fell to time. But the recent discovery of a horseshoe matching historical descriptions has renewed interest and controversy surrounding the lost grave. The duchess of the Dales quietly called on the Greenband to lead an expedition. Quietly—for not all the Dalefolk were excited about digging for the lost Lord. The Greenband was to hire out, that way they would not get their own hands dirty, nor would they lose the faith of the people they protect. Enter our adventurers.



The party heads out from Lockinge for a week long journey to their intended destination, a set of mountains long thought to be nothing more than part of the landscape. Four days in, they notice the land under their feet has shifted in shape and texture, from lush grasslands to rocky escarpments. Looking ahead, they stare at the mountains' grandeur with curiosity, so much so that Salazar, our barbarian, nearly trips into a chasm. The adventurers take pause.

“Uh, that just came out of nowhere?”

“What would you like to do?”

Russell asks, “Can you describe the chasm? Like, how big is it across?”

“It looks to be about 70 yards across. So about 210 feet. Looking over the edge you can see sharp rocks and rushing water very far down. This definitely isn't something that you can jump across. Falling in the chasm doesn't look pleasant either. You don't see any sign of a bridge.”

Mark—“Are there any trees around? We were in a forest, right? Maybe we can tie a rope to an arrow and fire it from one tree to another?”

“You just came from a forest, so there are trees around. But the other side seems rocky and there doesn't seem to be any tree big enough that could support the rope.”

“Can we just walk around it?”

“Uh, well, as far as you can tell the chasm stretches for miles in either direction. I mean, you could follow it if you want, but you might be walking for days, and the terrain isn't easy off the trail. Plus you told the Greenband that you'd report back to them three days from now.”

“What else is around?”

“So, directly in front of you is this chasm. There's a beetle rolling a ball of its dung about twice its size near the chasm's edge. Behind you is the trail that you've been on, surrounded by forest with rocks that, over the last few days you've noticed have been getting progressively larger. Near the edge of the chasm where the forest drops off you notice a small herd of seven rabbits grazing in the shade of a tree. There are boulders around the edge of the chasm, plants and shrubs, and a small piece of frayed rope, and not much else.”

GM Note—
Remember to give them everything they need to interact with. If you don't say it, they won't know it's there.

There's a few moments of silence as the group stares at the table, then at each other, then at me.

“I don't know what we're supposed to do,” Mark says on behalf of Perrin.

“We don't see a bridge at all? Does the trail continue off the other side?” asks Russell.

“Yes the trail continues. You don't see a bridge.”

“This rope doesn’t seem like it’ll be much help,” Aidan asks about the frayed piece, without really asking.

“Probably not. One of the rabbits hops its way over to you, Perrin, in a really cute way. And it looks up at you from the ground with a bushy nose and big glassy eyes.”

“Uhh, okay. I pick it up. What does it do?”

“It stares back at you with the big, glassy eyes of an innocent rabbit.”

Mark doesn’t hesitate. “I snap its neck.”

“Oh my god,” Aidan laughs in disbelief. “What the hell? Even Salazar wouldn’t do that.”

Russell looks at Mark with his arms outstretched. “Really, Perrin? What’s the matter with you?”

Mark tries to defend Perrin’s actions. “Come on guys. My character’s built like a Viking. He would totally do that. Graeme, does anything happen?”

Mark

This is not Mark’s first time with a set of dice. He’s played fewer years than Russell, but let’s just say he knows his way around his own imagination. He’s a serious player. As a player, he puts effort into learning the rules, the game system, and as much lore about the setting as he can, so he knows where Perrin fits in the game world. Mark really *wants* to role-play, but sometimes feels uncomfortable speaking in another person’s voice. He tries, and when he does, Perrin’s voice is only a slight change in pitch from his own, so Mark will often fall back to using the third person, or he’ll narrate Perrin’s actions. For example, *Perrin decides to walk over to the bar*, or, *I ask Naeris what she thinks about the merchant*, instead of asking, *Hay Naeris! Whaddaya know about that ogrish blacksmith making a fine bit of ruckus?*

In play, he will often take the time to choose the “best” course of action, something Russell is happy to oblige. Mark wants to develop a strategic style of play, and so doesn’t hesitate to talk out his thoughts about what he wants to do before he commits to actually doing it.



“GRAEME. Snap out of it. Does anything happen when I kill the rabbit or not?”

“Sorry. You look down and see a very cute, very dead rabbit in the palms of your giant hands, with its neck hanging backward at an angle way beyond what looks right.”

“That’s it? Ugh. Perrin throws the rabbit on the ground and keeps looking for a way across this stupid canyon,” Mark says.

“I’m guessing Naeris and Salazar are both looking at you in disbelief. Surprisingly enough, another rabbit comes over to join you.”

“Okay, I pick it up and break its neck too.” More stares in Mark’s direction from Aidan and Russ. “What? Perrin thinks rabbits belong in a stew, and we’ve been out here for several days without one. This might be our lucky break, if we could ever find a way to get through.”

“No pun intended,” says Russell.

“So, you notice the five rabbits left are making a lot of noise underneath that tree over there. They seem agitated.”

“I get the impression the GM wants us to go over to that tree. Fine. Perrin walks over.”

GM Notes
Shoot, cover’s blown. Was I that obvious?

“Salazar too.”

“Naeris follows but keeps one eye on her surroundings in case this is some kind of trap.”

“You get close enough to see that one of them doesn’t seem to be moving at all—”

“What, like Perrin already got his hands on it?”

“No, I mean like it looks like a fake. Made of stone, probably, just carved into the shape of a rabbit.”

“Salazar tries to pick it up and keep the rest of the rabbits away from Perrin,” says Aidan.

“As you go to grab it by the head, the stonework swivels. There is a rumbling coming from underneath you.”

“Not this again.”

“Nope, not this time. It seems like it’s coming from the canyon itself. Looking over the edge, you can see that what was once a camouflaged part of the rock seems to emerge from both sides of the chasm walls. You can hear the ancient grinding of metal gears and pulleys that must be built into the walls, doing this work. The two halves of the bridge meet in the middle with a thunderous boom and a cloud of dust, and then silence.”

“Oh, kay...” Mark says.

“Nice. That was easy.”

“I guess we should cross the bridge,” Russ suggests.



I could have handled this encounter much differently and I’m disappointed by how it developed. The players did not do as I had planned and I railroaded them until they were exactly where I needed to be. They attempted to be creative, to find another way of crossing the canyon, but I forced them to only act in accordance with what I had planned and wanted them to discover, and the players felt it. And it felt unnatural.

The encounter could have gone differently. Maybe they fire an arrow to the other side and pull themselves halfway across the gap before the rope snaps, throwing them into tension. Or maybe after Perrin took the first rabbit’s life, the rest of the herd became upset and revealed

themselves to be intelligent creatures, the keepers of the bridge, they talked and came to some agreement that the party owed them a life if they were to cross. Maybe one of the rabbits changes shape into a druid, who then angrily confronts the party and forces them into a combat, an eye-for-an-eye the only conceivable way to make a mends for sacrificing one of his own. There were a handful of more creative solutions to the problem that was posed to me: How do I get these players across the chasm? A bridge was one way, but not the only one.



Aoki (1981/2005) understands that conversation is a “bridging of two worlds by a bridge, which is not a bridge” (p. 228). Not a bridge to be crossed, but one that joins two perspectives. From this angle, the answer to *how should the players cross the bridge?* is irrelevant and met with another question: why have them cross at all? Instead, let them linger over the rapids, in the middle of the bridge. In doing so the bridge might become a site of generative possibilities as the players engage in conversation together. It would have been better to let those possibilities emerge in the difficulty of the problem, instead of steering the players one way or another. I should have engaged with the difficulty they had in order to encourage a creative conversation, one where infinite solutions were possible.

Because I forced them into a conclusion that I had predetermined, we all endured an encounter that was mechanical, dull, instead of gripping. By the look of their body language and hesitation, they must have felt as though they had no agency. Instead of allowing their creativity to thrive, I suppressed it. As a result of too much control and a narrow mindset, the game suffered.

 **Encounter: The Hellback Caverns** 

“You’ve been exploring the twisted tunnels that have been dug out underneath the mountains of this section of Dalefields. Just to remind you, these tunnels look like they’ve been holed out crudely and quickly, they have not been meticulously carved or adorned with any symbols. They’re narrow, allowing you to pass one after the other, and wind in a way that makes you think they were tunneled in the interest of time, not precision. You’ve been traveling through them for at least two days. Your rations are quickly being depleted and the only other food source you’ve come across was that hoard of spiders that you fended off last session.”

Mark pipes in, “Aidan, is Salazar still munching on one of their legs?”

“Ha, yeah! He’s been chewing on them one after another to pass the time down here. They taste like furry pretzels.”

“Last session Perrin told the rest of the party that, ‘if we make it out alive, we’ll certainly have gone through hell and back.’ Naeris then cracked her back and spoke about all the damage these tight spaces has done to her posture. You guys decided unanimously, then, to name this place the Hellback Caverns. We left off last session with the party on the verge of hopelessness.

Again, here, the terrain of our game shifts as the players contribute to building a world. I am making progress, I can see it in their faces.

“Anyone want a pop before we start?” Aidan gets up from the table, dragging his chair across the floor and making me cringe.

“We did start,” I remind him.

“Yeah but before we *actually* start, I mean. So far you just gave us a recap. So? Anyone want anything?”

GM Note–

It was great that Mark and Aidan participated like this. No better demonstration of immersion in the world around them than by voluntarily being a part of it.

Aidan

Aidan is the youngest player of our group, at fifteen. If I’m being honest, I was less than thrilled for him to join the party. Russ is his older second cousin and as a favor to the family, he invited the slightly awkward Aidan to our game. At first I wasn’t convinced. As a teacher, part of me felt like I was entitled to my evenings without socially-awkward fifteen years-olds. But Russ is a great guy with a good heart. I couldn’t turn Aidan down anymore than I could turn down Russell.

As a player, Aidan might not know the rules very well and doesn’t put as much effort into learning them as do Mark and Russ, but that’s to be forgiven. He’s surprised us by easily being one of the most spontaneous and creative members of the team, thinking far outside of the box.

When he pulls off the incredible, our sessions become infinitely more interesting. He's a nice counter-balance to Russ and Mark's logic-driven game, but that spontaneity has disadvantages, too. He is quick to interrupt other players, and has a lot of energy. He loves to hack and slash. Role-playing isn't always at the top of his agenda, so forty-five minute discussions don't interest him. He wants to shed blood and destroy, and from my experience, that isn't uncommon among teenaged players. As I think of how many hours they're in school, teenagers spend so much time abiding by the rules of the normal world and suppressing their instinctual energy, that when they come to the gaming table, it's let loose. He's learning, though. There are consequences for his actions, and there have been a few times in our game that he's come away with bruises on Salazar's body that match those on Aidan's ego.



Let's see if I can channel Aidan's attitude into good form.

"Could you bring the salsa I brought?" Mark asks. "Such a good deal. You get three jars of this stuff for nine bucks. It lasts forever and tastes so much fresher than the store brand spicy tomato junk."

"I know, right?" Russ adds. "My wife loves it, and with the baby due in a couple of months she's been sending me out at least twice a week to pick up a new case."

Testing my own patience I subtly try to refocus the group. "We'll get started whenever you guys are ready." I set my hands on the table and show them I'm ready to both start playing, but also listen to their banter. Their choice.

There's a story I would like to help tell, here, and as much as it is collaborative I do feel the need to want to continue to see it through.

GM Note—

Now that I think about it, maybe it's a bit obvious that I'm a teacher...

 **Encounter: Preparation / Hesitation** 

I want the story we tell to be collaborative. I want to be part of the story the group is creating, not its sole narrator. But removing myself from the position of total control is difficult. Questions emerge while I prepare my sessions. If I don't plan everything out, how will I know what to do or say next? If I don't at least think about the possible reactions players have to our encounters, isn't there the increased possibility that the game will spiral out of hand? Become

less fun or less engaging? At least if I plan every encounter and NPC, I won't be left floundering. From my experience if there's anything that takes away from the game, it's being unprepared, hesitation, being unsure in front of your players. By planning in advance, I eliminate uncertainty through the use of moderated control. But I also remove the possibility for creative engagement and improvisation.



In these moments of uncertainty I cannot stop but bring my teaching self into question. As a student teacher, we were instructed in the ways of understanding by design, a three-step tool for educational planning that follows backwards planning (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). It suggests thinking about the end of a learning unit first, asking what you want students to have learned, then, working backwards to realize your goal. I have seen this implemented in some shape or form at every school I have taught in. Anywhere that lay out competencies, benchmarks, or learning goals all begin from the ends, and ask teachers to reverse-engineer the means. I question what is lost when thinking and working backward. What do my students miss out on by adhering to the linearity of a backwards-planned framework, where the teacher is the only one in the room who knows what will be coming next? How is this any different from a Freire's banking model of education, where deposits of knowledge are made into student heads, one after the other, on the order of the teacher? Even if the teacher allows for creative breaks on the linear path toward the already-planned end, both student and educator already know that these moments are fleeting, since there is a lot more material that *needs* to be covered before their ultimate learning goal can be reached. That stressed *need* is intentional. It implies that neither teacher nor student have a choice in the matter. Topics need to be covered, without question.

My thoughts about gaming and teaching converge at a point where lived curriculum is undervalued. The lived curriculum is “not the curriculum as laid out in a plan, but a plan more or less lived out” (Aoki, 1993/2005, p. 201). I cannot help but dichotomize the words *laid* and *lived*, where one is prearranged, directed, and contrived, and the other seems to be something passed through, making no grand statements about pacing or strict direction. How I can I lead the way by retracing the steps that I have already walked? When I carefully direct where I replace my feet, I seldom look up, seldom experience the uniqueness of the moment together with those around me. Instead, as a director, those around me must place their feet in the exact same footprint, a single set of feet that hide what could otherwise be a textured multiplicity.

No, this is not what I want.



“Are we ready to continue? Great.”

“You wake up from a short rest that you so desperately needed. Your naps, you’ve noticed, are getting longer and longer as you feel progressively more drained of energy. I’d like you all to roll a perception check.”

Naeris: “Seventeen”

Perrin: “Fifteen plus my Wisdom modifier of 1, that gives me sixteen.”

Salazar: “Fourteen.”

“Naeris, you hear something in the distance. You aren’t sure what it is at first because it’s been half a week since you’ve heard anything but spiders and yourselves. It sounds like scraping and clawing at the rock walls of the caverns.”

With his best attempt at what a dignified woman sounds like, Russell speaks in Naeris’ tongue, “Gentlemen, stop. Don’t move. A sound. Up ahead.”

“Do we see anything?”

“Not from where you are... in front of you there’s still a narrow twisting tunnel, but the sound seems to be echoing from where they are. You get the impression that up ahead there must be a clearing, and as you continue to crawl—

“—Wait,” Russell interrupts.

“Yes?”

“I want to continue stealthily.” He turns to the rest of the group to make his point. “I think it’s important that we’re careful about where we’re stepping so we don’t disturb loose rocks and alert whatever’s ahead.”

“Great idea. Everyone roll a stealth check.”

*Your Wisdom (**Perception**) check lets you spot, hear, or otherwise detect the presence of something. It measures your general awareness of your surroundings and the keenness of your senses.*
(Crawford, 2014, p. 178)

Aidan's the first to speak. "Ehh... add my Dex modifier aand... Thirteen? Is that going to do it?"

"Nice! Nineteen," says Mark.

Russell suddenly jumps from his chair. "NO. NOT NOW."

Aidan looks over at him, "You rolled a one, didn't you?"

"How could I fail that? Why did I even *suggest* that we try and be stealthy? It would have never happened. Sorry guys." He finishes with an *ugh*, disgusted with his own lack of luck.

"Well, we'll see. Maybe nothing will happen," Mark tries to empathize.

"*Naeris, you, in your attempt to be as quiet as possible, you are actually the opposite.*"

"*God damnit.*"

"*Your foot accidentally kicks a golf ball-sized stone and sends it soaring down the hole like you slammed it with a Three-Wood, ushering an echo with every plunk it takes. After a teeth-clenching few seconds, the rock stops, and there is silence. Suddenly you all hear a loud, angry moaning sound pour through the tunnels. Next, feet, one after the other, plowing through the dirt up ahead, and getting louder like it's approaching you. Fast.*"

"We need to get out of these tunnels. NOW," yells the barbarian, alert.

"Quick, let's hurry forward and get out of here before whatever's coming makes they're way in. There's no way we go back. The best thing we can do is meet them in hand to hand combat."

"Blind?! We don't even know what's making that noise, and what kind of a clearing we're going to come out on!" Mark says.

"Can you think of any other option?" Russ returns.

"*The sound is getting louder. They're coming for you.*"

"There's more than one?"

"Okay, I want to try and squeeze through the other two to be first in this tunnel. Can I do that?" Aidan affronts, full of energy.

GM Note—

In our games, rolling a one is called a critical failure. The worst possible roll of the dice. Sometimes, a failure this bad reveals embarrassing consequences....



I hadn't prepared for Aidan to try this. In fact, I hadn't prepared for most of this scene. It is happening in the improvised moment, and so I know there aren't specific rules what to do here.

Aidan's attempting to pull off a difficult manoeuvre. I come up target number to match the difficulty of what he wants to do. Out of 100%, I'd say there's a 20% chance that a barbarian would be able to do this successfully. Let's say he needs an 18 on his d20 roll to reflect that.

Your Dexterity

(Acrobatics)

check can model any attempt to move nimbly, quickly, or quietly, or to keep from falling on tricky footing.

(Crawford, 2014, p. 176)



"Go ahead and try. Roll an... Acrobatics check, I guess, to see if you can use your dexterity to squeeze through."

"Seventeen. That's not bad!"

He didn't make it. That means failure. Never mind.

“You shove your way past Perrin and Naeris with a dexterity that boggles the collective mind of your party, near impossible for a big barbarian like yourself to accomplish. It’s almost like you passed through them.”

“Great! Next I want to light a torch.”

“What?! You’ll burn us alive,” says Naeris.

“If we’re almost out of here this might be our only chance! Even if we take damage it could be worth it. Trust me. They know we’re here and we don’t have much time.”

Mark and Russell both sigh and wave their hands in a resigned consent.

“Okay, you get your torch lit. Smoke starts to choke Naeris and Perrin in this tight space. You’re crouched in the front of them. Now what?”

“I want to charge as fast as I can to the end of this tunnel, and surprise whatever’s coming by whipping the torch at them.”

“No need to roll for that. You slither your way through the last twist and turn of the tunnel and burst through its mouth into some kind of big, carved out room. The ceilings are a comfortable 10-feet high, but you don’t have time to admire them. Closing in ahead of you look to be four rotting corpses with the sole intention of catching up to whatever is making so much noise. Skin flaps on their bodies, their eyes are yellowed and wide, and on their fingers, some of which are missing, you see long, sharp protrusions that look like talons that curve and stretch out at least six inches.”

“I want to throw my torch at the first one in front of me.”

“That’ll be like an improvised weapon, right? It’s not every day you whip a torch at an enemy. Check the player’s guide for how you can do it.”

Russell pipes up, “hurry, man. This is nuts!”

Flip after page flip, and then Aidan’s finger plunks his finger down onto the right weapon table. “Okay, for a thrown improvised weapon it says 1d4 points of damage. So what do you think?”

“Roll your d4.”

“Three.”

“You do three damage to the creature at the front of the pack as this torch gets flung at their chest. But because it was a torch, I want you to roll a d8 and tell me the result.”

Quickly fumbling for his eight-sided die, Aidan flings it in the air and watches it bounce on the table a couple of times. “Uh, five!”

“So Aidan, as the other two scramble to catch up to you, you fling this torch at the creature in front and the tattered rags it has on are set ablaze. It shrieks a high-pitched yell—which Naeris and Perrin can hear but can’t see—and it takes eight damage. He flails his arms widely and runs to the other side of the larger clearing, falls on the ground and stops moving.”

“Nice job, Salazar!” says Mark.

“Yeah, real quick thinking Aidan,” Russell adds.

“You have four other creatures about 6 feet ahead of you and closing in fast. Naeris and Perrin, as you catch up to Salazar in the clearing you see the still-lit burning flesh of a creature laying face down in the back this hollowed-out room, and four others quickly approaching.”

“What do you do?”

GM Note—

Yes, I flubbed the roll. Aidan needed an 18 and he rolled 17. He doesn’t need to know that he failed. I have no idea where he’s taking this, but I can see he’s going somewhere. Let’s not hold him back.

GM Note—

Called him Aidan by mistake. Must remember to stay in character...



This is perhaps the most important question in the game-master's arsenal, capturing the essence of the game in only four words. When I ask it, I give the game up to the players completely. My descriptions of tunnels and goblins are put on hold as the players help to invent the hallways themselves. They converse and negotiate to fill in the empty spaces of their environment, changing the game from a story with one narrator to a collaborative game of infinite possibility.

I too am changed. From a game-master who has a story to tell, to a listener who delights in hearing a story created and lived out in the moment. I am free to listen to their ideas, jokes, suggestions, and even frustrations as they wrestle with their thoughts. Sometimes I even take this time to scribble notes to myself as their ideas come to light, little asterisks in my books to help me lead the story in a different direction than I anticipated, if I want it to. I draw equally from what they say and what they might not say, listening to their words and the context behind them, their expressions of surprise, hesitation, and worry.

Who do I ask this question to? Who is the "you" that is being questioned? I am not asking Mark, Russell, or Aidan to tell me what they would do if they were pitted in a moment of tension against for unworldly creatures. Neither am I calling out Salazar, Naeris, or Perrin. These are fictional people, and would have trouble answering. I ask a hybrid identity, located somewhere, as Waskul and Lust (2004) write, "in the loose boundaries of the person-player-persona trinity" (p. 340). I am calling on my players to embody their character's identities as they have created and internalized them, and ask them to empathize, to answer what their characters would do. In this space it is difficult to fully separate Mark from his character Perrin, but also difficult to know which of them is giving me their answer.

Within this space, I boldly ask my players to have conversations among blurred identities. The first is between their player identity and their fantasy persona, where the question

they ask themselves becomes “what would *my character* do in this situation?” The *I* referring to their person identity, the one who has a life and experiences outside of the game. But only having very limited “experiences” as that fantasy creature, they undoubtedly draw inspiration from a different source, by asking “what would *I* do in this situation?” Players can wrestle with these two questions differently. Some attempt to bracket the player identity completely and rely solely on the identity they have created for their characters. Others welcome their own help. But as Waskul and Lust (2004) remind us, “fantasy, imagination, and reality are not so easily compartmentalized but necessarily blend and blur to such an extent they are often difficult to convincingly separate” (p. 339).

Other conversations happen too, these ones with the other players at the table. Once each player has individually negotiated between their own ideologies, they must share their decisions with each other. Here there is still more negotiation, a reciprocity of perspectives among a multitude of identities that outnumber the players at the table, before a plan of action is put into place. While this negotiation happens, a game-master listens intently to their conversation. Again, the game-master’s position is not an adversarial one. I want the story to continue with as much excitement as the players do. But there is a sense of power that comes along with listening. Not that, as the game-master, I wield the malfeasant upper hand, but in the sense that, in being mindful of the unsaid words, I feel blessed and privileged to capture the intimacy that surrounds the table, which could only happen as the game is played in the moment.

Asking *what do you do?* is an invitation to the lived curriculum of the game, an invitation to each player to bring their character’s narrative—as they understand it—to the greater ongoing metanarrative of the game. But by doing so, the players decenter that metanarrative. Jean-François Lyotard (1984) understands metanarratives to be the larger stories that legitimize the smaller narratives of society. In the tabletop role-playing game there exists a metanarrative in as

much as there is a larger story that the game unquestionably follows. Pieces of this story are questioned, but not the narrative of progress itself. One of the responsibilities of the game-master is ensuring the larger narrative follows the basic structure of a story. It has a progression. The characters embark on a journey, experience conflict, and resolve it over time. But the question *what do you do?* breaks that progression, if only temporarily, by allowing as Aoki (1993/2005) suggests, for “humanly embodied narratives to dwell contrapuntally” (p. 209) with the metanarrative of the game. As players attempt to answer puzzles and engage in unplanned dialogue with other characters, linear progress is displaced in favor of character development, in favor of legitimizing a “space for stories, anecdotes, and narratives that embody the lived dimension of curriculum life” (p. 209). Where other games are linear, conform to beginnings, endings, and rules, the role-playing game gives us a sense of how disruptions and breaking metanarratives can be both encouraged and encouraging. As Waskul & Lust (2004) put it,

the fantasy personas of role-playing games are not unlike people in everyday life—chiefly influenced not by the basic traits they start out with but by the choices they make, the outcome of those decisions, chance, and the ongoing dialectical relationship between consequences and personal adjustments (p. 343).



In the Hellback Caverns, Aidan failed to meet the target number. According to the rules of the game, I should have stopped him from doing what he wanted to do, told him he failed, and that would have been the end of it. But it would have also been the end of a moment of player development, one in which myself, Mark, and Russell got to learn about how Aidan plays his character, Salazar, about how Aidan thinks. In this instance, by making the choice to ignore that there was a target that he needed to reach, his imagination was allowed to take over. As a group, we were all able to dwell in a learning moment that helped to build community, one that, seconds before, was not planned.

 **Encounter: The Incident** 

The group sat down at the table with a joyous abandon of the workday. Hands were quickly stuffed into chip bags and were fidgeting with dice, warming them up.

“Guys, before we start our session, I feel like we need to talk about what happened last week.”

A part of the room choked, then died.

Aidan, looking uncomfortable, says “okay” with a confused inflection that tries to mask that he doesn’t know what this will be about. I catch Mark and Russell giving sideways glances to each other. The walls are closing in on us and the ambient noise of passing cars falls away. Only the slow creeping sound of a humid breeze through the window signals that we’re still alive.

I hate that I’ve just turned game night into an AA meeting, but this is something that needs to be addressed for the greater good of the game, so for utilitarian reasons alone I carry on.

“Last session I tried a new way of running an encounter. It didn’t go as well as I had wanted. I got the sense that some of you might have been frustrated, so I thought I would bring it up before we start... It’s not a big deal.”

No big deal, I said. Like I’m trying to play down the fact that the room is as inviting as an English torture chamber.



A week before, while preparing for that night’s session—still yelling at my blinking cursor—I was desperate to liven things up. Our sessions had been progressing for several months, and had become, in a sound, *meh*. Overall I felt as though excitement was stagnating. Player actions were orchestrated, responding to my calls almost dutifully. Encounters were linear. First *this* happened, then *that*, then you rolled dice, then everything worked out. Rinse and repeat. There was very little suspense, tension or spontaneity around the table. Players weren’t discussing in-game events. They talked, but mostly to answer my questions, not with genuine curiosity and interest.

In tonight’s session, there would be an opportunity for a chase scene. The characters were right now stuck in rocky caverns surrounded by a hoard of lulled undead creatures that, with one false move, would stir them into a frenzy. They had a group of eight rescued prisoners in tow that they needed to escort to safety. But guaranteeing their safety would not be easy. The rotting

undead would not be happy to find out that their pantry had been raided by a meddlesome motley crew. And they were going to find out. This was one hand that I felt okay forcing on my players.

One of two events were going to trigger my chase scene: either one of the characters or one of the prisoners was going to trip over themselves, causing a noise that would alert the enemy. They could roll all the dice they wanted, but someone was going to fall over something. The chase would be on. It was ten miles to the nearest village where they could seek refuge. Undead creatures would be at their heels as they fled the scene. A perfect time to create suspense, but how to manage it?

I began by thinking of the encounter as a whole. *What was the dramatic tension?* The chase sequence. *What was the primary source of conflict?* The zombies, frothing mad. *How could this end?* The party will eventually make it to the safety of the village. But could one of them die before getting there? Unlikely, but it was possible. The prisoners could also meet their end, too. Could the party ask to run in a different direction? Sure, but there isn't much of anything around.

GM Note—
I am careful to notice the difference here, between thinking of the end first, which I do in my teaching life, and thinking of this encounter as a complete story with many possible endings.

Next, I broke the distance between them and the village into parts and imagined what kind of hazards they would face as they ran down roads. What was the terrain like? What animals could be out there? Was it difficult to see? Was there a high wind? Rain? Did they get thrown off course by anything? How do I ensure a sense of imminent threat from the enemies so that I really

A round represents about 6 seconds in the game world. During a round, each participant in a battle takes a turn. The order of turns is determined at the beginning of a combat encounter, when everyone rolls initiative. (Crawford, 2014, p. 189)

make the players *feel* like they are being chased?

I made a list of possible threats for each of the broken up sections. The characters would roll initiative to tell them who acts when, and then they would each get one action per turn. Each round a new threat would emerge as they got closer to the village. Each turn assumed that

the characters continued to run for their lives. If a threat emerged, they would have to deal with it. Maybe they encounter a bear, unsatisfied with its pigeon dinner and looking for bigger game. Characters would need to decide what to do. Stop and attack, run around it, or something else?

I was still thinking about the mistakes I made at the bridge encounter. I wanted to give the players the option to think creatively about how the threats that I posed them could be tackled. This is a game where imagination reigns, right? Let me capitalize on that. At the outset I told them that while there might be a couple of obvious ways to overcome a threat, their creativity would be rewarded. I was hoping that my guidance would be a key to unlocking the door of their imaginations.

The encounter played out much differently. It fell flat.



“Still running, your energy waning on this long road, you can see a large animal sitting in the middle of the road. The black bear has a grin on its face like it welcomes your disturbance, licks its chops. You’re headed right for it. What do you do?”

“Jeeze. Do I have to fight it?” Aidan asks. And what a great question.

“I mean that’s up to you. What did you want to try?”

“Well I want to know if I can evade it, like run around.”

“Sure, you’d have to roll a dexterity check. He’s going to try and swipe at you as you attempt to evade, but it’ll be tricky. He’s big and pretty dextrous himself.”

Aidan lets the die bounce on the table. Looks up at me. “I rolled an eighteen.”

Behind my screen I roll for the bear. Seven. Ugh. *“...Okay. That’s enough to successfully run around it.”*

GM Note—
Good. Throw the opportunity for creativity right back at him by asking what he wants to do.

And that was it. A huge beast, mouth agape and ready to attack was skirted without difficulty. Each of the other characters and the prisoners rolled similarly high. And the bear? Low. It was as though all of them just casually strolled by, waving.

We talked about this later and why they didn’t use the opportunity to try to attack, offer it food, try to communicate with it, or any other innumerable reasons. They were fair with me. Mark silenced me with one question, “why would I try to do anything creative if I could just run around it?”

He was right. The players could have been as creative as they liked, but in the end, and this was true of most of the threats in the chase scene encounter, there was always a path of least resistance. Creativity, imagination, and engagement, as I had defined them, meant more work for

him with probably less favourable results. Why would they make their lives more difficult than it needed to be when given the choice? When I realized this, I was deflated.

There was a third reason that this encounter did not run as smoothly as it should have. Toward the tail end, Russell and I started to argue, just when I was wishing it was over.

I wasn't oblivious to the chase sequence not having the desired effect. No matter, adjust and adapt, right? Luckily, I had something in my back pocket in case this happened. The prisoners. Originally kept captive for later meals, they were now scared, starved, and slower than the nimble heroes of the party. Perfect.

“As you continue to run, you notice that some of the prisoners begin to lag behind. They clearly don't have as much stamina as you do. Sensing their weakness, two of the undead speed up, excited about the chance to feed. They move right on top of the prisoners. With one quick pounce, the undead tackle the prisoners to the ground and start to mangle their flesh with sharp teeth and claws.”

Russell goes wide-eyed. “Whoa, wait a second. I want to try and save them!”

“Well, this happens in an instant. From what you see they're screaming in agony but it looks like it's too late for them.”

“What do you mean? I can't even try?”

I sigh to myself. I wanted a burst of excitement in the otherwise forgettable session. Now I'm forced into a discussion about game mechanics.

I try to dissuade Russell as much as I can without actually forcing an action on him. *“You'd have to move right up to undead, putting yourself in immediate danger, and you'd have to roll well to first get the undead off of the prisoners before you cast your spell. And even then there's no chance that they'll survive. By the time you'd be able to manage, they could already have bled out. Are you sure you want to do that?”*

“Yeah but wait though. How can you just decide that a prisoner dies without giving us a chance to intervene? As soon as you start to mention that we notice the undead gaining on the prisoners, Naeris would try to stop them!”

Mark steps in now, “First, it's not your turn right now. It's mine. More importantly, what Graeme's saying is that there wasn't *time* to intervene. They were a lost cause. The prisoners lagged behind and were done for.”

“Yep,” I reaffirm. Maybe the power of many will help.

“Come on now. This doesn't make sense. You can't tell me that I can't stop this from happening. The prisoners can't just die. That's not fair and that's not how the game works.”

“Look it's not all of them that die. Just a couple.” At this point I can't believe the kind of turn this event has taken. We were full-out arguing now, out of character. Immersion and role-play be damned.

Mark again, “It's how *Graeme's* game works. This is how he wants to run it. You can't tell a game-master what he's going to do.” As a casual game-master himself, I could tell that Mark knew what I was trying to accomplish with the sacrifice and was trying to defend me. Aidan decided that this was not his fight and stayed silent.

Russell is frustrated that it is now two against one. I get the impression that he just wants this to be over. At least we can both agree to that.

Russell

Russell, older than Mark and I by a few years at thirty-four, has the most experience with role-playing games, having played most editions of *Dungeons & Dragons*. As a player, he knows the kind of game that he wants, knows well in advance the kind of character that he wants to play, and takes steps to making sure that his character follows the kind of arc that he expects. He's not afraid of experimenting by creating and playing a female character like Naeris, even if he doesn't need to, and it's obvious that he believes there is a responsibility involved. It is not an opportunity to flaunt female stereotypes, but to explore life through a different lens. And he does it well. When he plays, he is rational, reasonable, and measured. He loves to role-play his characters actions, speaking in Naeris' voice at all times, and he's imaginative with his dialogue, which comes much more quickly to him than the others. He really knows Naeris, and can spontaneously decide how she would answer to even the most morally-challenging confrontations. Among the other characters, he is a natural leader. Among the other players, he is a model of what experienced role-playing looks like. And yet, at times, his experience can cause challenges for the game-master.



“Hold on. Naeris wants to try and heal the prisoners. If she gets taken down because of it, fine. But that's what she would do. Are they already dead?”

In my mind they were, but fine, let's see where this goes. “*No, you can try to heal them if you want. Go ahead and make your checks. Make one for each prisoner.*”

He rolls, “a twenty-four and a sixteen.”

“*You're able to heal one of them, give them just enough strength to get up and keep running. The other one, though, was too far gone and doesn't make it.*”

“Fine. Whatever.”

There was a long silence then, in the moments between an uncomfortable resolution where nobody won, and the chance to move on. I decided to hurry it along. If more needed to be said later, let it happen then. The party made it into the keep of the nearby village soon after that. I ended the session earlier than I had anticipated.



When I had finished recapping what had happened the week before, I fell silent and let the others speak.

“I actually thought it was a fun session,” Aidan said meekly. Silence quickly swallowed the room again.

Mark’s turn. “I feel like it was explained pretty clearly... and I wasn’t upset that one of the prisoners died. I mean, we’re running for our lives with eight starving humans without the skills and strength that our characters have. I almost *expected* that one of them would die. Call me a sadist but that’s how I feel.”

“Sadist.”

Finally Russell speaks. “I guess I was upset because I felt like that was not how *D&D* should be played. You don’t get to only do one thing on your turn. Fifth edition says that at the very least you get one move and one action. And that’s not how the encounter was played. And I know that the rest of you feel like Graeme explained the rules specific to that encounter before hand, but I still don’t think it was fair. Naeris was put in charge of these prisoners. I wanted from the start to keep them safe. That was my mission throughout all of this, and I made that perfectly clear from the moment we rescued them. But then all of a sudden I wasn’t allowed to keep them safe? I mean, come on.

“I wanted to cast a Cure Wounds spell. You know? Heal them. But I wasn’t allowed to because I was told that the prisoners were already dead. I don’t even get a chance?”

Cure Wounds. A creature you touch regains a number of hit points equal to 1d8+ your spellcasting ability modifier. This spell has no effect on undead or constructs. (Crawford, 2014, p. 230)

“What does it change, Russ? Really?” Mark cuts in. I’m not quite sure if he’s intent on defending me or on proving Russell wrong. “Graeme killed the prisoners to light a fire under our asses and to create tension in the story. So what if he didn’t play by the official rules of the game? He outlined how those rules were going to change before the encounter started, anyway.”

“I don’t know. As a character, I created Naeris committed to keeping people safe. I just feel like I was shafted.”

More silence. I shifted my weight from side to side. I wanted to say sorry for making him feel bad. This a game. Part of my job is to make sure my players are having fun. Moments like this remind me why TRPGs are always so much bigger than the boxes they come in. I wanted to apologize, despite only ever having my players’ best interests in mind.

“Listen guys. I’m sorry the encounter went the way it did. I tried something new and, to an extent it flopped. I guess that’s just a consequence of trying something new.” They all knew I had the best of intentions, right?

“I’m not going to say that I’ll never try something like it again, but maybe it’s worth talking more about it. That said, let’s leave it for another time. I don’t want to delay this session any longer. Let’s get on with it.”



In a sense, surrounded by hazards, undead creatures and other enemies, I was the biggest threat to this encounter. I wanted my players to take more complex, creative actions, but failed to appreciate the complexity involved in the creative process. I did not expect my players to flounder or hesitate when I gave them the freedom to act without limits, in accordance with their

wildest imaginations. Perhaps limits are a necessary component to creativity? Perhaps creativity hinges on a balance between freedom and boundaries?

Boden (1994) becomes entangled in these questions in her work on understanding creativity, and suggests that an encounter, or the environment of an encounter, could be understood as a conceptual space. She writes that a conceptual space is the “generative system that underlies [a] domain and defines a certain range of possibilities” (p.79). Her examples include chess moves and jazz melodies, suggesting that both are made or created inside of a larger set of boundaries that allow them to happen.

In the TRPG, the conceptual space of the game world becomes the environment described by the game-master and thought of by the players. This generative system is vast. While I have written how a player-character can make a near infinite amount of choices, these choices are understood to remain within a generative system. Taking up the previous example of the characters encountering a bear in the road, player-characters are free to make any *reasonable* choice concerning how to tackle the threat, whether by force, stealth, evasion, etc. However, it would be unreasonable, for example, for them to fly over a threat if their character does not have that power, or exclaim that they would like to run into a nearby house for shelter, if no such house was described. Both of those cases represent limits on the potential actions the characters. However, there are always ways to tread, blur, and overcome the limits of the generative system of the game world.

Often, player-characters will inquire about the encounter, in order to understand the environment or situation they are in. Through their questions they can better visualize the conceptual space of the game, the game environment and its limits. When Aidan asked if he necessarily had to fight the bear that was dropped in his path, this was his way of gaining

additional information about the conceptual space of the game. Did the bear require a weapon or was there another way to handle it?

Similarly, as the characters ran for their lives toward the nearest village, they could have asked me to describe the area around the road. Were there short, weeded lawns? Were there fields of corn? A rocky pass? In both cases it would be my responsibility as the game-master to better flesh out the environment for them. The mechanics of the game encourage these questions, and players are never penalized for interrupting in order to seek clarification. As a game-master, they are some of the most tantalizing moments of game-play. It is in these moments that the game world can shift, change, and morph without prior notice, sometimes without the players ever being aware that a change was made.

These questions are the players' ways of identifying the limits and contours of the conceptual game space. Once the limits have been identified, characters can then hope to overcome them in some way. Boden (1994) tells us overcoming the limits of a conceptual space can be accomplished by changing the space in some way. Changes could be small or large in nature. An example of a small change would be "like opening a door to an unvisited room in an existing house" (p. 81). Small changes act as modifications to "open up the possibilities (the rooms) implicit from the start" (p. 81). Larger changes, however, can transform the conceptual space completely, which is, as Boden writes, "more like the instantaneous construction of a new house" (p. 80).

In tabletop RPGs, overcoming limits can occur through both small and large changes. After describing the road that the characters were on while they escaped the clutches of the undead, Mark could have asked, *what borders the road?* To which I could have provided more information. *Your road cuts through corn fields on either side of you. It is dense and the stalks raise seven feet from the ground.* With this new information, the characters might decide that

they want to try running through the corn fields to evade threats. This was a small change to the conceptual space; they opened a door that was previously closed. During my planning of the chase scene I knew that corn fields border the road they were running on; it was a limit that was previously established but was unknown to the players before one of them asked the question.

Other times, player wanderings through the conceptual space of the game necessitate larger changes. Let us assume that I had *not* planned that there were corn fields bordering the roads of the encounter. A player might conjure the question anyway, *are there corn fields bordering the roads?* It would then be my decision to make, based on the knowledge I have of the environment and how willing I am to indulge the player's question. *Yes, there are corn fields. They are dense and raise seven feet from the ground.* Perhaps I intended for this terrain to be nothing but a grassland. But the player chose to bump up against the limits of the conceptual space of the game, and so a spontaneous change needed to be made.

Just as likely, the character may ask a general question about the environment, *What surrounds the road?* Perhaps I did not plan for this possibility. Perhaps while planning my only concern was the road itself, and I neglected to imagine neighboring terrain. In that instant, then, I would need to provide an answer. *There is a corn field. Or, nothing special... a flat grassland borders the road on either side.* In either case, my motivations for the change vary. Maybe I feel that my answer provides the players with a deeper feeling of agency, or I feel it enables a better story, or maybe I feel that given what I *do* know about the environment, a corn field bordering the road makes the most sense. Regardless of my motivations for the change, the character's investigation of the conceptual space of the game caused them to rub up against its limits, ultimately enabling the limit to be torn open and overcome. "In that sense," Boden (1994) tells us, "conceptual exploration is a form of creativity" (p. 82).



Of interest to me is the liminal nature of creativity during these examples of game-play. Who actually performs the conceptual exploration? Who is the one that is creative? The answer is unclear. Of course the player explores, he first enables the investigation by posing questions which expose the limits of the space, *Is there a corn field?* But only the game-master confirms the change. *Yes, there is a corn field. / No, the land is flat.* Only he or she decides what borders the road, and in instances where a general question was asked, such as *What borders the road?*, it is up to the game-master to then decide for himself, using the generative system at hand to enable possibilities. *There's a corn field.* Or maybe, *You're surrounded by a mountain wall, it looks like the road carves right through a mountain.* It would seem then that the novel idea emerges from the thoughts of the game-master. But the player enables that novel idea. Without wandering around the conceptual environment of the game, the limits could never have been discovered, and the game-master would never have had the opportunity to make the change.

In my assessment, the answer to who is creative cannot be neatly relegated to either the game-master or the player. It is both. Both player and game-master navigate the boundaries of the conceptual space. Both player and game-master can enable the overcoming of those boundaries through changes that are small and large, and both are responsible for creative border work. What I find most interesting, and which perhaps acts as a concluding remark, is that in Boden's (1994) understanding of conceptual spaces, boundaries are a *pre-condition to creativity*. Without a properly understood conceptual space, its contours and boundaries cannot be identified. And if we cannot identify its boundaries, than we cannot go about overcoming them. I would do well to remember this. Never again will I ask my players to simply "be creative," a bumper-sticker imperative that helps no one and destroys creativity. Boundaries enable player questions, and questions enable change, one way or another.



I woke up to an e-mail from Russell the next morning addressed to the group. Time-stamped 3:23a.m. Subject: *Re: Tonight's Session*. Still groggy, I hoped it wouldn't be about the chat we had before last night's game. I mean, it could be about any part of the session, right? Plus it's not uncommon for us to send and receive e-mails about the game outside of the hours we play. One of the most difficult parts of playing involve actually getting a group of people together for a weekly game night, so a lot of the coordinating actually takes place over the Net. So I hoped the e-mail wouldn't be about our pre-game chat... But I knew it would.

Hey all,

Sorry things worked out the way they did last night. For my part I know I did a lot of out-of-game rules-lawyering and trying to manipulate the game through the rules. I wasn't at 100% last night. We've already talked about how the kind of game we want to play has a lot of role-playing, that telling the story comes first and that metagaming has no place at the table. Hoping to be back on top for next week's session.

Until then,

Russ

And after a couple short, sympathetic replies by the other members, I contributed my two cents.

Hi,

I feel strongly that out-of-character events are and should be part of playing all tabletop role-playing games, but a very specific part. What makes the TRPG interesting is that as much as it is a story-building game, there is no strict narrator and no one for whom a story is being narrated. A dungeon master doesn't narrate a story, s/he drops pieces of a story and players assemble those pieces into a story that makes sense. Together, the players pick up and assemble the narrative building blocks into a coherent whole.

*For that to happen, out-of-character (OOC) remarks **need** to happen. OOC talk is the glue that binds the narrative blocks into a story. What's beautiful about the tabletop role-playing game is how each of us author **and read** an unfolding story concurrently. Yes, our characters' actions help to narrate a story, but we also get to listen to how each other character narrates it as well. To me, being able to remark, OOC, about something particularly funny, creative, or telling that has just happened is an important and fun part of the game! A story only exists in a D&D adventure in its ability to be experienced and remarked upon. Once experienced, narrative threads are tied together and create an ongoing story. As Aidan alluded to in his response, no one person creates the story on their own; each player's contribution creates it together.*

Sometimes, the off-handed remarks a player makes out-of-character can even help the story in its becoming. Here's an example.

Russell: Naeris casts "produce flame"

[Russell rolls a 1 on a 20-sided die, a critical failure]

Aidan: HA! It's like embers burst from his hand and charred his eyebrows. Now he looks like some ugly mannequin.

DM: In fact that's exactly right. Not only are Naeris' eyebrows burnt off, but the colossal failure of roll suggests that they've been charred so badly that they're never going to grow back.

Russell: ...Fine... Naeris didn't need eyebrows anyway.

Out-of-character talk can enable a piece of a story to be actualized and woven into the already established narrative. Who knows what could happen next now that Naeris' eyebrows are burnt off? Maybe she suffers a permanent -1 to charisma checks until she sees some specialist to get new eyebrows. (side quest 1). But since she doesn't care for money, she couldn't afford the best surgeon, and so settled for a "natural healer" who sewed on black dragon scales instead. From then on, Naeris starts having nightmares about dragons and feels compelled to get in touch with the one whose scales are perched over her eyelids (side quest 2).

As overdramatic as that example might be, you can see how a combination of out-of-character talk and meta-gaming reflection actually help to tie story moments together. Story building blocks become story through their actualization and acknowledgement by the players as the game is played through.

That said, I think it becomes near impossible to tie those narrative threads together when the out-of-character metagaming happens as a result of serving rules and mechanics of the game, instead of the story. It's written right into the DMG [Dungeon Master's Guide], "the rules serve you, not vice versa" (Mearls & Crawford, 2014, p. 235). The rules serve to enable a story, but are not a part of the story themselves. A successful Wisdom Save enables a story. A failed Athletics Check enables a story. Even dropping to 0 HP is a building block that enables the story of how that character cheated death.

*A story is **disabled** when there is an overarching sense that as players must first oblige the mechanics and rules of the game and only secondly act as individuals who guide protagonists through an adventure. Serving the rules sets up a false dichotomy between a game that **is played** versus a game that **should be** played. There is no game that **should be** played, there's no higher example of what should be happening to these fictionalized people that we players need to aspire to. It's our game and we're creating it as we go. If we force the thought of what and how should we play, we're defeating the purpose of the playing. It stops us from thinking about unfolding story moments, we aren't able to reflect on the question of how our protagonists have created adventure, which would otherwise enable a story. Instead, serving the rules, we become stuck reading in between the lines of the instruction manual, trying to look for hidden clues about what is the course of action; there is no **the** course of action, only **a** course of action.*

I really hold true to the idea that the tabletop role-playing games are a direct descendent of an oral tradition steeped in an imagination and infinite flexibility for the purpose of entertaining audiences. The old storytelling fused with the newer wargaming. In this new creation, as a player I act both as storyteller and audience. It is interactive. I try to keep that in mind as I play. We create stories that are in the middle of unfolding. It was not one, as a game-master, that I planned, but it is one that was and still is (literally) being played out. I'm looking forward to seeing what direction it takes on its own, not trying to manipulate it.

Dwelling on what is the best way to play according to a vague notion of an overarching rules hierarchy that demands our servitude is akin to living through a dystopic version role-playing. In trying to build a perfect world you end up with the opposite. When the rules serve us, we keep the tradition alive. When we serve the rules, we might as well stop telling stories.



I admit, that last part may have been over the top, but it was written to drive the point home. My e-mail didn't open the discussion I hoped for, and that's fair.

Helio (2004) underscores my argument about whether TRPGs can be considered narratives by suggesting that they represent games with "strong narrative aspirations" (p.65); there are narrative elements to TRPGs, but no narratives themselves. These aspirations emerge from player renderings of the narrative events. She writes, "it is our interpretations and experiences that can be strongly narrative seeking, and this becomes even more evident in the way we put the experiences into words after having played" (p. 69). This is where my discussion of the usefulness of metagaming toward the creation of stories begins. She cites post-game discussions and debriefing sessions as examples of formal and informal ways that players create their interpretations.

Where Helio (2004) and I differ is how far we will push our argument. Helio believes that interpretations of the narrative events of the game remain interpretations, whereas I believe that they signal a willingness of the players to develop and establish a consensus among the events of the game. By establishing that consensus, they are, in effect, attaching narrative events together, forming a cohesive narrative. Helio further believes that there are two foundational aspects lacking in the TRPG that prevent it from becoming a narrative, there is "no one for whom the story is told to, and neither is there a storyteller" (p. 68). However, if it can be assumed that the TRPG is an interactive game where *each player* acts as both narrator and audience, this dilemma dissolves, leaving the possibility that narratives can exist through the shared consensus of the players. Rosenblum (1994) supports this as well. To her, the blurred boundaries between narrative and narration are what make the TRPG narrative possible.

Storytelling is an event, not a static linguistic entity that can be handed down, and as such each of these events are unique, only ever happening once. In that sense, the tabletop role-playing game is a descendent of an oral tradition that is performative and entertaining, as well as interactive. The storytellers in these traditions, as true for the game-master is it was for Homer, are “not relegated to the role of reciter,” but someone who “maintains creative control over the event, who yet must interact with and continually change according to the needs of his audience in order to create a positive, communicative event” (Rosenblum, 1994, p. 15). The audience is far from a passive group, but part of a collective in a hierarchy of constantly shifting power where communication is taking place. Ultimately, “the tensions produced in this communication give rise not only to the shape and meaning of a story, but to the narrative itself” (p. 33).



It's been seventeen hours since you collapsed against a thick, inside wall of this keep's antechamber, exhausted from the run, from the stress of being chased, exhausted from the exhaustion of the last weeks. Salazar, your pack is still heavy from the hammer that you quickly pocketed before leaving Onxyarm's tomb. The party saw you took it, but no one else knows you have it.

You found out, in those early hours of the morning, that the owner of the large keep, a dwarven nobleman named Renn, was alerted by his guards of an incoming party being chased. You guys. He ordered his doors open, and shut them just as quickly. You fell asleep immediately, and now, as you begin to wake up, you notice that is dark still. It must be night once again, but to you it must seem as though the sun had never risen at all.

Aidan cuts in. “You would notice Salazar get up and stand by the window, looking upset as he looks out.”

Russell, “Naeris approaches him. ‘What’s wrong, friend? Did you not rest?’”

Aidan, trying to focus on staying in character, “Salazar is staring out of the window and doesn’t look back at you when you ask him.” Aidan then clears his throat in a half-growl. “We haven’t seen the light of the sun in weeks. We came out of those damn caves in the black, ran for our lives in the black, and now stare out from this place in the black. Well let me tell you sumthin, I... hate the blackness. Too much... evil happens at night. I remember... the gutters, the gutters where they took my childhood. I can see the streetlamps reflecting off their fists as they came closer and closer to my face. It’s... painful to think of. Not now.” Aidan clenched his fists and closed his eyes as though Salazar was in the middle of doing the same.

For a moment, I’m at a loss for words. That was the first time we’ve heard Aidan speak so much through Salazar’s voice, in

GM Note—

I wonder what gave him the courage to try this? Why that moment in particular to bring up a piece of character development? Anything to be learned about Salazar/Aidan here?

character, in the first person. What a great moment. You could hear in his voice that that he really wanted to go for it. He stuttered at the end like he was pushing himself, but I can't suppress the smile that shows how proud I am. Looking around, I can see that Mark and Russ share the same smile.

“Actually, Salazar looks distressed as he peers out the window.”

Russ, feeling a bit more inspired by Aidan's effort, powders his voice with a warm and delicate woman's contralto. “Salazar... your face is leaking color. What do you see out there that upsets you so?”

Aidan looks to me for the answer.

“Looking out the window Salazar is staring at a gruesome scene of battle taking place in the shadows of the dusk, swords and faces and arrows all lit by hundreds of torches, happening right outside the keep.”

GM Note—

It's nice when these moments come together just right. Game-master's story development weaving right into player's character development!

In fact, as you shake away the weariness of rest, your senses attune to the sound of metal clanging on metal, loud snarling, the smells of smoke and burning flesh, and the agonizing yells of the dying.

You hear a knock on the door.

“Can't we just get a moment's peace?!” Perrin yells.

“Standing at the door is Renn, your host, dressed in blood splattered chainmail, holding an axe dripping small droplets of blood onto the stone floor. He says, ‘I must apologize for the intrusion, but we've been checking on you on the hour to see if you've waken and I'm afraid we can't have you sleep another minute. Your enemies, the ones who have chased you here, have not let up. My men have tried to hold them, but, to our despair they seem to be multiplying in numbers. They're relentless. It's almost as though there is something driving them. Moradin only knows what.”

“Yikes, sorry about that, buddy,” Mark colloquially breaks character.

“Will you help us?” asks Renn.

I relax back into my chair for a moment and let the group process. There's a long pause.

“My good man, would you let us talk for a moment? We need some time.” Mark asks of Renn.

“Of course, but time is something we are all in desperate need of. I'm afraid we may not have much of it left.”

“Understood,” Perrin answers, “we won't be long.”

“Renn leaves the room and closes the door, but you can be sure that he's waiting right behind it.”

Mark sighs. “Looking out the window... could you describe the scene a bit more?”

“Sure. You can tell after a couple minutes of watching that the size of the keep's army is about 120 men and women, with several bodies motionless on the ground. Though, from your vantage point they look to be powerful fighters. The undead army fights with slightly less, you can guess about 100, but it looks like there's a thin trail of them stretching as far as you can see, all the way back to the mountains where you came from. They continue to slowly trickle into the area such that, anytime the keep's warriors throw down an opponent, there is an undead creature ready to replace his kin. Things do not look good. Renn's men look tired, as did Renn himself.”

“What good is us joining this madness going to solve?” Naeris threatens.

Mark, in Perrin's jovial voice asks, “Do we really have a choice? This man took us in when we were half dead and has already offered us protection.”

“What about that hammer you grabbed, Salazar?”

“What about it?”

“I don’t know, maybe it can help,” Mark offers.

“Okay,” Aidan concedes. “Salazar takes the hammer out of his bag.”

“So, he reaches in his rucksack and pulls out this hammer. It’s about 3 feet long... looks plain, very well-used... much like anything you would find hanging around a smith’s shop. Except that it is emitting a faint orange glow, and Salazar notices quickly that the hammer is warm to the touch.”

“Neat. That definitely didn’t happen when I picked it up in the tomb.”

“Renn knocks and opens the door all at once. ‘Friends, we simply do not have the— is that... is that what I think it is?’ He is completely wide-eyed and suddenly pale in the face as the orange glow shines a couple of feet in front of him.”

“Uhh... maybe?” Aidan says with a confused grunt, trying to mimic what Salazar might sound like in this moment.

“Far be it from me to recite history at this hour! But what you hold in your hand seems to match descriptions of the hammer of... can it be? Lord Onxyarm’s?” *He looks transfixed for a moment, then shakes himself out of it. ‘Ahem... there will be time to examine this more closely later. You must come with me at once.’*

“Salazar stuffs it back into his rucksack.”

Russell jumps in excitedly, “We ready for this fight? Seems like a biggie!”

“Right behind you!” Perrin jumps in line.

“Renn leads you through the keep to a small pantry room with a trap door. ‘Follow me,’ he says, as he leads you through an underground tunnel toward the battlefield.



“Guys, my spells are almost all used up, I don’t have much left in me,” Russell tells the players.

“This has been brutal. Almost an hour now and they just keep coming.”

“Salazar, you’re up in the initiative order.”

HP [Hit points]

Your character’s hit points define how tough your character is in combat. (Crawford, 2014, p.12)

“Salazar’s bloodied and almost out of HP.... Damn... I don’t know guys.”

“Why not try the hammer?” Mark suggests. “What do we have to lose at this point?”

Aidan takes his cue. “Salazar reaches into his bag. Is the hammer still glowing?”

“Oh, yes. Even brighter now.”

“Okay good. I take it out and swing at the first undead I see. I rolled at seventeen.”

“Okay, so as you swing this hammer, it produces a flaming orange tail behind it where you’ve swung. There’s an accumulation of force that builds up as you swing. In one swoop you destroy this undead and cast its pieces back 20 feet, colliding into a group of his friends.”

“Nice!”

“Something else happens though. As you use this hammer, Naeris and Mark both start to feel the ground shake, originating from a spot under your feet, Salazar.”

“I didn’t do it.”

“The ground underneath your legs cracks and splits, Salazar. It starts to grow and extend, until there’s what looks like a bolt of lightning in the ground extending north toward the

mountain range of Onyxarm's tomb. Some of the undead start to fall in. Everyone make an Acrobatics check please."

"Nineteen for Perrin."

"Salazar gets eight."

"Twelve for Naeris."

"Oof... Salazar, you start to fall into this pit underneath you and just manage to grab on to a ledge. The hammer gets thrown to the floor nearby. Naeris, you fall prone because of the shockwave."

Dash. *When you take the Dash action, you gain extra movement for the current turn.* (Crawford, 2014, p.192)

"Perrin! Grab the hammer!"

"It's about forty-five feet away from you. It'll mean you'll have to use a dash action this turn and won't be able to swing it. Still want to go for it?"

"Guys, do I?"

"YES!"

"Perrin, since you're the closest, you can see that, even though the ground is shaking, the hammer itself looks like it's vibrating."

"You hear the sharp crack of thunder in the sky. Looking up, dark clouds are swirling over the mountains amid the thunder and shimmering lightning. They continue to swirl until you're sure you can see them taking a shape. In the clouds above the mountain the face of a man begins to appear. The apparition looks cruel and fuming, accentuated by dark clouds that make it look like smoke foaming from its mouth and eyelids."

From the ground nearby you hear Renn exclaim, "ONYXARM. IT'S HIM!"

Mark interrupts, "guys did we just awaken a corrupted demon blacksmith?"

"Yup. And we stole his hammer, too," Aidan says, with a big smile.

"You see the skies form into arms and hands for this dark apparition, and one of them creates this sweeping motion through the air towards the east. Looking ahead you can see hundreds of undead lifted into the air at this sweep and cast fields away. The second arm sweeps towards the west and hundreds more right in front of you are swept up from the dirt and cast aside like they were made of straw."

I see Russell furrow his brow and is about to interject, but decides not to.

"There are only a few scattered undead that remain around you now. And the swirling dark clouds that make up this apparition's eyes are staring deeply into you. Each of you feels a dark connection between this enormous ghostly face and yourself, like he's peering right into you and demanding an explanation."

"I sure don't want to give him one," Aidan says.

"And that's where we're going to stop for today."

"What?!"

Encounter: The Never-Ending Story

The next week, we gathered around the table ready to strike the final blow against the big boss of this adventure, Lord Onyxarm himself. It was a long fight, took nearly the whole session, but finally, with the help of the hammer, the heroes—and all of the Dalefields—were saved.

Or maybe the party chose to return the hammer to Onyxarm's ghost instead of fighting him, who feeling once complete, calmed the tides of his undead minions and returned to his grave never to be disturbed or heard of again. Or maybe something else?

I had thought of and scribbled down notes in the event that either of those scenarios, and a few others, occurred. I had also intended that the party would encounter another source of tension, a small band who were displeased with the party's work, demanding reconciliation, thus setting up a conflict for another adventure at another time.

Instead, none of this happened. There was no conclusion. One week we gathered to play, the next week, we didn't. One of us cancelled. It doesn't matter who at this point, since, at the time, our schedules were busy and not playing for a week was convenient. The following week I fell ill. After missing a few weeks in a row, it was more usual to not play than to play, and so we didn't. And that was the end of our campaign.

I write this knowing how unsatisfying of a conclusion it is, but also with some amount of validation. Monte Cook (2009) has written that many GMs "do not plan for an 'end' to the campaign:

The end to most campaigns comes when real-world concerns intervene, not when the story comes to a logical conclusion. A player moves away, the group gets an interest in another game or genre, or someone else decides to take on the role of the GM for a while—these are the things that end campaigns. [...] Some campaigns get no satisfactory conclusion at all, and the story is left unresolved" (pp. 97-8).

As much as the following months saw me dwelling on the non-ending of our group's game, there might be a sense of serenity in its lack of completion. One might say that our characters, with skills honed over the course of many cities, dungeons, caverns, and most of all imaginations, weapons that were blunted and resharpened, characters war-torn and tanned by the hot suns of countless open roads, were abandoned. Left to the mists of open spaces to wallow by their creators, the ones who, for better or for worse, gave pieces of themselves in order to craft

the identities of a new individual, fill them with thoughts and actions, heroism, fear, boons, and many mistakes. It is a dismal thought. But if nothing else, there is hope in knowing that a piece of you has been left somewhere, in some in-between space. A space not quite real, not quite physical, but far from illusory or meaningless. One day—and it could be years—you may come across a folder, yellowed with frayed edges, and you will open its battered cover lined with pencil marks, simple additions and scratch notes, and there will be three names on three separate sheets—one ruthless barbarian, one nimble rogue, and one sophisticated warlock. They will still be there, waiting for your voices, your rolls, your selves to fill their thoughts and actions once again.



As I write this, I think to what it is like for a teacher to end a school year. Mixed emotions, mostly. In one sense, I am always happy that the school year is over. No more planning, no more daily stress. No more thinking about my students more than about my own health, at least for a couple months. I'm upset that I wasn't able to accomplish everything I had wanted to. I'm happy that my students get to move on to better lives. I'm upset that so many of them are leaving having contributed so little to their own education.

This speaks to some difference, I think, between the conclusion of my role-playing game and that of an academic year. Whether my players are upset that they never got to have their final boss fight, at least they can feel satisfied knowing that they contributed to everything leading up to that final session. Salazar, Naeris, and Perrin Darkcloak existed because Aidan, Russell, and Mark made them exist, through their individual actions the story became meaningful. I do not know that I can say the same about my students. Was my class meaningful to them because of any contributions that they made? Tests and essays can measure how much of the education I

had planned and delivered, but what about *their* education? How was my class educational because of the students that made it?

At the end of a school year, I feel about as unfulfilled as a story with no ending. There is something missing, something unresolved about education that makes me feel this way. It is the same absence that is evident in the eyes of so many students for whom schooling is not working.

Without a legitimized lived curriculum, without abundant space for the lives of students, their interests, their motivations for learning, their shared stories, I question whether our system of education will ever be enough. But just as I can be given some hope at the thought of personas who linger through the years until someone is ready to give life to their voices again, I have hope that all is not lost, and that perhaps the tabletop role-playing game may provide a space to dwell in future possibilities.

Space 3: Implications for Education

Touring a Bridge under Construction: Introduction

When I was nine my family took a trip to Prince Edward Island to visit my aunt and uncle. They relocated from Montreal so that my uncle, an engineer, could work on the Confederation Bridge project. During the years of its construction, my family talked about *Straight Crossing* like it was a canonized saint. The bridge was an impressive, awe-inspiring marvel, and yet the simple instructions embedded in its own name—cross, straightly—defied themselves and sunk into a mire of complexity over which it was supposed to be elevated.

Before this trip, I understood bridges as two-dimensional tools that existed only in reference to their horizontality, talked about as much, too: *You crossing the bridge? Going this way or that way? Here or there?* Discussing a bridge's relation to verticality was taboo. Going “up” a bridge was inconceivable, unless you were a superhero. Going “down” was only mentioned when kids cascaded and cheered the news that London Bridge was falling. Imagine my surprise when my uncle invited my father to plunge into one of the hollow Confederation piers before it was filled and reinforced. All week I heard about how dad was taking a tour of the bridge, spending an afternoon deep *inside* it, and I had no idea what that meant. A bridge had no depth, it had span and length. It was the first instance I can remember when the physical world was challenged by conceptual theory.

In this project, I hoped to have reinforced this challenge. Curriculum scholar Ted Aoki writes us that we should reconsider bridges. Instead of crossing them, we should linger. Certain themes emerged from the narrative which forms the basis of the work of this section. They act as openings to a discussion about how the game-master, and tabletop role-playing games can imply and inform educational work. In so doing I hope to construct my own bridge between these two subjects, one that reimagines a bridge as occupying both horizontal and vertical spaces, not only to be crossed, but stopped on, plunged into, and toured.

To some, the construction of such a bridge is a pointless endeavor. The cultures on either end are diametrically opposed, they might say. On one, the rigors and responsibilities of educating children resemble a fortress, walls of stone three-feet thick. The game-master and his role-playing game on the other side are a world away, and in comparison look like a lush meadow where play, fantasy, and the imagination roam free; these individuals would tell us it is a landscape of childhood and nothing more. But this is narrow perception of what it is to play.

I am reminded of the creative architects Lewis, Tsurumaki and Lewis (2008) and their paradigm of play, how it is less a frivolous act of fun and more of “an active manifestation of curiosity” that requires “action and commitment in seeking a goal through transformation and change” (p. 10). As I conceive both the role of the teacher and the game-master to contain such commitments, the task of bridging the curriculum worlds of both positions becomes easier to conceptualize. Standing in the middle of a span with the teacher on one side and the game-master on the other is to dwell on what is both present and not present on either end, and to put into play the goal of transformation, both in education and gaming. From the middle I now share one occurrence of what it was like to tour such a bridge under construction.

In the course of writing my narrative, without intent, I described no fewer than three instances where the ground crumbled underneath the feet of my players. Solid earth collapsed into dust and rubble, sending once sure-footed heroes into tumbling uncertainty. Should I pity them? What made me wish them such a tumultuous fate? Considering the dual life I live, teacher by day, game-master by night, what could the trembling earth signal if not etchings of a seismograph plotting, overlapping marks across my teaching and gaming lives? Teaching can and does leave me feeling like I am treading on unstable ground. One day I feel that my gravity in the classroom is enough to sustain an entire career’s worth of sure-footing, the next I am so completely powerless to stand against the tremors of my classroom that I fall into its open

cracks. Teaching is to face and submit my self to these seismic aggressions, so much so that the aches and pains of each day's difficulty pounds at my joints each night as I prepare for my gaming sessions.

Stories like the ones above are where the coincidences of shaky ground between gaming and teaching coincide. The implications for education below, based on my experience as a game-master, are storied events, and "are always open-ended, inconclusive, and ambiguous, subject to multiple interpretations" (Denzin, 2014, p. 5). I welcome these interpretations as they emerge from the following moments.

Conceptual Spaces and Creativity

In what seemed like a knee-jerk reaction to the other players, Mark's character, Perrin, snaps the neck of an innocent rabbit. To him, this is what Perrin, a cold and calculating Viking, would do. I did not plan for Mark to take this course of action. I planned an environment for my players to wander in their imaginations, one where several rabbits existed, one of which was a fake. I intended to have my players explore that environment, find the false-rabbit puzzle piece that I had planted, and unlock the next scene in the narrative. When Mark decided to kill the rabbit rather than investigate, my reaction was not to move beyond what I had originally planned, but to reemphasize what he already knew. In my mind, the players would be stuck until they reached the preconceived end of the encounter. As the players' bland reactions to this encounter suggest, when the game-master provided little to no flexibility in the choice given to them, the game suffered.

What would have helped, as Boden (1994) writes, would have been the possibility of overcoming the conceptual space of the environment. Prior to this study, I have always assumed that this is the player's responsibility; after the game-master provides an environment to explore, it is the player's choice whether or not to explore and break through its borders. The GM's role is

done. I realize now that it is equally the task of a game-master to break through the conceptual borders of the game. If I were to have made changes to the conceptual space, my players would have had more incentive to respond creatively. In this, the responsibility for creative engagement in the game is symbiotic and liminal between the player and the game-master. Both roles must engage at the threshold of the environment simultaneously, such that, even though the game-master initially provides its description, it can take on new life under the players' suggestions, spoken ideas, and actions.

The game environment must always remain in a state of becoming. It has no beginning and no end, but exists in an ever-changing present only conceptualized when visited by the players. It is not enough for the game-master to provide the space for play, she must be cognizant of how that conceptual space unfolds and changes over time, and must adapt accordingly. Thus, while the game-master knows that it is important to plan for the initial atmosphere of the game, it is equally important for her to be present when the game begins to stray from the plan, and be a participant of the game as it is reshaped. I wonder about the implications for teaching, and how my teaching life might benefit from thinking about conceptual spaces.

Conceptual Spaces and Teaching

If Boden (1994) understands a conceptual space as a generative system that defines a range of possibilities, where are they located in education? Two important spaces for discussion are curriculum and classroom.

Curriculum (in the wild). One space is curriculum, made up of units of study about a discipline, acts as a set of connected parts of learning that combine into a complex whole dictating what is to be taught and learned. These topics ultimately define a range of possibilities for the teacher as they face decisions about *how* they will teach. It is the teacher who makes the choices about how to teach and how to assess learning. Students are only tasked with engaging

with results of the teacher's choices. A student is *provided* the lesson, *provided* the assessment, but is rarely complicit in creating the lesson or the assessment. Traditionally, encountering the conceptual space of the curriculum means choosing some features of a discipline, but since it is not possible to cover all there is to know about a subject, teachers stay well within the borders of a discipline's focus. Students, necessarily, are presented with a landscape that is even more narrow. They can only be cognizant of those features which the teacher points out, drastically limiting their scope of potential curricular possibility. Overall, there is little chance to engage with what lies beyond the boundaries of the conceptual space of curriculum.

In such a jungle, curriculum is like a safari. Together, guide and passengers pack themselves into a car (often cramped and uncomfortable), and head into the wilderness in hopes of the false sense of discovery. The guide is very careful about the choice of roads on which his vehicle treads, whether because of safety or maintaining general interest. Sometimes, even, the guide has no choice but to take only the roads previously-built for the safari.

Every so often on these roads, the guide points to and calls out where his passengers should look. Sometimes, passengers are graced with resplendent colours and fascinating wildlife the likes of which they would have never been able to spot on their own. Other times, the guide points, but the passengers see nothing. The passengers fret, *The animals must be hidden, my vision must not be alert enough, it is not the right time of day for this*, or even, *the guide has led me astray*. During times where they see nothing, passengers must rely on the descriptions of the guide in order to pique their curiosity, interpreting the explanations and descriptions as best as they can to get a sense of what they should be able to see and know.

I ask now, what if these passengers were allowed to leave the vehicle? Not only would they be able see the entirety of the landscape in front of them, but also be able to interact with it. This scenario raises questions about learning situations where the guide—a teacher—is not the

sole conveyer of information, but where the passengers— students—are allowed hands-on experiences which help to build their curriculum as it happens.

Whether speaking of safari or curriculum, the question of danger surfaces immediately: wouldn't it be risky to let students interact with curriculum, making individual observations and customizations to better suit their needs? Perhaps. Under this model, a student might learn something new about the conditions under which they learn, surprising to both teacher and student. Maybe they uncover a different technique previously unprovoked by the teacher about how to learn a given topic, or offer extensions to the classroom material that would have otherwise been ignored. Interacting with curriculum *in the wild* suggests that the role of the teacher would change, focusing not on the delivery of a static understanding of topics, but instead on practical strategies that could be used to navigate them.

The classroom. The classroom as a conceptual space is a generative system that allows for a teacher to employ multiple configurations and uses of its resources. It is a place where multiple possibilities exist, connected together by its boundaries. Traditionally, again, if anyone is responsible for configuring and reconfiguring the space, it is the teacher. They arrange desks to suit a specific teaching approach, tell students where and when to sit, look, listen, and where to find the various tools they need. Students, conversely, are tasked only with remembering and referring to those configurations, not questioning or changing them in ways that may better suit their interests.

I ask, what would happen if teachers allowed students to push the borders of the conceptual spaces of their teaching? Drawing from both Boden's (1994) work and that of the tabletop RPG narrative, we find students engaging with the construction and reconstruction of the boundaries of their learning environments, their classroom assignments, their desks, chairs, in

other words, their conceptual spaces. All of this is accomplished as needed to a specific task, rendering a student's education a system always in becoming.

Complicit in the not-yet conceptual. Even if education changed to allow for the breaking of curricular/conceptual borders, this study suggests that the teacher needs to be complicit in this borderwork. Like the game-master, who helps shape the game environment through the actions and negotiations of his player-characters, teachers and students should mold, add to, shape, reshape and cull from a planned curriculum through questions, negotiations, and discussions that, at present, are viewed as veering off-course. And, just as the game-master allows and encourages these negotiations, the teacher should encourage his students not only to tour, but to veer from that tour without the pressure of having to get back on the original road's track. If we are to allow students to break the boundaries of their conceptual educational spaces, we must be prepared to interact with students about how continue to make changes. We must be ready, with students' help, to engage in liminal play beyond the threshold of what was previously conceived.

If this idea of education were possible, it would be more in line with Aoki's (1993/2005) sense that we must legitimize the lived curriculum, a curriculum that is worked through and which spans the divide between *teacher* and *student*, bridging ideologies, and then moving beyond them together, toward the inconceivable. From the conceptual to the unconceptualized. What would education be if it were to work through the unworkable? What would be needed to fulfill this promise? If the study of the game-master suggests anything, what is needed, in part, is for those in privileged positions to release and diffuse the control they have over education. I return to the narrative for an example.

A Rhizomatic Diffusion of Control

Salazar crouches awkwardly, shifting past his companions and moving up the marching order from last in line to first so that he can navigate the narrow tunnels and gain an advantage against incoming foes.

When Aidan’s barbarian tried the above, I knew it would be difficult to accomplish. It was up to me to evaluate the difficulty and validate it with a target number that Aidan would hope to roll. He didn’t. Yet, instead of acknowledging his failure, I told him that he succeeded. What followed was a burst of creativity on his part, an exciting scene that engaged all players as Aidan found inspiration in a moment of his own creativity. He broke through the conceptual space of the environment I provided and built on it, allowing the other players to riff and improvise along with him, further extending the boundaries of the game in ways that none of us could have imagined. In a sense, I changed the rules of the game. This is routine for the game-master. For example, the *Dragon Age* role-playing game calls this the “Game Master’s Fiat,” writing that although some might call this cheating, “it is ‘cheating’ in order to make the game more interesting and fun for everyone involved” (Pramas, 2009, p. 2).

As a referee, the DM interprets the rules and decides when to abide by them and when to change them. (Crawford, Perkins & Wyatt, 2014, p. 4)

What happens during these liminal moments of boundary breaking? The playing environment shifts away from a linear story progression toward one that more closely resembles a rhizomatic pathway, without beginning or end. Each time a player-character suggests a new action that was not thought of by the game-master, a new node grows on the game map, away and in a different direction from the planned curriculum of the game. It grows only when and as much as each player allows it to, through negotiation and discussion. And it continues to grow, sprouting from nodes that have no concern for direction. The tabletop role-playing game is rhizomatic to the extent that narrative elements are emergent, unconcerned with linearity. It journeys, rhizomatically.

I ask whether it would be prudent for teachers to let students break through the boundaries laid out in the conceptual spaces of classroom and curriculum. How can teachers encourage this journeying and what are the risks of doing so?

When I write about the liminality of boundaries and moving beyond them, what I describe is a diffusion of control, one that moves away from a hierarchal model of teaching where control is held by a few privileged positions, to one resembling the rhizome, where control is spread across teachers and students, favouring learning that is emergent, unpredictable, improvised, and negotiated. Cormier (2008) suggests reshaping what education looks like toward “a model of knowledge acquisition that accounts for socially constructed, negotiated knowledge. In such a model, the community is not the path to understanding or accessing the curriculum; rather, the community *is* the curriculum” (par.11).

Here, the role of the teacher shifts, becoming the individual who provides only an *entry point* into the subject matter. The teacher does not necessarily decide *what* is to be taught, but, when that decision has been made, offers the beginnings of a landscape in which learning can happen. It is up to the community as a whole to then decide how to continue. Unlike traditional systems of education which rely on authority for curricular decisions, this model “dispenses with the need for external validation of knowledge, either by an expert or by a constructed curriculum” (Cormier, 2008, par. 17) in favour of negotiation that legitimizes the work that is being done by that learning community. In practical terms, the classroom becomes its own community of legitimized knowledge which can be shared with other learning communities as part of vast network of connected information, feeding into the idea of Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) rhizome.

In this space, the teacher becomes complicit in negotiating what is learned, by accessing information from various sources. In Cormier’s example, information provided by the teacher

was combined with the background knowledge and research completed by the students, informing their understanding of what was learned and creating their own unique bank of knowledge.

Where have we seen this before? This process, (initial impetus, followed by research, investigation, and negotiation) is exactly what is accomplished by a game-master and players in a tabletop role-playing game. When a game-master releases control of the game, whether by allowing players to discuss the possibilities of their environment or by letting what defines success be more fluid, players are free to investigate and negotiate as a team, the game-master included. Did Aidan *fail* his roll in the tunnels? Yes. But, in choosing to move beyond success and failure, a space was opened for a shared control of what happened next.

Gaming the Role of a Teacher

The game-master does not have a singular identity or strict set of responsibilities by which he or she must adhere. Just as Cover (2010) questions the necessity of providing a rigid definition to the tabletop role-playing game, and by extension, the game-master, before they can be studied, this monograph pushes the questioning further to the role of the teacher.

Wittgenstein (1958) challenges the language assumption that each word names an object or an action and gives it meaning. This enables a tension in our words, blurring definitions to the extent that strict categorization is no longer simple, and meaning associated with the words we use is fluid. Similarly, Waskul & Lust (2004) tell us that the multiple identities of role-players—and indeed of all individuals—blur into one another, making it difficult to ascertain which is being evoked at any given time. Clearly we exist in a time of liminality in our language and our identities. What could bringing a liminal space to education do for teaching and learning? By interrogating education through a game-

...the individual words in language name objects—sentences are combinations of such names.—In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands. (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 2)

master's lens, how can we diffract the word "teacher" into many blurry parts? In the following section, I ruminate on how the different roles of the teacher and how the terminology of a tabletop role-playing game, borrowed loosely from the latest edition of the *Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon-Master Guide* (Mearls & Crawford, 2014), might help.

Teacher as world-builder. Before a fantasy tabletop game can be played, the game-master must build a world for a story to take place. Typically this means borrowing elements from various other sources, such as novels, movies, or video games, and adapting them to suit the type of setting the game-master and players wish to build. The game-master of a TRPG understands that his players can only interact with the descriptions of the world he provides. Each description, then, is purposeful, and used to convey information about the game world that he wishes his players to know. Ultimately, the game-world serves the players by creating a setting for story to take place. This does not, as previously discussed, prevent the player from changing the setting by pushing through the conceptual space of the world, forcing the game-master to adapt, create new settings, reacting to the unpredictable requests of the player. In this way, the game-world is a collaborative venture between game-master and player.

A teacher is likewise faced with designed a world: their classroom. Classrooms often begin bare, and are constructed over time by the teacher around the curricular story they wish to tell. Posters are put on the walls, desks are moved into configurations, and furniture is arranged all to help facilitate engaging with a curriculum. Applying a sense of liminality to the classroom space, teachers should keep in mind that while each element should be purposefully chosen, they do not need to be permanent fixtures. The tabletop role-playing game teaches us that the design of a classroom should be a flexible and collaborative effort between a teacher and their students, allowing for multiple configurations, uses and, and many different meanings attached to its objects. As the relationship between the game-master and players demonstrates, the opportunity

to interact, modify configurations, boundaries and uses should be given to the students. Just as the game-master's description of his world acts as an entry point for a story to take place, the design and arrangement of a classroom and the inclusion of specific elements provides instances for interaction by the students that would help them build a curriculum, not progress through one that was prefabricated.

In the tabletop RPG, the game-master makes no assumptions about which parts of his descriptions the characters will engage with. By describing a setting, he allows his players to choose what (or whom) they wish to interact with; everything is available as a reference point, nothing is excluded. In school, regardless of the design and arrangement of classroom tools made available to the student, the teacher generally dictates what their use is, and when their use is appropriate, meaning a student has little meaningful choice. There are fewer instances where they can make authentic choices without the explicit permission of the teacher. At that, it becomes more likely that they develop compliant tendencies rather than attitudes of questioning and curiosity, a distancing from learning possibilities rather than investigation of them.

The game-master's role teaches us is that the best games involve the players. As teachers, our students must be involved in the ever-forming story of our classrooms. While teachers provide the skeleton for the existence of such a story, our students should be continually shaping it.

A well-designed and well-run world seems to flow around the adventurers, so that they feel a part of something, instead apart from it. (Mearls & Crawford, 2014, p. 4)

Teacher as story-teller. As we have seen, the game-master is responsible for providing the beginnings of a story to their players, as well as continuing it by providing opportunities of interaction with environments, puzzles, peoples, and quests. But what of the teacher? Do we, as teachers, over the course multiple units, evaluations, months, terms, interactions, and

negotiations with our curriculum and our students, create a story? Is there not only the teaching of narratives, but narratives of teaching?

A conference entitled “Curriculum as Narrative/Narrative as Curriculum,” wondered about these connections. There, Carl Leggo (1997) asked, “what are the ‘true,’ ‘real,’ narratives of schooling?” and “what narratives are told/written/lived/ translated/perpetuated in schools?” (par. 10). Aoki (1997) also wrote to this effect:

Narrative writing as signifying practice is enactively performative [...] productive of effects, situated horizontally midst words and language, always partial ‘truths,’ even deferred, therefore always incomplete.

Recent writings support such imaginary. Dr. Trevor Barnes of U.B.C. claims geography (earth-writing) is not so much writing about ‘geo’ (earth) but more so graphic writing that *produces* ‘geo.’ (par. 7-8, emphasis added)

If narrative writing is performative, the tabletop role-playing game adheres to this description, as players literally perform the game around the table. The teacher, I contend, does as well. Each classroom finds a teacher in the midst of an enacted performance, whereby through discussions, activities, reading, and writing, the teacher guides students through a continually evolving narrative.

Like game-masters, teachers need to remember that we meet our students in the midst of their existences. The game-master and player understands that their characters have lives before coming to the adventurer’s vocation. Students come to our classrooms with personalities, interests, abilities, talents, experiences, and expectations that, when combined, create a class of idiosyncrasies unlike anywhere else in the world. Just as a game-master then provides in-game occasions to engage and develop the personalities of his characters, the teacher should create a classroom narrative that capitalizes on students’ individualities, providing opportunities to make them aware of their abilities, and hone their natural interests and tendencies.

Rather than the teacher creating daily lessons *about* curriculum, daily lessons should *produce* curriculum. This is in line with the tabletop role-playing game where a narrative, while

partially conceived by the game-master prior to the game, is brought to life and fully realized in its playing. Without the players, the game narrative would not exist. This is curriculum, not as a fixed and rigid set of topics to be provided for the students which they have no capacity to change, but as a set of encounters only partially developed, to be fleshed out by the individuals that make up the situatedness of the classroom.

Teacher as referee. Each role-playing game comes with a rule book. But as there is no game board, Bateman (2012) reminds us, these rules first serve to provide the players a way of imagining what is happening rather than as a set of instructions that describe acceptable conduct or a means of developing strategy. While the game-master typically acts as the primary rule enforcer, in times where players are unsure of a rule, any player can attempt to clarify the rules through discussion or negotiation. This occurs quite naturally, as Kociatkiewicz (2000) noted when he loosened the rules of his game and removed the game-master position completely.

I did not attempt to explore the characters (and their creators) using the events of the game, concentrating instead on the free play of the collective imagination, using the roleplaying session as a tool for a social creation relatively unrestrained by any pre-set rules. (Kociatkiewicz, 2000, p. 73-4)

The game-master does not police his players, but rather acts as a “mediator between the rules and the players” (Mearls & Crawford, 2014, p. 5). This gives him the freedom to interpret, bend, and break the rules if he knows that by doing so, he will better serve his players. I wonder about different contexts where it would be acceptable to break the established rules of the classroom or the school, both explicit and implicit, and how that could benefit learning. Like the game-master who recognizes that the ultimate goal of the tabletop RPG is entertainment, if teachers were consciously aware of their purpose as an educator, perhaps this could influence decisions made in the course of their teaching. In understanding and believing in that purpose, teachers might be more apt to interpret, bend, or break rules in the interest of students’ learning.

What would happen if instead of failing a math test, a student passes on the belief that they would learn more from the passing mark than the failure? Instead of a detention for incomplete work, there was no penalty or consequence? This conceptualization not only raises questions about the autonomy of a teacher and the identification of a teacher's position in the classroom as someone with the authority to make these changes, but also about the nature of success, failure, consequence and punishment. In an education system where rules are more fluid, how could we reconceptualise success? Failure? Would such terms be necessary in a system where decisions about meeting expectations were arranged on a case-by-case basis?

What's more, like in Kociatkiewicz's (2000) example where RPG players aided in remembering rules or developing them as needed, what transformations would schools endure if students were given the chance to discuss, negotiate, and change rules? As they arise, these negotiations and discussions might take away from what the teacher had already planned. However, in dwelling on this kind of democratic conversation, discussion about policies and why they matter become an active and important part of classroom learning as opposed to a distraction. This is an example of how daily lessons can produce curriculum. A living, liminal curriculum which challenges students to attune their listening to the ideologies present in their classroom.

Legitimizing the Curriculum-as-lived: A non-ending

I began this monograph by asking the question, "What emerges from the space between the curriculum-as-lived and the curriculum-as-planned in a fantasy role-playing game, from a game-master's reflection on his own experience? I believe this study has provided the basis for a partial answer. What emerges is a generative site of possibility. It features disrupted plans, broken boundaries, negotiated creativity and imaginative improvisation inside of a game

framework that is more than a game. It is a liminal construct that is always changing, always in the middle of being constructed. It is one where edges are blurry at best. One that does not adhere to traditional notions of beginnings and endings, where even though a story can be preconceived, it may not end as predicted, or, as demonstrated in this thesis, may not end at all.

What is the pedagogy of the game-master, then? It is an ontology of the middle, of co-construction and outwards spreading that legitimizes and thrives on a curriculum as it is lived through, and not as it is passed down. It is a pedagogy that moves beyond game theory to the space of education. Teachers, players, students, and game-masters who practice this pedagogy submit themselves to the unpredictable and work with it, shaping and reshaping what they know into something that works for them. In the role-playing game, the goal is typically entertainment. In the classroom, the goal is learning. It is a pedagogy that makes no totalizing claims about *where* curriculum begins or ends, and instead teaches the value of how each individual's own spaces, identities and roles can be brought together to build something that no one of them could have built on their own.

I make no attempt to conclude this study, or to suggest that by writing its final pages it is somehow finished or complete. Rather, like the characters in my narrative, I hope that this dissertation sits until a day comes when some individual retrieves it as a tool for journeying, helping them fulfill quests of their own. By revisiting the theoretical concepts from the beginning of this monograph I dispel the need for endings or closings and instead hope to rhizomatically provide a space for new openings, new beginnings.

A game-master asks, *what is the point?*

Early in this monograph I cite Waskul and Lust (2004) who help (de-)classify the tabletop role-playing game, to demonstrate just how different it is from other games. They write, “the point of fantasy role-playing games is neither merely to play well nor to ‘win’” (p. 336).

While the negative framing speaks to their desire for resistance, one question we are left to confront is, what *is* the point? I return to other researchers for the basis of a partial answer. Williams, Hendricks, and Winkler (2006) settle on a concise understanding: the point of the fantasy role-playing game, for all participants including the game-master, is to “collectively engage in protracted storytelling” (p. 3). Of course, as we have learned, this game is far from simple. In between the words and letters of their definition are open spaces where a defraction can cast blurry light. From the lens of this study I offer such a defraction below.

That Williams, Hendricks, and Winkler (2006) highlight how participants *collectively engage* inherently speaks to how the game is played: as a group. The word *collectively*, though, falls short of describing the process of playing. What is closer is that this game is a co-constructed event. Describing what emerges during a tabletop role-playing game fails if it is considered strictly from one perspective, whether that of a game-master or a player. As much as one cannot pinpoint a singular author of the game story, neither can it locate a definite audience to whom the author(s) speak. While unwritten, Williams, Hendricks, and Winkler’s *collective engagement* references a game exists always in tension with itself, in liminal spaces.

Next, the authors use the word *protracted* to emphasis the ongoing nature of the game. Conveying how this game persists is important, but what is missing is what becomes of this persistence. When players are given time, time to think creatively by moving beyond the boundaries of what is presented to them, time to negotiate boundaries, time to acknowledge the different but linked identities of player, persona, and person that each participant accesses, tension is inevitable. Tension is product of a game of liminal spaces and protraction. It is the strife encountered through the negotiations of blurry player identities, blurred game spaces, blurry rules and settings. And what emerges from that tension is not reconciliation or conclusion, but what can only be described as new directions.

New directions, spread outward in no predefined sense, are the result of a co-constructed, negotiated, and liminal storytelling. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) reject the traditional model of hierarchal knowledge, so too does the collective engagement of the TRPG. It is the tension produced by in-between moments of game-play, by participants with in-between identities, fueled by the *protracted* nature of the game, which creates the story as it is experienced. This is unique from other games with referees or rule-keepers in that, rather than privileging one participant's experience over another, the extent of how each participant's experience contributes to the story is not only difficult to assess, but irrelevant. Far from being hierarchal, Williams, Hendricks, and Winkler's (2006) word *protracted* helps to demonstrate how the tabletop role-playing game carries on, casting aside traditional beginnings and endings and leaving the boundaries of game-play blurry.

Wittgenstein (1958) once used the term *resemblances* to describe liminal relationships between words and their meanings. When speaking of the tabletop role-playing game, we account for a narrative experience that begins and ends in the middle of participant existences. What we are left with is only the ability to discern what resembles, or *seems like*, beginnings or endings, *seems like* player identities, and what *seems like* a story.

Indeed, whether the participants of a tabletop role-playing game know it, they are playing in the *seems/seams*. This is a liminal space where blurred identities overlap, not only between participants' individual player/person/persona identities, but between and among those of the other participants. Perhaps, then, the game-master functions as the thread of this woven tapestry, tying together in tight tension the storied pieces of fabric that participants bring to the table. Sure enough, while the tension of thread is what holds the tapestry together, when it is looked upon as a whole, these threads are only small details of the completed clothwork. Deleuze and Guattari

(1987) are here, too, reminding us that these threads grow outward, creating a multiplicity which can easily be added to, suggesting a rhizomatic tapestry without beginnings or endings.

While succinct, Williams, Hendricks, and Winkler's (2006)'s understanding of a tabletop role-playing game fails to appreciate the liminal nature of the game, co-constructed through tension and time. Educators can learn from the importance of these elements. Teachers, administrators, and policy writers should consider how they can appreciate the liminal in education. How can the blurred boundaries of curriculum be legitimized? How can we bring into view and celebrate the multiple identities of our students and how do they contribute to a rhizomatic education of becoming? Among the numerous conceptual boundaries of the planned curriculum, how can we move beyond? How can we encourage new directions that emerge from protracted tensions and negotiation?

A game-master asks, *what do you do?*

Ted T. Aoki (1993) once wrote an article entitled "Legitimizing Lived Curriculum: Toward a Curricular Landscape of Multiplicity." In it he identifies how "*curriculum*, in spite of its inherent indefiniteness, has become definitive so much so that we speak with ease of *the* curriculum, *the* curriculum-as-plan" (p. 204). He advises those who hold true to this curricular landscape to pay attention, since this way of thinking may soon fall by the wayside.

Curriculum developers and curriculum supervisors should heed thoughtful practicing teachers who already seem to know that the privileging of the traditional C&I landscape may no longer hold, but must give way to a more open landscape that offers possibilities by, in part, giving legitimacy to the wisdom held in live stories of people who dwell within the landscape. (Aoki, 1993, p. 214)

I am saddened to know that the C&I landscape has not yet fallen into obsolescence, even more than twenty years after this writing. What were once "statements of what teachers and students should do... statements of official and recommended *resources* for teachers and

students, and usually, implicitly, statements of *evaluation*” (p. 203) have become statements of data collection, statements of universal curriculum design, and statements of visible learning.

While we have come a long way in recognizing a multiplicity of teacher and student identities, identities that are “ongoing effects of our becomings in difference” (Aoki, 1993, p. 205), there is still a disconnect. Even now I feel that teachers are cautious about speaking against a singular curriculum, cautious about acknowledging multiplicities of open curricula, moving landscapes of between, between lived and planned, between each student and teacher. Even now there is a need to continue the work of legitimizing the lived curriculum.

The game-master offers an example of an identity as effect. An identity always in the middle of both production and in its own producing. As world builder, he spends hours crafting environments and encounters for his players to experience, but must be quick to change them at their players’ suggestion. As storyteller, he must recall and recount a narrative that was preconceived, but must improvise dialogue, yield to the stories of player characters, and integrate both as they are created. As referee he must be fluent with and enforce game rules, but know how and when to break them on the recognition that they would be detrimental to his players’ own experience. Yes, he is an important part of the game, the threads that tie narrative pieces together, but the experience of playing is so much bigger than him.

For that reason the game-master and the tabletop role-playing game offer a unique account of how to *game* education, located at the liminal boundaries of multiple identities. If educators are to continue to resist the centrality of *the* curriculum, the curriculum as singularity, the pedagogies of the game-master offer spaces for legitimizing the lived dimension of curricular life. Yes, rules may be contested and boundaries may be broken, but in so doing we wink into existence educational possibilities that were previously impossible, as many as there are answers to the hanging question that ignites the spark of our imaginations: *What do you do?*

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