The Functions of the Gamemaster

A comprehensive, practice-based overview of the role of the gamemaster of tabletop roleplaying games

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Abstract

This research provides a comprehensive, practice-based overview of the role of the gamemasters (GMs, akin to referees, storytellers, and guides, leading a tabletop roleplaying game) of tabletop roleplaying games (RPGs, games primarily played in conversation between multiple people in a shared space, led by a GM). All functions that a GM performs are investigated, derived and discussed. The contribution to knowledge provided by this work is the complete, evidenced-based list of the Functions of the Gamemaster, presented throughout Chapters 2, 3, and 4, and summarised in Chapter 5. This has value for RPG participants (GMs and players), designers, developers, scholars, and other stakeholders, in that the detailed analysis of the GM's role furthers studies of the concept of the GM and provides a strong pathway into understanding its functions, responsibilities, and practices. Potential value is also provided to stakeholders in related fields, such as videogame design, due to the complex nature of the GM's role in managing an experience via rules, storytelling, and social interaction – understanding how to best perform a GM's functions can provide insight into performing roles with similar functions.

This investigation follows the principles of practice (-led, -based, -driven) research, using the structure of Archer (1995) and Frayling (1994): The research is *through* practice – investigation by the attempted constructing/enacting of some work made to embody, explore or test the subject (Archer 1995: 11). This investigation is also autoethnographic, in the tradition of similar research projects dealing with RPGs and GMs, such as Cover (2010). To these ends, the accompanying 'Gamemastering Practice Document' (GMPD) contains the substantive, significant record of this practice, and should be considered a substantial appendix to this thesis. The GMPD is the record of the substantial majority of the research and evidence for this investigation – the practice research. It records an estimated 1,200+ hours of gamemastering practice, as well as other work, and reflections and analysis relating to the practice.

CONTENTS

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used throughout this thesis:

RPG: Roleplaying game (with the term "role-playing game" also commonly used) – a type of game in which players take on the roles of their characters and typically have adventures, generally including defining features such as die rolling, social aspects, tabletop play, and others. The complexities of RPGs are examined in later sections of this thesis.

GM: Gamemaster (with the terms "referee", "game master" and "gamesmaster" also commonly used) – the participant of an RPG who tends to guide play. This term is also used as a verb to describe the act of performing the duties of a GM – i.e., GMing, GMed, etc. The complexities of the GMing role are examined in later sections of this thesis.

PC: Player Character – the game characters that the players control, like avatars and usually main characters/protagonists.

NPC: Nonplayer Character – the game characters that are not PCs, usually under the control of the GM, varying from antagonists to allies and from major supporting characters to nameless extras.

GMPD: The 'Gamemastering Practice Document', described in the following section.

The Gamemastering Practice Document – an Appendix

This thesis should be accompanied by the separate 'Gamemastering Practice Document' (GMPD). This document serves as a substantial appendix to the thesis. It is attached separately due to its size (300+ pages) and for ease of referencing. It also acts as a record of the practice element of this practice-based investigation (1,200+ hours of gamemastering, and other work). When sections of the thesis refer the reader to parts of the GMPD, this will be in a format like "see GMPD, page 5".

Chapter 1: Introduction

Research Justification

This research provides a comprehensive, practice-based overview of the role of the gamemasters (GMs, akin to referees, storytellers, and guides, leading a tabletop roleplaying game) of tabletop roleplaying games (RPGs, games primarily played in conversation between multiple people in a shared space, led by a GM). The contribution to knowledge stemming from this piece is the complete, evidenced-based list of the Functions of the Gamemaster, presented throughout Chapters 2, 3, and 4, and summarised in Chapter 5. This has value for RPG participants (GMs and players), designers, developers, scholars, and other stakeholders, in that the detailed analysis of the GM's role furthers studies of the concept of the GM and provides a strong pathway into understanding its functions, responsibilities, and practices. Potential value is also provided to stakeholders in related fields, such as videogame design, due to the complex nature of the GM's role in managing an experience via rules, storytelling, and social interaction – understanding how to best perform a GM's functions can provide insight into performing roles with similar functions.

Work has been done in academia to deconstruct the GM concept, though the formats of these papers and articles tend to necessitate focus on a portion of the GM's role – often centring around how the GM handles interactive storytelling (Peinado and Gervás 2004; Tychsen et al. 2009; Luong et al. 2017; Strugnell et al. 2018). Where the focus is broader, such as Tychsen et al.'s 'The Game Master' (2005), the work must generally prioritise some aspects of the GM's role, and deal with others in less detail. Also, these works have tended to have less of a practice research focus than, say, Cover's *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (2010). The methodologies of this investigation are covered in detail in the next section, but this work is unlike others in the field in that it provides a long-form examination of the concept of the GM, and it is practice research at its core.

Methodologies

This investigation follows the principles of practice (-led, -based, -driven) research, using the structure of Archer (1995) and Frayling (1994): The research is *through* practice – investigation by the attempted constructing/enacting of some work made to embody, explore or test the subject (Archer 1995: 11). This must be performed under the criteria of research – "a systematic enquiry whose goal is communicable knowledge" (Archer 1995: 6). The research is also *for* and *about* practice – to be applicable to practitioners and relating to relevant fields of practice.

Rust et al. (2007) define practice-led research in art and design as: "*Research in which the professional and/or creative practices of art, design or architecture play an instrumental part in an enquiry*" [authors' emphasis] (Rust et al. 2007: 11). A design or artwork, created with "a purposeful process of production", possibly including experiments or investigation and exhibited or with some other public result, can provide insights similarly to a journal article (Rust et al. 2007: 12). In order for their practice aspects to be valid, practice-led methods must account for the tension between the usual requirements for predetermination and precision in research and the "uncertain and open-ended nature of creative practice" (Rust et al. 2007: 13).

Candy et al. (2006) suggest strategies for practice-led interactive art research – they imply that the roles of the artist (practitioner) and researcher are exclusive, and that their concerns and tasks must not impinge on each other for the project to be successful. They suggest that the first decision to make is the viewpoint of the investigations: be that from the artist, the curator, the researcher or the audience. The choice of methods will be influenced by the viewpoint of the investigations, but Candy et al. state that both qualitative and quantitative methods can be used – where qualitative methods are useful for developing hypotheses which quantitative methods may verify. They claim that questionnaires, interviews and observation are normally used in qualitative research, where the first two "are to investigate 'reflections on a process of activities', whilst the latter is to investigate 'a process itself'" (Candy et al. 2006: 212–4).

Archer (1995) and Frayling's (1994) descriptions of research through practice would seem to clash with Candy et al.'s (2006) suggestion that the tasks of creation and research should be kept separate. For this work, the researcher and practitioner are the same person, so Archer and Frayling's summaries of practice research are more appropriate. The investigation is performed partly through game design practice, with pieces (in an art and design sense) made to embody or explore principles identified elsewhere in the research. This is performed systematically, with the goal of communicable knowledge, while accepting that creative practice does not share the usual precise, predetermined aspects of more traditional research.

This investigation uses Archer (1995) and Frayling's (1994) structure as follows:

- It is *about* the practices of GMing, and RPG play and development. It gives a thorough overview and study of the functions of the GM in the context of RPG best-practice.
- It is *for* the practices of GMing, and RPG play and development. The provided analysis of GM functions can be leveraged to strengthen GMing practice and engage in better informed RPG play and development.

- It is *through* the practices of GMing, reflective play, game design/development, and the related practices of diagramming, illustration, creative writing and so on. The author performs and documents these practices to embody, explore and test principles related to GMing, such that the knowledge generated therein fuels this investigation.

This investigation is also autoethnographic, in the tradition of similar research projects dealing with RPGs and GMs. Cover (2010: 12–3) discusses this while describing her research methodology for *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*. She references prior studies that analyse their own RPG groups (Mackay 2001 and 'many of the authors in the Gaming as Culture (2006) essay compilation', as cited in Cover 2010: 12), which is also the case in this work. She acknowledges that the RPG subculture has its own rules and norms, and that gaming groups often develop over time or are invite-only, such that researchers who are experienced with these communities and their games (which can also require insider knowledge to play and analyse) are better able to conduct studies such as these.

In line with similar autoethnographic works in the space of RPG-related academia, such as Kemper (2017), Baird (2021), and Girvan (2022), this project studies the field via the author's position within it. Like Girvan (2022), the author retains notes from play "to bring method to… thought processes, articulating… experiences and insights in a manner which brings both the pleasures of play and academic thought together", and the author similarly imagines themselves "to be in dialogue with" the creators of the RPG rulebooks and related texts being analysed. Like Kemper (2017), the author retains "ephemera" from play (here including images, preparation materials, and so on) to create "a thorough living document" to record the experience and allow analysis (via the GMPD).

Cover (2010: 12–3, 17–8) acknowledges the potential for bias and idiosyncrasy in such an approach, but counters that the advantages of a researcher with expertise and insider knowledge outweigh the potential problems. This investigation takes a similar stance and applies similar precautions to those described by Cover, to help mitigate subjective bias: the research draws not only on the experiences of the author, but the many participants in the various gaming groups analysed, as well as the experiences of relevant others sought out via RPG books, forums, and so on; the research also includes textual analysis and literature and context reviews of relevant theory and practice.

This autoethnographic approach is also in keeping with Archer (1995) and Frayling's (1994) principles of practice research. By being immersed in RPGs – reading about them, playing them, GMing them and reflecting on them – the author ensures that the investigation is both performed *through*, and is *about*, the practice of playing/GMing. To this end, the accompanying 'Gamemastering Practice

Document' (GMPD) contains the substantive, significant record of this practice, and should be considered a substantial appendix to this thesis.

The GMPD is of vital importance to this investigation as it is the record of the substantial majority of the research and evidence for this investigation – the practice research. See pages 5-6 of the GMPD for a thorough introduction to the document and further details, but it records an estimated 1,200+ hours of GMing practice, as well as other work, and reflections and analysis relating to the practice.

To readdress Archer (1995) and Frayling's (1994) principles of practice research – because this investigation is *about* the practice of GMing, the bulk of the sources reviewed are those that relate directly to this practice. GMing is largely learned, communicated, and discussed through media such as:

- RPG rulebooks, which usually at least include sections on both how to GM in general, and how the GM role might differ for the specific game (perhaps some duties are missing/altered, or the GM should emphasize certain aspects of the role). Notable examples include *Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Master's Guide* (Wizards RPG Team 2014a) and 'the Master of Ceremonies' section of *Apocalypse World: the Master of Ceremonies Playbook* (Baker and Baker 2016: 80–93).
- GMing advice books written by experienced GMs and game designers. Notable examples include *Robin's Laws of Good Game Mastering* (Laws 2002) and *Focal Point: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Running Extraordinary Sessions* (Vecchione et al. 2015).
- Online forums and similar spaces where GMs and game designers can discuss techniques and share tips. Notable examples include *The Forge* ('About the Forge' n.d.) and *RPGnet Forums* ('RPGnet Forums' 2023), both online forums.
- Podcasts, video series, blogs and similar in which notable GMs and designers present advice and analysis to their audience, perhaps including interviews/discussions with other notable figures. Notable examples include the *Running the Game* (Colville 2023) and *Adventuring Academy* (Dropout 2023) online video series.
- Actual play podcasts and video series, which present recordings of RPG sessions for the entertainment of their audience, and often include some discussion of GMing, including advice. Notable examples include *The Adventure Zone* (McElroy et al. 2023) podcast series and *Critical Role* (Critical Role et al. 2015) online video series.

As these media types are where the practice of GMing is mostly communicated and analysed, this necessitates that this investigation utilises a large proportion of practice-focused, non-academic sources. This is in keeping with similar works in the field.

Academic works by Tychsen et al. (2005), Aylett et al. (2008), Cover (2010) and others reference pages from John H. Kim's 'RPG Theory' section of *darkshire.net* (2012) due to their influence on the academic study of RPGs and Kim's involvement in early discussions of RPG styles and models of play (Appelcline 2014a: 136–9)[1]. Similarly, academic works by Tychsen et al. (2005), Aylett et al. (2008), Manzo (2011) and others reference writing and analysis of RPGs originating at *The Forge* ('About the Forge' n.d.), an influential online community during the period between 1999 and 2012, dedicated to the creation and analysis of RPGs (Appelcline 2014a: 135–9). As such, this investigation maintains this tradition of acknowledging the influence of these non-academic sources on the field of GMing, and thus focuses its attention accordingly, on the work of practicing GMs and game designers/developers.

Positionality Statement

Due to the autoethnographic nature of this work, it is important to acknowledge how the author's identity and experiences interact with the research. Accordingly, the rest of this section is written by the author in the first person:

The following aspects of my identity are likely to have impacted my research: I identify as a White British, cisgender man in my forties; I have a mixed-race daughter; I work as a Lecturer at a UK university games department, alongside completing my PhD; I come from a working-class background, and I was the first in my family to attend university; I am in receipt of disability benefits and received a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder in my late thirties.

With regards to RPGs, I came to them somewhat late in life – my first RPG session came in my early-to-mid-twenties, after impulse-buying a copy of *Mutants & Masterminds* (Kenson 2005) and recruiting some friends who liked comics and were willing to try a game. Before then, partly due to growing up in rural Yorkshire, I had been somewhat unaware of RPGs and I hadn't come into contact with people who were knowledgeable enough to induct me into the hobby or otherwise interested in the medium. I had glimpsed the potential of the format at times: I owned a copy of the dungeon-crawling boardgame *Warhammer Quest* (Jones 1995) that included a *Roleplay Book* – this book of optional rules explained how to link individual sessions of play together into campaigns that included generating narrative content between dungeons and progressing characters through levelling up and buying equipment. I didn't know anyone who would play this version of the game with me, but I

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[1] Appelcline's incredibly thorough history of the RPG industry, *Designers & Dragons* (Appelcline 2014b, 2014c, 2014d, 2014a), is used throughout this thesis to provide context for practice-focused sources.

would excitedly read these rules and imagine the potential of a game that generates a grand story about characters who change through their adventures.

Since my first RPG sessions, I have engaged in the hobby whenever able – usually this required proximity to others who were interested. Moving home would usually mean abandoning established groups of players and sometimes led to prolonged periods without being able to play (before online RPG play became prevalent). When I moved home to engage with my PhD institution, I gained the most reliable and regular access to willing RPG players that I'd had so far, via the staff and students of the games department.

Having almost exclusively played with participants from this games department for the practice that forms the bulk of the research for this thesis, it is important to note that the student body and staff mostly identify as men and are mostly White. The student body has a higher prevalence of neurodiversity than the general population, and informal conversations with staff implies that this is also true in the staff body. I have generally involved anyone who was willing in my games (and initially extended open invitations to all students and staff in the department), but these trends of mostly White men are reflected in my players. While I had tended to run games with more diverse groups (in both ethnicity and gender) before this project, it should be noted that these trends are present in the project – the RPG sessions were mostly run by a White man and mostly played by White men.

While issues of diversity and representation are very important to me in my personal life, I am limited by my own experiences – and as such, the research is limited by the experiences of me and my players. I have been wary of potential issues of privilege and marginalisation, but the practice may have taken different directions with access to more diverse groups of players.

Another consideration is that my earliest sessions featured players who were mostly from my student body. While I was a very junior staff member at the time, and we made sure to delineate the space and time as unrelated to their course, there was a power imbalance that likely impacted how they engaged with the activity. Similarly, my later players were mostly my colleagues – other staff in the games department, of varying levels of seniority. Approaches were likely similarly impacted here (while similarly delineated the sessions as social activities unrelated to work), though I was one of the most junior in these circumstances.

In order to minimise the impact of these relationships and aspects of identity on the research, the session coverage and reflections in the GMPD rarely directly refer to individual players and remain focused on general principles of GMing and RPG play. This is coupled with coverage of a diverse

spread of RPG systems and stories, across a huge number of sessions, with the aim that generalised information in volume and variety provides a diversity of evidence.

Accessibility in the Practice Research

While, as stated above, it is likely that some of the participants of the RPG sessions of the practice research were neurodiverse (including the author), no explicit accessibility concerns arose in relation to the practice research. The author would offer general support to participants, but the available population raised no issues relating to unique needs or challenges due to being variously abled.

It is recognised that neurodiverse people appear to be drawn to RPGs (and similar activities), but that they may require particular accommodations and support to properly enjoy the practice (Valorozo-Jones 2021: 14–5; Jung 2024: 19). Valorozo-Jones explains that explicit "group norms, expectations, and social rules" are important for neurodiverse players, and these can be supported by using safety tools to establish clear and accessible modes of communication (2021: 15–8). Clear and regular communication was encouraged throughout the practice research, with further details covered in the Chapter 2 section titled Hosting and Managing Players.

It is also important to note that most of the RPG sessions during the practice research were run with established groups of players. This impacted considerations of access and onboarding because the GM became familiar with the group's needs and preferences. This means that instances of having to develop new accommodations and otherwise establish modes of communication and support were rare.

Author's Preferences as a Gamemaster

In relation to the above, it is also important to consider that a GM (or player) brings their own style and preferences to their RPG sessions. The GMing and RPG preferences of the author will therefore have also impacted the research for this project. Accordingly, the rest of this section is also written by the author in the first person:

My preferred GMing style is mentioned and alluded to in the GMPD, with this excerpt being an example:

> [The RPG adventures being reflected on] are quite thin in terms of planning/prep materials – like some of my other adventures, this is how I tend to prefer to run things (short adventures anyway). I just have some essentials recorded about the setting and especially any antagonists' plots, then I can adlib the rest during play. It lets me operate in that comfort zone of familiarity with the setting (because I constructed it myself and don't have to worry about contradicting anything) and freedom for the players to just do what they like (making

sure that I can bend things to reward them for their approaches, rather than requiring very specific actions from them to progress). (GMPD, page 278)

I also describe myself as "a GM who likes to fudge rolls and overlook mechanics in favour of drama and engaging storytelling" (GMPD, page 10), demonstrating occasional frustration with systems that prevent this approach (such as in the example this quote is from, in which I reflect on struggling with the approach to GMing that *Apocalypse World* requires).

While I accept that I have preferences, and I believe that I tend to GM better when I'm facilitating sessions that align with them, I also made great efforts to GM sessions in ways that aligned with the systems we played. The above reflection on *Apocalypse World* is from one of the sections of the GMPD that demonstrates this – we played this system (and others like it) many times through the practice research. Each time we played, I worked on addressing my discomfort with the style and methods of GMing required to properly facilitate the system (often reflecting on this process in the GMPD). Similarly, I initially struggled with GMing authored adventures and settings that I was unfamiliar with, yet returned to this type of GMing repeatedly to reflect on the style and improve my skills:

> [The *Paths of the Damned* campaign] was one of my first experiences with trying to run a more long-form campaign from a book, as opposed to authored one-shots (in which inaccuracies are less frequent and can be more quickly dealt with) or longer adventures/campaigns of my own design. Some of the problems were due to my lack of confidence in running something like this – I wasn't especially familiar with the system and setting, and I didn't know which elements of the adventure I could gloss over, adlib around or otherwise alter, due to not knowing what might have repercussions in the campaign. (GMPD, page 301)

The practice research therefore involved RPGs of a wide range of system/GMing styles, settings, and so on. This includes games that were largely played using miniatures and gameboards (or virtual equivalents), such as *Dark Heresy* (GMPD, from page 254) and *Pathfinder* (GMPD, from page 287), as well as games that were played almost exclusively via verbal description and discussion, such as *Blades in the Dark* (GMPD, from page 118) and *Fiasco* (GMPD, page 272). Similarly, we played mechanically complex games, such as *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* (GMPD, from page 300), and simpler story-focused games, such as *The Skeletons* (GMPD, from page 292). The aim was to involve myself in all aspects of the GM's role, across the variety of styles and techniques that are common in RPGs, to ensure that my reflections and analysis incorporate the approaches that are further from my preferences.

As much as I worked to challenge my GMing preferences, I accept that I also have some relative GMing weaknesses, some of which I believe are related to my neurodiversity. I believe I can struggle with portraying characters – I find myself unable to perform accents to distinguish character voices, though I do alter elements of my voice such as tone, rhythm, and so on. I can also struggle to improvise conversation with NPCs sometimes, when I'm finding it hard to imagine myself in their position – at these times, I tend to abstract out the conversations by describing the NPC's tone and summarising the key points of their dialogue instead of acting it out directly, for example. I also believe that I can become overwhelmed easily, so I tend not to include elements like soundtracks, mood lighting, or other "set dressing" in my sessions due to the additional cognitive burden required to manage these.

Overview of Thesis Chapters

The introductory chapter of the thesis establishes terms and justifies and situates the research. It also establishes definitions and descriptions for RPGs and GMs, including context and examples as well as breakdowns of the components that comprise the experiences.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 explore the role of the GM in detail and extract the lists of the functions that make up the respective GMing sub-roles of Entertainer, Storyteller, and Referee (+). They extract lessons relating to GMs' direct management of RPG play via their functions, effects and responsibilities.

The final chapter presents the implications and conclusions of the investigation, summarising the research and identifying key takeaways, and suggesting further avenues of enquiry. The final summary of the Functions of the Gamemaster is presented here – outlining the contribution to knowledge presented by this project.

Defining and Describing the RPG

RPGs are defined in the dictionary as "game[s] in which players take on the roles of imaginary characters who engage in adventures, typically in a particular fantasy setting overseen by a referee" ('Role-Playing Game' 2019). Originally arising as an offshoot of wargames (notable early examples of which being *Strategos* (Totten 1880) and *Little Wars* (Wells 1913)), their first incarnations in the late 1970s required players gathered in a physical space. Since, they have grown into a distinctive genre and gaming type of their own (Kim 2011; Peterson 2012).

RPGs have dual history in games and literature, beginning with *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974) – the origin of the RPG genre and a popular RPG brand[2] (Cover 2010; Peterson 2012; Mearls 2014). This dual history is discussed by Cover (2010: 8–9) via Mackay (2001: 15, as cited in Cover 2010: 8–9): the idea for *Dungeons & Dragons* spawned from the inclusion of elements from fantasy novels in wargames, shifting the focus to controlling powerful and heroic individual characters rather than armies. This positioned RPGs as "a response to literature and a way of interacting in literary worlds" (Mackay 2001: 15, as cited in Cover 2010: 8–9), which requires the acknowledgement that they have a dual nature, in that they are the direct descendants of both games (wargames) and stories (fantasy novels) (Cover 2010: 9).

According to Peterson (2012), the common defining features of RPGs are:

- A distinction exists among participants between a "referee" or "gamemaster" and the "players" of the game (Peterson 2012: 592). The term "Dungeon Master" or DM is often used to refer to the GM role. While the DM term originated in *Dungeons & Dragons'* (Gygax and Arneson 1974) specific terminology, the success and importance of the brand saw its use popularised.

- Player interaction with the game's fictional world is done in dialogue with the GM, rather than via a mode of visual representation such as a game board with pieces (as was prevalent in the wargames which preceded RPGs) (Peterson 2012: 592).

- The Player Characters (PCs) can attempt almost any action within the game's world, though the GM decides on the outcomes (Peterson 2012: 592).

- The gameplay is constructed of multiple modes – combat and exploration, for example (Peterson 2012: 592).

- The PCs can improve and progress via the game's mechanics – "levelling up" and improving their abilities, for example (Peterson 2012: 592).

In addition to the PCs, Nonplayer Characters (NPCs), including enemies and allies, are often a feature of an RPG – these are characters that exist in the fictional world of the game, but who are not PCs. Generally, their personalities and choices are decided upon and performed by the GM, but in some

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[2] The importance of the *Dungeons & Dragons* brand to the RPG leads to repeated references to it throughout this research – "as the origin of the [RPG], a focus on *D&D* is foundational to our understanding of the genre" (Cover 2010: 18).

cases – e.g., during combat in *Savage Worlds* (Hensley 2011) or for allies and teams in *Monster of the Week* (Sands 2015) – they can be distributed to other participants.

Peterson's terminology, in distinguishing between the GM and players, implies that the GM is not a player of an RPG, but perhaps oversees or inflicts play on the other participants. While the GM and players are all participants in the RPG, whether the GM is playing the game is less clear. This complexity, including the participant/player distinction, is discussed in Manzo's 'There Is No Such Thing As A "Game Master"' (2011), with reference to related friction across academia and general understanding of terms within RPG-related subcultures. While the term's boundaries and strict definition are complicated to determine, this investigation is more concerned with establishing the general history of the GM role, its common practical aspects and understanding, and how those relate to videogame development.

The history of the GM role lies in the referees of competitive play, carried over from wargaming into RPGs (Peterson 2012: 59–64), and referees tend to be separate from players. For example, *The Football Association* defines their referees as part of a group of "match officials", distinct from the players, with the duty to enforce the rules (The Football Association 2019). The concept of a neutral party supervising a contest dates back at least as far as early Olympic Games, in the sixth century BC (Duvinage 2012; Dosseville and Laborde 2015), while the notable referees of association football were proposed at least as early as the sixteenth century (Mulcaster 1581).

GMs have duties beyond only enforcing rules, and they take action to progress the state of the game and build the story with the players. To avoid confusion, the term 'participants' is used to refer to all people involved in the live play of an RPG (players and GMs), while 'player' refers to a non-GM participant and vice-versa, thus fitting Tychsen et al.'s (2005: 217) assertion that a GM "is a participant in the game, however, with the exception of a few RPGs focused on collaborative storytelling…, is not a player".

The term RPG is used to describe many experiences beyond the types of games on which this chapter focuses. Within this thesis, the term 'RPG' describes games that are also referred to as Pen and Paper RPGs (PPRPGs, PnPRPGs) and Tabletop RPGs (Table-top, Table Top, TTRPGS), as opposed to Computer RPGs (CRPGs), the other RPG genres of videogames (such as Japanese RPGs, Open-World RPGs), Live-Action RPGs (LARPs), pervasive games, other games "with RPG mechanics" or the concept of roleplaying as it relates to non-RPG games, psychology, training, or any other use of the term. Cover defines an RPG as follows:

a type of game/game system that involves collaboration between a small group of players and a gamemaster through face-to-face social activity with the purpose of creating a narrative experience [author's emphasis] (Cover 2010: 168)

This is an expansion upon Mackay's (2001: 4-5, cited in Cover 2010: 10) definition with an acknowledgement of the social motive for participating in an RPG, but with a focus on the narrative experience over narrative form. While Peterson's (2012: 592) list of common defining features of an RPG is useful for identifying certain elements of their structure, Cover's definition includes reference to the reason for, and result of, play. It is worth noting that precise adherence to the definition would exclude some RPGs. For example, GMs are not necessarily present in the same way in all RPGs – some distribute some GM functions amongst other players (e.g. *Apocalypse World* (Baker and Baker 2016)), have the role of the GM rotate between more than one player (e.g., *Alas Vegas* (Wallis 2017)) or are designed in such a way that a GM is not appropriate or required (e.g., *Fiasco* (Morningstar 2009)).

Zagal suggests that some RPG designs with a deemphasis on "the power and control" of the GM demonstrate "a desire to reduce or distribute the labor [sic] required to play", with an acknowledgement that the GM must "engage in significant labor [sic] prior to play" and therefore "face a higher barrier to success" (2019). Clark similarly describes GMing as a "service job" and "a lot of work", but adds that performing this job correctly creates a "positive feedback loop" in which GM work to please players results in the players becoming more invested, contributing more to the game for the GM to work with, and so on (2017: 13–4). This acknowledgment of the labour required to successfully play RPGs highlights the importance of understanding the GM's role, perhaps so that elements might be redistributed.

In addition, a GM's role and functions are not consistent across all RPGs. Also, not all RPGs must be played face-to-face: internet forum RPGs, as described at *Forum Roleplay*'s 'Forum Roleplaying Basics' page (K. "Sie" W. 2019) and with many available at *RPGnet Forums*' 'Roleplay-By-Post Play Forum' ('Roleplay-By-Post Play Forum' 2019), are played asynchronously, via text rather than voice and with players generally physically distant from each other; and software and applications such as *Roll20* (Roll20, LLC 2024) and *Fantasy Grounds* (SmiteWorks USA, LLC 2019) allow RPGs to be played over the internet, between physically distant (and perhaps not visible or audible) participants, with functionality provided by the tool for various aspects of the game.

Dungeons & Dragons' current, fifth edition (Wizards RPG Team 2014b), describes itself as an RPG that is like a structured game of "make-believe", in which one player takes on the role of the "lead storyteller and referee" – the GM. They create adventures for the PCs, who "navigate [their] hazards

and decide which paths to explore". The GM determines the outcomes of the PC's actions and describes their experiences. Because the PCs may have many reactions to any situation, and the GM can improvise many responses to their actions, the game is "infinitely flexible". There is no true end – one adventure can flow into another – and PCs will grow in ability from one session to another. There is no winning or losing – the GM and players share the goal of having a good time and creating an exciting and memorable story together, regardless of the fictional successes or failures of the PCs (Wizards RPG Team 2014b: 5).

Apocalypse World (Baker and Baker 2016)[3] describes an RPG as a conversation:

> You and the other players go back and forth, talking about these fictional characters in their fictional circumstances doing whatever it is they do. Like any conversation, you take turns, but it's not like taking turns, right? Sometimes you talk over each other, interrupt, build on each others' ideas, monopolize and hold forth. All fine.

> These rules mediate the conversation. They kick in when someone says some particular things, and they impose constraints on what everyone should say after. (Baker and Baker 2016: 9)

The concepts of the players, GM, PCs and NPCs, and their relationships to each other, are central to the RPG genre. The ruleset or game system is also a core component of any game and forms a relationship with these parties during play – it, to some degree, dictates what is required for an attempted action within the game world to be successful, and therefore alter the ongoing story. The ruleset of an RPG may, stereotypically, require a player to roll a polyhedral die and achieve some target value for their PC to succeed at a fictional task.

While it is a definition rather than a principle, The Lumpley Principle [4], attributed to Vincent Baker and Emily Care Boss[5] (Edwards 2004; Boss n.d.), states that, with regards to RPGs, "[s]ystem (including but not limited to 'the rules') is defined as the means by which the group agrees to imagined events during play" (Edwards 2004). The system may be a branded, published rule set with or without some degree of inherent fictional setting, such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (Wizards RPG

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[3] D. Vincent Baker, also credited as Vincent Baker, is a prolific and influential RPG designer (Appelcline 2014a: 174–87). *Apocalypse World*, developed with his wife, Meguey Baker, has been particularly influential on the industry, having inspired a format or genre of its own – "Powered by the Apocalypse" games (Appelcline 2014a: 182–6).

[4] "Lumpley", usually characterised in all lower-case, is a name that Baker historically "used on various online systems" which also became the name of his independent RPG publishing company – lumpley games (Appelcline 2014a: 176).

[5] Emily Care Boss is an influential figure in the RPG industry, being an early participant of *The Forge*, game developer and published theorist ('Emily Care Boss' n.d.).

Team 2014b) or *Call of Cthulhu* (Petersen and Willis 2005), or it could be some other agreement between the participants on how the fictional activity is resolved. The system, setting and choices of the GM and players are all factors in resolving the outcomes of all events in the game world.

PLAYERS: CREATE CHARACTERS

1 Choose a style for your character: **Alien, Android, Dangerous, Hot-Shot, Intrepid, Savvy,** or **Sexy.**

2 Choose a role for your character: **Doctor, Envoy, Engineer, Explorer, Pilot, Scientist,** or **Soldier.**

3 Choose your **number**, from 2 to 5. A high number means you're better at **LASERS** (technology; science; cold rationality; calm, precise action). A low number means you're better at **FEELINGS** (intuition; diplomacy; seduction; wild, passionate action).

4 Give your character a **cool space adventure name**. Like Sparks McGee or something.

You have: a Consortium uniform (with built-in vacc-suit for space walks), a super-sweet space-phone-camera-communicator-scanner thing (with universal translator), a variable-beam phase pistol (set to stun, usually).

Player goal: Get your character involved in crazy space adventures and try to make the best of them.

Character goal: Choose one or create your own: **Become Captain, Meet Sexy Aliens, Shoot Bad Guys, Find New Worlds, Solve Weird Space Mysteries, Prove Yourself,** or **Keep Being Awesome** (you have nothing to prove).

PLAYERS: CREATE THE SHIP

As a group, pick two strengths for the *Raptor*: **Fast, Nimble, Well-Armed, Powerful Shields, Superior Sensors, Cloaking Device, Fightercraft.**

Also, pick one problem: **Fuel Hog** (always needs energy crystals), **Only One Medical Pod** (and Captain Darcy is in it), **Horrible Circuit Breakers** (in battle, consoles tend to explode on the bridge), **Grim Reputation** (Captain Darcy did some bad stuff in the past).

ROLLING THE DICE

When you do something risky, roll **1d6** to find out how it goes. Roll **+1d** if you're **prepared** and **+1d** if you're an **expert.** *(The GM tells you how many dice to roll, based on your character and the situation.)* **Roll your dice and compare each die result to your number.**

↓ If you're using **LASERS** (science, reason), you want to roll **under** your number.

↑ If you're using **FEELINGS**, (rapport, passion) you want to roll **over** your number.

0 **If none of your dice succeed**, it goes wrong. The GM says how things get worse somehow.

1 **If one die succeeds**, you barely manage it. The GM inflicts a complication, harm, or cost.

2 **If two dice succeed**, you do it well. Good job!

3 **If three dice succeed**, you get a critical success! The GM tells you some extra effect you get.

! **If you roll your number exactly**, you have **LASER FEELINGS**. You get a special insight into what's going on. Ask the GM a question and they'll answer you honestly. Some good questions:

What are they really feeling? Who's behind this? How could I get them to _____? What should I be on the lookout for? What's the best way to _____? What's really going on here?

You can change your action if you want to, then roll again.

HELPING: If you want to help someone else, who's rolling, say how you try to help and make a roll. If you succeed, give them **+1d.**

Figure 1 Excerpt from Harper 2013. Lasers & Feelings.

Figure 1 (Harper 2013) shows an example of a system, *Lasers & Feelings*, in which the rules and fictional setting are presented partly in combination and partly separate. Being inspired by the space opera genre of television and films such as *Flash Gordon* (*Flash Gordon* 1936) and *Star Wars* (*Star Wars* 1977), much of the language evokes the intended themes of the game. The choices for character and ship creation set up a situation where "crazy space adventures" are to be expected but will also influence the play of the game. The "Rolling the Dice" section states how the fictional activity is to be resolved when a PC undertakes a risky action, with consideration given to whether they are prepared for the action or an expert in its execution – these factors are dictated by the choices made when considering the fictional setting, during character creation.

In a forum post at *The Forge*, Baker (2002) states that all RPG systems do is apportion 'Credibility' – that there is "nothing else for them to do". Baker uses the term Credibility as follows:

> I call the power in a roleplaying game Credibility. As in, whose statements about what happens are Credible? If I say that I shoot you, and you say the gun jams, whose word do we take for it? (Baker 2002)

While this statement is perhaps falsely absolute and was debated on proposal (see the full thread of (Baker 2002)), Baker's focus on Credibility is a useful approach for analysing RPGs. The Credibility of any statement that would affect the ongoing story being built by the participants is all that matters. When some change to the state of the shared, imagined world is attempted, the participants must agree on whether that attempt is Credible – whether it should be allowed and accepted into the shared imagination. If the participants agree to follow a certain system, then the rules of that system can dictate what is or isn't Credible – often players will be required to roll dice or follow some other rules to effect a change (see the "Rolling the Dice" section in *Figure 1* for an example). Games with a GM often dictate that the GM is the final arbiter of Credibility, in their role of refereeing and leading the story, but only as far as the rest of the group agree to keep playing: "the GM exists via the acceptance of the players" (Tychsen et al. 2005: 217) and "[p]layers have the ultimate control – by leaving the game" (Fine 2002: 107)[6]. Even when Credibility is assigned to a set of rules or particular participant, group consensus is still a factor. As described above, the figure of the GM is central to most RPGs as they "hold a major part of the game control" (Tychsen et al. 2005: 215). They create scenarios for the PCs to react to and develop – making the base decisions that lead to the construction of the RPG's fantasy. They are sometimes described as a "storyteller" or "playwright" – metaphors recognising their structuring of the action of the game in both setting and scenario (Fine 2002: 72–3). They control the pace and direction of the narrative, striving to mesh the story with the players' actions. They also react to the actions of the players, make sure that they are driving the narrative and attempt to learn about their preferences and behaviours (Laws 2002; Strugnell et al. 2018: 431).

Thus far, each of the following is established as a component of an RPG: the system; the setting; the ongoing story of the PCs; the physical rulebook; the entire collection of books required for play; the experience of "live" play; the preparation for the experience of play; the group of participants –

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[6] Much of this thesis, especially those sections dealing with the definitions and explanations of RPGs and GMs, relies heavily on *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Fine 2002), originally written in 1983, because it is among the first and most notable academic studies to be produced on RPGs as a distinct culture (Ashmore 2008; Cover 2010; Kim 2011; Carbonell 2016). While it is now a dated source, it is useful as a foundation for studying RPGs due to its impact on the field.

together or apart; an assembly in a particular place. Is the RPG itself any one of these? Perhaps it is all of them combined, or some subset. Laws (2002: 2) states that rulebooks "are not roleplaying games, any more than a screenplay is a movie" – that an RPG not only demands, but is constructed of "active participation". Related to this, players can end an RPG by leaving the game (Fine 2002: 107), implying that all the other required elements, including the GM but excluding the players, do not add up to an RPG.

Treating the Gamemaster as a List of Functions

The role and functions of the GM have been commonly described in frameworks or lists of responsibilities, such as Tychsen et al.'s (2005: 215–6) five "Functions of the GM" – Narrative Flow, Rules, Engagement, Environment and Virtual World – or the description of what a *Dungeons & Dragons* GM is – Architect of the campaign, Storyteller, Actor and Referee (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 4). However, prior frameworks prioritise certain aspects of the GM's role, focus on analysing particular effects, or seem incomplete when compared to other frameworks. This investigation uses a broad range of sources from academia and practice to compile a long-form, thorough list of GM functions, with analysis of each.

The Two Periods

The functions of the GM are commonly understood to be enacted within two distinct types of period, referred to by Laws (2002) as "game running" and "adventure creation":

- Uptime, during which the game is being played – all participants are gathered, perhaps around a table, and the story is being built live. The "conversation" of the RPG happens during the uptime. During this period, the GM can be described as "running a session" (Vecchione et al. 2015)[7].

- Downtime, during which the GM is working on tasks related to the game, but play isn't currently happening. The GM may be preparing a new adventure for the players, learning the system, generating new NPCs or performing any other task that will enable play when the participants are gathered. Players may also perform some RPG-related actions during downtime, such as deciding on elements of their PC's personal story or choosing new abilities for their PC as part of improving their abilities. During this period, the GM can be

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[7] *Focal Point: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Running Extraordinary Sessions*, (Vecchione et al. 2015), is published through Engine Publishing by *Gnome Stew* (Gnome Stew and Individual Authors 2022), an award-winning blog about RPGs and GMing.

described as preparing/prepping (for) a session, or performing "session prep" (Vecchione 2012)[8].

A GM generally has different responsibilities and performs different functions between these two periods, though some functions straddle both uptime and downtime. It is also worth noting that there are edge case situations that cannot be attributed clearly to uptime or downtime. For example, a GM may offer opportunities for play outside of established sessions, perhaps through short scenes involving only one PC, played out through private messages or similar, like those described on page 255 of the GMPD: "I offered extra story and engagement between sessions, usually via group or private messages with the players, providing extra off-screen story details or some character choices". Similarly, even when considering these two periods as a binary, there are at least buffer periods between uptime and downtime that also do not clearly fit into either categorisation, such as periods of socialisation at the beginning of an arranged RPG session (before play/storytelling truly begins but while all participants are in attendance).

The uptime/downtime binary is further complicated by considerations such as bleed (discussed in the Chapter 2 section titled Bleed), which can see players experience impacts from RPG play outside of sessions via their relationship to their PC, and activities that communally establish details of the setting for the RPG and/or deal with considerations relating to the expected behaviour of participants, usually taking place before play begins (discussed in the Chapter 2 sections titled Caring for the Players and Teaching and Onboarding Players). While these elements are further discussed in later sections, they at least demonstrate that it is not possible to clearly delineate a boundary between uptime/play and downtime/non-play. However, this distinction between "running a session" and "session prep" is common in GMing- and RPG-related materials, and as such is a useful lens through which a GM can delineate two rough, broad periods in which their responsibilities will be largely performed.

GM Functions During Uptime

While the GM, at least in part, creates the world and scenario for an RPG's story, as described in the next section, the direction of the story is dictated by the action of the players via their PCs. It may seem that the referee should be able to present the predetermined game world to the players, via description and fair and impartial application of the rules, but this isn't true in reality – the GM, acting as "a system of computational logic that multiple users input commands into" (Lalone 2019)

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[8] *Never Unprepared: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Session Prep* (Vecchione 2012) is also published by *Gnome Stew* (Gnome Stew and Individual Authors 2022) – see footnote 7.

"is continually involved in shaping the game action" (Fine 2002: 84). The larger part of the GM's role is enacted during play – in the uptime.

In *Focal Point: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Running Extraordinary Sessions*, Vecchione et al. (2015) acknowledge the complexity of the GM's role during uptime, in comprising multiple functions – "you must balance a multitude of game elements while monitoring the status of your players and making real-time adjustments to the game and/or story, all the while being entertaining and engaging" (Vecchione et al. 2015: 6). They use moviemaking as a metaphor and framing device for breaking down and understanding these uptime functions that "are common to virtually every GM and virtually every game" (Vecchione et al. 2015: 6). The proposed sections are:

- "Lights—The set, the props, and the soundtrack. This is the arena of the entertainer." (Vecchione et al. 2015: 8)
- "Camera—Framing scenes, the opening, the climax, and the cliffhanger. This is the realm of the storyteller." (Vecchione et al. 2015: 8)
- "Action—Safety, collaboration, and managing all the moving parts. This is the domain of the facilitator." (Vecchione et al. 2015: 8)

Many other texts with advice on enacting GM uptime functions exist, including most RPG rulebooks, and the approach of breaking these functions down into themed sections or roles is common.

GM Functions During Downtime

In *Never Unprepared: The Complete Game Master's Guide to Session Prep*, Vecchione states that the "*goal of prep is to give the GM a level of comfort through the understanding that all the information they need to run the game as smoothly as possible is readily at hand.*" [author's emphasis] (2012: 11). They also state that "useful" prep has four attributes – it must be accessible, organised, effective, and reliable – and that there are five phases to the prep process – brainstorming, selection, conceptualisation, documentation, and review (Vecchione 2012: 12, 16). Essentially, that a GM must go through an appropriate process of idea generation, refinement, and documentation to ensure that any information they may require will be on hand during the next uptime period.

There are also many other texts with advice on enacting GM downtime functions, and often they will similarly break these functions down into themed sections or roles. *Never Unprepared*, for example, suggests that proper review of prep requires acting as "The Proofreader", "The Director" and "The Playtester" – with a GM assessing their work from three perspectives (Vecchione 2012: 58–60). *Sly Flourish's Dungeon Master Tips* includes the chapters 'Build Your Story' and 'Design Fun Encounters'

(Shea 2010)[9] while, similarly, *Your Best Game Ever* includes the chapters 'Building a World' and 'Creating Adventures' (Cook 2019)[10].

It is apparent that, while texts may disagree on exactly how the role of the GM is broken down, or what aspects should be considered, it is common practice to construct the GM from a list of functions, often sorted into larger categories or sub-roles. Patterns are common – many structures accept that the GM acts as both storyteller and referee, for example, even where the stated functions of those sub-roles may differ.

Gamemaster Functions Examples

Examining several examples that deal with describing the role of the GM to those learning or developing it, often through RPG rulebooks, is useful for understanding how the role is described as functions to those performing it. This aids in drawing out the common and important sub-roles and functions.

Dungeons and Dragons

The most recognisable RPG brand, in the fifth edition *Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Master's Guide*, states that a GM "wears" the following "hats" (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 4):

- "Architect of the campaign" – inventing and writing adventures for PCs. (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 4)
- "Storyteller" – narrating and improvising the ongoing fictional action. (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 4)
- "Actor" – performing as believable and interesting NPCs. (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 4)
- "Referee" – interpreting and arbitrating on the game rules, including altering/ignoring them where desired. (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 4)

These are then reframed within the three parts of the book, stating that a GM is:

- "Master of Worlds" – concerned with creating a fictional setting (even where a setting is provided, as it comes to belong to the GM and RPG group as they make changes and play in it), ensuring that it matches the desired play experience, and presenting that setting as a consistent and believable world. (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 4)

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[9] Under the brand name Sly Flourish, Mike Shea has been "writing for and about RPGs since 2008", including a successful series of *Lazy DM* advice books (Shea 2008).
[10] Monte Cook is prolific in the RPG industry, having created and worked on many games and related works, including *Dungeons & Dragons*, since the 1980s (Appelcline 2014c, 2014d, 2014a).

- "Master of Adventures" – concerned with creating and running compelling adventures for the PCs, including handling exploration, challenges, rewards, and memorable NPCs. (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 5)

- "Master of Rules" – concerned with mediating between the rules and the players, including adjudication, setting limits, and designing new game content in a way that works as desired within the established systems. (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 5)

These three primary roles of a D&D GM align with what the *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook* describes as the "Three Pillars of Adventure" – the "three broad categories" of activities that D&D PCs will take part in (Wizards RPG Team 2014b: 8):

- "Exploration" – entailing PCs' movements through the fictional world and their interactions with objects and situations (Wizards RPG Team 2014b: 8).

- "Social interaction" – entailing PCs' interactions with NPCs (Wizards RPG Team 2014b: 8).

- "Combat" – entailing PCs' clashes with opponents, using the "most structured" rules of the system to determine victory, defeat, and so on (Wizards RPG Team 2014b: 8).

The three "Master" roles of a GM are performed to support delivering satisfying exploration, social interaction, and combat for the players. For example, as Master of Worlds, the GM crafts a compelling and believable setting, which they then create adventures within, as Master of Adventures. When the players play, the GM acts as Master of Adventures to handle engaging exploration, social interaction, and combat, while sometimes acting as Master of Rules to adjudicate rulings and handle the complexities of the combat systems.

Two different methods of deconstructing the GM into sub-roles and their functions are presented in the introduction. While the two lists are related, they don't neatly align – for example, while the advice given in 'Master of Worlds' would help fuel effective performance of the Storyteller and Actor roles, it isn't explicitly represented in the first list. However, they clearly align with common understandings of the GM – the three parts describe the role as dealing in storytelling (Master of Worlds, Adventures) and rules (Master of Rules), both in uptime (Master of Adventures, Rules) and downtime (Master of Worlds, Adventures). The explicit acknowledgment that 'Master of Rules' includes functions relating to designing and implementing game content is a useful one that is sometimes overlooked in other structures.

Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay

Similarly to *Dungeons & Dragons*, the second edition of *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* lists the GM's "primary responsibilities" (Pramas 2005: 191) while running a game as:

- "Framing the story" – narrating, to promote player immersion. (Pramas 2005: 191)
- "Act as the referee" – adjudicating on the rules and making fair decisions. (Pramas 2005: 191)
- "Take on the role of the [NPCs]" – communicating the characters of NPCs and keeping the story moving. (Pramas 2005: 191)
- "Roll for NPCs" – administrating the actions of allies and opponents, especially where they represent challenges for the PCs. (Pramas 2005: 191)

Again, these align with the common understandings of the role – the GM deals in storytelling and rules. The emphasis on NPCs, by mentioning them in half of the responsibilities, is unusual. The final entry in the list seems somewhat minor compared to the others and could perhaps be a function of the sub-role of "taking on the role of the NPCs".

Immediately after describing the primary responsibilities of a GM, the book lists its five "Golden Rules" (Pramas 2005: 191) of running an RPG:

- "Always be fair" – interpret the rules fairly and do not act arbitrarily, to avoid losing the trust of the players. (Pramas 2005: 191)
- "Give them a chance" – try to allow for the players'/PCs' unusual actions by giving them a small chance of success, to encourage inventiveness and allow them to feel like heroes. (Pramas 2005: 192)
- "Lay down the law" – establish boundaries for disruptive unusual actions and stick to rulings, to retain the authority of the role and the best function of planned game content. (Pramas 2005: 192)
- "Don't play favourites" – ensure the players and PCs receive equal attention, opportunities for interesting storytelling, and rewards, to encourage engagement. (Pramas 2005: 192)
- "Keep the pace brisk" – control and minimise distractions and breaks in the action, to reduce player boredom. (Pramas 2005: 192)

These lists seem somewhat less comprehensive than those provided by *Dungeons & Dragons*, though they only relate to GMing during uptime – some downtime considerations are covered in other parts of the book. However, the Golden Rules are a useful inroad to considering justified functions of a GM's sub-roles – each is explained to provide a benefit to the heroes.

The more recent fourth edition of *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* states that the "most important responsibility of the GM is to make sure everyone has fun, including [themselves]" (McDowall and Law 2018: 258). The acknowledgment that RPGs are primarily played for fun is common in advice

and rulebooks, though the focus on the GM also having fun is sometimes overlooked. This edition also lists the following statements about the GM:

- "You are the world" – narrate the ongoing story, decide on the outcomes of PC action, and perform the roles of the NPCs, to allow for player interaction. (McDowall and Law 2018: 258)
- "You are the rules" – be familiar with the rules, adjudicate quickly, and be transparent in arbitration, to keep the game running smoothly and demonstrate the consequences of player actions, and fairness and consistency. (McDowall and Law 2018: 258)
- "You are the plot" – prepare adventures, including contingencies for unexpected player actions, to support effective improvisation. (McDowall and Law 2018: 258)
- "You are the leader" – ensure all players have a chance to participate, ensure that the game runs smoothly, minimise distractions, be thoughtful and respectful of the players, moderate potentially offensive content, and rule fairly and consistently, to encourage good playing and maximum fun. (McDowall and Law 2018: 258–9)

This list again similarly acknowledges that a GM deals in storytelling and rules, in uptime and downtime, but the addition of the leader sub-role is an important one that is sometimes overlooked. A GM usually necessarily takes on a form of leadership within an RPG group – it is important to consider what functions must be included within this sub-role.

Blue Rose

Blue Rose: The AGE RPG of Romantic Fantasy (Crawford et al. 2017) lists similar sub-roles and functions for a GM to those provided above, but its chapter on "The Narrator's Art" (Narrator being its term for GM) includes explicit acknowledgment of the need to consider styles of play, both in the GM and players (Crawford et al. 2017: 278–9). It lists three common GMing styles, suggesting that switching between them is an option to match player and GM tastes:

- "Adversarial" – a GM who tries to get PCs into trouble a lot, portraying very challenging and ruthless NPC enemies, and sticking quite rigidly to rules, to appeal to players who primarily enjoy overcoming challenges. (Crawford et al. 2017: 278)
- "Benevolent" – a GM who closely follows the rules, emphasizing consistency, flexibility, and player choice, to ensure fun and fairness. (Crawford et al. 2017: 278)
- "Director" – a GM who encourages players to act as the GM feels is appropriate to a situation or ongoing story, rewarding "correct" actions and punishing "incorrect" ones, emphasizing the needs of the story over the rules of the game, to produce memorable story arcs and dramatic moments, and a strong sense of style. (Crawford et al. 2017: 279)

It similarly stresses the importance of knowing the players – what they enjoy, how they interact with each other, and so on. It lists a series of potential "Problem Player Types", explaining how each of eight play styles (or social styles) might disrupt an RPG, along with advice on how to cater to them or bring them in line (Crawford et al. 2017: 279–82).

This focus on interpersonal and personal stylistic aspects of the role of the GM is useful, and sometimes overlooked. It can similarly aid with defining functions of a sub-role.

Cypher System

Where *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, and *Blue Rose* are all varieties of fantasy RPGs, the *Cypher System Rulebook* (Cook et al. 2019) presents a system that is designed to be tailored to the genre and setting that the group desires. It is also a system with "flexibility, … narrative focus, … fast-paced gameplay, and a uniquely GM-friendly design" (Monte Cook Games, LLC 2015). It describes the GM as follows:

> The game master (GM) is the architect of the game but not the sole builder. You're the facilitator as well as the arbiter. You're all of these things and more. It's a challenging role that's not quite like anything else. People try to equate the GM with a playwright, a referee, a judge, or a guide. And those are not terrible analogies, but none of them is quite right, either. (Cook et al. 2019: 402)

This comparison between a GM and an architect matches one of *Dungeons & Dragons*' listed sub-roles, though here the relationship to storytelling is quickly expanded: "[the GM is not] the sole storyteller. The group is the storyteller. But it's the GM's job to pull together the actions, reactions, and desires of [the participants], mesh them with the setting and background created [during downtime], and turn it all into a cohesive story" (Cook et al. 2019: 402).

This storytelling focus persists where the rules are discussed: "the rules are [the GM's] tools to tell a story, to portray a character, and to simulate [their] world." It also states that the GM is subservient to generating "fun gameplay mixed with exciting story" before the rules (Cook et al. 2019: 402), which is a common acknowledgment in other RPG systems. However, it states that *Cypher System* has been designed to account for this aspect of GMing – "to allow the GM to focus on helping to shepherd a great story" (Cook et al. 2019: 402). This approach is due to the stated nature of the system as being focused on storytelling, and perhaps would be deemphasised in other RPG systems, but it is a useful perspective for deriving more sub-roles and functions of the GM.

A key lesson represented clearly in *Cypher System* is that GM sub-roles and functions can be considered in a hierarchy:

- The primary functions of the GM are to provide/encourage fun and excitement.
- This entertainment is primarily accomplished by the GM facilitating/shepherding group storytelling.
- The rules of the system are subservient to this group storytelling and entertainment.

This hierarchical approach is not unusual – fourth edition *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* and many other RPG systems state that a GM's primary responsibility is delivering fun, or entertainment. Though some systems may stress the storytelling focus more than others.

Another useful acknowledgement of *Cypher System* is the recognition that a GM is often responsible for "Teaching the Rules" – that it's "not really [their] job, yet it often falls upon [them]". The GM, as the participant who usually owns the RPG rulebook and has read more of it than others, should generally brief players on which rules they should read, as well as give them an overview of the fictional setting. They should also generally try to introduce the players to the basics of the game mechanics – for example, how dice rolls are used to resolve conflict, and so on. It is acknowledged that the GM should be careful not to overload players with too much, or too complex, information at once, and should account for much of the learning happening during play. (Cook et al. 2019: 426)

This GM sub-role of teacher is another that is often overlooked in advice or rulebooks, though it is sometimes implicitly acknowledged in that GMs are generally the participants who are expected to be most familiar with the setting and rules.

Paranoia

PARANOIA XP (Varney et al. 2004) presents the setting of Alpha Complex – a dystopian science-fiction self-contained city ruled over by The Computer. Relatively few facts are established about the setting because "Alpha Complex is not a place but a state of mind". It is more importantly a mood than a preestablished setting – it is for the GM to create the "Alpha Complex state of mind" by using whatever "tools" fit them best, whatever "makes *[them] personally* feel paranoid." [author's emphasis] (Varney et al. 2004: 95)

This emphasis on the setting and system primarily being used to engender a mood or experience is another useful perspective on GM sub-roles and functions. The rulebook's breakdown of the GM's role also contains similar aspects to others around storytelling and rules, but some emphasis and some extra considerations are provided to further establish the tone/style of the game and the desired mood:

The Prime Rules for the GM

GM Rule #1. You are IN CHARGE. You are ALWAYS RIGHT.

Use [these rules] when you don't know what you'd like to have happen in the game. When you do know, ignore them… **if you don't like a rule, *the rule is wrong*…**

Dice are handy for giving players the illusion they control their destiny… **If a die roll gives you a result you don't like, *the die is wrong*.** Change the result to the number you want…

If a player tries an action you like, roll lots of dice and consult lots of tables. Whatever they tell you, have the action succeed. If you don't like the action… have it fail. If you're undecided, use the rules…

GM Rule #2. The players aren't your enemies. They're your entertainment.

Reward player behavior that entertains you; punish behavior that doesn't… **The best entertainment you get as a Gamemaster is seeing everyone have a good time.**

GM Rule #3. Always turn the players against each other, not against you.

As a ***PARANOIA*** Gamemaster your job is to set up situations where the players can entertain you. You'll do this by dangling great opportunities and then sometimes frustrating them, by giving the PCs many opportunities to kill each other, and by subjecting the players to psychological stresses… [author's emphasis] (Varney et al. 2004: 50)

While presented comedically and certainly related to the unique identity of *PARANOIA*, placing the rules as subservient to even the whims of the GM (without explicit reference to the story) is an interesting approach that acknowledges functions of the role that are occasionally overlooked. Again, there's an acknowledgement that one of the primary reasons for play is every participant having a good time, even while *PARANOIA*'s method of providing that involves psychological stress. This is a useful consideration that demonstrates that "fun" isn't always the most desirable experience for an RPG – entertainment can be accessed through other emotions and experiences.

To aid the GM in accessing *PARANOIA*'s stress-based entertainment, the rulebook gives advice on "player conditioning", focusing on their psychology. This section highlights that a GM should reward players for taking desirable actions (to encourage them to do more of these things), always including "brilliance", but most fundamentally rewarding them for playing the game: "Make them laugh. Make them get creative. Make sure when they're entertaining you, this also entertains them, and thereby conditions them." (Varney et al. 2004: 50)

Similarly, the rulebook stipulates that a GM should punish the players for undesirable actions (to encourage them to do less of those things) – "for stalling the game, disrupting the atmosphere and above all for arguing over rules" (Varney et al. 2004: 50). This is an interesting consideration and

sub-role for a GM – providing fictional rewards and punishments for (un)desirable actions that occur at the game, but not necessarily in the fiction. Again, something that is often overlooked. This section does stress that a GM should not use their authority maliciously, which is important to factor in (Varney et al. 2004: 50).

In its section on "what a GM does", *PARANOIA*'s rulebook covers standard considerations with its first two sections – "Referee the rules" and "Play NPCs". It does also include the acknowledgement that "*[t]he narrative is more important than the rules*" [author's emphasis]: "You want the collective actions of the PCs and NPCs to become, over time, a satisfying narrative. To this end, you provide a goal, obstacles, interesting events and a climax" (Varney et al. 2004: 51). However, its lengthy third section states that a *PARANOIA* GM should "sustain psychological stress" through "suspension of disbelief", "rivalry", "lethality", "Computer pressure", and "ignorance". (Varney et al. 2004: 51–2)

Again, it is important to acknowledge that much of this advice is somewhat unique to *PARANOIA* – not all RPGs rely on tactics like psychological stress, and this approach can be quite divisive for players: "I tend to find that players either really enjoy it or really dislike it. I think it's partly because it's quite a particular, unusual experience – they have to be able to find some fun in stressful, paranoid play." (GMPD, page 286). However, the explicit acknowledgment that a GM should take on sub-roles relating to managing player psychology, including conditioning them, is useful.

PARANOIA is a strong example of a system that alters the common understanding of the GM to match its desired "identity" or themes. This highlights the fact that the GM role can fluctuate significantly depending on the requirements of the system, its desired player experience, and so on. In *PARANOIA*'s case, the extreme control of the GM mirrors the dystopian setting and the authoritarian Computer overlord.

Apocalypse World

Apocalypse World: the Master of Ceremonies Playbook (Baker and Baker 2016) presents a system with a similarly strong identity to *PARANOIA* – one that also significantly alters common aspects of the GM role. This is recognised in the rulebook – an *Apocalypse World* GM equivalent is referred to as an MC (Master of Ceremonies), with the acknowledgment that MCing is a particular kind of GMing that requires a particular approach: "There are a million ways to GM games; Apocalypse World calls for one way in particular." (Baker and Baker 2016: 80)

An *Apocalypse World* GM must follow an agenda – they must do only these things and no other:

- "Make Apocalypse World seem real." (Baker and Baker 2016: 80)
- "Make the players' characters' lives not boring." (Baker and Baker 2016: 80)

- "Play to find out what happens." (Baker and Baker 2016: 80)

The rulebook stresses that the GM should not, for example, "punish" or "control" their players, or try to "get them through [a] pre-planned storyline" or put the PCs in "double-binds or dead ends". This would not be "playing to find out" (Baker and Baker 2016: 80). This is in stark contrast to *PARANOIA*, which relies on these elements to produce its signature entertaining experience.

Apocalypse World's agenda governs how the role of the GM is broken down and explained in the rulebook. While some of the common elements are represented, the GM isn't described as "storyteller and referee", for example. Accompanying the agenda are two lists: what the GM should always say, and the principles.

The *Apocalypse World* GM should "always say" (Baker and Baker 2016: 81):

- "What the principles demand." (Baker and Baker 2016: 81)
- "What the rules demand." (Baker and Baker 2016: 81)
- "What your prep demands." (Baker and Baker 2016: 81)
- "What honesty demands." (Baker and Baker 2016: 81)

The third thing a GM should always say references prep, which therefore includes GM sub-roles relating to downtime activities involving preparing details about the world and NPCs. However, adhering to the agenda requires that no defined adventures are prepared, as would be typical in many other RPGs.

The fourth thing a GM should always say would also be unusual in some other games – sometimes, a GM may be dishonest in delivering information to the players to maintain intrigue (for example, in a mystery game), sustain a mood (for example, the psychological stresses of *PARANOIA*), or for other reasons.

The first thing a GM should always say references "the principles", which is where other GM sub-roles and functions are represented (Baker and Baker 2016: 82–8). Selected "principles" are:

- "Address yourself to the characters, not the players" – a GM addressing the players will more easily present description as PC knowledge or experience, rather than exposition. (Baker and Baker 2016: 82)
- "Make your move, but misdirect" – the outcome (success or failure, for example) of a PC's action will be due to the result of a dice roll in the real world, but the GM should make it seem that there is a fictional reason for said outcome. This directs attention away from the rules and dice, towards the fiction. (Baker and Baker 2016: 82–3)

- "Be a fan of the players' characters" – a GM should focus on aspects of the PCs that are interesting, with the aim of allowing them to take actions relating to their defining traits, resolve compelling situations that they've established connections to, and develop in fitting ways. (Baker and Baker 2016: 85–6)

- "Think offscreen too" – a GM should consider what established NPCs are doing "offscreen" to further their own goals. Representing these offscreen actions to the players can make the setting seem real and dynamic. (Baker and Baker 2016: 86)

- "Sometimes, disclaim decision-making" – to truly "play to find out what happens", a GM should not make all decisions on a whim. A GM should sometimes give responsibility over to the players, or other rules of the system. (Baker and Baker 2016: 86–7)

While some of these principles align with common GM sub-roles and functions, the specific considerations around managing focus are useful. The GM's choice of addressing players or PCs can be important, and explicit mention of shifting the focus away from the dice to the fictional causes and consequences is not common. Similar to *PARANOIA*, *Apocalypse World* has its strong and unusual identity driving much of its GMing advice, but it also similarly contains some useful and often overlooked detail.

Unknown Armies

The second edition of *Unknown Armies* (Stolze and Tynes 2002) is less unusual in its structure and experience than *Apocalypse World* and *PARANOIA*, despite its distinctive postmodern magical urban fantasy setting. The rulebook also contains much of the same advice for GMing as many other systems. However, it does focus very strongly on the GM's storytelling sub-role.

A whole chapter of the rulebook is dedicated to planning out the narrative structure and elements of a campaign, including such considerations as structuring narrative based on PC group dynamics, defining major and minor themes of the story, concluding both plotlines and campaigns, and so on. (Stolze and Tynes 2002: 265–74)

Before any rules are covered in depth in the GMing section of the rulebook, the advice goes into great detail on basic narration: "In a pinch you can fudge rules, gloss over continuity errors, and get away with using formula plots. The one thing you're never able to fake is the meat-and-potatoes ability to describe things" (Stolze and Tynes 2002: 275). The importance of the GM's use of their voice, vocabulary, pacing, detail level, and so on, are covered. It also stresses that the GM should avoid referring to the rules and mechanics of the game during their narration, under threat of popping "the bubble of credulity": "The rules and stats are conventions, tools for modeling capacity. Instead of describing the tool, describe what it's modeling." (Stolze and Tynes 2002: 276)

While it is not uncommon for an RPG system to stress the importance of storytelling, the levels of detail and commitment to narration over rules found in *Unknown Armies* is unusual. It is useful for identifying further sub-roles and functions of the GM.

The Functions of the Gamemaster

To comprehensively analyse the role of the GM, a similar method will be taken to the above examples: the GM will be deconstructed into sub-roles and functions. As established, this is a common approach to understanding the complexities of the role. It also easily allows the handling of sub-roles and functions that are not consistent or that relate to particular system identities or player experiences (such as those seen in *PARANOIA* and *Apocalypse World*).

This investigation considers the GM to have one primary and two secondary sub-roles, in keeping with common understanding of the role:

- **Entertainer** – the single most important sub-role of a GM is that of an entertainer. This is common acknowledgment in RPG rulebooks and GMing advice (Laws 2002: 3; McDowall and Law 2018: 258; Cook et al. 2019: 402; and many others). The entertainment is often described as fun but could take the form of other emotions or experiences (such as *PARANOIA*'s psychological stresses or a horror game's fear and tension).
    - **Storyteller** – in the service of entertainment, a GM must generally act as a storyteller in some capacity (Pramas 2005: 191; Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 4; Cook et al. 2019: 402; and many others). This sub-role requires various story-related functions from the GM, including worldbuilding, plotting adventures, representing NPCs, narration, managing dramatic tension, and many others.
    - **Referee (+)** – also in the service of entertainment, though sometimes described as subservient to other sub-roles and functions, a GM must generally act as something like a referee (Pramas 2005: 191; Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 4; Cook et al. 2019: 402; and many others). "Referee" is certainly a common term used in RPG rulebooks, but it is not broad enough in its meaning to accurately describe this sub-role. "Storyteller" is a broad enough term to capture all required considerations for how a GM handles a story, including functions relating to planning, authoring, narration, performance, and more. The intention is that "Referee (+)" describes a similarly broad purview but applied to game (rather than story) elements – not just adjudicating established rules during play, akin to referees in other fields, but also planning rules alterations, designing and tweaking game elements (including entirely new content, sometimes), making decisions on when to overlook rules, and so on.

The term "referee" is therefore retained to keep consistency with common terminology in the field, but evolving it to "referee (+)" explicitly acknowledges that its use here is broader than how it is understood in other contexts.

It is important to note that the boundaries between these sub-roles are not always entirely solid – for example, if a GM is deciding whether to ignore a rule (which would be the territory of the referee (+)), this is often related to keeping a story moving or maintaining tension (which would be the territory of the storyteller), such as during the situation described in the GMPD, page 15: "Some elements of [*Apocalypse World*] had to be completely overlooked (such as micromanaging elements that only apply to one PC, that would divert too much from progressing the story for everyone at the table)". Similarly, if a GM is narrating certain details about an NPC's apparent threat (storyteller), this can be in service to their game statistics (referee (+)) (Stolze and Tynes 2002: 276). This is in keeping with the understanding that GMs are perhaps uniquely positioned to deal in games and stories simultaneously, and that this union of the two fields is the origin of their role (Cover 2010: 9; Unterhuber 2011).

This Entertainer-Storyteller-Referee (+) structure is mirrored in the following chapters of this thesis. The GM sub-roles and functions related to these three areas are presented and discussed. This is largely supported by the wealth of practice research covered in the *Gamemastering Practice Document* appendix, alongside relevant examples for each section.

Chapter 2: Gamemaster as Entertainer

Laws'[11] (2002: 3) "Great, Immutable, Ironclad Law" is stated as follows:

> I submit to you that the most important, yet most often forgotten, rule of good GMing is this: *Roleplaying games are entertainment; your goal as GM is to make your games as entertaining as possible for all participants.* [author's emphasis] (Laws 2002: 3)

This importance is echoed in the *Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Master's Guide*: "The success of a D&D game hinges on your ability to entertain the other players" (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 6). As previously described, a GM runs an RPG by the consent of their players – if the players cease to enjoy the experience, they may leave the game, thus ending it. A GM must entertain their players to secure their game's existence. Any other function that a GM performs must therefore be in service to their sub-role as an entertainer.

It is commonly the responsibility of the GM to provide the fun of an RPG (Tychsen et al. 2005: 216), and this fun is the "central purpose" of playing (Fine 2002: 233). The key to this fun, according to Fine, is the engrossment of players in the game. This engrossment is described by Fine as players being willing to "bracket" their "natural" selves and enact the fantasy selves of their PCs for the aesthetic experience of the RPG to work. They must lose themselves to the game – this is what provides for the fun of the experience. The game's meaning comes from accepting the fantasy world as temporarily real, and the scenario and culture must incorporate that which the players find engrossing (Fine 2002: 4).

The rules of the game systems are less important than anything that can aid engrossment within the game's world – the game must be made to fit the players. However, it is the rules of the system that allow the engrossment to be built – they simulate the whole existence of the game's world, and part of the engrossment is attributed to the sense of power that players feel when in control of a world (Fine 2002: 233–4). Therefore, a key function of the GM's entertainer sub-role is to facilitate this engrossment.

Facilitating Engrossment/Identification/Immersion

Engrossment, identification, and immersion are interrelated concepts, and are discussed in turn in this section. The enjoyment of an RPG is tied to these concepts and, as such, a key GMing function is to facilitate and encourage these player experiences.

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[11] Robin D. Laws is a prolific and notable RPG designer, author, and commentator in the field, described as a "star designer" and "RPG luminary" (Appelcline 2014d: 55, 323).

Engrossment

Fine (2002: 185) states that, where other games may have victory as their definitive goal, "engrossment in the game world is the dominant reason for playing [an RPG]", because of its link to the fun of the experience. A player needs to care about their character and world for the game to have meaning, therefore practically anything can be incorporated into a game, so long as it increases player engrossment. Cazeneuve (2022) likens Fine's engrossment to "the capture of an individual within fiction", described as a type of immersion (discussed below) which is not a "voluntary action", but which is "emergent".

An important consideration for this engrossment, according to Fine (2002: 80–2), is that realism and logic are important to an RPG's world, despite the often-fantastical settings. Fine explains that the 'realism' of an RPG is an "*illusion of realism*" [author's emphasis] that will allow the players to accept the fictional world "*as a world*" [author's emphasis] by catering to the players' expectations of the setting (Fine 2002: 81–2). This acknowledgment of the importance of the interpretation of the realism implies that the meaning here is close to verisimilitude – "the appearance of being true or real; likeness or resemblance to truth, reality" ('Verisimilitude' 2023).

Fine further clarifies that an RPG's logic can be understood as realism that is divorced from real-world historical accuracy (2002: 83–4). Players should be able to reasonably predict the results of their actions in the game's world, allowing them to get a feel for what this world is like and incorporate themselves into it. The GM can aid this by presenting consistency in the world's natural laws and connections between causes and effects.

It is important to consider that this function of facilitating engrossment overlaps with the secondary GM sub-role of referee (+) – this believability of the fictional setting is largely enacted through adjudication on the RPG system's rules. Facilitating this believability, and therefore engrossment, requires that a GM applies consistent, logical interpretation of rule nuances, as well as logic and consistency where they must make decisions that aren't covered by the rules (Cook 2019: 154–5). For example, *Cypher System* allows characters to gain a resistance to fire but features no special rules for "fire damage" (as opposed to other damage types) – the GM must logically determine whether any damage counts as fire. In this situation, "there are only two times when [the GM's] answer is wrong… when the answer breaks the players' suspension of disbelief… [and] when [they're] inconsistent." (Cook et al. 2019: 413)

Realism and logic are required to provide a common frame of reference to the players, to allow for everyone to share and manipulate the fantasy of the game. The appropriate level of realism is debatable, but it is crucial to present the world in such a way that the players can accept it as a

world that they can become engrossed in. The GM must cater to the players' expectations of the world to avoid their displeasure – the world's realism is created by the GM and negotiated by the players.

This can be difficult for a GM when the players' expectations of a world are set by prior experience with the setting, or where some or all players are more familiar with a setting than the GM or each other:

> One of the players was a fan of the Warhammer Fantasy setting, and very knowledgeable about the fictional cultures, laws of the land, politics, and so on – certainly they were more knowledgeable about the setting than I was. When another player played their character in a way that would have caused problems in the setting (they were treating magic in a carefree manner, when magic is heavily regulated and treated with suspicion in the fiction), and I didn't punish them for it (in-fiction), the knowledgeable player became frustrated. This resulted in slight real-world friction between some players, but more fictional friction between the characters, which was an issue for player enjoyment and a pleasant play environment. (GMPD, pages 301-2)

In these cases, a GM can address the issues either by spending more time becoming familiar with the setting, or by setting the players' expectations more accurately, perhaps by explaining that their version of the setting is going to be different (such as the example in the GMPD, page 269: "Due to the inconsistent application of the rules of the canon setting, and the changes made to the setting through the course of the campaign, the universe that [our Apostasy Gambit campaign] took place in was dubbed a "branch"").

Permanent Consequences

Some RPG systems provide players with resources to occasionally overrule the outcomes of rolls and choices, such as *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*'s Fortune and Fate points, which allow a limited number of dice rerolls and protections from PC death, but the standard procedure of RPG play is that the result of any roll or choice is final, and the consequences are permanent. This can aid engrossment as it encourages realism for the setting and establishes a clear logic.

The RPG *Rhapsody of Blood* (McJanda 2018) has players take on the roles of both bloodlines and individual characters of those lines, as each generation opposes an evil castle as it reemerges in the setting. Players were observed to enjoy the additional layer of play and progression (see GMPD, page 292: "The players seemed to enjoy [the legacy mechanics]"). While the standard play of exploring a castle and improving a character is satisfying enough, having the additional layer of

managing the progression and fortunes of their bloodlines provided them another aspect of the game to become engrossed in.

Identification

Players identify with their characters in an RPG, whether they play themselves in the guise of a character or the self of the character (Fine 2002: 4).

Related to engrossment, Fine also stresses the importance of a player identifying with their PC: "Players must identify with their character in order for the game to be a success. Put differently, players must invest their characters with meaning" (Fine 2002: 215). Some considerations for building identification are presented:

- Addressing a player as their PC (using the PC's name instead of the player's, or referring to the PC as "you" in the second-person while talking to the player) is a common technique that GMs use to "to enhance player-character identification" (George et al. 2022: 39, cited in Voorhees and Klein 2024), described by Voorhees and Klein as "suturing player and character" (2024).

- "For identification, the character must have attributes that permit a player to esteem that persona." It is not required for all traits to be admirable, but some traits must be admirable, or the worthiness of the character must otherwise be explained. For example, a "truly average character who does not redeem himself by having an important role in the game social structure is worse than a poor character who can at least be enacted as a parody of successful characters." (Fine 2002: 215)

- Players will "kill off" undesirable characters (those with poor statistics, for example), or ask the GM for permission to change their abilities, before the game even begins. "Most [GMs] allow some leeway for players to do this… Such [undesirable] characters have little for players to identify with – nothing on which they can construct an identity." (Fine 2002: 215)

- Players will use the small amount of (potentially contradictory) information about their character provided by the game system to try to build a meaningful identity. Due to family and personal history being large components of the self, many players will design a backstory for their characters. This simple construction is crucial for a player to give their character an identity (Fine 2002: 216). Players will continue to search for ways in which they can come to know their character and identify with them further – this grows over time with continued play and, as the identification becomes strong, the player begins to empathise with their character (Fine 2002: 217). Also as a function of time invested, the personal progression and development of the PCs causes players to become invested in their

particular characters and games, and helps them develop this strong identification (Peterson 2012: 592). However, whether their PC is represented physically ("instantiated tangibly in written form…, physical images…, or even miniature figurines"), digitally ("instantiated visually on screens"), or immaterially ("existing principally in the imagination") has negligible impact on a player's identification (Banks et al. 2018: 5, 17–8).

In practice, this identification presents at different levels and through different methods among players. For example, a player may prefer to base their PC concept on an aesthetic that they find appealing, or they may prefer to randomly generate aspects of a character before inferring a matching backstory. It has been observed that any individual player may prefer particular methods of identifying with their PC, returning to those more frequently, but they may also alternate between methods of identification:

> Some of my players have loved to spend a long time concepting and detailing their characters before play, including doing quite a lot of research (into the system, setting and/or character aesthetics), such as by experimenting with mechanical "builds" and constructing mood boards. Some are happy to just decide on an aesthetic and run with it, with little consideration character personality, psychology, or backstory. Some enjoy deciding on some basic details before play, perhaps with random character generation, and then figuring out the rest during game sessions, but still ultimately ending up with a lot of character detail.

> I have found that players mostly seem to enjoy engaging with their character creation roughly the same way each time, though with some occasional variation. Generally, I can rely on one of my players to roll their character as randomly as possible, but I will usually ultimately see them become one of the most invested players, for example. (GMPD, pages 74-5).

While this identification of a player with their character generates satisfying play, it can also negatively affect the players. Sometimes, players experience guilt over their character's actions, even where they were the result of chance. The death or injury (or threat thereof) or disfigurement of a character can particularly negatively affect a player, potentially leading to depression, anger, bitterness or other negative feelings (Fine 2002: 218–20). While Fine asserts that the disfigurement of a character may also lead to shame and identity loss like that experienced by those who become disfigured in real life (2002: 220), this assertion that disfigurement may equate to shame for all players could perhaps be interpreted as ableist.

RPG systems usually incorporate systems that allow PCs to avoid or recover from death, via healing wounds or resurrecting deceased characters. Where a PC is at risk of staying dead, either because of the chance of a resurrection failing or because of the failure to stave off death in a game where resurrection isn't possible, their player tends to experience anxiety. According to Fine, this is because of the identification. Players can become so concerned about their characters facing death that they neglect their contributions to the team's success or lose sight of the overall situation (Fine 2002: 221–3).

It has been observed that players will choose to allow their PCs to die at times where it could have been prevented, perhaps where this would provide a fitting end to a character's story, or it would have some other notable impact. An avoidable PC death provided a powerful moment during an *Apocalypse World* campaign run as part of the practice research, but it also allowed the player to finish with playing a character that had suffered from unlucky dice rolls and move onto a "fresh" PC, which can be an attractive prospect:

> The death of Sequoia was quite a powerful moment, as PC deaths are often said to be. It's quite rare for PCs to die in any of my games, so we don't experience it very often. Usually in my experience (as with this death), the player has made a choice not to pursue available ways of keeping their character alive. These are interesting cases where the player allows their character's story to end in a way that satisfies them, or perhaps they are bored of (or otherwise done with) playing the character. (GMPD, pages 48-9)

During a *Dark Heresy* campaign (briefly discussed in the GMPD, pages 255-70), another player killed off their PC and chose not to spend a resource to prevent their death, but this was at least in part because the personalities of several PCs in the party were clashing and causing repeated moral quandaries that were proving difficult to resolve while maintaining party cohesion. Removing one of those personalities from the party (and replacing them with a PC that would cause less friction) allowed for this issue to be resolved.

Fine states that players develop a "strong identification" with the PCs that they create because they create them, sometimes temporarily adopting the identity of the character due to a high level of engrossment in the game (Fine 2002: 10–1). As previously mentioned, the possibility of this engrossment produces the fun of playing an RPG – It is the indicator of successful play and games are structured to maximise this effect (Fine 2002: 53). Fine states that both identification and engrossment are targets for a successful RPG experience and claims that high levels of identification are encouraged by high levels of engrossment.

This balance between protecting from the negative consequences of high identification and emphasizing engrossment through permanent consequences is important. Players need to identify with their characters, but also be engrossed in the world.

Bleed

Related to concepts of engrossment and identification, the term "bleed" refers to "a phenomenon in which psychological contents spill over from the player to the character (bleed-in) and vice versa (bleed-out) in games" (Bowman 2022). These psychological contents include "emotions, thoughts, relationship dynamics, physical states, ideologies and personality traits," and more (Bowman 2022).

George et al. suggest that GMs may "enhance player-character identification" to "enable bleed" (2022: 39, cited in Voorhees and Klein 2024), while Bowman describes the process of bleed as "unconscious and unpredictable" (2022). Bowman does state that players are more likely to experience bleed when playing a PC that is "close to home" – "characters with personality traits, backgrounds and/or life circumstances similar to the player's" (2015a, 2022).

While bleed is a neutral phenomenon that may be described as positive or negative by those experiencing it (Bowman 2022), it is found by many "to be a powerful tool for learning and personal development when paired with off-game processing, reflection and integration of these experiences" (Bowman & Hugaas 2019, Kemper 2017, 2020, cited in Bowman 2022). Therefore, while a GM may encourage identification in order to access the pleasurable aspects of the phenomenon, they should be aware of bleed – taking caution where players are at risk of undesired negative psychological contents bleeding-out from their character and perhaps encouraging their players to process and reflect on their experiences outside of the games.

Immersion

In games where players take the roles of specific characters, a bond is formed between a player and their PC. When this bond intensifies, it displays the property of immersion – defined by Peterson (2012: 375) as "the state in which a player experiences the game in a vivid, impactful manner comparable to real events." This is typically between a player and their specific, surrogate character within the setting. Peterson's description of immersion seems wholly related to the bond between the player and the PC that they have taken the role of – no mention is made of the function of the game system, fictional world, or rules in this.

Vecchione et al. (2015: 7) propose that a GM helps their players "immerse themselves in their roles" by performing as NPCs with discrete voices and mannerisms, by using interesting physical representations of fictional spaces and characters, and by using props and audio resources that

match the mood of the game. This implies that the GM's presentation of the setting and themes to the players is another route to immersion, separate from the players' bonds with their PCs. Cook et al. (2019: 430) seem to agree, stating that immersion "comes from a sense of being truly caught up in the action and the fictional world", and that the GM has to "give great descriptions" to access it.

Bowman states that "the activity of immersing into a role-playing character is quite similar to both stage acting and improv" (Bowman 2015b). While "grand gestures and vocalizations [may be] intended to enhance immersion of other players" (Bowman 2015b), RPG play has different "expectations of performativity" from theatre, where "the [RPG] experience could be said to be more subjective and personal than grandiose and evocative" (Stenros 2010, cited in Bowman 2015b). Therefore, while the GM and players may attempt to boost immersion via acting techniques, it is not required for participants to aim for theatre-level performativity.

Murray (1997: 98–9) describes immersion (in the context of simulation) as "the experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place", which is "pleasurable in itself, regardless of the fantasy content". The pleasure of Murray's description of immersion stems from being psychologically "surrounded by a completely other reality… that takes over all of our attention" and experiencing "the feeling of alertness that comes from being in this new place, and the delight that comes from learning to move within it". A key consideration is that "in a participatory medium, immersion implies learning… to do the things that the new environment makes possible". Murray's description of immersion here seems almost entirely a function of experiencing a simulated, fictional world – without special consideration for the character through which this world is contacted.

Murray's method of immersion can likely be accessed via some of the previously discussed methods relating to engrossment, seeing as it relates strongly to a perceived realism of a fictional world. Though, Murray (1997: 110) also states that, because the process of "surrender of the mind to an imaginative world" is pleasurable, those seeking it will actively do so, attempting to "*create belief*" [author's emphasis] and "reinforce rather than question the reality of the experience". The implication here is that realism, for some players at least, only needs to get players close enough to immersion for them to actively close any remaining gap themselves.

The Dungeon Master's Guide for the fifth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* states that, as a GM, "your role is to keep the players (and yourself) interested and immersed in the world you've created, and to let their characters do awesome things" (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 6). While no concrete structure is established for building or maintaining immersion, several factors are mentioned for consideration:

- "Finding six hundred ancient bedoars from the rule of Coronal Eltargrim twelve centuries before offers a deeper sense of immersion in your world than finding 60 [silver pieces]" (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 20). The argument here is that the representation or implication of cultures and eras that are unfamiliar to your players offers deeper immersion – perhaps because this better establishes the other reality of the game world, under Murray's description of immersion.

- On "Immersive Storytelling": "This style of gaming is deep, complex, and challenging. The focus isn't on combat but on negotiations, political maneuverings [sic], and character interaction." Complex and richly-detailed NPCs are featured in this type of play (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 34). The implication is that enabling the players to explore the personalities and characters of their PCs in more depth allows for more immersive play. This would seem to fit with Peterson's definition of immersion.

- "Other times exploration is the focus, a chance to describe a wondrous part of the world or story that increases the players' feeling of immersion" (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 34). In contrast to glossing over travel through and exploration of the game world, an increase in immersion could arguably be gained by better establishing its features – again, resonating with Murray's immersion.

- "…landscapes that are too alien can break your players' sense of immersion in the world" (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 106). Related to the previous point, the claim is that a focus on features of the game world that are too unusual could damage immersion. This does not immediately seem to connect with Murray's immersion, but perhaps relates to Fine's considerations for engrossment – logic and realism. If this realism is stretched, engrossment could be hindered – perhaps this hindering of Fine's engrossment is what negatively impacts the immersion. Perhaps this engrossment is a sub-component of immersion.

- Rolling dice frequently or infrequently can affect immersion – more dice rolls cause the participants to focus more attention on the game's systems, while more focus on fictional considerations for determining success or failure (with the GM making these decisions) allows players to better immerse themselves (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 236–7). This argument also seems to match with Murray's immersion at least partially – enabling the players to focus more of their attention on the other reality could allow for greater immersion. However, the dice are a part of the game's method of simulating the place – moving within this place (via the dice) arguably should not harm immersion under Murray's description, as this is part of the described experience.

- The GM stepping back and giving the players freedom to do what they want allows the players to focus on immersion (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 241). This consideration does not seem to relate to either Peterson or Murray's descriptions of immersion. The implication is that there is another factor to be considered – perhaps related to players being able to ignore the systems of the game at times (even including the GM), similar to the suggestion in the previous point. It may be that these times allow the players to form a deeper bond with their PCs, fitting Peterson's immersion.

- The GM's "lively portrayal of NPCs and monsters can inspire players to make just as much investment in portraying their characters. This makes social interactions an opportunity for everyone to become more immersed in the game, creating a story whose protagonists have depth" (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 246). The justification for this point is twofold. Firstly, an effective portrayal of NPCs better establishes the other reality of the game world. Secondly, having the GM portray the NPCs with liveliness may encourage the players to take a similar approach in their portrayal of their PCs. This second justification involves consideration of the social pressure involved in playing an RPG – that each participant may influence others with their actions, separately from direct interactions with the system or in-fiction occurrences. These factors play into both Murray and Peterson's descriptions of immersion, though the social pressure involved is a new aspect.

The links between *Dungeons & Dragons*' considerations and Peterson and Murray's models of immersion are apparent. Both by enabling the players to practice expressing the characters of their PCs and by balancing the description and simulation of the other reality of the gameworld does the GM encourage player immersion. However, some new considerations for immersion are raised – the players' awareness of the game systems or GM and the social pressure stemming from participant actions.

Vecchione et al. (2015: 30–1) propose another method for keeping players immersed and focused: creating a "wow" moment – "something awesome and unexpected that completely changes the paradigm". It has certainly been observed in the practice research that unexpected and unusual set piece moments in adventures and campaigns are able to engage players very well. *The Darkest House* (Cook 2021) is heavy with paradigm-changing, unexpected encounters, and it was observed to be among the best received content that was GMed for players as part of this investigation – "the general feedback is that [The Darkest House] was very well received by the players. The production value of the elements that are shown to the players is great, and it maintains a solid mysterious and horrific atmosphere throughout" (GMPD, page 272 – also see pages 186-229 for detailed coverage).

Similar, high levels of engagement have also tended to be observed whenever surprise, bombastic set piece sequences occur during RPG sessions.

Vecchione et al.'s explanation of "wow" moments implies that these should occur once a paradigm has been established, meaning at some mid-point of an ongoing game. It has been observed in the practice research that "wow" moments can make effective openings to games also. The aptly titled *In Media Res* (Crowe III et al. 2002: 146–61) is short RPG adventure that throws the players immediately a "wow" moment – they play as escaped convicts experiencing movie-style amnesia, who come to having seemingly just committed a ritual murder. This was observed to be one of the most engaging game openings that was GMed for players (see GMPD, pages 119-20). In situations like this, it would appear that the paradigms that are being changed for impact are those of the players' expectations for "normal" play.

Addressing the Player or the Player Character?

Both *Apocalypse World* and *Dungeon World* state that the GM should address themselves "to the characters, not the players" (LaTorra and Koebel 2012: 162; Baker and Baker 2016: 82). The justification is that this mode of communication emphasizes that the GM is delivering information that the characters know/experience, rather than delivering exposition to a player – it keeps the focus on the fiction and not the real world. It is apparent that this technique could reinforce immersion by encouraging the player's bond with their character and maintaining a focus on the simulated world. As previously discussed, this technique may also "enhance player-character identification and enable bleed" (George et al. 2022: 39, cited in Voorhees and Klein 2024).

Catering to Players

Separate from (but not necessarily unrelated to) facilitating engrossment, identification, and immersion, a GM can maximise enjoyment of their RPG sessions by catering to their players. Laws (2002: 3) states that the desires and preferences of each player should be given roughly equal weight for the optimal enjoyment of the game by the group, requiring recognition that GMs will have to compromise on their own tastes. A balance must be struck because "bored GMs run boring games" (Laws 2002: 3), but innovative stories have no value to the game if the players don't care about them. This balance must also be managed live: If the players seem less entertained, it may be necessary to make changes to the game to raise their mood. In this case, a GM may need to temporarily "set aside [their] own taste preferences, or things [they've] already accepted as true about [their] setting and characters, to better please the group" (Laws 2002: 26). While a GM theoretically has total control of game events, they must "have players enjoy the game and esteem [them]" (Fine 2002: 112); In cases where GMs run games because they enjoy power fantasies over their players or like treating them sadistically, they run the risk of driving said players away or losing them to other games (Fine 2002: 114; Laws 2002: 9).

This balance of catering to players while maintaining interest has been observed to be difficult at times during the practice research. Situations have been observed both:

- Where a GM was very invested in a setting/story, to reduced interest from the players:

    o " I like the Awakening setting and system a lot, but it never engages players as well as Conspicuous Events. I think this is in part because the premise of the setting is harder to communicate and less relatable." (GMPD, page 127)

    o "[*Unknown Armies*] might be one of my favourite systems because it's so full of flavour and it has a very clear identity… I've found that it can be very hit-and-miss with players… Perhaps I don't do a good enough job of presenting the intrigue and mystery of the setting, and hooking people that way." (GMPD, page 293)

    o "This [*Unknown Armies*] campaign didn't go very well, even though I was excited about it and I tried to sell the mystery of the setting. The players didn't gain skills and progress quickly enough. They wanted magical power fantasy, but I wanted to play out a grounded mystery story. This led to some friction and decreased enjoyment on both sides. I could have overruled my plans and the system to some degree, to give them the magic they wanted and satisfy them, but it would have been drastically changing the game I had planned." (GMPD, page 296)

- Where a GM's waning engagement in a setting disrupted an ongoing game:

  o "I GMed [*Apocalypse World*] for a group that was far too big, and the pacing was [a problem]… The PCs became far too powerful, too quickly, which led to frustrating problems with having to rapidly generate challenges for them that they would usually immediately overcome… I was particularly frustrated that the system doesn't allow for the GM to sometimes take control and overrule it for the sake of satisfying storytelling… The inter-PC conflict took a lot of focus and often felt like it was preventing comprehensible or meaningful story threads from emerging… I think I could have helped more" (GMPD, page 15)

  o "I'm starting to feel that sinking feeling I sometimes get when I start to lose interest in a campaign. I think some of it is because I felt like I've had a run of bad sessions, but I also think that the nature of [the Convergence campaign] was always sort of difficult to grasp and loosely held together… I think [the Desert Under the Water chapter] has been a bit weak and directionless, which is probably a big part of the problem. It feels like poorly-thought-out side-content." (GMPD, page 186)

As suggested by Fine (2002: 80), a game in which either party takes too much control is unsatisfactory: The joint construction of the game's story by the players and the GM is important. The GM is in control but requires the support of the players to create a meaningful world. The system is dynamic and social, as players make story decisions within the context created by the GM. The GM suggests a scenario, but the players give it meaning through their actions.

Player Types

For a GM to perform their job successfully, they must tailor the content and presentation of their game's story to their players. Laws (2002) suggests ways in which a GM could plan a satisfying session of play based upon their knowledge of their players' preferences and playstyles – also incorporating suggestions for live amendments to the story during play.

While player typologies have been described as "inadequate" due to narrow focus or faulty psychological underpinnings (Bateman et al. 2011: 2), with considering player traits or motivations being a more promising method for understanding segments of player behaviour (Bateman et al. 2011: 4; Hamari and Tuunanen 2014: 39), these lists of potential player interests (coupled with targeted methods for engaging those interests) can be useful for GMs to consider when aiming to satisfy their players.

Edwards (2001) suggests, in his GNS structure, that any RPG player favours one of three modes of play: Gamism, with a focus on competition, victory and loss; Narrativism, with a focus on co-authorship and themed story creation; or Simulationism, with a focus on intense exploration of some facet of the RPG (for example, very character-focused play, or great interest in consistent and thorough application of the system's rules). The implication is that, upon identifying a player's preferred mode, in-game activity could be tailored to them – though there is the acknowledgment that not all players of one mode would enjoy the same aspects of an RPG.

Laws (2002) expands upon Blacow's (1980) four *Aspects of Adventure Gaming* – Power Gaming, Role-Playing, Wargaming and Story Telling – to categorise RPG players into seven types: The Power Gamer, seeking advancement and success; The Butt-Kicker, seeking escapist combat; The Tactician, seeking complex, logical problems to solve; The Specialist, seeking to perform the typical "cool" actions of their favourite character type; The Method Actor, seeking to identify strongly with their PC and stay true to their personality; The Storyteller, seeking to be a part of a fun story as a whole; and The Casual Gamer, seeking socialisation with the other players above any engagement with the RPG itself. Laws acknowledges that few players exclusively fit into one type but asserts that identifying players' tastes through these lenses will improve their experience with an RPG. He identifies specific suggestions for catering to a player, by aiming to provide particular emotional experiences based upon an estimation of a player's desires (via his player types), for example (Laws 2002: 6).

Caution should be taken with the term "Casual Gamer" – while Laws uses it in a different context here, the term is associated with issues of gender and exclusion in relation to videogames. The term can be used "to distinguish between the "true" gamers and the mass so that the casual gamer is not really a gamer at all" (Kuittinen et al. 2007: 106), with this use of the term often being wielded by players who identify as men to question the value of those players who identify as women or are gender nonconforming (Roberts 2019: 31–2). A GM should be mindful of these associations when considering how their players engage with RPG sessions and take care not to unduly dismiss or exclude.

In an episode of his YouTube series titled *Running the Game* (*Different Kinds of Players* 2016), veteran GM and RPG writer and designer Matthew Colville suggests first breaking players down into two categories – "players" and "audience members". The justification is that some players are happy to be a part of the game through mostly observation, and that trying to force them to engage won't be productive for GM or player. He also explains Laws' seven player types, while adding two of his own: The Wang Rod, seeking to use the game to perform fictional cruelty, often with the defence

that they are accurately roleplaying a cruel character; and The Mad Scientist, seeking to experiment with the fictional and mechanical rules of the gameworld, aiming for extreme reactions. Colville does reiterate that players rarely perfectly map to one type.

Aside from these broader theories of player types, RPG rulebooks stress the importance of the GM coming to better understand the players so that they might tailor content to their interests. This advice may also be presented via player typologies, sets of possible interests and/or possible preferred activities or content. For example, the current edition of *D&D* states that knowing each player's most-enjoyed activity will allow a GM to "tailor adventures that satisfy [their] players' preferences as much as possible, thus keeping them engaged", with recommended game content listed for each of its seven activities: acting, exploring, instigating, fighting, optimising, problem solving and storytelling (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 6). The *Cypher System Rulebook* (Cook et al. 2019) states that a key concept for running games is learning "what motivates the players at your table" and "[catering] to these desires", with suggested motivations being exploration, combat, puzzle-solving and interacting with other characters (Cook et al. 2019: 428).

Cypher also provides descriptions of potential of "problem players" – both those who may disrupt the game via improper social interaction and those who focus too much on trying to "win" the game rather than the story being told – with some advice on how a GM might handle them (Cook et al. 2019: 433). Similarly, *Blue Rose: The AGE RPG of Romantic Fantasy* (Crawford et al. 2017) provides a list of specific "problem player types" – Character Thespian, Griefer, Hack-n-Slasher, Hanger-On, Motivator, Rules Lawyer, Spotlight Hog and Wallflower – along with tailored advice for minimising each type's negative impact on the game (Crawford et al. 2017: 279–82). Notably, *Blue Rose* avoids offering advice for catering to non-problem players, even offering no typology of these, "because non-problem players are, by definition, easy to deal with" (Crawford et al. 2017: 279).

Similar to Casual Gamer, above, caution should be taken with the term Wallflower – it also has associations with gender and exclusion, with the definition of the term in this context being: "A lady who keeps her seat at the side of a room during dancing, whether because she cannot find a partner or by her own choice" ('Wallflower' 2025). This classification of a Wallflower player as problematic (for a *Blue Rose* game) risks undue negative associations that a GM should also be mindful of.

The similarities between some of *Blue Rose*'s problem player types and Laws' generic RPG player types highlight the fact that different RPG systems inherently cater to different types of players due to their themes or intended experiences. *Blue Rose*'s Hack-n-Slasher is essentially the same player type as Laws' Butt-Kicker, the Character Thespian is very similar to the Method Actor, and the Hanger-On and Wallflower could both fit into the Casual Gamer type (also notable is the similarity

between *Cypher*'s win-focused problem player and Laws' Power Gamer). Perhaps framing these as problems to be solved rather than players to be catered to is a matter of ideology or perspective, but in the case of the Hack-n-Slasher, there is a clash with the intended experience of *Blue Rose*, which is designed to have "romantic fantasy" themes (more focused on comradery and belonging than "high fantasy") and explicitly not supposed to be "all about fighting" (Crawford et al. 2017: 4, 283).

Whatever the reasoning or framing of these sources, they demonstrate a general acceptance that an important aspect of a GM's role is to understand their players' drives and preferences, and to tailor the content of their games around this understanding.

Catering to Aspects of a Player's Type

The practice research has provided some insight into how a GM might cater to their players. The variable approaches of players to identifying with their characters (as discussed previously, and revisit GMPD, pages 74-5) can be catered to by acknowledging and accounting for these different styles. For example, an RPG system like *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* (4th edition) allows multiple methods of character generation, including full randomisation and free choice. This caters to multiple methods of initial identification.

Another effective method of catering to player types is for a GM to create/customise game content for a player in response to observations about their playstyle and PC. For example, a GM might offer a custom character type for a player who has a special interest in the setting that isn't catered to by default, or a GM might grant each player/PC a custom new special ability at the end of a sequence of play, based upon how they played through said sequence – both of these methods proved effective during the sessions GMed as part of this investigation, and they have been witnessed in other games:

> I created a custom race/class for one player to engage them better, as their interest in the [*Warhammer 40,000*] setting was almost exclusively related to a particular fictional species. I also created custom talents suited to each PC to encourage character engagement – this seemed quite successful, as the players seemed to feel like they were receiving tailored content based on their choices. I observed their playstyles and areas of interest (using social cues as well, like my knowledge of their interests outside of the game) and tried to play into them. I also created a lot of patched-together/custom content for character advancement, like unique progression schemes and rules tweaks. There was a lot of catering to players, and I feel like it paid off. (GMPD, page 255)

Some players can also be catered to by offering additional opportunities for engagement with game content outside of the scheduled sessions. This can be delivered through asynchronous or live

messages, perhaps playing through "off-screen" narrative content that is focused on one PC, or similar:

> I offered extra story and engagement between sessions, usually via group or private messages with the players, providing extra off-screen story details or some character choices. Some players very much enjoyed these extra opportunities for engagement (maybe Specialists/Character Actors, to use Laws' (2002) typology) where some largely ignored them. One player engaged more with discussion and analysis of the systems mechanics, rather than details about their character's story. Notably, one player began to generate a lot of art of their character, and the fictional circumstances, perhaps due to their preexisting interest in the setting and engagement with the additional content between sessions. (GMPD, pages 255-6)

Example: Dungeon World

During the creation of the setting and planning the upcoming story opportunities, *Dungeon World* suggests that the GM leave "gaps" in the world, to be filled later. This allows for defining further setting details in response to the ongoing action and player decisions, which is a method of catering to their tastes and choices. As discussed previously, engaging the players in the creation of the setting in this way has been found to be effective in encouraging engrossment.

Measure Engagement and Redirect

Strugnell et al. (2018) identify ways in which GMs may observe if a player is demonstrating interest in a story, as well as indicating when changes to the story may become necessary based upon player activity. They state that players demonstrate their interest in the following seven ways:

> 1. Asking questions. Players ask more questions about objects of interest;
>
> 2. Interactions. Players will have more interactions with objects of interest;
>
> 3. Discussion. Players will talk about in-game events between sessions;
>
> 4. Showing emotion. Players will show stronger emotion when they are engaged;
>
> 5. Body language. Players will show interest or lack of interest non-verbally;
>
> 6. Keeping playing. If players are enjoying themselves, they will play longer; and
>
> 7. Revisiting. Players will voluntarily choose to revisit areas or NPCs. (Strugnell et al. 2018: 438)

They also suggest that changes to a storyline are required when players do the following ten things (ordered from most to least common):

1. Miss plot hooks (clues the GM provides to lead players further into the story);

2. Forget details of plot hooks;

3. Misinterpret plot hooks;

4. Concentrate on side plots (sub-plots not directly connected with the main plot);

5. Exaggerate background elements (unimportant people, places, and objects);

6. Succeed too early in 'solving the problem';

7. Show they prefer a change of tone (feeling and style of play);

8. Show inattention to the plot;

9. Show lessened engagement with the plot; and

10. Show intense personal interest in a story element. (Strugnell et al. 2018: 432)
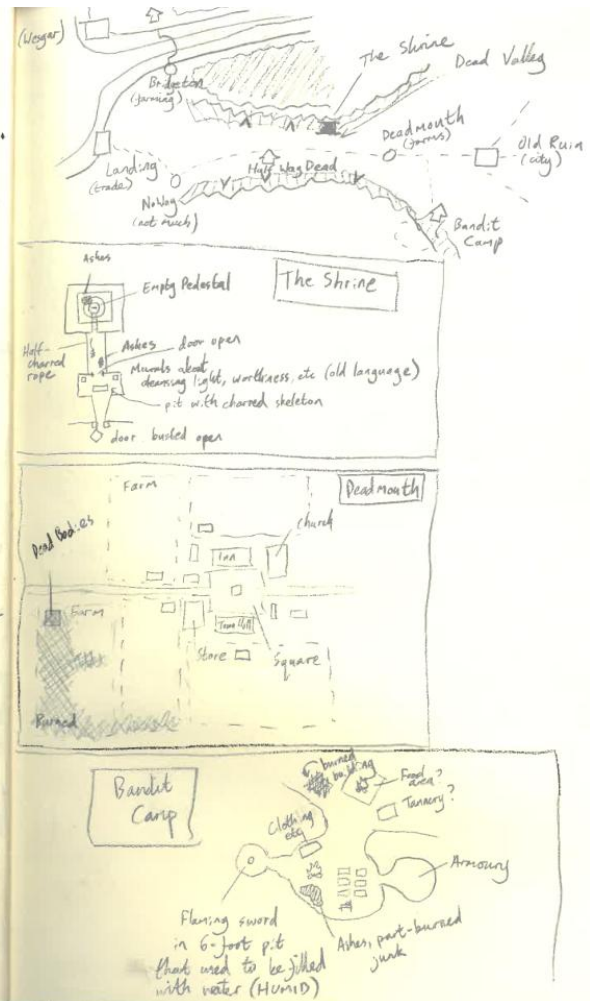
This list perhaps overlooks other potential reasons that players may demonstrate some of these behaviours and may blame them too much – for example, players may miss plot hooks due to communication issues relating to neurodiversity, or due to the GM improperly presenting information. Given that, for example, neurodiverse players tend to be under pressure "to understand neurotypical people" (but not vice versa) (Valorozo-Jones 2021: 59), it behoves a GM to take steps to address issues of unclear communication and potential misunderstandings where possible, perhaps by "asking questions and creating shared understandings of a problem" in the context of the RPG group (Valorozo-Jones 2021: 60–1). However, these considerations may be useful in guiding a GM on what to look out for to assess whether their players are still properly engaged with the ongoing story, and how to assess what aspects of the game the players might be currently most interested in. This would allow a GM to redirect their players by adjusting the story such that it maps onto items of interest, for example.

THE TERRIBLE FLAMING SWORD   [AWAKENING]

OVERVIEW

Legend has it that there is a magickal flaming sword, once wielded by a mighty, zealous warrior, enshrined somewhere in the vicinity of Landing. The wealthy Lord Lum wants it and will pay the PCs to get it for him.

Landing was the landing point for a zealous crusade against the Necromancers of Old Ruin (then called something else) and Dead Valley. The necromancers were defeated, but their influence is ever-present. Lots of crypts, etc.

The problem is that a flaming sword is an awful thing to try to deal with. Also, it's already been removed from its shrine by another group of adventurers (who all burned to death) caused a catastrophe in Deadmouth and then been taken by some bandits/mercenaries to their camp (where it has also caused death and havoc).

[Right side — map sketches with labels:]

(Wogar)
Bridgeton (burning)
The Shrine   Dead Valley
Landing (trade)
No Wag (not much)
Half Way Dead City
Deadmouth (burning)
Old Ruin (city)
Bandit Camp

The Shrine
Ashes
Empty Pedestal
Half-charred rope
Ashes — door open
Mounds about — dreaming light, worthless, etc (old language)
pit with charred skeleton
door busted open

Deadmouth / Farm
Dead Bodies
church
Inn
Farm
Town Hall
Store
Square
Burned

Bandit Camp
burning
Food area?
Clothing
Tannery?
Armoury
Ashes, part-burned junk
Flaming sword in 6-foot pit that used to be filled with water (HUMID)

Figure 2 Scan of the plan for The Terrible Flaming Sword (Wilbraham 2024: 128)

The practice research has produced some insights into measuring interest and redirecting players. An occasionally successful GMing technique is to simply insert any important story content wherever players choose to focus next, while maintaining the illusion that things would have worked out differently if another approach had been taken. Relatively loose adventure planning can help with this – if the GM knows the broad strokes of what needs to happen, but hasn't cemented too many story details, they can more easily introduce important elements in ways that match the ongoing action. This is the approach taken in the planning referenced in the GMPD on pages 126-8, 276-8, 285-6, and 289-90 – these plans mostly take the form of broad overviews of intended themes, scenes, and challenges, alongside some relevant map sketches and details of any allies/opponents, including their intentions. See Figure 2 for one such brief example.
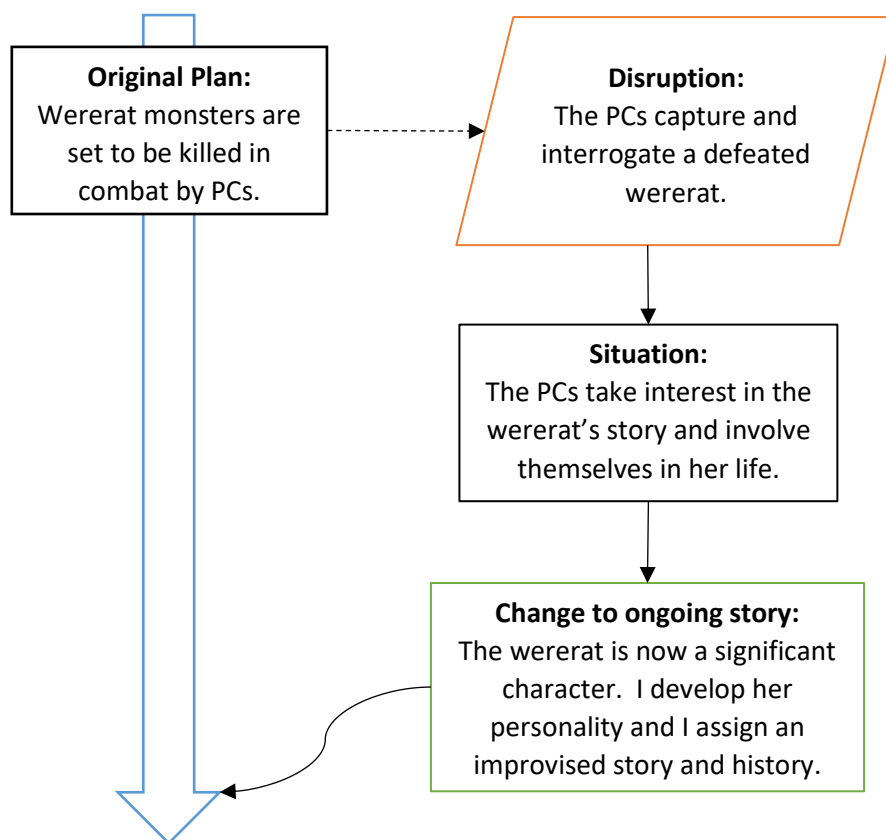
Figure 3 Diagram of a disruption and adjustment from the 'Demons Below' campaign (Wilbraham 2024: 288)

Another method is to revisit plans more formally between sessions, in the downtime. This can grant time to review planned content and make adjustments in order to improve its impact. Some examples of this in action can be seen in the GMPD, on pages 287-9 – Figure 3 is included here for reference. A GM can factor unexpected player choices, and stated player preferences, into plans for upcoming content – for example, changing the setting of an upcoming mission from a mountain to a forest, based on stated player preferences, or granting significance to an NPC who was expected to be a minor character, but who received interest from the players.

Example: *InSpectres*

InSpectres (Sorensen 2002) is an RPG that caters to players by addressing the common problem in mystery adventures of unsatisfying or ineffective mysteries/clues – primarily due to authored clues that have been grossly misunderstood or completely missed, either through player or PC failure or errors, in game or out. *InSpectres* instead has the GM establish the presentation of a mystery, but then has the players decide what any clues mean as they succeed in fiction, meaning that the players collaboratively decide on a solution to the situation (Sorensen 2002: 6).

This approach is a step beyond the GM adjusting content to match player interpretation, instead only deciding on the story role of any game element once the players have interpreted it. While this is a rather extreme solution that would not always be practical, it has been observed to be very successful in GMed games as part of the practice research. Players of *InSpectres* were vocal about enjoying the experience, observing that the increased senses of agency and contribution to the ongoing situation (and similar) were prime factors in this: "I have found that *InSpecters* tends to go down well with players, though they need to be in the right mindset… they do seem to enjoy the high amounts of agency it grants" (GMPD, pages 273-4).

Managing Player Intervention

As previously mentioned with *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*'s Fate and Fortune points, which allow a player to intervene by occasionally overruling dice rolls and the results of choices and challenges, some RPG systems allow this kind of player intervention via various methods. This has been discussed to aid with engrossment, but it is also a way of catering to players.

Cypher includes a similar mechanic, named 'Player Intrusion' (Cook et al. 2019: 21), which allows the player to spend a limited resource in order to make a small but tangible, beneficial change to the fictional circumstances, such as having an NPC friend turn up to help (even where that character had never been previously mentioned). Again, this caters to the player by allowing them to make clear changes to the fiction to match their preferences.

This relates to Baker's concept of Credibility – while most "standard" RPG systems assign the GM and system itself as the primary arbiters of Credibility (behind the general group consensus, of course), there seems to be some value in allowing the players some limited method of wresting temporary, individual Credibility. This would seem to relate to the satisfaction related to catering to them.

To some degree, powerful moves and abilities in an RPG are also methods for players to exercise temporary, individual Credibility, and these are inherently catered to the players as they are presumably the result of choices they made when creating or developing their PCs. A wizard's powerful spell, such as stopping time, should be able to significantly impact the ongoing story (if the relevant challenges are successful, etc.), for example.

A potential issue here is that assigning this power over Credibility to individual players is not always ideal for the group. During the practice research, situations have been observed where big moves taken by players have had adverse effects on the ongoing story and the general enjoyment of all participants. There was a moment at the end of a campaign of *Monster of the Week* (Sands 2015) (a

system where the GM is unable to overrule the results of any rolls, as player power is prioritised) where a powerful player ability retroactively made all of the fictional content of the sessions irrelevant for example, as they were able to establish that it had all been an elaborate ruse:

> The ending [of the Madness of Ages campaign] was very disappointing, though, and quite frustrating to experience as a GM. Because of the nature of the system, character abilities can be quite strong, and the GM is required not to deny their use or alter their effects. So when a character used their ability to state that the main antagonist had actually been a normal person in disguise the whole time, and that all of the monsters and supernatural occurrences had been ruses and delusions, there was nothing I could do about it. It made it feel like all that work of constructing a cohesive plot behind the scenes had been wasted. I know that it frustrated some other players who were invested in the mystery, also. I think there's a lesson here about the effects of player freedom on coherent and satisfying storytelling, especially when some choose to play a game somewhat adversarially. (GMPD, page 280)

Hosting and Managing Players

GMs often act as host to a session of RPG play, necessitating a related set of skills and considerations. For example, the *Dungeon Master's Guide* for *Dungeons & Dragons* recommends establishing the following Table Rules:

> **Foster respect.** Don't bring personal conflicts to the table or let disagreements escalate into bad feelings. Don't touch others' dice if they're sensitive about it.

> **Avoid distractions.** Turn off the television and video games. If you have young children, hire a babysitter. Reducing distractions helps players stay in character and enjoy the story. It might be fine to have players wandering away from the table and back, but some players prefer planned breaks.

> **Have snacks.** Decide before a session who will bring food and drink. This is often something the players can handle. (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 235)

In *Your Best Game Ever*, Cook states that one of the most important considerations of a host "is to be cognizant of the needs of both [their] game and [their] group. This includes everything from day, time, and length of sessions, to whether or not to use a table, to allergies and accessibility" (2019: 205). Though Cook adds that some of these tasks may be shared with other participants, both to lighten the load on the GM and allow them some shared control over the experience.

Cook (2019: 206) also points out that it is commonly assumed that the GM of a gaming group will act as host but this is not required, mentioning that "being both the host and the GM [can feel] overwhelming." This implication that the GM and host roles can be separated implies that hosting is on the periphery of a GM's functions, and perhaps optional. The practice research has found that the organisation and consideration of hosting duties will generally fall to the GM first by assumption before that aspect of the role could be delegated to other participants, except for in rare circumstances such as a GM being invited to run a game for an established gaming group (as was the case in the second example mentioned on page 295 of the GMPD, though the GM still performed most hosting duties in this case, except for recruiting the players).

Manzo highlights that local gaming cultures and individual RPG groups will find their own balance of roles relating to hosting and managing players, but that "who the [GM] is almost always either factors in assigning [these roles], or even descends from them" (2011: 117–8). Manzo also observes that, when one member of an RPG group takes the roles of organising a group of players and acquiring the relevant materials for play (primarily an RPG rulebook or similar, which they have read and will introduce to the other participants), "it is usually because they're the only one genuinely enthusiastic about playing: that is, the *initiative* of a role-playing game originates from them; then they usually also end up hosting" [author's emphasis] (2011: 118). This can lead to further logistical considerations regarding handling play materials and duties relating to hosting a social event, such as feeding and cleaning up after the group, which should be negotiated within the group as they can impact the personal lives of the participants and therefore affect the gameplay (Manzo 2011: 118).

Despite the perhaps optional (to the GM) nature of the hosting function, Cook (2019: 206) states that acting as host gives a GM control over the play space and therefore many variables that can affect the gaming experience. Numerous RPG systems recommend the use of props or ambience such as food, audio or lighting that matches the tone or themes of the game (Stolze and Tynes 2002; Petersen and Willis 2005; Wizards RPG Team 2014a; Baker and Baker 2016).

Given that players, like those who align with Laws' Power Gamer type (2002: 4), may sometimes try to exploit RPG systems for maximum personal benefit (Fine 2002: 110), and that they may use different negotiation strategies depending on their issues (the workings of the game's world, the workings of the system, ignorance of the rules, and threats to their PC's life) (Fine 2002: 107), an aspect of this function of the GM is in managing communication with the players with regards to the system, not just managing the interpersonal situation. Cook et al. recommend "speak[ing] with the player person to person (not GM to player)" to resolve these issues, perhaps highlighting that an RPG system's "rules exist to facilitate the story and portray the world" (2019: 433).

Laws (2002: 25) suggests that, when the mood at the table starts to become negative, a GM should consider the player types and include story elements that would cater to the largest number of players, or the most unsatisfied, to immediately improve the mood. He states that it's better to make an immediate change and deal with consequences (such as incoherent fictional elements) later, again stressing the importance of catering to players.

Sometimes, poor player mood or bad feelings within an RPG can be the result of factors that are external to the game (such as players falling out elsewhere or having bad days beforehand). In these cases, Laws (Laws 2002: 26) proposes that it can be better to end the game early than allow those bad feelings to "attach themselves to your game".

Cook et al. (2019: 433) state that handling players is part of being a GM. That it's partially a GM's job "to make sure that everyone has a good time… to ensure that all the players get to do the kinds of things they like to do in games, and that no one is left out". This again stresses the links between the job of handling/managing players and the job of catering to them, which appears to be a primary mechanism.

The GM has "considerable discretion" in handling situations where a player has mistakenly taken a harmful in-game action due to their inexperience with the game. They can treat the players in accordance with their relationships, regardless of the legitimacy of their arguments, the wording of the rules or the game's world's internal logic. This allows the GM to keep the players happy (Fine 2002: 112–3).

GMs can use three techniques to facilitate control over the game: The strength of societal expectations; the power inherent in their position of authority; and controlling events within the game's world (Fine 2002: 115). By reminding unruly players of social conventions outside of the structure of the game, the GM can keep it running smoothly for everyone (Fine 2002: 115). GMs can also use in-game punishments, inflicted on their characters, to keep troublesome players in line, or give in-game rewards to encourage good player behaviour (Fine 2002: 119–20), though Cook et al. advise against using in-game punishments, instead recommending a discussion with the player where the GM "explain[s] that their behavior [sic] is causing problems… [being] clear, direct, and firm, but also… friendly" (2019: 433).

Cook et al. (2019: 413) state that "honest discussion" is usually the best method for addressing any problems that occur in games, and that players who can't handle that method of interaction are probably too disruptive to be worth playing with.

Recruiting and Managing a Group of Players

Cover (2010: 13) states that a common way to play RPGs is via a "gaming group, a number of people who meet on a regular basis". The GM usually takes on the large part of the responsibility of arranging this – acting as the central point of contact for finding an appropriate space and time for play, that works for all participants.

The practice research certainly found that this was a major part of the GM's role. Much time was spent by the GM for the various groups in liaising with each participant to find the most agreeable time of the week for play, then securing any other needed resources for the sessions, such as rooms to play in, materials for play, etc. The task extends to continuing to administrate the group – checking in on player availability, adjusting for changes, accounting for missing players, filling them in on missed content, etc.

Where the RPG sessions were held virtually, equivalent and additional responsibilities also tended to fall on the GM, such as setting up and administrating communications software to allow play to occur, as well as setting up, learning, and teaching other required software such as virtual tabletops:

> Virtual tabletops have generally been quite helpful to me as a GM… They do each come with their own learning curve, though, which can increase time investment at the beginning of a campaign. This can also burden the GM with having to teach these to the players as well as the RPG system. I've found that the ones that are more flexible and powerful in terms of helping during a game also take longer to learn. (GMPD, pages 304-5).

Recruitment of players is another consideration. Laws (2002: 7, 13) discusses the impact of the choice of game system and setting on the chances of recruiting players for a game. This was also observed to be the case in the practice research. The GM of the various sessions found that the number of players who would attend a session would vary wildly based upon the setting/system of the game being offered. Often, more popular fictional settings would attract more players, even where the systems or adventures of those games was of lower quality. This demonstrates another link to the importance of catering to players.

Cook (2019: 27) states that finding a group of potential players "is only half the story": The nature of RPGs as social experiences, focused on "interaction and conversation", necessitates that a vital consideration for any potential gaming group is that the participants like each other and can be comfortable with having involved, lengthy, and regular social experiences together. Cook also points out that that a key factor to consider when assessing the suitability of a group is that participants will have differing needs and desires – "Some people want everything to be casual, while others get

really involved. Some people love the rules, and some are there only for the story" (Cook 2019: 27). This again highlights the importance of catering to players.

Caring for the Players

The GM is often required to take the lead in caring for the group, though this duty is every participant's responsibility to some degree. Cook (2019: 27–8) states that it is important for an RPG group to feel safe in "opening up" and "exposing [their] inner selves" with each other as this exposure is required, even if only a little, for roleplaying to occur – participants should feel that the others won't "laugh at [them] or judge [them] or get an insight into [them] that [they] don't want to provide" as they roleplay their PCs.

Cook (2019: 28) suggests that this feeling of safety begins with a feeling of comfort – that the group recognises that "every player will have some kind of need in order to be comfortable, either physically or emotionally or both", and that "[as] a part of that group, [the GM] must discover the kind of space each of [their] fellow players needs and help provide that space, and if [they] see someone doing something—intentionally or inadvertently—that encroaches on that space, [they] need to advise them to stop." The "space" mentioned here is both physical and metaphorical – the group should account for the physical and emotional accessibility needs of each member, effectively.

Cook (2019: 28) goes on to state that the feeling of safety is "a step beyond just being comfortable while playing the game", with the ideal group being described as "a safe space free of hassle, harassment, negativity, judgment, and unfriendly behavior [sic] in general, both in and out of the game." This can be approached by focusing on what should be done to achieve this state, with the GM setting a positive example in this regard, according to Cook (2019: 30), with the "ideal game group" being:

- Welcoming to any roleplayer regardless of gender, race, sexual orientation, age, ability, personal issues, economic status, religious beliefs, or political beliefs. In other words, inclusive and friendly to everyone. (Cook 2019: 30)

- Sensitive to the concerns of every member of the group, and willing to address issues that arise immediately and fairly. (Cook 2019: 30)

- Willing to create a comfortable, safe space where those involved never need to fear that they will be mocked or belittled, be discriminated against, or need to spurn unwanted advances. (Cook 2019: 30)

This list of the attributes of "safety" with regards to RPG play is not an uncommon method for approaching the issue. Vecchione et al. (2015: 167) state that "the responsibility for and benefits of

feeling safe at the gaming table" are shared among the whole group, and that "[in] terms of roleplaying and gaming groups, the definition of the word "safe" includes the following elements:"

- "Respect for Each Other" – Respecting the varied experiences, cultures, and morals of every participant, and supporting (or at least acknowledging) them without critique or mockery. (Vecchione et al. 2015: 168)
- "Respect for the Game" – Understanding that the game is created by all participants for all their enjoyment, that in-game actions can create emotional responses in other participants, and that the group should adhere to agreed tone and expected behaviour so as not to negatively impact others' play. (Vecchione et al. 2015: 168)
- "Everyone Has a Voice at the Table" – Ensuring that all players can speak and be heard during play, without dismissal, and showing the shyer or quieter participants that their voices and thoughts are equally valued. (Vecchione et al. 2015: 168)
- "No Bullying" – Not tolerating any participant exerting pressure to get their own way, within or outside of the game. (Vecchione et al. 2015: 168)
- "We are Candid" – Agreeing that any participant feeling unsafe has every right to express this without judgment, ideally rationally, with plain, simple speech, by voice or text. (Vecchione et al. 2015: 168)
- "We Compromise" – Agreeing on working together to resolve conflict when it occurs in order to move forward, attempting to satisfy all parties rather than one at the expense of others. (Vecchione et al. 2015: 169)

Bowman highlights that various types of "social conflict" occur in RPGs, with some "sources of conflict" being "specific and unique to the role-playing experience, including creative agenda differences, the game master/player power differential, and the phenomenon of *bleed* [author's emphasis]" (2013: 4). Being aware of this potential for conflict, and taking steps to resolve issues, will allow a GM to better care for their players. Bowman's study suggests several preliminary solutions to these problems, with the following being among the most frequently suggested: "taking time away from game"; "soliciting help from friends and other players"; "remov[ing] the offending party from play, either temporarily or permanently"; "getting to know players out-of-character in order to promote role distance"; and "players in conflict talking out negative emotions out-of-character with one another" (2013: 19).

Vecchione et al. (2015: 169–70) further suggest that it is rare for participants to deliberately make each other feel unsafe, but that these instances are much more commonly unintentional, with the following most common reasons: "cultural differences", "differences in morals", "unearthing past

experiences", "simple misunderstandings", and "personality issues". They suggest that these accidental compromises of safety can be best mitigated by establishing boundaries within the group, perhaps via a codified "social contract" (which establishes the group's comfort levels with various topics) or "campaign framework" (which defines what will be included and excluded from the game's content, based on group preference as well as comfort/safety), while also establishing a clear method for dealing with moments of discomfort (Vecchione et al. 2015: 171–2).

It is not uncommon for RPG rulebooks to give similar advice, with *Monsterhearts 2* dedicating an entire chapter to "Keeping Your Heart Safe" (Alder 2017: 73–82), highlighting the risks involved in play, as well as the responsibilities of the participants and methods for setting boundaries and resolving occurrences of discomfort. This focus is partly due to the subject matter of the game (teenage monsters, both literally and allegorically), but it is quite common for RPG play sessions to feature a heavy focus on combat and other violence. The *Fabula Ultima TTJRPG: Core Rulebook* also focuses on safety and comfort while explaining how to play, recommending tools and good practices to avoid "hurting the sensibility" of other participants, including fostering "mutual trust and respect" and not allowing "the game and its fiction" to "replace human interaction" (Galletto 2023: 140). It suggests discussing how comfortable the group will be with three elements of the game that are most likely to cause safety issues: "the depiction of violence", "the nature of evil", and "romances, relationships, and sexuality" (Galletto 2023: 147).

Fabula Ultima recommends using Ron Edwards' "Lines and Veils" from *Sex and Sorcery* (2004, cited in Galletto 2023: 140) as a method for handling uncomfortable or unsafe elements before and during play: "Drawing a line" allows a participant to exclude an element from the game. "Veiling" an element requires that it won't be expressly depicted or focused on during play, though the element can be present in the game's fictional world and may influence character actions. These lines and veils may be drawn while establishing the group's boundaries during an early session (perhaps through some social contract or similar). They also may be added and updated during play, even when elements arise for the first time.

Consent in Gaming (Reynolds and Germain 2019) provides structure for handling comfort and safety during play via considering participant consent, listing these factors as important:

- You decide what's safe for you. (Reynolds and Germain 2019: 4)

- The default answer is "no." (Reynolds and Germain 2019: 4)

- It doesn't matter why consent wasn't given. (Reynolds and Germain 2019: 4)

- Nobody has to explain why they're not consenting. (Reynolds and Germain 2019: 4)

- There may not be a reason why they're not consenting. (Reynolds and Germain 2019: 4)

- There's a spectrum of consent for each topic. (Reynolds and Germain 2019: 4)

- It's not up for debate. (Reynolds and Germain 2019: 4)

- They can always change their mind about what they are or aren't consenting to. (Reynolds and Germain 2019: 4)

- Anyone is allowed to leave an uncomfortable situation at any time. (Reynolds and Germain 2019: 4)

To aid an RPG group in discussing consent for their game, *Consent in Gaming* includes the "RPG Consent Checklist" (Reynolds and Germain 2019: 13) which is designed for the GM to instruct every participant to fill out before play. It lists plot and story elements (such as blood, sex, and torture) that could be included in play, with space for a participant to indicate whether they consent to each element being included (either explicitly or "veiled"). The GM should then compile the responses and distribute a list of the topics that every participant has consented to, including highlighting which are to be excluded, to the whole group. This acts as a group agreement/social contract and reference document for aiding the group in maintaining comfort and safety. Like Lines and Veils, the consent topics can be updated during play. This method similarly requires that the group is cognizant of the principles of consent and must be properly introduced and established during an early session.

Vecchione et al. (2015: 172) and *Monsterhearts* (Alder 2017: 78) recommend using "the X-Card" (Stavropoulos n.d.) as a tool for handling occurrences of discomfort during play. The X-Card is a card with an "X" drawn on it, placed in reach of all participants, that any participant may touch or raise at any time to indicate that a game element has made them feel uncomfortable, with no explanation required. When this happens, the group will immediately edit the element out of play, allowing the game to continue in comfort. This method also requires that the group is aware of the inclusion and workings of the X-Card, and that they have agreed to use it as designed. The GM would typically be the person to introduce its use.

Lines and Veils, *Consent in Gaming*'s checklist, and the X-Card feature in the *TTRPG Safety Toolkit* (Shaw and Bryant-Monk 2024), "a compilation of safety tools that have been designed by members of the tabletop roleplaying games community for use by players and GMs at the table", co-curated by Kienna Shaw and Lauren Bryant-Monk. The Quick Reference Guide of this toolkit recommends that any RPG group should discuss their use of safety tools and techniques (including choosing which they will use) at their formation or at the beginning of any game, with consideration that any tools are variously used during three key periods – before, during, and after play. These three periods require different foci and techniques: agreements, expectations, and boundaries are set before play; safety and comfort (and potential breaches) are handled live during play; and the group debrief, check-in, and adjust their agreements after play.

These caring duties again show the importance of the GM's catering to their players, even while performing other duties. While some safety considerations will be largely identical between different RPG groups, it is most important to establish comfort and safety that is particular to the current participants – any given group will have their own requirements that need to be accommodated.

Organising and Managing the Space and Time for Play

As briefly mentioned above, a GM will usually also oversee organising and managing a space for play, even where that space is virtual. Cook suggests that the host of an RPG group (who is usually the GM) must anticipate the needs of the game and the group, including "day, time, and length sessions, … whether or not to use a table, … allergies and accessibility" (2019: 205). Though Cook also highlights that other participants may help with these organisational duties: "Make it a coordinated effort with your players – they'll appreciate the opportunity to ease your load, while also having a say in the experience" (2019: 205).

Relatedly, the group must decide on the location for play – likely the host's home but perhaps in a public space, in which case the host should scout the location, ensure that the group has directions, and arrange for transporting the required equipment (books, sheets, and other materials for play). The group may also choose to alternate play locations, perhaps to rotate hosting duties, in which case the host should organise this and coordinate within the group. Once the play locations are decided, the host should prepare the spaces for the group's play. This preparation includes not only cleaning and setting up the spaces that the games will be played in (including ensuring that there is a surface to play on if needed, such as a table), but also areas like kitchens and bathrooms, as well as handling other considerations in the location such as any duties relating to caring for children and pets (Cook 2019: 205–6).

As well as space for play, session timing must be similarly considered and planned. Cook states that the host must coordinate with the group to decide on the time that sessions will start, the planned length of sessions, and any expected breaks in play. This should include discussions about whether it is appropriate for participants to arrive early to the location, and whether they may linger after the session to socialise, etc. Relatedly, the host should consider establishing a fixed period of time at the beginning of a session for non-game-related socialising – allowing participants to chat and catch up with each other before play begins, so that this does not interfere with the time allocated for the game (2019: 210).

Throughout the practice research for this project, the GM almost exclusively took on all hosting duties, including coordinating availability and travel considerations for the participants, sourcing spaces to play in, and acquiring the necessary materials for play (including buying any required books and stationery, though some players would bring their own dice). While it frequently seemed that the initiative of the sessions (to use Manzo's term) was originating from the GM, the players often seemed aware that the GM had much more work to do on the games before sessions (downtime duties and preparation), which seemed to prevent them from taking the lead in this organisation, perhaps in case the GM wasn't ready to run a game (or similar). The extra work required to organise the space and time for play was certainly not insignificant though, adding to the GM's burden, which can sometimes be overlooked.

Virtual "Spaces"

For groups that don't intend to physically meet up to play, the hosting duties remain similar. A virtual "space" will need to be arranged, accounting for the needs and preferences of the group. This may be as simple as discussing which software the group will use to handle the voice and/or video calls that will be required for play, though consideration will need to be given to each participant's device capabilities, etc. Cook describes extra considerations for playing online, relating to barriers to communication and easier distraction from the game, but suggests that these can be overcome by remaining cognizant of the additional issues, focusing on visual stimulation for the group, and increasing player agency – all methods claimed to increase player engagement (2019: 212–4).

"Virtual tabletop" (VTT) software, such as *Foundry Virtual Tabletop* (Foundry Gaming, LLC 2024a) and *Roll20* (Roll20, LLC 2024), provide functionality to emulate or replace some of the aspects of RPG play in-person. Their capabilities vary, but they usually provide a simulated, visually represented "space" that all connected participants can view and manipulate, often also allowing storage and manipulation of other play-related elements such as variables representing PC/NPC statistics, programmable formulae to represent virtual dice rolls, and the like. A participant will generally

connect to a VTT over the internet, and then be able to interact with it through their device to perform roughly the same functions as they would if they were playing the game in person.

Figure 4 Screenshot of Foundry VTT in use (Foundry Gaming, LLC 2024b)

Figure 4 shows *Foundry VTT* in use (Foundry Gaming, LLC 2024b), demonstrating typical functionality for many VTTs. The largest portion of the screen is dedicated to visually representing the ongoing game to some degree – in this case, a map is shown, which includes virtual tokens representing PCs and NPCs and models their spatial relationships. These relatively precise maps aren't always necessary – some games may mostly use their VTTs to show higher-level maps (such as a political map of the country the game is set in) or thematically appropriate imagery (such as the book cover of the adventure being played or generic mood-inducing pictures). Other standard VTT features are shown, including visual representations of virtual dice, character sheets, and a text log that displays the outcomes of actions and allows for text communication. These features provide visual stimulation for participants and allow for handling other considerations relating to play, such as replacing some of the materials required (character sheets for PCs and NPCs, and sometimes rulebooks).

While VTTs can account for some of the issues with playing RPGs online, the group will still need to agree on which software to use, which might include considering the technical skills of the participants and the capabilities of their devices. Many VTTs also have a monetary cost to access their full features. These considerations are usually led by the host, and the challenges are somewhat like arranging a physical space for play. There are additional challenges with VTTs in that the GM will likely need to spend significant time preparing them for play in advance of the sessions – setting up the VTT to use the appropriate rulesets and functions for the system being played, data entry to ensure that any relevant characters are properly represented in the system, adding relevant images for mood, maps, characters, and so on. These duties also require the GM to spend enough

time learning how to use the VTT to perform these actions. Even where a VTT isn't used for remote play, or is used minimally, the GM/host will usually need to establish other methods to handle these aspects of play, such as setting up shared documents via a cloud service to handle character sheets, disseminating relevant excerpts of the RPG rules via text to the players, and so on.

Teaching and Onboarding Players

Related to organising the other participants and the resources needed to facilitate play, it often falls upon the GM to take the initiative in learning any required skills and knowledge for play, then disseminating this to the other participants. Usually, this means learning the RPG system (how to create characters, how to resolve conflicts correctly using the rules, narrative details about the setting and adventures, and so on) but this also extends to other aspects such as learning about "best practice" in relation to a system (recommendations and advice from other users, including beneficial tactics for play, for example), understanding a VTT (as described above) or any other software or tools required for play (including safety tools, discussed below), and some other peripheral skills such as learning how to book spaces to play in and learning how to source and use any required resources (printouts, dice, various stationery, etc.). The other participants will require enough understanding of these skills and information for effective play, often requiring the GM to coordinate their learning.

Manzo proposes that "an opportunistic economy of actions in having fewer people read the book" (2011: 114) is the reason that only the GM (or a small number of participants) tends to read the rulebook and take on the task of teaching the game. Manzo also highlights that the teaching duty extends beyond communicating the rules of the game, into communicating the game's desired aesthetics (2011: 114). This is an element that VTTs can help with – the focus on visuals can communicate aesthetics alongside the ongoing play, especially where the host/GM spend time setting up the VTT's visual aspects with thematically appropriate materials.

The practice research for this project saw the GM taking on almost all the teaching duties in every RPG session, including teaching rules, aesthetics, use of external tools, VTT interfaces, other software, and so on:

> Having to learn how to use *Roll20* added an extra burden for this game. It's normally enough work to have to do all the other jobs as GM – learning the system, prepping the content, etc., but adding a virtual tabletop program into the mix made a noticeable difference. Players were no longer just looking to me for story and system information, but for help with the UI and workings of an intermediary program that I was also unfamiliar with. (GMPD, page 255)

Often, one or more of the players would have more familiarity with an RPG system than the others (either because they had some prior knowledge or they had picked it up faster in the session(s)), leading to a shared burden on occasions where these players could share their knowledge or answer questions. A notable example is *The Enemy Within* campaign mentioned on page 302 of the GMPD – after two years of regular play (almost every week, usually for three hours) several of the eight players regularly demonstrate relatively little understanding of both core rules of the system and the VTT being used for play. This teaching burden on the GM is not only present early in play but continues through the life of a game.

It is somewhat common for RPG rulebooks (or other related texts) to suggest performing a "session zero" (a title that highlights that the first session works differently to those that follow) when beginning a campaign with a system and group of participants – this is generally a play session that focuses on performing any preparation steps that require group participation (most frequently, the players creating their PCs), introducing the main rules of the system, and establishing the aesthetics and/or themes of the setting (which may be done in conversation, perhaps involving player choice).

The *Fabula Ultima TTJRPG: Core Rulebook* (Galletto 2023), an award-winning RPG inspired by the JRPG videogame genre, describes session zero as a meeting which "is meant to establish the basics of the setting in which your adventures will take place, along with the themes you want to explore and the heroes you will portray" (Galletto 2023: 145). The related chapter guides the participants through establishing aspects of their intended experience by answering questions as a group, broken down into four sections: "Commitment and Expectations", "Tone and Themes", "Rules and Challenge", and "Safety" (Galletto 2023: 146–7). While these discussions don't directly teach the mechanics or aesthetics of the game, involving the players in discussions about how the play is expected to be experienced begins a campaign with their investment in the game's workings. Through the practice research, it was observed that this initial "buy-in" from players can ease the GM's burden with regards to getting the players into the game:

> One thing that my players seem to consistently enjoy in *Apocalypse World* games is being directly involved in the worldbuilding, at least to some degree. When generating their PCs, they get to make some decisions about what is and isn't included in the setting, including sometimes deciding on some of the metaphysical workings of the world. This tends to pull players into the game, such that they often start more engaged with the setting than in games where they haven't been involved with the worldbuilding. (GMPD, page 11)

The *Fabula Ultima* system features a separate title from the rulebook – *Fabula Ultima TTJRPG: Press Start* (Galletto 2022). This shorter book guides a new group through a session of play that introduces

the system in almost its entirety, via a step-by-step tutorial. The opening section describes the basics of RPGs in general, then the following sections can be played with no prior preparation – even the GM can be decided at the beginning of the session. The fictional scenario introduces the system's rules and mechanics one at a time, requiring the participants to engage with them before proceeding. This approach is not especially common in RPGs, but it is common for modern videogames to feature tutorials that function this way. Again, this approach of explicitly involving the whole group in the process of establishing and learning important game elements shifts some of the burden from the GM and can directly engage the players in the game quite effectively.

Theming the Play Space

Related to both organising the space for play and communicating the aesthetics of the game to the players, a GM can take on duties relating to modifying the space to "support [their GMing] efforts" by "[keeping] people focused and [keeping their] players engaged" such that they can avoid having to spend as much "effort and energy" on these duties, in favour of their others (Vecchione et al. 2015: 12). Vecchione et al. propose that controlling the "information [the] players pick up from [the] gaming space" (2015: 14) is key, proposing that this information control is performed via the following methods:

- Removing anything that would distract from the theme of the game or the intended mood, even temporarily, during play. (Vecchione et al. 2015: 14)

- Adding "elements that help increase immersion" – those match the theme of the game or the intended mood – to "inspire or draw [the participants] into the themes of the game" (Vecchione et al. 2015: 15).

- Including RPG paraphernalia, primarily other gaming books, in the area to "build connections to the act of gaming" (Vecchione et al. 2015: 15).

- Consider the space between the GM and the players to be akin to a movie set or theatre stage, being the space that the "camera" of the players' eyes will mostly be focused – "where the game "lives" in their imaginations" (Vecchione et al. 2015: 21). Extra care should be taken to remove distractions from this area of the play space, to maintain the "mise en scène" (Vecchione et al. 2015: 21–2). This can be supported by having imagery or another appropriate centrepiece in the middle of this area, or by otherwise physically distinguishing this area with boundaries, features, or markings, in order to draw the players' attention there and delineate it as the area where "players can engage with the game world in a discrete way" (Vecchione et al. 2015: 25–7).

As discussed above, VTTs can aid the GM in performing some of these duties during remote play – while the players use a VTT actively, their focus will be on the visual elements in the central area of the screen. The GM can ensure that this contains thematically appropriate material. A notable issue experienced throughout the online play in the practice research was that players at their own computers (or other devices) can easily get distracted and move their focus away from the VTT (to other internet browser tabs, or similar), especially when unobserved – "It felt a little like some were disengaged at times [during the RPG session], but the nature of playing online and having so many players (meaning any one player's space for engagement is reduced) makes this hard to read" (GMPD, page 158).

The first of *Dungeon World*'s GM Principles (guides for the GM's actions during play) is "draw maps, leave blanks", acknowledging that maps help all participants "stay on the same page" while the fictional action mostly exists in their imaginations (LaTorra and Koebel 2012: 162). This also works to draw their attention to the central area, while occupying that space with game-appropriate material that maintains the themes. Similarly, authored RPG adventures and starter sets often include handouts or other aesthetically game-appropriate elements to draw attention and maintain themes: the *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game: Beginner Box* (Bulmahn 2014) includes sheets with full illustrations to represent each of the PCs, as well as fully-illustrated maps of the important locations of the adventure, all of which are to be placed on the table and used in play; and *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay: Enemy in Shadows* (Bambra et al. 2020: 151–6) includes six pages of handouts and maps for the GM to reproduce and present to the players, with many being representations of letters and other documents obtained by the PCs in-fiction, seemingly hand-written and aesthetically appropriate for the setting.

Apocalypse World (Baker and Baker 2016: 294) includes a recipe for "Apopalypse Corn", implied to be an aesthetically appropriate snack to consume while playing the game. Cook (2019: 210–1) suggests that serving food that is themed to the game being played is "a great way to set the mood for the game and make [the participants] feel immersed in the setting" – that themed meals "fill [the] players' imaginations by bringing the smells, sights, and tastes of the setting right to them". The host/GM can think beyond the visual when theming the play space, in order to maintain player focus and engagement. Appropriate music, sound effects, and lighting may also be used to compliment the desired themes, tone, and aesthetics (Vecchione et al. 2015: 71–5; Cook 2019: 166).
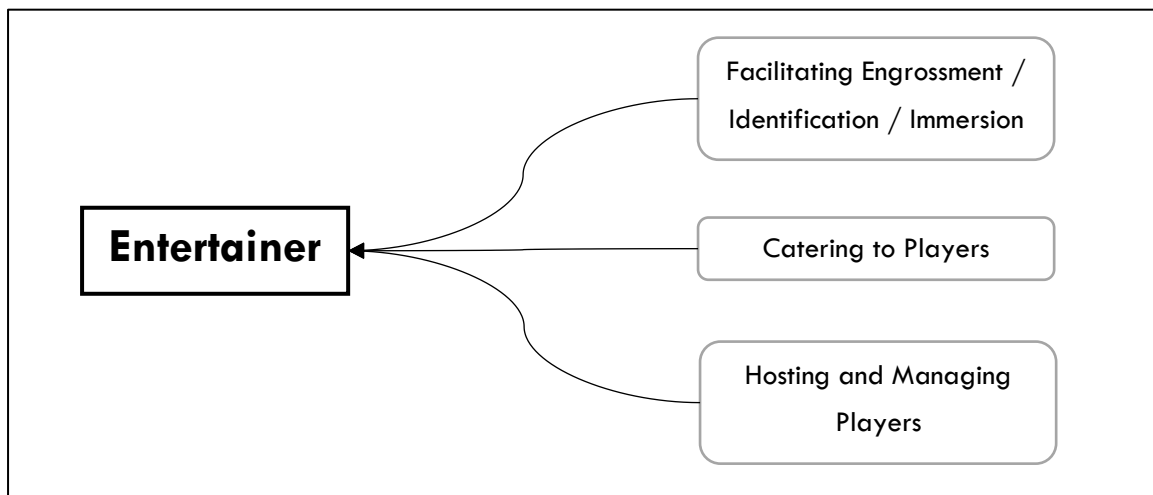
Summary: Gamemaster as Entertainer

Figure 5 Diagram depicting the functions of the GM sub-role of Entertainer

Given that the most important aspect of a GM's role lies in entertaining all participants and providing the fun of an RPG (Fine 2002: 233; Laws 2002: 3; Tychsen et al. 2005: 216; Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 6), it follows that the primary sub-role of a GM is that of an Entertainer. This Entertainer sub-role is supported by three functions (depicted in Figure 5): Facilitating Engrossment/Identification/Immersion, Catering to Players, and Hosting and Managing Players. These functions are the first part of the list of all functions of the GM, which is the contribution to knowledge offered by this project, and which is summarised in Chapter 5.

Fine describes engrossment (players losing themselves to the game) as being key to the fun of the RPG (2002: 4) but the concepts of engrossment, identification, and immersion are interrelated, and as such a GM should understand and facilitate these phenomena.

Engrossment, which may be described as a type of emergent immersion (Cazeneuve 2022), may be supported via the appearance of realism and logic (verisimilitude) within the RPG's fictional world (Fine 2002: 80–2). This verisimilitude is built through consistent, logical interpretation of the RPG system's rules (Cook et al. 2019: 154–5, 413), providing a common frame of reference to the players, to allow everyone to chare and manipulate the fantasy of the game. A GM may need to take extra care where players' expectations of the RPG's world are set by familiarity or prior experience (such as the situation described in pages 301-2 of the GMPD), in which case, a GM may either invest more time in becoming familiar with the setting or take steps to more accurately set player expectations.

Identification is built between a player and their PC when players "invest their characters with meaning", using the information that an RPG system provides about their character (alongside player-created details such as backstory) to build a meaningful identity, with this identification

growing with continued play and developing into empathy (Fine 2002: 215–7). Identification with a PC is negligibly impacted by how the PC is represented (Banks et al. 2018: 17–8). This identification can be supported through progression and development of the PCs (Peterson 2012: 592), and "suturing player and character" (e.g., by referring to a player by their PC's name) (Voorhees and Klein 2024).

Identification may lead to bleed (the bleeding-in or -out of psychological contents between player and PC), which may have positive or negative impacts on players despite being a neutral phenomenon, and which may be more likely when a PC is more similar to a player than not (Bowman 2022). A GM may aid in positive outcomes of bleed by encouraging players to process and reflect on in-game experiences (Bowman & Hugaas 2019, Kemper 2017, 2020, cited in Bowman 2022).

Peterson describes immersion as resulting from a particularly intense bond between a player and their PC, with immersion being "the state in which a player experiences the game in a vivid, impactful manner comparable to real events" (2012: 375). Some GM-focused RPG resources place more emphasis on the GM representing the fictional world and themes of the RPG with complexity to build immersion (Vecchione et al. 2015: 7; Cook et al. 2019: 430). While immersion is a richly-debated and analysed phenomenon in game studies and related fields, this pleasurable "surrender of the mind to an imaginative world" (Murray 1997: 110) may be encouraged by supporting the related phenomena of engrossment (because a sense of simulation of place is important (Murray 1997: 98–9)) and identification (because empathy with their PC may cause a player to more vividly experience the RPG's world).

Beyond facilitating the above phenomena, a GM may entertain participants by accounting for the desires and preferences of the individuals within the group, ideally by attempting to give equal focus to each, but with the acknowledgement that the GM also needs to be satisfied (Laws 2002: 3). Despite criticisms of the concept (Bateman et al. 2011: 2), player typologies are often recommended as a lens through which GMs might consider the preferences of their players, though usually with the acknowledgment that they are imperfect methods of describing the desires and patterns of real people (in that any individual rarely perfectly represents one type, and will usually fluctuate between multiple simultaneously) (Blacow 1980; Edwards 2001; Laws 2002: 6; *Different Kinds of Players* 2016).

A GM may also try to cater to their players by estimating their engagement with aspects of the game and adjusting efforts accordingly. Offering custom mechanical and narrative content depending on perceived player preferences proved successful in the practice research (see pages 255-6 of the

GMPD for one account), as did adjusting upcoming sessions to better meet what players had demonstrated interest in during play (GMPD, pages 287-9). Strugnell et al. (2018) suggest ways that a GM might measure the engagement of their players, but these would need to be tempered with true understanding of, for example, any accessibility considerations of the group.

Players may also enjoy increased impact within RPG play, such as through systems that allow them to (occasionally) overrule rolls or GM rulings (like *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*'s Fate and Fortune points or *Cypher*'s Player Intrusions). This can lead to disappointment and frustration in instances where one player's impact is deemed unpleasant by other participants.

To properly entertain, a GM must usually also host and manage their players. This entails duties such as establishing social rules for game sessions, catering to the needs of the players, gathering participants and play materials, arranging a space to play in (including virtually), taking steps to prevent and resolve problematic player behaviours, managing the overall mood of the session, and so on. Throughout these duties, the safety and comfort of all participants should be prioritised, including any accessibility considerations. Various resources exist to support a GM in prioritising participant safety, with Shaw and Bryant-Monk's *TTRPG Safety Toolkit* (2024) being an excellent compilation – a key recommendation is to establish and clearly communicate the use of safety tools before play begins.

As part of these hosting/managing duties, it usually falls upon the GM to teach and onboard players. This describes both ensuring that the players both know how to properly (and effectively) play the game, as well as that the players understand the themes, genres, setting, and so on, of the fictional aspects of the RPG. These duties require the GM to first understand these elements well enough to communicate them to others. Holding a "session zero" is regularly recommended to "establish the basics of the setting in which your adventures will take place, along with the themes you want to explore and the heroes you will portray" (Galletto 2023: 145), with this also being a good opportunity to establish factors such as safety tools and accessibility requirements (if they haven't been considered prior to this point). A GM may also use elements such as decorating the play space, playing appropriate soundtracks, and so on, to communicate aesthetics of the game.

Chapter 3: Gamemaster as Storyteller

While RPG rulebooks often only implicitly frame the GM as an entertainer, the requirement of a GM to act as a storyteller is frequently explicitly stated. Cook et al. suggest that a GM's "biggest job" is "to provide the impetus for stories in the game", noting that the stories are built through play, but they are initiated and guided by the GM – "You [the GM] provide the seed of the story and present the events as they unfold because of what the PCs and NPCs do" (2019: 428).

As suggested, the term "storyteller" can be somewhat misleading. As Vecchione et al. state – "the GM doesn't literally tell his players a story—but he does tell stories during the game" (2015: 7). The details and specific approaches to storytelling for an RPG will vary by GM, system, adventure, and more, but Vecchione et al. mention two example approaches:

> Some GMs create the framework of an engaging story and then hook the group into the plot, making adjustments, often on the fly, as the players' actions create unexpected and exciting changes. Other GMs tell "small stories" in the moment, when they introduce a new NPC or location, but don't come to the table with a plotted adventure for each session. (Vecchione et al. 2015: 7)

Vecchione et al. also describe some example elements of the work of a GM that relate to storytelling: "the creation of dramatic tension in a horror adventure, aggressive scene cutting to bring about a frantic pace, and the ability to quickly move a scene back into the path of the player characters (PC) if they passed it by" (2015: 7). Cook et al. stress that a GM who is focusing on storytelling should ultimately be aiming for their players to engage and interact with the fictional situations within the game, rather than the rules and variables that represent the situation through game mechanics (2019: 407).

The GMPD describes various approaches to storytelling taken throughout the practice research. As mentioned, any given approach would be followed to fit the needs of the game, depending on various factors. Some systems may require that the GM does not plot out any story in advance – *Apocalypse World* requires that a GM "Play to find out what happens", going on to explicitly state to the GM: "DO NOT pre-plan a storyline, and I'm not fucking around" (Baker and Baker 2016: 80) (*Apocalypse World* games are reported on in detail on pages 10-104 of the GMPD).

Even with un-plotted adventures, a GM can plan out information that might drive a story. *Dungeon World*, for example, has the GM lay out various threats and potentially antagonistic parties in the fictional world as "Fronts", describing each with impulses that guide their fictional actions and "impending dooms" that will occur if the PCs don't intervene (LaTorra and Koebel 2012: 183–201).

These don't provide plots or clear narrative structure, but the resolution of the Fronts taking fictional actions for the PCs to oppose can produce compelling stories.

By contrast, published adventures often require that a GM run a series of authored scenes, necessitating that a game flows more like a plotted narrative. Several similar issues were encountered when different practice research groups played through *The Apostasy Gambit*[12] adventure trilogy and the first book of the *Paths of the Damned* adventure trilogy, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay: Ashes of Middenheim* (Davis 2005). In both cases, the GM's unfamiliarity with the larger plot and both peculiarities and inconsistencies in the story content of the adventures caused undue dissatisfaction, though these could have been somewhat mitigated had the GM spent more time reading well ahead of the group's current story position and preparing notes and amendments:

> Because [the *Apostasy Gambit*] campaign was run primarily using prewritten adventure books, I experienced some struggles with "keeping hold" of the story. There were numerous inconsistencies in the books themselves – plot threads that were mentioned and not explained, characters that were inconsistently described, elements that were alluded to in one section but then never materialised, etc. This inconsistency made it very difficult to make definitive statements about elements of the story – I found it hard to be sure when the information in the book was reliable, and if I could overrule it without that causing a problem with a later part of the plot or similar. Relatedly, I would also sometimes introduce inconsistencies, for example due to forgetting a detail. When these elements combined, it led to some rough and/or slow sequences of trying to work out story details in order to answer a player's simple question about a character's whereabouts, for example. (GMPD, page 256)

> I wasn't especially familiar with the system and setting [for the *Paths of the Damned* campaign], and I didn't know which elements of the adventure I could gloss over, adlib around or otherwise alter, due to not knowing what might have repercussions in the campaign… Ultimately, my lack of confidence and the flaws in the design/writing of the adventure combined to harm the player experience and cause them to lose their engagement with the game. As a GM, there are things I could have to done to address this (in hindsight). I could have hidden the flaws in the book by glossing over them or better predicting issues that could arise during play, but this would have required me to spend

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[12] *The Apostasy Gambit* is comprised of three books: *Dark Heresy: The Black Sepulchre* (Martin and Counter 2017), *Dark Heresy: The Church of the Damned* (Martin et al. 2017), and *Dark Heresy: The Chaos Commandment* (Huckelberry et al. 2017). The system used for this campaign is described in the *Dark Heresy: Core Rulebook* (Barnes et al. 2017).

more time preparing the sessions than I'd been able to – I would have had to read ahead more thoroughly (GMPD, page 301)

One technique that was observed to enhance the experience of authored adventures for some players was having the GM offer extra, personalised story content around the content of the adventure – examples being playing out solo scenes and backstory details for a player's PC, or offering customised progression by tweaking some of the system's standard character options to better suit a PC's individual story. Examples of this are included in the GMPD, on pages 255-6, and have been previously discussed in this thesis in the section titled Catering to Aspects of a Player's Type.

The practice research generally observed that groups would appreciate the depth and direction that came with authored adventures, and the increased player freedom that came with systems that necessitate less plotting. The downsides observed were that authored adventures would sometimes be frustrating where errors and peculiarities were experienced (as mentioned above), and that un-plotted games could feel aimless or without depth: "Many of my players also remarked that they found *Apocalypse World* sessions narratively unrewarding at times because they lacked clear authorial control and a good sense of plot" (GMPD, page 11).
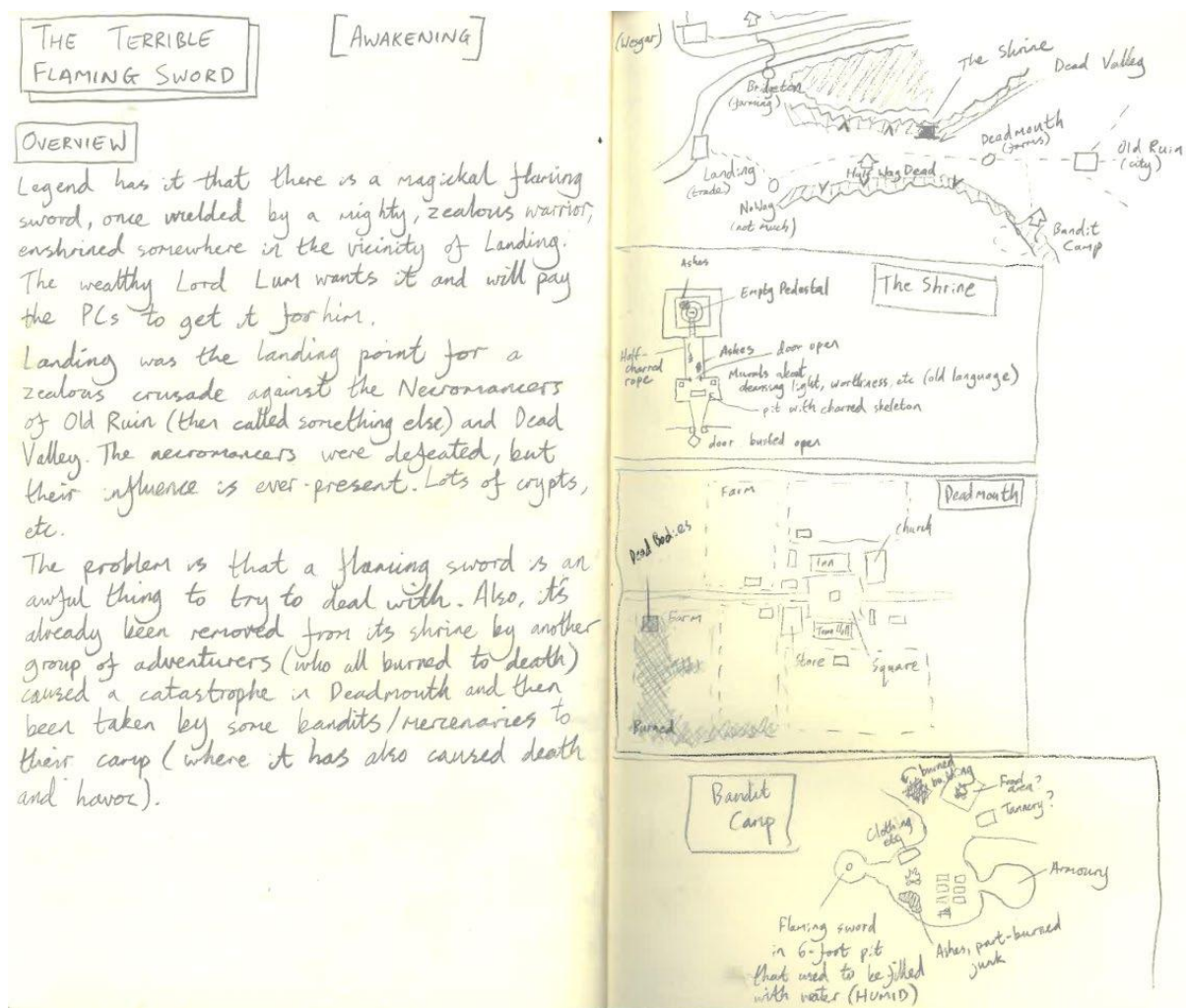
Figure 6 Scan of the plan for 'The Terrible Flaming Sword' (Wilbraham 2024: 128)

Through the practice research, a common and popular approach to planning for storytelling saw the GM plan out the drives and intentions of potentially antagonistic groups (somewhat like *Dungeon World*'s Fronts) and design locations with details and challenges meant to engage the players. This, coupled with a rough idea of how a plot might emerge, can present fictional circumstances that feel like a setup for a plot while allowing the players to interact with the fiction dynamically. Examples of this approach can be seen in the GMPD: 'Normal Person Dungeon Crawl' is run simply from a map that indicates two ways the PCs might resolve their circumstances, with notes as to the denizens of the dungeon they find themselves in (GMPD, page 121); the plans for 'A Dragon in a Dungeon' and 'The Terrible Flaming Sword' (Figure 6) both simply describe problems to resolve (with their histories/overviews) while providing maps of key locations (GMPD, pages 127-128); 'JankenSquad Origins' is presented through a rough city map with notes about an antagonistic force's plans, sketches of its members, and notes about the regions of the city (GMPD, page 277); while a slightly unusual format because of its constrained nature and highly player-driven story, 'Nil Escape' arises from a map of a small location (full of challenges) and notes on the PC's relationships with each

other (GMPD, pages 281-4). 'Nil Escape' was observed to be an especially popular game throughout the practice research – players would excitedly discuss the stories that emerged, despite them growing from simply a location and set of character relationships, with no clear plot.

Considering "Traditional" Storytelling

To ensure that the stories of RPGs are being told well, GMs may need to consider aspects of "traditional" storytelling – storytelling techniques from media such as novels. This topic would be far too large to cover in full, but a summary of some of the main concerns are presented here. This section is based heavily on *The Science of Storytelling* by Will Storr (2019). Storr is an award-winning writer, storytelling teacher, and theorist, and this text focuses on the psychological and neurological underpinnings of storytelling to provide a thorough overview of important aspects.

Curiosity

A core aspect of storytelling lies in triggering curiosity in the reader (/viewer/player/etc.). Stories feature (unexpected) change at their beginning and throughout because it "is endlessly fascinating to brains" – it triggers human perceptual systems and activates curiosity (Storr 2019: 11–7). These moments of unexpected change can be understood as the dramatic events that both begin the circumstances of the story and keep the action moving along. One of the most popular games observed in the practice research was 'Nil Escape', in which the story opens with the PCs waking up in an unfamiliar location, having been taken from their normal lives to participate in a life-or-death game – this moment of change from the norm (from the points-of-view of the PCs) was observed to spark immediate engagement with the premise and ongoing story (GMPD, pages 281-4).

Incomplete "information sets" also activate curiosity. Stories can trigger this in their readers by providing incomplete information about their worlds – enough that a reader can form ideas about the gaps that they aren't certain of (Storr 2019: 17–9). This includes both worldbuilding detail (perhaps broad details about the way the world works are initially left mysterious) and detail about the plot and characters of the ongoing story (perhaps character motivations and/or the direction of the story are initially unclear). To return to the example of 'Nil Escape', it was observed that players would engage with this game more than some others in part because of the mysterious circumstances the PCs find themselves in and the clearly telegraphed secret information/motivations of the other PCs – each player begins with a substantial amount of secret information, representing their PC's knowledge, and hints as to what the other PCs may be hiding. Other notable examples from the practice research are 'Schrödinger Fantasy' (GMPD, page 271), in which the players were strongly engaged by the initially mysterious workings of the fictional world,

and 'Normal Person Dungeon Crawl' (GMPD, page 121), in which the players were strongly engaged by the exploration of a mysterious, challenging location that the PCs find themselves in.

Loewenstein (1994, cited in Storr 2019: 19) states that there are four ways to involuntarily induce curiosity in humans:

1. "the 'posing of a question or presentation of a puzzle'" (Loewenstein 1994, cited in Storr 2019)
2. "'exposure to a sequence of events with an anticipated but unknown resolution'" (Loewenstein 1994, cited in Storr 2019)
3. "'the violation of expectations that triggers a search for an explanation'" (Loewenstein 1994, cited in Storr 2019)
4. "knowledge of 'possession of information by someone else'" (Loewenstein 1994, cited in Storr 2019)

These curiosity triggers are frequently accessed by storytelling. While mystery stories may explicitly match these descriptions more clearly than some other genres, even relatively simple action stories, for example, frequently: open with unexpected events, the cause of which is to be explored (point 1); follow a formulaic but not entirely predictable plot (point 2); feature some sort of twist or dramatic turn (point 3); and tease that an antagonist or other character has some knowledge that a protagonist doesn't, perhaps the details of a nefarious plan (point 4).

Narration

Storytelling prompts the creation of a model of the fictional world and circumstances in the reader's brain (Storr 2019: 20–7). A reader begins modelling information as soon as it is received, meaning that word order will impact the reader's model, with active sentence structure being more effective than passive (Bergen 2012, cited in Storr 2019: 28). Precise and specific description allows more accurate reader models, with the suggestion that three specific details (including various sensory information) of an object be described to allow for vivid scenes in the reader's imagination (Summerfield et al. 2010, cited in Storr 2019: 29–30).

Reader attention is drawn to "meaningful" details, not just details that stand out in a situation (Henderson and Hayes 2017, cited in Storr 2019: 39). Storr (2019: 39–40) suggests that details that communicate human change and those that relate to a fictional character's dramatic circumstances are high in meaning.

In the *Unknown Armies* rulebook, Stolze and Tynes (2002: 275–7) state that effective basic narration – a GM's ability to describe the players' characters' situation – is essential to good storytelling.

Techniques such as appropriate tone of voice, meaningful vocabulary, evocative props, full-sensory description, appropriate level of detail and playing the characters' psychology can be used to improve storytelling. While contradiction, repetition, what they call 'genericity' (inclusions that make the story too predictable) and using a game's rules and statistics to describe a situation can weaken the narration and storytelling. This seems to relate to some of the considerations for immersion mentioned in the earlier section – sometimes, allowing a focus on the elements of the game's systems can have the negative effect of harming player immersion.

Metaphor and Poetry

Neural models of the world, including those created of fictional worlds, are influenced by an individual's memories and feelings (personal associations) about any elements, often subconsciously (Storr 2019: 41). These associations are leveraged by poetry – terms trigger associated feelings in a reader to move them (Storr 2019: 42).

The use of metaphor creates an information gap, prompting more vivid modelling (Storr 2019: 44) and triggering curiosity in a reader. It also activates additional neural regions relating to extra sensory information, adding this depth to the model (Lacey et al. 2012 and Lacey et al. 2017, cited in Storr 2019: 45).

Characters

Focusing on (main) character psychology can be important for storytelling. A person's psychology affects how they have learned to deal with the world – how they might try to exert control when unexpected change occurs, often in flawed ways (Storr 2019: 68). These attempts to exert control produce goals, plans and actions that can drive a story forwards (Oatley 2011, cited in Storr 2019: 71).

Character psychology and personality can be communicated through their possessions and "behavioural residue" – people broadcast their identity both deliberately and accidentally through the impact they leave on their environment (Gosling 2008, cited in Storr 2019: 73). Similarly, describing the fictional world through a character's point of view can flavour this description with more insights into their personality, psychology, and flawed perceptions (Storr 2019: 77–8). These insights into character psychology can help partially bridge information gaps that the reader may have – giving enough information for the reader to anticipate resolutions without knowing for certain.

Character-Focused Drama

Storr claims that "the question all stories ask" is "*Who is this person who behaves like this?*"
[author's emphasis] – that a reader "will likely be engaged" wherever this question is present in the
story (2019: 108). These moments arise when the unexpected changes driving a story interact with a
character's model, challenging their flawed theory of control, and prompting an odd (over)reaction –
this signals a "spark between character and event" that can better engage a reader (Storr 2019: 90).
Storr suggests that the events of a story only matter because of who they are happening to – what's
important and interesting is how the character will deal with their dramatic circumstances and
perhaps change (2019: 100–3).

Storr claims that "well-told" stories feature characters that are complex, in that they have
recognisable personalities but also constantly shift as their circumstances change (2019: 117), and "a
constant interplay between the surface world of the drama and the subconscious world of the
characters" – the dramatic events cause/require a character to change through turmoil, as their
identity is tested (2019: 121–2).

Storr emphasizes the importance of dialogue: "All the principles of storytelling combine into the art
of dialogue." (2019: 134). When characters speak (or otherwise verbalise their thoughts), it should
efficiently leverage all of the strengths and important features of storytelling – communicating their
personalities, relationships, and how they are dealing with the dramatic events before them,
triggering curiosity and other positive responses in the reader.

Morality and Pleasure

Humans inherently find selflessness pleasant and selfishness unpleasant in stories, and seeing the
selfish punished is also pleasant (Storr 2019: 139–41). Status is also important as a story element –
humans inherently want to both connect with others and get ahead of them. Seeing esteemed
characters (protagonists, often) rise in status can be pleasant, partly explaining why underdog
stories can be so successful (Storr 2019: 143–6). Because of these factors, humiliation of a villain can
be an especially powerful story element – the punishment of a selfish person, that results in them
losing status (Storr 2019: 152).

Humans can also react powerfully to disgust (relating to an evolutionary past link to competing
tribes bearing dangerous pathogens), leading to additional negative perception of villains with
stereotypically disgusting features such as disfigurement or ugliness, but stories that are so morally
simplistic can cause us to overlook complexity that is present in real life, with troubling
consequences – life is not so simple (Storr 2019: 162–3). Storr suggests that straightforward morality
(simple uses of selflessness, selfishness, humiliation, and disgust) is less interesting than an antihero,

who might display some immoral aspects but still trigger a reader's empathy, and that perhaps all protagonists are antiheroes to some degree, due to their initial flaws (that they must overcome to be truly heroic) (2019: 163–8).

Goal-Directedness

The final essential quality for a hero is to be goal-directed (Storr 2019: 179). It can also be important for protagonists to be active – principally causing the effects of the plot (Archer and Jockers 2016, cited in Storr 2019: 185). These traits tend to be esteemed by readers, and they can ensure that an ongoing story remains clearly connected to the main character(s).

Plot Structures

Balancing the cause-and-effect relationships between scenes of a story is important. Stories that are over-explained leave fewer information gaps to engage reader curiosity, while those with more abstract structures and relationships between elements will demand more of their readers (though this might be appropriate for relatively "expert" readers who enjoy the extra demands of deeper analysis) (Storr 2019: 53–5). The structure and relationships of the scenes of the story can overall be considered the plot structure.

There are many options and paradigms for plot structures, dramatic arcs, story shapes, and similar (see texts such as Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and Yorke's *Into the Woods*), but the key aspects in most cases are the rising and falling of emotional temperament ("emotional arcs") (Reagan et al. 2016, cited in Storr 2019: 188) and a focus on "human closeness and human connection" (Archer and Jockers 2016, cited in Storr 2019: 188). Storr claims that all these options "embrace the three-act shape of crisis, struggle, resolution" – that drama emerges when unexpected change happening to a character leads to a conclusion (2019: 189). A final, decisive, personal challenge for a protagonist can be important (Robinson 2017 and Peterson 2017, cited in Storr 2019: 191), with a story's ending often hinging on whether or not the protagonist is able to change appropriately in order to exert control during their final challenge (Storr 2019: 192–8).

Telling Interactive Stories

While a GM needs to consider "traditional" storytelling techniques, as above, it is important for them to also be aware of the particulars of storytelling in/through/using interactive media.

Understanding Interactive Stories

In *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing* Games, Cover (2010: 21–2, 28–9) provides a thorough overview of the relatively recent history of interactive storytelling, with a focus on media emerging from the 1970s – RPGs and gamebooks – and media and genres that evolved from these.

Cover summarises some of the advancements and scholarly discussion around related concepts, citing terms such as "interactive fiction", "emergent stories", "ergodic texts", and "cybertexts". Notable concepts include:

- "ergodicity" – where ergodic texts require "nontrivial effort" to navigate, with cybertext being a medium that includes both ergodic and narrative elements (Aarseth 1997: 1, 5, cited in Cover 2010: 22)
- "productive" interactivity – with "*productive action*" being action "that leaves a durable mark on the textual world, either by adding objects to its landscape or by writing its history", and with emergent stories arising from productive action (Ryan 2003: 205, cited in Cover 2010: 22)

Comparing these concepts highlights that there are multiple styles of interactivity as applied to storytelling. As Cover (2010: 22, 28–9) also discusses, while cybertexts apply interactivity to narratives by having a reader negotiate a correct traversal to successfully navigate a text, they don't inherently include productive interactivity – no narrative events are truly changed, only accessed or not accessed, depending on the reader's (lack of) success in their traversal attempts.

These two modes can be useful when considering interacting with game narratives – RPG or otherwise. RPG sessions observed through the practice research would feature both traversal of a narrative in an ergodic manner and productive interactivity, often switching between the two modes on the fly, or otherwise combining the concepts. For example, the sessions in which a group played through *The Apostasy Gambit* campaign (see the GMPD, pages 255-6) were mostly run as the authored adventures contained in the books. Much of the time, the GM was acting as an intermediary as the group of players attempted to successfully traverse the authored narrative elements of the text (via the fictional actions of their PCs) – they could fail to access some narrative elements by failing fictional challenges, or by making certain choices (for example, a PC could fail a skill test relating to perceiving their surroundings, and therefore fail to collect clues or other narrative elements, as determined in the books). This was also combined with elements of productive interactivity, with one of the most notable being early in the game, when the players created their characters. Through the character creation process, players determined elements of their characters that weren't (initially, at least) related to the content of the adventure books, including backstory elements and establishing other characters, places, and objects in the setting as related to the PC, almost none of which were established as narrative elements of the broader fictional world before the players made these choices about their characters. Not only was this arguably productive interaction with the narrative in the first place (in that objects were added to

the fiction), but it allowed the GM to add further narrative elements into the ongoing fiction that were built upon these player-dictated elements, such as having characters, places, or objects that have been established as being important to a PC appear in the game in ways that advance their stories.

This approach, of having players productively interact with the fiction of an RPG so that the GM can expand on their additions (sometimes alongside/around/within ergodic navigation of a narrative), is very common in RPGs. Some systems explicitly encourage it through their rules, such as *Apocalypse World* and *Dungeon World* having the players directly make decisions about the contents of the fictional world from the outset, but arguably any RPG with a character creation system (which is most by far) will ask a player to establish some backstory and other details for their character, which is likely to add narrative elements to the fiction.

Friction Between Narrative and Interactivity

Cover (2010: 8) establishes that *D&D* stems from two traditions: games and literature. The idea arose when concepts from fantasy novels were applied to wargames (Mackay 2001: 15, cited in Cover 2010: 8), resulting in a new format that fused the two. The GM grew out of the role of the referee, but with some added functions relating to literary traditions of storytelling such as the control of characters that oppose and assist the protagonists. RPGs experience friction for being both "games" and "stories" simultaneously. This friction has been discussed and debated via "ludology versus narratology" approaches and a general acceptance within the field that interactivity and storytelling follow very different rules and often clash with each other (Juul 1998; Murray 2005; Crawford 2012 and many others).

Arguably, the RPG (via *D&D*, the origin of the format) is the originator of the modern story game – *Colossal Cave Adventure* (Crowther 1976) was the first digital adventure/story game, and was explicitly based on Crowther's personal games of *D&D* (Adams n.d.). Hints of the GM are seen in *Colossal Cave Adventure*, as the player acts in the game world through (parsed) dialogue with a (simulated) narrator. Therefore, from the very origins of the story game (RPGs), the GM was the answer to the problems that arise from combining these two concepts that create friction. Their role is to bridge the gap between game and story – to be aware of it and operate on both sides of it, all the while catering to the specific needs of their players.

Allowing player agency introduces runs the risk that player actions hinder aspects of the experience that would contribute to strong storytelling – a player might not necessarily follow a tightly crafted plot at the right pacing or succeed/fail at game challenges in a manner that best fits the narrative of their character. Similarly, a game that attempts to force players through a satisfying narrative runs

the risk of spoiling the pleasure of experiences like agency. The term "railroad" is frequently used to describe this scenario for RPGs: "A railroad adventure is one in which the players have no meaningful choices. It's like riding on a train, which can only follow the tracks, and the tracks go in one direction" (Cook et al. 2019: 435).

The practice research various instances of these clashes between game and story. Games of *Apocalypse World*, a system which demands the GM does not plot out stories, were often remarked upon as feeling narratively unrewarding or aimless as compared to other adventures with clear plots, especially as the group became familiar with the specifics of storytelling in these types of systems (as discussed in the opening section of this chapter – also see GMPD, pages 10-1 and 14-5). By contrast, the rigid nature of the plotting in *Ashes of Middenheim* frustrated the group when their progress was hindered by none of the PCs having a skill that the story required to proceed (as discussed in the opening section of this chapter – also see GMPD, pages 300-1), and while the GM improvised solutions to allow the group to continue to follow the story, it had compounded with other issues that caused the end of that adventure. Finally, player agency was observed to harm satisfying storytelling for many participants in 'The Madness of Ages' campaign, in which a player used a powerful ability during the finale to change the nature of the main antagonist and retroactively render almost all of the campaign's progress and investigation invalid – and because this campaign was played using *Monster of the Week*, the GM wasn't able to overrule the player's action or otherwise take narrative control during this occurrence (as discussed at the end of the section titled Managing Player Intervention – also see GMPD, pages 279-80).

Negotiating Between Story and Rules

While various systems will handle the balance differently (for example, *Apocalypse World*'s insistence that the GM does not plot a story versus *Paranoia* recommending that the GM overrules anything to have fictional events turn out how they like), and GMs will have their personal styles, a large part of a GM's role is to handle the negotiation between story and rules in order to maximise the entertainment value of ongoing play. Whenever storytelling takes precedence, there is a risk to satisfying interaction, and whenever the rules take precedence, there is a risk to satisfying storytelling.

In *Chris Crawford on Interactive Storytelling*, Crawford suggests that interactive storytelling systems should present a player with a "large set of dramatically significant, closely balanced choices" "that can reasonably go either way" (2012: 63). Relatedly, in *So You Want To Be A Game Master*,

Alexander[13] suggests that a GM should only have the rules interrupt PC's fictional actions when failing an attempted task would be interesting and/or meaningful – where failure would create "an obstacle or consequences, forcing the PCs to create a new path to their goals" (2023: 28–9). This advice is fairly common in RPG and GMing discussions – where a game allows it, dice rolls (or other methods for handling fictional challenge) should only be used when any outcome of the roll would be desirable or fictionally interesting.

Cook et al. (2019: 414) highlight that part of the excitement of the format of RPGs is that the story is turned over to chance at times (via dice rolls, primarily) – that a feature of RPG play is that the story might not go the way one would expect due to the influence of the rules of the game. They do acknowledge that the vast majority of fictional occurrences shouldn't be resolved using dice (or similar rules) – mundane activities such as travelling safely, chatting to NPCs, casually observing surroundings – but that the rules should be used wherever chances of PC success/failure aren't certain, or where an action is taken that could harm another creature or object.

The practice research observed dice rolls interacting with storytelling and meaning/interest across a spectrum of positivity-negativity. The groups would often comment that rolls that result in failure where no information is gained, and the PCs' circumstances don't meaningfully change, can feel underwhelming and frustrating. These circumstances can occur frequently so are not explicitly recorded in the GMPD, though the circumstances described on page 301 are similar (the PCs could have failed a roll if they had possessed the required skill, which would have led to the same situation. By contrast, situations where players succeed at unlikely rolls can be impactful and dramatic. Such specific situations are similarly not recorded in the GMPD, but there was a moment in the *Enemy Within* campaign (briefly discussed on page 302 of the GMPD) where a player was hoping to find an item that would allow their character to grow in power, and they had a chance to acquire it while escaping a collapsing castle – the GM declared that they had a one in ten chance of doing so, leading to aiming for a roll of ten on a ten-sided die, which the player succeeded at, causing the group to erupt in cheering. Similar situations occur in various dramatic moments, and the groups can be frequently observed to tensely await the results of rolls at these times, before animatedly celebrating or commiserating the results.

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[13] Justin Alexander is an award-winning RPG developer, designer, and producer, as well as a prolific writer on the medium (Alexander 2024).

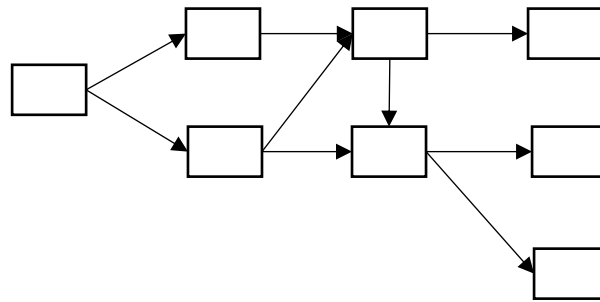**Branching Narrative Structures and Videogames**

Figure 7 A typical branching narrative graph

Branching narrative structures, while primarily being associated with videogames, represent a "significant contribution to interactive storytelling" and a "dominant approach toward game design" (Ip 2011: 109). They can be defined as a subset of nonlinear interactive narrative structures. Within branching narrative structures, decisions are presented to the player, the outcomes of which determine the following story's direction (Moser and Fang 2015: 147). Like Figure 7, they "are typically represented as directed graphs in which each node represents a … scene followed by a decision point. Arcs between nodes represent decisions the user can make" (Riedl and Young 2006: 23). By their nature, RPG stories could be considered branching narratives, though the term is rarely applied to them. A GM will generally have to consider that the outcome of any player choice or challenge could change the direction of the story (to various degrees).

One way for a GM to handle the balance of story and rules is to consider the overall structure of an interactive story. Therefore, GMs can plot out their intended stories by considering where a story might "branch" based on PC actions or player choice. For example, if the PCs manage to apprehend a major villain, this may determine that some of their favoured NPCs are spared from the villain's attacks, otherwise those NPCs could be killed – this could be considered a branching point where one of two (or more) possible outcomes is determined, leading the story in different directions. Arguably, any time the dice are rolled (or similar) or a player makes a decision, the story branches to some degree, but the most notable branches for an intended story can be plotted out into a rough structure.

When compared to linear narrative structures ("traditional" storytelling), branching narrative structures in videogames offer the player more control over the progression of the story, but are limited by their required increase in the quantity of content to be produced for their branches (Ip 2011). The narrative variability available to the player in a videogame is typically built in during design and is therefore limited by the designer's anticipation of the player's needs or preferences (Riedl and Young 2006).

Game narrative components take one of two forms: embedded narrative (pre-generated, authored) and emergent narrative (arising from play, experiential) (Salen and Zimmerman 2004). These two components are related to ergodic traversal of a narrative (which would largely rely on embedded narrative components) and productive interactivity (which produces emergent narrative components). Embedded narrative provides motivation to the player by giving story context for the events and actions of the game. It structures interaction and movement through the game world in a meaningful way and acts as a reward for completing a goal (Salen and Zimmerman 2004).

Branching narrative structures use embedded narrative to provide agency to players, defined as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (Murray 1997). Embedded narrative components link the pleasure of agency with narrative progression via meaningful interaction with the game's story and narrative rewards for progress.

"Flow" (Csikszentmihalyi 2009) is described as optimal experience – the exhilarating pleasure occurring when someone is engaged in an activity and feels in control of their actions. The degree of a player's engagement with an interactive narrative is tied to their perceived control (Riedl and Young 2006).
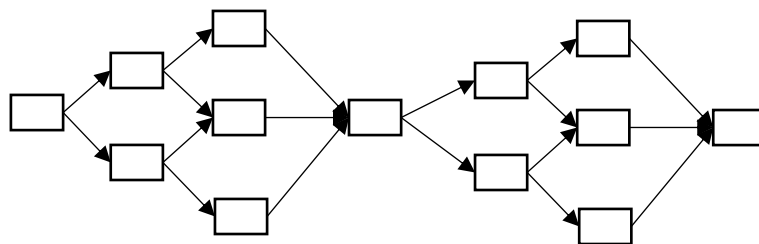

Figure 8 Diagram of a branch-and-bottleneck structure

Branch-and-bottleneck structures, referred to by Crawford as foldback schemes (2012: 126) and represented in Figure 8, are commonly used to provide the experience of branching narratives while reducing the amount of prewritten content required (Ashwell 2015; Tucker 2019; TV Tropes 2019)[14]. This addresses one of the weaknesses of the typical branching structure while retaining the enjoyable experience of agency through a significant portion of the experience.

Narration for Interactivity

There are extra considerations for narration for interactive stories, over non-interactive stories. Because the action in an RPG's story is mostly communicated between the GM and the players in a verbal dialogue, the GM has great freedom in how much or little information to reveal in response to

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[14] The *TV Tropes* entry for Branch-and-Bottleneck Plot Structures (TV Tropes 2019) is referenced here to demonstrate the prevalence and cultural relevance of this interactive storytelling technique.

the players' enquiries. The flexibility of language also allows the GM to represent fantastical situations in ways that can be more evocative and effective than visual or sculptural depictions, according to Peterson (2012: 308–9). However, because GMs aren't able to describe scenes with perfect definition and clarity, players sometimes end up taking action that fits their imperfect understanding of an in-game situation, leading to disputes and unforeseeable problems (Fine 2002: 107–8). Awareness of this effect highlights the importance of measuring player engagement and redirecting where required, as discussed in the earlier section.

In RPGs, the level of detail in narration can be adjusted to best entertain the group at any given moment. Cook et al. highlight that, while narration and description can fuel immersion, sometimes a GM should encourage shorter descriptions in order to keep the story moving along – that sometimes long descriptions can be tedious, and so they recommend "precise and concise" descriptions as optimal, to both give clear impressions to the players and maintain their attention (2019: 430). They explain that the GM's descriptions and narration represent the equivalent of sensory inputs for the PCs, and therefore the main method by which the players understand the world, but that the rules can also meaningfully convey information to the players by clarifying, for example, exactly how injured a character is beyond a visual description, or how far a character's attack can reach in precise terms (Cook et al. 2019: 412). To this end, the rules can sometimes be used to provide precise, concise description, even where that may otherwise risk harming immersion.

Cook et al. (2019: 430–1) also highlight the importance of stressing the most interesting and genre-appropriate aspects of description. Where the GM is describing a world that matches some genre clichés, the players will initially conjure trope-filled imagery, which the GM can allow them to picture while highlighting the aspects of the world that set it aside from the generic. Relatedly, the GM should pitch their description to match themes of the genre – for example, horror games may benefit from evocative but less precise description to prompt the players to vividly imagine strange visuals.

Handling Progression and Pacing

To attempt to ensure that the story progresses in the desired direction, GMs can "use their role as the storyteller to structure game situations through the control of information. By giving the players information, even if it has no significance to the game at that point, the referee can direct the players" – by mentioning some element, the GM draws the players' attentions and imaginations to it (Fine 2002: 117). They can use this narration and description to manage the progression and pacing of the story, with an aim to tap into the "traditional" storytelling principles relating to story structure – managing the emotional temperament of the story. GMs also use NPCs to control story

development by granting or denying opportunities to the players. Incredibly powerful NPCs can aid or contest players in order to guide them along the correct path (Fine 2002: 119).

GMs "must make decisions in structuring game events to insure that action progresses with appropriate speed, dramatic balance, and tension so that all participants enjoy themselves" (Fine 2002: 86). According to Stolze and Tynes (2002: 279), as storytellers, GMs have two tools for controlling the flow of the game's story – narrative and plot. A GM can slow things down using narrative by cutting back on description, encouraging the players to discuss their current situation and presenting them with a breather in which time is experienced subjectively. To use this technique effectively, the GM may have to remind the players of their situation occasionally and monitor the mood, staying ready to resume narration if it strays from what is desired. To slow things down using plot, a GM can provide the players' characters with an in-fiction breather, perhaps a safe space, where the characters can discuss their situation in objective time. Again, the GM may have to monitor mood to decide when to use the plot to move things along.

Cook et al. highlight the importance of pacing, with the primary advice being to keep the fictional action "moving" and "interesting", though they state that proper implementation of pacing comes with "practice and… developed intuition" (2019: 428). They recommend that pacing is handled differently at different levels of play:

- During an encounter such as combat or a tense interaction, they recommend avoiding distractions such as player indecision, rules discussions, minutiae, and anecdotes – to save these kinds of discussions until after the session. They also recommend preventing the end of encounter from dragging by concluding it when the outcome becomes clear – for example, having the last few enemy combatants flee when defeat seems inevitable, rather than continuing to play using the combat rules. (Cook et al. 2019: 428)
- At the level of the game session, they recommend planning for a variety of lengths and levels of complexity for encounters. They also recommend cutting back on narration/description for sequences that would harm the pacing or flow of the session, such as shopping trips – the GM doesn't necessarily need to describe the market and shopkeepers if this sequence isn't narratively important and it would slow down the pacing of the session, for example. They recommend that a GM err on the side of fast pacing, rather than slow, even if this means glossing over some details that some players may enjoy, for the sake of skipping any dull sequences and keeping the story moving along – this may include sometimes interrupting player discussions using either fictional circumstances or direct statements to the players. It is important, they state, that players can look back on a

session a feel a sense of accomplishment at what happened in the story. (Cook et al. 2019: 429–30)

- At the level of the story, they recommend using the established three-act structure as a starting point – introduce a problem, have the problem get worse or more complicated, then resolve it. They recommend a focus on the ebbing and flowing of action, including downtime between tense moments. (Cook et al. 2019: 430)
- For a campaign, they recommend varying smaller sub-story lengths and weaving them together such that elements of one story run into the next. They also recommend including periods of relatively long fictional downtime such that fictional time passes at a greater rate, highlighting the developing lives of the characters. (Cook et al. 2019: 430)

While approaches will vary by GM, game, and system, the importance of managing story progression and pacing is clear. Many of the key factors of "traditional" storytelling apply, but this is complicated by the interactivity inherent in the medium, so the GM must take steps to manage this as best as possible.

Zooming In or Out, or Handling Abstraction

According to Peterson (2012: 592), traditional RPGs – those structured similarly to the earliest examples – can be considered to use three modes of play: exploration, in which the PCs travel and investigate locations; combat, in which the PCs deal with conflict; and logistics, in which the players deal with the consequences of an adventure. A GM can pace their story by switching between these modes to create "a dramatic blend of tension, catharsis and banality" (Peterson 2012: 592). This variation in presentation can be applied to the tone or theme of the story – "[the] best [GMs] attempt to maintain dramatic balance in the game, incorporating humorous, trivial episodes… with others that are more serious" (Fine 2002: 88–9), thus managing pacing.

Switching between the modes of play of the system will affect the pacing of the storytelling, deliberately or otherwise. For example, playing out travelling from one town to another using the combat mechanics of *Dungeons & Dragons*, where characters act in discrete turns in initiative order and only move a few dozen feet per turn, would be extremely dull. While this example is extreme and unlikely to occur, GMs should be mindful of modes of play and encourage them as appropriate to the ongoing story – for example, if the PCs get into a minor scuffle with some thugs as an unplanned encounter that would detract from the current story focus, it may be better for the story to avoid entering the combat mode of the game, which would slow things down, and resolve the encounter via another method, such as glossing over the fight with dice rolls that abstract the conflict.

Making Adjustments to Story and Plot

The power of the GM's ability to direct player action through the revealing of information (narration, description) is considerable because this is the main way that the players build upon their imperfect knowledge of the RPG's world. Players can assume that all information given by the GM is significant and planned, whether or not this is true (Fine 2002: 117). This can lead to problems when players misinterpret information that is important to the GM's plot or follow information that was intended to be unimportant, as described by Strugnell et al. (2018: 432).

The players have the power to steer an RPG's story, but the GM can interfere – for example, by denying them combat. Often, the GM will allow the players to stray from the plans. This requires the GM to use their discretion, perhaps deviating from the rules of the game system (Fine 2002: 89), changing, redefining, or overruling rules that would produce "illogical or unenjoyable" results (Cook et al. 2019: 433). The GM should incorporate the players' choices and the outcomes of their characters' actions to construct a good story, but either can hinder this (Fine 2002: 104).

When issues arise due to players' misunderstandings about an in-game situation, GMs can be convinced to concede to the players' assertions about their position (Fine 2002: 109). As briefly described an earlier section, Strugnell at al. (2018: 435) also examine these occurrences; Players sometimes misunderstand the GM's plot hooks and clues and focus on elements that were not intended to be related to the main story. The players craft their own theories about how these elements are related, expecting them to connect. The GM must decide if these are interesting enough for inclusion, perhaps having to expand upon the initially sparse definitions of characters and objects that were included simply for flavour, with little actual importance. If the GM decides that these elements cannot be made to fit the main story, they must decide whether to shift the players' focus back to the main story or change the story to fit the element. The GM can also choose to accept the theories that the players developed based upon misunderstandings, retroactively changing the meanings of the plot hooks – the players will never know that this was not the intention.

This type of occurrence is common while GMing – the players making assumptions and taking an interest in story elements that the GM did not plan for. Some such events are described on pages 287-90 of the GMPD, with the previously discussed Figure 3 being a notable example. What was intended to be a minor encounter saw the players take an interest in an aggressor, which prompted the GM to invent and attach story elements to this NPC in order to link them to the broader story.

Relatedly, a GM must incorporate any relevant new information that arises during play into the broader story. This is often considered part of the downtime duties, but aspects of this duty should

be administered during play. Cook et al. (and others) suggest that GMs take notes during play to record any invented content (such resolving rules issues or a new NPC's name and role) so that it can be factored into the planning of future sessions to maintain consistency (2019: 413).

Previously discussed as an example, *InSpectres* was designed in part with the purpose of fixing the aforementioned issue of players misinterpreting clues, described by Sorensen as the "murder mystery" plot (2002: 6): this game "allow[s] the GM to set up the events, but then [has] the players (through their characters) decide what is really going on. The GM then reacts to the players and what they see as intriguing or exciting elements of the story" (Sorensen 2002: 6).

GMs must also "incorporate things external to the game environment – e.g., the addition of new players, the absence of regular players, or the desire of the gaming group to end a scenario" (Fine 2002: 89). These factors must also be incorporated as story or plot adjustments. For example, Cook et al. suggest that absent players either have their PC handled by the GM (with a "very small role in the action") or the GM should create a "story reason for player absences" such as "The PC got an urgent message from home and had to return"(2019: 188–90).

Manipulating Outcomes

Where the outcomes of game events would be left to chance, if the rules were followed completely, the GM and/or players would be required to roll dice or partake of some other activity that would randomise the results. This can be problematic as it has the potential to move the game's story in directions that neither the GM nor players would enjoy (Fine 2002: 91). "Because creating an enjoyable scenario is seen as more important than enforcing the laws of chance, [GMs]… alter their rolls" (Fine 2002: 102), which is in keeping with advice in RPG rulebooks such as *D&D*:

> Rolling behind a screen lets you fudge the results if you want to. If two critical hits in a row would kill a character, you could change the second critical hit into a normal hit, or even a miss. Don't distort die rolls too often, though, and don't let on that you're doing it. Otherwise, your players might think they don't face any real risks–or worse, that you're playing favorites [sic]. (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 235)

If the GM can secretly perform their rolls (such as by rolling behind a screen, in the above example), this action becomes trivial. While players sometimes accuse GMs of altering rolls to hinder them, it is usually done for the benefit of the PCs and is a very common practice (Fine 2002: 102–3). This is in keeping with various advice that the enjoyment, fun, entertainment, etc., of the RPG is the primary goal and takes precedence over any rules (Laws 2002: 3; McDowall and Law 2018: 149).

As briefly discussed in an earlier section, one way to mitigate the impact of unwanted results of rolls (or similar) is to only allow them to happen when any outcome of the roll would be interesting. A GM can gloss over boring details and interactions, and they "may insure that the characters do succeed the first time if they are doing something at which the [GM] wishes them to succeed" (Fine 2002: 117). To some degree, the players will acknowledge that even choosing to apply the rules is within the GM's remit, and therefore any outcome could be attributed to the GM, even where the roll result dictates what happens in fiction: Where the death or injury of a PC is caused by chance, this is still seen as the GM's responsibility because the GM controls the dice and the situation that gave rise to this event (Fine 2002: 113).

Christensen (2012: 76–7) argues that cheating as the GM "is a legitimate tool of Storytelling and one of the most important", but that revealing when it occurs to the players or using it too frequently is wresting too much control of the story away from the players. This can be especially troublesome if the players find out about the GM's cheating, as they can feel robbed of their agency, though they may not experience this negativity if they don't discover the act.

As previously discussed, this is all to be balanced with the fact that the rules of the game, and adherence at times to chance, are part of the excitement of interactive storytelling. If the GM controls all outcomes, then the experience moves away from being a game.

Creating Settings and Scenarios

A GM chooses a setting for the game's world, along with the history that produced it. Some RPG systems have predefined settings, but GMs can alter or replace them. These settings can be complex developments of the GM's own design or borrowed and adapted from other media or the real world (Fine 2002: 73–4). Even where the RPG is set in a preestablished setting such as D&D's "Forgotten Realms", the setting comes to belong to the RPG participants as they modify it and "explore the consequences of the players' actions" (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 4). As well as the setting, a GM creates the world in which the action takes place, establishing the worldview that directs the action and communicates its philosophies and ideals (Fine 2002: 76).

A GM often also creates a scenario within their setting, comprised of forces which provide motivation for the players' characters. These scenarios can be simple or complex. There is the option for a GM to avoid creating a scenario – instead just providing the players with a world in which they can decide on their own goals and direction. This gives the players more freedom but creates a less organised game with the potential for player disagreements. "Most successful are mixtures between worlds and scenarios. A [GM] should not construct too complete a scenario – one that gives the players their total motivation and eliminates individual action" (Fine 2002: 78–80).

The above describes the process of the creation of a fictional world by the GM, along with a focus on parts of that world that will provide a compelling space to play in. Systems and individual games will very in their approaches, and GMs will have their own styles. For example, *Apocalypse World* begins with few details for the setting beyond that it is post-apocalyptic and contains a few specific features – the play group will decide on the landscape and specifics of the setting as they begin play. It also forbids the GM from bringing a plot or anything beyond the broad details of some threats for the PCs to react to. Conversely, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* games take place within an established setting, with notable locations and NPCs. While the GM may also bring loose scenarios to this game, many authored adventures are available, such as *The Enemy Within*, that provide clear scenarios for a group to experience via their PCs.

Authoring Storylines and Plots

After establishing the settings and initial scenarios of their games, a GM may consider plotting out some intended stories to tell via play. As has been discussed previously, there are considerations to plotting out interactive stories, such as allowing for the most entertaining aspects of both storytelling and interactivity.

The *Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Master's Guide* advises that a GM will need to set aside time to "invent compelling plots, create new NPCs, craft encounters, and think of clever ways to foreshadow story events yet to come" (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 5), highlighting that this is a large part of the GM's role. However, Cook et al. warn that a GM should not predetermine outcomes when preparing potential stories – that they should consider their "story as having many possible plotlines" and they should therefore plan for multiple outcomes to encounters, allowing the gameplay to determine the path of the story (Cook et al. 2019: 435). This advice further reinforces that plotting out a story structure as a branching narrative could be beneficial for a GM.

Cook et al. also suggest that a GM might best plan out stories by considering them as series of encounters. They suggest that encounters in RPGs are akin to scenes in a movie or book, in that they are the units (or "chunks") of storytelling. They consider encounters to be the sequences of an RPG where the GM is providing a high level of detail, and where a high level of interaction is happening between the GM and players (2019: 434). Given that encounters are the units of play that are dense in interaction and storytelling, and that they are the points where a GM should most focus on the branching nature of the planned stories, it follows that these could be the focus of the planned branching plot structures that the GM prepares to run their stories from – perhaps the nodes of the branching graph.

When planning out stories, the *Cypher System* rulebook suggest the following "key concepts" (Cook et al. 2019: 428):

- "Learn what motivates the players at your table" and "what motivates the PCs that the players run." – Focus on the motivations and goals of the PCs and use those as the underpinnings of the stories. (Cook et al. 2019: 428)

- "Create stories that involve the PCs as directly as possible" – have events affect them or their close relations, for example. (Cook et al. 2019: 428)

- Ensure that PC decisions "have direct impact on what happens", as they are the main characters, and the players are co-authors with the GM. (Cook et al. 2019: 428)

- Have the PCs learn elements of one story while still engaging with another, to "[w]eave multiple stories together". (Cook et al. 2019: 428)

- Vary the length, tone, and contents of stories. (Cook et al. 2019: 428)

- "Vary the encounters within a story." (Cook et al. 2019: 428)

- Include stories of differing scales of importance – sometimes saving the world, sometimes saving one person, for example. (Cook et al. 2019: 428)

- Includes "[t]wists and unexpected events", but not all the time. (Cook et al. 2019: 428)

- Leave gaps in the players' understanding of story elements – don't explain every detail. (Cook et al. 2019: 428)

- Avoid stories in which the PCs are unaware of most of the events, as these are likely to "make little sense to the players". (Cook et al. 2019: 428)

- Include "real human emotion" in stories as much as possible – have antagonists driven by various emotions and attempt to instil various emotions in the players. (Cook et al. 2019: 428)

- Sometimes have new stories directly reference previous stories – perhaps have an antagonist return to attempt their plan again, or otherwise demonstrate that the "decisions that the players made in the past affect things in the present". (Cook et al. 2019: 428)

Similar advice is commonly given in RPG rulebooks and GMing advice texts. The above points are largely a mixture of factors that have been discussed in earlier sections, primarily focusing on catering to the players and leveraging "traditional" storytelling elements, though the focus on relating planned stories directly to the PCs as much as possible is important. This demonstrates the variety of processes and considerations that a GM might use when preparing their stories.

Playing in Established Fiction

It is acknowledged that a GM might not wholly create a world (or accompanying scenarios) for their game to take place in. The *Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Master's Guide* presents an established fictional setting but explicitly states that the world that any campaign takes place in is "a sort of mirror universe of the official setting", where the consequences of the PC's actions can change and modify the world (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 4).

Even with this being the case, the practice research observed some notable considerations when RPG play occurs in an established fictional setting. In both the *Apostasy Gambit* and *Paths of the Damned* campaigns, at least one of the players was a fan of the setting and more knowledgeable than the GM (for more details, see the GMPD, pages 255-6 and 300-2). This led to some negative experiences in both cases where the players felt that the setting was being represented differently than their understanding of the fiction from other media. In both cases, this related to other players also being less familiar with the setting and portraying their PCs in ways that arguably should have been restricted or have created fictional negative consequences for their actions. The GM struggled to manage the competing perceptions of the players, as it seemed that it would be impossible to please both players. Ultimately, these issues weren't enough to truly harm the games, but they were worthy of consideration – GMs should be wary of players' perceptions of established fictional settings and consider how they might interact with the GM's portrayal and other players' actions.
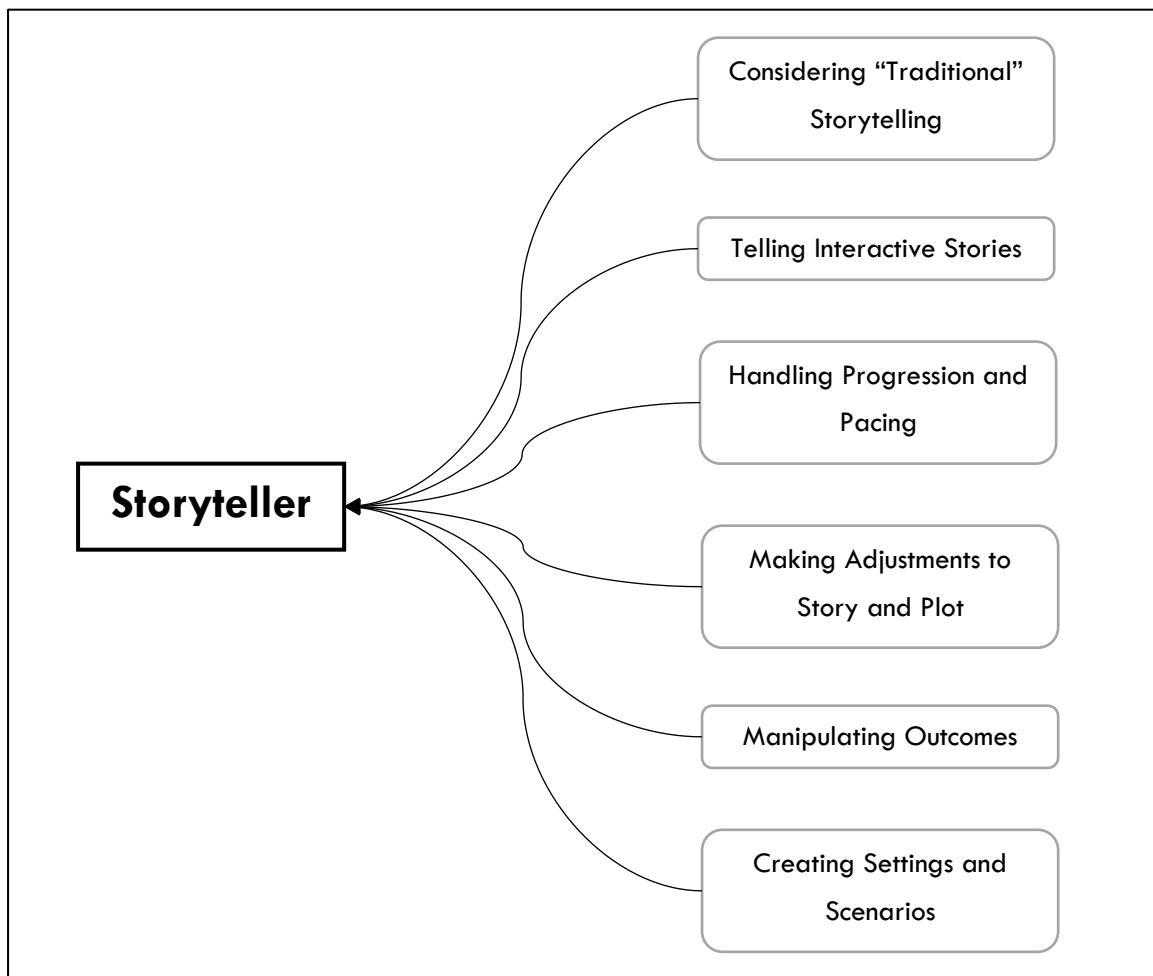
Summary: Gamemaster as Storyteller

Figure 9 Diagram depicting the functions of the GM sub-role of Storyteller

While the GM's sub-role of Entertainer is usually only implicitly framed despite its importance, the sub-role of Storyteller is regularly explicitly stated in RPG rulebooks and the like. This Storyteller sub-role is supported by six functions (as depicted in Figure 9): Considering "Traditional" Storytelling, Telling Interactive Stories, Handling Progression and Pacing, Making Adjustments to Story and Plot, Manipulating Outcomes, and Creating Settings and Scenarios. These functions are the second part of the list of all functions of the GM, which is the contribution to knowledge offered by this project, and which is summarised in Chapter 5.

It is vital that a GM understands that RPG stories are built through play – that their role is "to provide the impetus for stories in the game", initiating and guiding them (Cook et al. 2019: 428) but not literally telling them to the players (Vecchione et al. 2015: 7). The proper approaches will vary by RPG system, genre, player preferences, and so on, but some techniques to support this storytelling include managing tension and pacing (Vecchione et al. 2015: 7), and maintaining a focus on the game's fictional situations over rules (Cook et al. 2019: 407). Both freeform/unplotted, and heavily

authored RPG stories present challenges that a GM will need to account for, with the practice research demonstrating that RPG groups tend to appreciate the player freedom of the former and the depth and direction of the latter.

A GM will likely benefit from a strong understanding of "traditional" storytelling principles. Texts such as *The Science of Storytelling* (Storr 2019) cover the most important considerations, including those summarised here:

- Curiosity is vital for maintaining attention and can be activated via unexpected change (Storr 2019: 11–7) and incomplete information sets (Storr 2019: 17–9).

- Precise and specific information in narration aids players in accurately modelling the fictional world (Storr 2019: 20–7), with attention drawn to meaningful details (those relating to change and dramatic circumstances) (2019: 39–40).

- Unexpected change that challenges a main character's flaws and prompts odd reactions, perhaps inciting change, is likely to drive high engagement (Storr 2019: 90, 100–3).

- Complex morality can be more interesting than simplistic morality (Storr 2019: 163–8), even though the latter can be powerfully pleasing (Storr 2019: 139–41, 143–6, 152).

- The overall "shape" or structure of the plot should perhaps follow established patterns but should focus on the rising and falling of emotional temperament (Reagan et al. 2016, cited in Storr 2019: 188), human closeness and connection (where appropriate) (Archer and Jockers 2016, cited in Storr 2019: 188), and "the three-act shape of crisis, struggle, resolution" (which should stem from change happening to a character that leads to a conclusion) (Storr 2019: 189).

A GM's understanding of "traditional" storytelling should also be supported by an awareness of the particulars of interactive storytelling. While RPG narratives tend to be both ergodic (requiring effort to navigate) and productively interactive (where interactions make changes to the fiction), these modes will be combined and shifted between during play. Productive interaction by the players allows a GM to expand on their additions and demonstrate their agency.

While interactivity and storytelling follow very different rules and often clash with each other (Juul 1998; Murray 2005; Crawford 2012 and many others), the GM role originated as an intermediary to resolve these frictions. A GM must balance the needs of player agency and satisfying storytelling. Various advice exists, with some key recommendations being ensuring that the choices that the players make are always "dramatically significant" and "closely balanced" (Crawford 2012: 63), and

that the GM only has the rules interrupt the fiction when any outcome of a roll (for example) would be interesting or meaningful (Alexander 2023: 28–9). However, it is important to highlight that turning the story over to chance (such as via dice rolls) is part of the excitement of RPGs (Cook et al. 2019: 414).

A GM will need to consider that the way they give information to the players will direct them (Fine 2002: 117) – they can use their narration and description to manage progression and pacing, aiming for desirable emotional temperament structures, for example. Both narrative and plot can be used to control the flow of the story (Stolze and Tynes 2002: 279), and pacing can be handled differently at different levels of play (Cook et al. 2019: 428–30). Relatedly, RPGs are usually comprised of multiple modes of play – traditionally exploration, combat, and logistics (Peterson 2012: 592) – a GM may further control story pacing by switching between these modes to create "a dramatic blend of tension, catharsis and banality" (Peterson 2012: 592).

The interactive nature of RPG stories will generally require a GM to make adjustments to planned story and plot. One cause of these requirements is likely to be when players misinterpret information given by the GM, perhaps incorrectly assessing its significance (Fine 2002: 117; Strugnell et al. 2018: 432). In these cases, a GM may alter their plans in favour of their players' misinterpretations. Relatedly, a GM may also alter plans to incorporate new information that arises during play, such as players expressing preferences or introducing unplanned narrative details. A GM may also need to fictionally account for external factors such as missing or new players (Cook 2019: 188–90).

Where game outcomes are left to chance, there is sometimes potential for these to move the game's story in directions that would be unenjoyable (Fine 2002: 91). While not all sources agree, many recommend a GM considers fudging rolls for the benefit of the players, story, and enjoyment, which can be made easier if a GM rolls privately (such as behind a screen) (Fine 2002: 102–3; Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 235).

A GM will generally also be required to define the RPG's setting and scenario. Even where the group is playing an established setting, it comes to belong to the participants as they modify and explore it (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 4). The above considerations of player freedom versus satisfying storytelling will need to be considered in establishing the scenario – the forces which provide motivation for the PCs. Within the setting and scenario, a GM will usually need to establish storylines and plots. Advice and styles again vary, but some important considerations include not predetermining outcomes (Cook et al. 2019: 435) and tailoring narrative content to the PCs (Cook et al. 2019: 428).

Chapter 4: Gamemaster as Referee (+)

As previously discussed, the origins of the GM's role are in the role of a referee, though adherence to the RPG's rules is not the GM's primary concern. The previous sections have shown that a GM is usually more concerned with entertaining the players and effective storytelling than enforcing rules complexities. However, a GM must still take on several functions with regards to overseeing the rules and game-focused aspects of RPG play.

A large part of the Referee (+) role is adjudication of an RPG system's rules. Cook et al. describe adjudication as using a "sense of logic… to determine whether the rules make sense for a given situation… on a case-by-case basis", as opposed to strictly following the rules of a game system as presented (2019: 412). This prioritisation of logic over the rules during play can tap into the entertaining experience of engrossment and the related immersion, as discussed in the earlier sections.

Presenting Challenges and Processing Responses

Often, the bulk of an RPG system's rules will relate to resolving situations in which the PCs must overcome challenges – these are the most "game-like" aspects of the medium. While the process for determining when to implement the rules with regards to challenges will vary by system and current circumstances (perhaps with regards to the storytelling needs), and GMs will have their personal styles, any challenges will stem from fictional elements. There is nothing to apply rules to until the PCs meet circumstances that they must interact with or overcome.

As has been discussed previously, the GM may consider storytelling factors before applying the rules – perhaps glossing over some of the more complicated mechanics at one point would keep the story moving in a more entertaining way, or perhaps it would be better to rule that the PC may achieve their goal without resorting to dice rolls (or similar) because failure would not be meaningful or interesting. Again, this flexibility in application may vary by system and GM style.

Dungeon World handles challenges via its "moves", with each describing what would trigger it and the effect it would have. For example, the "hack and slash" move must trigger whenever "[a PC] attack[s] an enemy in melee", and triggering it prompts the PC's player to roll some dice, add one of their PC's attributes to the roll, and use the resulting value to determine the outcome of the move – primarily, how much damage is inflicted on the PC and/or their enemy (LaTorra and Koebel 2012: 16, 56). Proper play of *Dungeon World* requires that the GM does not interfere with the application of moves – whenever fictional circumstances are described by their trigger conditions, they must be resolved – therefore, the GM has little flexibility in processing challenges in these games.

Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay (4th edition), on the other hand, uses the more common paradigm for RPG systems with regards to the application of rules and processing of challenges. The second page of the section of the rulebook concerned with the core rules even states the "Golden Rule": "if a rule negatively impacts fun for your group, change it or ignore it" (McDowall and Law 2018: 149). This clearly communicates to an RPG group that there is more flexibility in rules application, permitting the GM to sometimes gloss over or ignore rules that would interfere with enjoyment/entertainment. The rulebook then goes on to explain the process for resolving challenges at length, including specific detail and extra rules for circumstances that are likely to occur given the setting and themes of the system (including, for example, rules relating to precise positioning in combat, and rules relating to becoming mutated due to the corrupting influence of magic). This is the common approach for many RPG systems, including titles like *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Call of Cthulhu*.

So, once a GM has decided that the rules should apply for any given fictional challenge, based on the needs of the storytelling and ongoing entertainment of the players, the application of the rules is usually a matter of following the specifics of the system being played. It may be that some relatively complex reasoning and processing of game information is required – for example, processing a PC attacking an enemy in *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* would require (McDowall and Law 2018: 158–64):

1. applying situational modifiers on both sides (from aspects such as positioning, physical condition including blindness or being stunned, magical effects, and so on) to the PC and enemy's attributes
2. rolling a set of dice for each to compare to their target values, to deduce how well both sides succeeded against their targets
3. comparing those relative successes to each other, to determine which side ultimately succeeded over the other
4. using these calculations to determine the amount of damage done, if the attacker succeeded against the defender (or, in some cases, if the defender succeeded over the attacker and possesses certain abilities)
5. determining the actual damage received by reducing the total damage by relevant attributes of the receiver, and applying said damage

The above process describes a relatively straightforward attack (which is a common occurrence) in *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, but there are many other rules and circumstances that might alter the process. Many other RPG systems use conflict resolution rules of very similar complexity. This example highlights that a GM, supported by player input, may often be required to process fairly

complicated implementations and interactions of rules to properly determine the outcomes of challenges. When we consider that the GM is often assumed to be the participant with the deepest understanding of the system and is likely to be teaching the other players, and their role as referee (+) carries authority with regards to rules implementation and adjudication, this process (that occurs very frequently) can be demanding.

Once such a challenge has been processed and the outcome has been determined, play resumes in the standard paradigm – the GM narrates the fictional circumstances to provide story elements for the players to respond to via their PCs. There are various possible approaches to resuming this narration, and again, the GM may choose a level of detail (etc.) for their description based on the current entertainment needs. The GM may simply state that a PC achieved their goal, with a brief narration, and then continue – for example, "you've successfully leapt over the gap, now what do you do?" Some GMing advice recommends not dwelling on the mechanical details of fictional actions, but using these terms can help with precision and some players can be more invested in the numeric game elements than the story elements at times, so the GM may describe the outcome using game terms – for example "you inflicted eight damage, but their armour blocked three, they're down to four health." In some circumstances, more elaborate narration may be the most appropriate, so the GM may include detailed more story elements – for example, "as the orc tries to defend themselves, blood runs into their eyes, preventing them from seeing your attack coming – you decapitate them with a final swing." Whatever the approach, Alexander suggests that the most important elements to communicate are: how the intended PC action succeeds or fails, if any complications arose from the attempt, and what the consequences of the attempt are (2023: 32–3).

Preparing Challenges

In order for the players and their PCs to have challenges to overcome, a GM may need to prepare these aspects of the game ahead of time. Again, this will vary by system and GMing style, and whether the group is playing through an authored adventure. With authored adventures, challenges are usually provided within the content, so the GM may not need to perform this duty in those cases.

Fine states that, for an RPG to be successful, the GM should design the challenges around the abilities of the PCs (2002: 105). Some systems have clear (and sometimes complex) processes for determining appropriate challenges for any given party of PCs – for example, the *Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Master's Guide* includes a section that guides a GM through designing encounters of appropriate challenge for their players, which requires some fairly complex calculations involving multiple game elements relating each PC and every opposing element of every encounter, as well as

encounter frequency, timing, and other considerations (Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 81–7). Some systems eschew the concept of balance in encounters – for example, *Cypher System*, with its focus on story, suggests that the GM prepare challenges according to fictional circumstances, with challenges that are established fictionally as being too difficult for the PCs to overcome requiring that they flee or attempt new approaches (it also suggests that consistency is more important than balance, and that only routinely too-easy or too-difficult challenges will feel unbalanced) (Cook et al. 2019: 435).

It may be the case that a GM can combine approaches. Sometimes, they may be concerned with precisely calculated, tightly balanced encounters that are designed to perfectly test some aspects of the PC's abilities. Sometimes, they may be more concerned with the fictional details of challenges, and allow those to produce encounters that are very easy or difficult for the PCs, perhaps in service of communicating some story elements. For example, in the practice research, the longform *Enemy Within* campaign (briefly described on page 302 of the GMPD) saw the GM use encounters pitched at various levels of challenge, for various reasons. Because the PCs progressed in ability over a long period of play, it was satisfying for the players to experience encounters that their PCs found difficult in early sessions, to see how comparatively easy they had become, highlighting their PCs' growth. Similarly, the occasional extremely difficult encounter could highlight how dangerous the setting, and the PCs' opponents, were, to dramatic effect. These choices by the GM were often in aid of managing the emotional temperament of the ongoing story, to shape it into something akin to dramatic arcs.

Adjusting Challenges

Once the challenges are being encountered during play, it may become apparent that their difficulty is having an unexpected effect. Perhaps they turned out to be more easy or difficult than intended, perhaps due to unexpected factors such as missing players or bad luck in dice rolls.

Fine states that GMs must make sure that the challenges of aspects of the RPG are not too great or too small as to frustrate or bore players. Separately from preparing appropriate challenges, the GM must manage them during play. Challenges that are too easy make for boring play, while those that are unfairly difficult can drive players to leave the game (2002: 105). The enjoyment experienced when a person is engaged in an appropriately challenging activity is described as flow. To achieve a flow state, participants must be involved in an activity that has challenges balanced with their skills – relatively low challenges lead to boredom, while relatively high challenges lead to frustration (Csikszentmihalyi 2009). The parallels between these requirements for flow and a successful RPG are apparent.

Fine (2002) presents several considerations for altering or overlooking rules:

- "One of the cardinal "metarules" of [RPG] gaming is that there are no "rules"; the rulebooks are only guidelines" (Fine 2002: 115).
- "The good story is more important than the sanctity of the rules" (Fine 2002: 235).
- GMs can alter the rules of the game system in favour of their players in order to keep them happy. For example, a player may be allowed a second chance at a die roll that determines their character's survival (Fine 2002: 114).
- "The [GM] can cope with problems by the simple expedient of creating a rule." (Fine 2002: 116)
- "Rules can be changed permanently or temporarily in order to solve a problem for the [GM]." (Fine 2002: 116)

While this somewhat reiterates previous discussions around the GM choosing when to apply rules, and to what degree, the highlight here is that a GM may sometimes "cheat" or alter rules during play in order to adjust challenge to be in line with the intended experience for the players. It might be that an encounter that was intended to be easy is challenging the group too much and risking the death of a PC, in which case a GM may secretly adjust the rolls of enemies before announcing them in order to spare the PCs further harm, or otherwise intervene in the encounter to reduce the challenge. Similarly, an encounter that was intended to challenge the group may not be playing out that way, in which case a GM may secretly increase the abilities of enemies, or introduce more as unplanned reinforcements, in order to bring the challenge closer to the intended level. Whether these adjustments are made secretly or publicly would depend on various factors, but a GM would generally be taking these steps in service of storytelling or entertainment, managing emotional temperament, for example.

All of these examples and more were certainly observed during the practice research, where systems allowed – secretly adjusting rolls, presenting twists to encounters as if they were planned, and so on. The exceptions were where proper play of a system prevented this kind of GM intervention, for example with *Apocalypse World*, and this sometimes led to frustration from the group due to the stories of those games occasionally feeling aimless or unrewarding (as discussed in the opening section of Chapter 3: Gamemaster as Storyteller – also see GMPD pages 10-1, 15).

Acting as the Intrigant

The role of the GM has parallels with Aarseth's (1997) concept of the intrigant. The intrigant is the equivalent of the narrator. It could be said that games have narrators – the "voice" of the game – but these are both more (in that they can negotiate) and less (in that they are bound by a system of

rules) than a storyteller. The voice sits between the intrigant and the intriguee. The intrigant (architect of intrigue) is more like the author (mastermind), ultimately responsible for events, characters and settings, but not motivated by a particular outcome (Aarseth 1997: 114).

But the intrigant is not the same as the implied programmer (author) – it arises from the text in play. It schemes for successful development of the intrigue as an opponent of the intriguee. When someone refers to their technology as "it", that is the intrigant – for example, when speaking of a computer: "It crashed and I lost my work!" (Aarseth 1997: 120–4)

While Aarseth's intrigant is defined primarily with videogame systems in mind, the concept clearly relates to the GM as the representative of the system and story of the RPG. As previous sections have shown, the GM's association with the rules and mechanics can affect the players' experience, even lessening immersion.

Fine (2002: 85) states that both the GM and the players attempt to shape an RPG to their own ends. To do this, each needs the cooperation of the other. Thus, negotiation occurs throughout. The players want: "an imaginative fantasy experience"; in-game survival; in-game "material rewards"; fun in overcoming the challenges of the game; and advancement of their characters, leading to more power. The GM wants: to create "an imaginative fantasy experience"; and to maintain the balance of the game by not having the PCs become too powerful, too fast. These differing goals lead to a perceived conflict between the players and the GM, and this conflict seems to mirror the relationship between Aarseth's player and intrigant.

This aspect of the GM, as representative of the system at large and sometimes as representative of opponents of the PCs within the system, can be used for dramatic effect. While it is usually the case that all participants are playing to have a good time together, a GM may sometimes act as more direct opposition to the players in order to represent the challenges they must overcome and manage emotional temperament. The practice research certainly observed this effect frequently – while the GMs were frequently very pleasant and generous with their players, there came times that they would perform more strictness and antagonism when, for example, the players were confronting a major villain or participating in an especially difficult encounter.

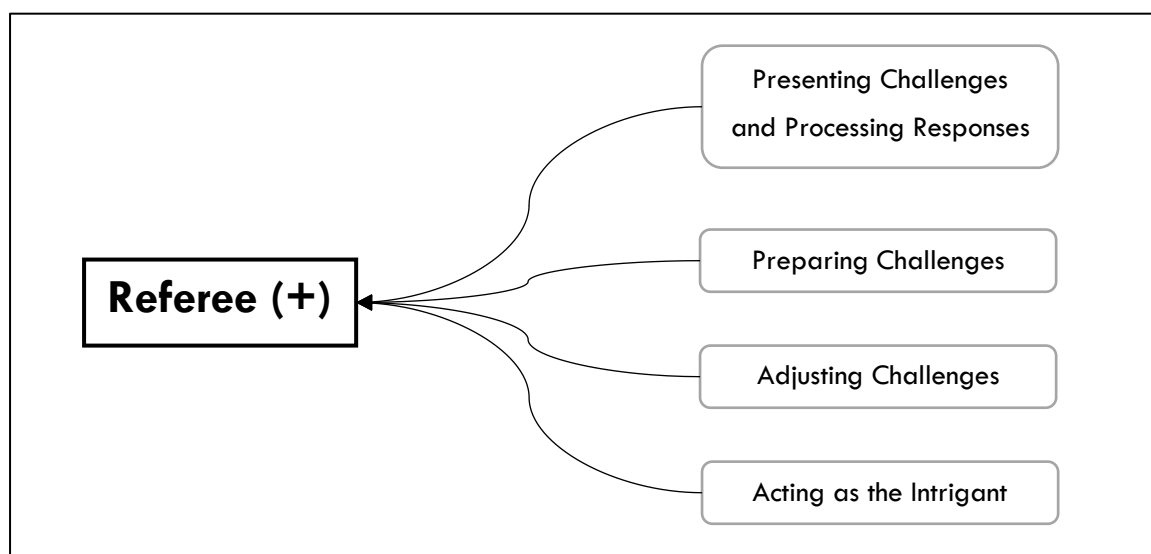## Summary: Gamemaster as Referee (+)

Figure 10 Diagram depicting the functions of the GM sub-role of Referee (+)

While the GM's origins are in the role of a referee, the previous chapters have shown that adherence to an RPG's rules is generally not a GM's primary concern, as they are usually more concerned with entertaining players and maintaining effective storytelling. The Referee (+) sub-role is supported by four functions (as depicted in Figure 10): Presenting Challenges and Processing Responses, Preparing Challenges, Adjusting Challenges, and Acting as the Intrigant. These functions are the third and final part of the list of all functions of the GM, which is the contribution to knowledge offered by this project, and which is summarised in Chapter 5.

The Referee (+) sub-role is primarily concerned with adjudication, described as using "sense of logic… to determine whether the rules make sense for a given situation… on a case-by-case basis", as opposed to strictly following the rules of a game system as presented (Cook et al. 2019: 412), with the focus on logic supporting the experiences of engrossment and immersion discussed in Chapter 1.

RPG system rules will generally relate to challenges that PCs are likely to encounter, with the process for determining when to implement them varying by system and circumstances (including storytelling considerations). Once a GM has decided to apply rules for a given situation, they must oversee application of the specific requirements of the system being played – checking that potentially complex processes are being correctly followed, and potentially taking responsibility to teach players the process, verify veracity, or similar. This can be a demanding process that a GM will need to be prepared for.

Once the outcome of a challenge has been processed, play resumes with (usually) the GM narrating the following fictional circumstances, providing story elements for the players to respond to via their

PCs. Again, approaches to this narration vary by style, circumstances, and so on, but the most important elements to communicate are: how the intended PC action succeeds or fails, if any complications arose from the attempt, and what the consequences of the attempt are (Alexander 2023: 32–3).

So that the players and their PCs have challenges to overcome, a GM will likely need to prepare these ahead of time, again varying by system, style, circumstances, and so on (authored adventures often delineate most potential challenges, for example). Some sources recommend that a GM design challenges to be roughly balanced with player/PC ability level (perhaps involving complex calculations) (Fine 2002: 105; Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 81–7), while others recommend that challenges should adhere to fictional circumstances before any sense of balance (perhaps prioritising consistency) (Cook et al. 2019: 435). A GM may wish to combine approaches, sometimes testing their players/PCs and sometimes prioritising a story-focused outcome (such as a very easy or very difficult challenge) to manage emotional temperament.

Even where challenges have been carefully prepared ahead of a session, a GM may need to make adjustments during play. Related to the phenomenon of flow (a pleasant experience had when a person engages in an appropriately challenging activity) (Csikszentmihalyi 2009), challenges that are too easy may bore players, and those that are too difficult may frustrate them (Fine 2002: 105). A GM should monitor perceived challenge level during play and consider altering rules or adjusting planned challenges to better provide enjoyment to their players.

There are parallels between the GM role and Aarseth's concept of the intrigant – the equivalent of the narrator, but in a game context, where the intrigant is the perceived architect of intrigue, arising from the text in play and scheming for successful development of intrigue with no motivation towards a particular outcome (Aarseth 1997: 114, 120–4). The perceived conflict between potential goals of the GM (e.g., maintaining balance, preventing system exploitation) and players (e.g., gaining rewards and power, succeeding at all challenges) leads to constant negotiation as the two forces steer the game to their own ends (Fine 2002: 85). This conflict mirrors the relationship between intrigant and intriguee, and the GM can use an understanding of this relationship for dramatic effect. For example, a GM may sometimes act as more direct opposition to the players to amplify challenge and antagonism, managing emotional temperament.

Chapter 5: Implications and Conclusions

This chapter summarises some implications of the investigation before arriving at the final conclusions of the project. The contribution to knowledge is best presented in the final section.

Preparation Versus Live Management of Play

As discussed in the Chapter 1 section titled The Two Periods, it is generally considered that a GM performs their functions during two distinct periods – uptime and downtime. Even though this is an oversimplification due to considerations that complicate this binary, we can generally consider the labour of a GM to be occurring either outside of a play session (generally performing preparation) or during a play session (live management of play). Given concerns about the burdens on the GM due to the additional work required (Zagal 2019), we might consider where a GM might focus their efforts for maximum positive impact on play.

While some functions described in this investigation more clearly align with one period than the other (for example, storylines and plots are usually authored outside of sessions), many cannot be precisely attributed to only one period (a GM will likely manipulate outcomes live but may make plans for where this could occur before a session). This investigation offers no clear answer about whether preparation or live management has more impact on the play experience, but it could form the groundwork for further research in this area, which could prove a fruitful pursuit.

The Functions of the Gamemaster, Applied to Videogames

The relevance of the concept of the GM to videogames has been the subject of various academic works, often with a focus on creating systems that can simulate some aspects of 'GMing' to better direct storytelling during play (Tychsen et al. 2009; Luong et al. 2017; Strugnell et al. 2018). Unterhuber's 'The Gamemaster-Approach to Game Studies' (2011) argues that the shared natures of RPGs and videogames in dealing in both games and stories allows the efficient application of the principles of GMing to the study of videogames, as the GM fundamentally deals in both games and stories. Therefore, there is potential for parts of this investigation to be of benefit to designers and developers of videogames, where implementing functions of the GM would be beneficial to their game. For clarity, this section is primarily concerned with highlighting potential further avenues of research in the videogames field.

The relevance of understanding the relationship between RPGs and videogames has also been covered in academic spaces. The emergence of RPGs is an important moment that strongly relates to the history of the modern videogame. Aarseth (1997: 98) states that an RPG (described as "the *Dungeons and Dragons* genre") "might be regarded as an **oral** cybertext" [emphasis mine], where

"oral" refers to the primary method of interaction being the conversation between the GM and players. A cybertext is defined as a text (an object with the primary function of relaying "verbal information", fitting the common comparisons and alignments between RPGs and conversations or dialogue) producing verbal structures for aesthetic effect but with an additional, paraverbal dimension – the "reader" (or player) must expend nontrivial effort in order to traverse the text due to its mechanical organisation (Aarseth 1997: 1–3, 62). Because the "cybertext model does not allow for users to directly affect the story or storyworld, only to uncover it" (Cover 2010: 23), this comparison is not entirely accurate. However, in order to theoretically distribute the cybertext model onto an RPG, at least one player and the GM (if used) must be involved, with access to the system and setting – the potential text (story) exists within at least the player, GM and setting, and the system is required to construct a traversal through the text and game world (where the text is the story being constructed and the game world is the setting, in motion). Cover (2010) describes both RPGs and gamebooks (books with branching stories in which the reader makes choices to define the outcome) as "Interactive Narrative" (perhaps a more appropriate description of an RPG than cybertext), with both genres emerging roughly simultaneously in the 1970s. Cover states that gamebooks evidently seem to predate RPGs (with *Consider the Consequences!* (Webster and Hopkins 1930) being a notable early example), but that "subsequent iterations of the genre were highly influenced" by the success of *Dungeons & Dragons* (2010: 24), implying that the development of branching stories was heavily influenced by the RPG genre.

Indeed, early text-based adventure videogames were directly influenced by early RPGs (Cover 2010: 27–8), with notable titles such as *Colossal Cave Adventure* (Crowther 1976) and *Zork* (Anderson et al. 1977) acknowledging *Dungeons & Dragons* as direct inspiration (Cover 2010: 27; Rignall 2015; Adams n.d.). With Cover's interactive narrative descriptor also applying to videogames, and with the development of videogames following that of the RPG and gamebook, the implication is that the development of videogames was heavily influenced by the RPG and gamebook genres.

With GMs holding such a core position in the structure of the RPG, it follows that the concept of the GM also influenced the development of videogames. Arguably, the system of a videogame inherently performs some of the functions of a GM – it at least enforces the rules of the game on the player (like the referee), controls any NPCs and decides upon the Credibility of any attempted actions. As such, understanding the functions of the GM could improve the experiences of branching narratives in videogames, by considering how relevant functions might apply to videogame storytelling.

The format of this section mirrors the format of relevant sections of the previous chapters – the relevant (sub-)roles and functions are revisited and their applications to videogames are discussed. As such, we begin with the primary role – Entertainer.

Entertainer (Videogames)

Like RPGs, videogames should arguably ideally always be as entertaining as possible. It should therefore follow that any other aspect of videogames should be in service of entertainment. Videogames with a focus on stories can access the same pleasures as RPGs, so they may also aim to facilitate engrossment, as Fine describes the experience (2002: 233–4).

Engrossment and Videogames

Videogames don't generally feature a human GM who must make logical rulings on-the-fly, lessening the application of this function to their experiences. However, similar threats to engrossment can arise when game events contradict established logic or lead to inconsistencies. A relatively common occurrence is when the logic of the fictional world is presented differently between, for example, gameplay sections and cutscenes. An example of this is *Halo 3* (Bungie 2007), a videogame in which the opening cutscene shows the main character surviving a fall to the ground from the upper atmosphere, yet which also features levels where the character can be killed by falling much smaller distances, such as from cliffs.

A common solution to this issue in videogames is in ensuring that consistent rules apply for interaction with the world throughout almost the entire experience – this is especially common in games/genres that focus on simulation. For example, videogames like *Dishonored* (Arkane Studios 2012) offer a player a great deal of agency and freedom in how they accomplish their tasks – the main character can use combat, traversal, magic, environmental manipulation and more, and they can choose to kill or spare NPCs largely however they wish. They can use these tools to complete their goals in ways that are guided by the developers of the game (clear routes through spaces, etc.), or they can combine them in unexpected ways to accomplish the same ends. A potential issue here is that player freedom can lead to situations that can hinder the realism of the setting – for example, in a session where a player kills many guards and leaves them in a pile to be discovered, it feels unusual to see other guards ultimately not take severe steps to halt the main character's progress.

Example: Dwarf Fortress

Dwarf Fortress (Adams and Adams 2006) is a videogame which features incredibly deep and intricate simulation of its fictional world. A player's first contact with *Dwarf Fortress* is likely to be through generating a fictional world that play can occur in – this operation must be completed before playing the game's various modes. In doing this, the player witnesses the software running through its

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processes for thorough world creation, highlighting the rigorous generation and simulation of geography, history, culture, civilisation, etc., across centuries of fictional time. The player watches the game's logic play out to create the world, which helps "sell" it to them. This transparency of the system's complexity reinforces it – it convinces the player that the world is highly simulated and therefore very logical.

Procedural Generation

Procedural generation of videogame content can be used to generate videogame elements that appear unpredictable to players, but there are risks associated with the algorithms producing content that can be perceived as repetitive or non-novel (Seidel et al. 2019).

Videogames like *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios 2011) and *Civilization V* (Firaxis Games 2010) allow the player to guide the procedural generation of their simulated spaces by prompting them to set some parameters for the algorithms – for example, a player may wish to play a game of *Civilization V* in a simulated world with one large continent, or almost completely arid terrain. Taking this step to engage the player in the content generation can provide them with a sense of ownership of the setting, which can increase engrossment as they feel more familiar with the setting, helping to establish their expectations and access their sense of realism. This phenomenon is discussed with regards to *Apocalypse World* in the section titled Teaching and Onboarding Players (also see GMPD, pages 11 and 16) and has been experienced while playing other RPGs that involve the players in creation of the setting, such as *Dungeon World* (LaTorra and Koebel 2012).

Relatedly, we could consider randomised generation of game elements, such as random equipment loot drops in *Diablo IV* (Blizzard Entertainment 2023), as a form of procedural generation. These elements of videogames can tap into Caillois' concept of "alea" (2001: 17–9) – games of chance, in which winning can give a player the sensation of being favoured by fate. Through the accompanying practice research, this pleasurable play with randomisation has been repeatedly observed in players. A moment during a *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* (Pramas 2005) campaign (briefly described in the GMPD, page 302) saw a player exclaim with joy when successfully rolling a die value that granted them an item that they greatly desired. Another player particularly enjoys randomly generating their characters using dice rolls, to see what "fate" grants them, and then enjoys constructing a backstory around the results (briefly discussed in the GMPD, pages 74-5).

A level of balance seems to be key, however. It has been observed that too much randomness, or randomness in the wrong places, can grate on the players, or leave them stuck with game elements that they don't enjoy or that don't fit with other aspects of the game:

Many random generators are available online, akin to random tables used in some RPG systems. They can be used to rapidly generate almost any game content, if you can find the right one, including names and other character details, encounters, items, locations, etc. I have occasionally found them useful, but I think I tend to prefer adlibbing or trying to create something that resonates with established details of a game, when I'm called to bring in a new element. (GMPD, page 305).

Permanent Consequences in Videogames

Many videogames will allow the player to go back on choices and replay sequences in ways that disrupt the realism of the setting – the traditional loop of having a main character die during an attempt to complete a level, before immediately retrying with no fictional context. Some games that emphasize having a persistent world, such as *Minecraft*, will permanently represent the players' changes to the landscape (etc.), even through character deaths and repeated attempts at overcoming challenges.

Games that feature "legacy" mechanics, where the results of a playthrough of the game can impact the game state and setting for future plays, can address this issue by representing permanent changes and consequences while allowing for repeated play of game sequences. The videogame *Rogue Legacy* (Cellar Door Games 2014) has the player take on the roles of individual descendants of a shared bloodline, each of which must attempt to defeat all enemies within a large dungeon. When one character inevitably dies in their attempt, the player resumes play as a member of the next generation of the family, with the same goal, though the player can spend some acquired resources each time to improve the family's facilities, thus making further attempts easier. This frames the repeated failed attempts at overcoming the dungeon as a generational struggle, where the heroic family progresses in their abilities each time. This aids with engrossment by contextualising an element that could harm realism, and also establishing a clear logic.

Identification and Videogames

Identification in videogames has the same requirements and considerations discussed in Chapter 1.

Example: Concrete Genie

The videogame *Concrete Genie* (PixelOpus 2019) has players create allied characters in a somewhat freeform manner, by drawing their shape and adding visual details. The player travels with these characters through the course of the game, but towards the end they become enemies. Because the player created and spent time with these characters, their identification had grown. This was then turned against them to maximise the impact of a twist in the story.

Videogames like *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* (Firaxis Games 2012) give players control of a group of customisable characters that must be managed as they are sent out on repeated dangerous combat missions. In these games, the characters progress individually, gaining skills and further customisability, but they can also be permanently injured or killed ('permadeath', as opposed to the die-and-retry paradigm of other videogames), reducing their abilities or removing them from play. A player will grow to identify with the characters more and more as they customise and spend time with them, which will increase the potential for impact if permanent consequences are inflicted on the characters. This impact, while having the potential for negative results for the player (grief, frustration), can be a powerful motivator for trying to keep characters safe, or emphasizing engrossment in the world.

Catering to Players of Videogames

As discussed, an effective way to best entertain players is to cater to their needs and desires. This is true of videogames as much as RPGs. Bored and unsatisfied players will cease playing in a similar manner.

Videogame Player Types

As with RPGs, one method of catering to players is via understanding player typology and using this information to tailor the game to their preferences.

Bartle (1996) identifies four distinct player types for Multi-User Dungeons – a genre of text-based, online, multiplayer RPGs. These are Achievers, focused on points-gathering and strengthening their PCs; Explorers, focused on testing the workings and limitations of the game's rules and systems; Socialisers, focused on interacting with and observing other players; and Killers, focused on imposing themselves on other players, for good or ill. These types lie in four quadrants dictated by two axes – acting-interacting and players-world (these are often attributed to the fours suits of a deck of playing cards – game attributes in themselves). Already, the synergies with the RPG player types are apparent – Bartle's Achievers resemble Laws' Power Gamers, for example – though gaps are apparent, too – Bartle's types do not overtly account for an Edwards-style Narrativist mode of play, though we could consider that some Explorers may like to test the workings of the narrative.

Yee (2005) identifies three main components, with ten total subcomponents, of motivation for the players of Massively Multiplayer Online RPGs. These are Achievement, Social and Immersion. Again, comparisons to RPG player types are apparent, with aspects of Laws' and Edwards' structures reflected in Yee's subcomponents.

A videogame may cater to a player's type in a similar manner to a GM:

- By allowing multiple methods of character generation to allow for multiple methods of initial character identification.

- By creating/customising game content for a player in response to observations about their playstyle and interests. This would likely have to be performed via artificial intelligence systems or procedural content generation.

- By offering additional opportunities for engagement with game content outside of play sessions. This could be with external narrative content, companion apps/games, social media, and similar.

Some existing videogames attempt to automatically tailor their experience to perceived or assumed preferences or aspects of their players: The AI Director of *Left 4 Dead* (Valve South 2008) adjusts game events to provide compelling pacing based on a live estimate of the player's experience of tension (Booth 2009). The AI Storyteller of *RimWorld* (Ludeon Studios 2013) matches game events to the player's nominated storytelling style (Ludeon Studios and Sylvester 2018). The Nemesis System of *Middle-earth: Shadow of War* (Monolith Productions 2017) attaches story significance and challenge during play to NPCs that the player seems to prefer.

Example: *SmackDown! 2*

The videogame *WWF SmackDown! 2: Know Your Role* (Yuke's 2000) features a main gameplay mode (season mode) which procedurally generates narrative elements to contextualise and determine the wrestling matches that comprise the core gameplay. These narrative elements are usually presented as cutscenes between matches, used to reveal narrative developments and present the ongoing activity in a format like the TV shows on which the game is based. These cutscenes are of predetermined structure, but the theme and characters involved are chosen by the game in response to the changing action of the matches and the choices of the players.

The player may create (and edit) characters, as well as relationships between them, all of which is factored into the stories that the system generates. These procedurally generated cutscenes and narratives are presented alongside fixed narrative events, set to reveal a central story over the first section of the game.

This is an example of a game system presenting a main story thread around its core gameplay, while still catering to player choice and preference by factoring these into story elements as they are presented.

While a GM is arguably more able to assess player engagement during play than current videogame technology, there is the potential for some of these principles to be applied to videogames.

An experiment run as part of the practice research (simple interactive stories that initially run poorly by ignoring player choices to present a rigidly "authored" plot, before presenting an alternative version that caters better to the player – see GMPD, pages 303-4) suggests that systems could prioritise player choice over authorial intent, where possible, to better cater to players. Given that players make decisions based on information that is revealed by the GM (Fine 2002: 117), and that they might misinterpret this information (Strugnell et al. 2018: 432, 435), a system could alter the structure of an ongoing story to match the player's interpretation. For example, if clues ambiguously suggest several solutions to a puzzle/challenge, the system could arrange itself such that the answer that the player chooses is the correct one.

The same experiment suggests that systems could consider choices made during character creation to be indications of a player's preferences. If a player chooses to play a character that is proficient at social challenges rather than physical combat, then a system could arrange upcoming story elements to provide more important social challenges over combat ones.

Managing Player Intervention

Systems that allow players to intervene, in the form of overruling the outcomes of the standard rules at times, and similar, may aid engrossment and would be catering to players. Powerful abilities in any system may be considered a form of player intervention, as they allow for the exercising of Credibility. Some care may need to be taken though, as there is the potential for player intervention to harm some game pleasures relating to other players' desires and story cohesion (etc.).

Storyteller (Videogames)

As with other long-established fields of study, storytelling in videogames is a topic of much coverage and discussion. This investigation has no intention of digging into the field too deeply but is concerned with applying the principles discussed with relation to RPGs, above. As such, videogames can likewise be considered to be facilitating storytelling in manners similar to GMs, with much variability, and so on.

Considering Traditional Storytelling in Videogames

The core considerations of traditional storytelling are essentially the same as for RPGs and can be similarly applied to videogames.

Paradise Killer (Kaizen Game Works 2020) strongly utilises the curiosity triggers to engage its players. The story opens with an unexpected change to the life of the protagonist, as they are summoned from an extended imprisonment to solve a murder. The circumstances of the murder mystery certainly present in incomplete information set, but the setting and past of the protagonist are also immediately strange, with many details left initially unexplained, presenting further incomplete information sets. The story also presents the murder as a puzzle to be solved, with progression allowing the player to anticipate the resolution without truly knowing it, there are twists that violate expectations to trigger searches or explanations, and the investigation heavily features attempts to uncover information possessed by other characters.

Understanding Interactive Videogame Stories

Interactivity for storytelling takes multiple approaches, with two key concepts being ergodic traversal of a text (Aarseth 1997: 1, 5, cited in Cover 2010: 22) and productive interactivity (Ryan 2003: 205, cited in Cover 2010: 22) – interactive storytelling is built of these two approaches. Productive interactivity can begin during character creation or other early actions in a videogame, where the player chooses story elements that can later be expanded upon.

Games and stories work differently and follow different rules, and the two can clash, but many of the GM's functions can help bridge the gap between the two. A videogame could negotiate between story and rules – balancing story entertainment with game entertainment – like a GM. This could be by providing many dramatic choices with closely balanced outcomes that are still interesting (Crawford 2012: 63), and by only having the rules interrupt fictional actions where failure would be interesting and/or meaningful (2023: 28–9). However, the uncertainty of an action's outcome can, at times, be interesting in itself (Cook et al. 2019: 414), especially in tense moments.

Videogames that are story-based (that rely more heavily on embedded narrative than others) have been shown to generate significantly higher identification between the player and their character, as well as more presence, positivity, enjoyment and physiological arousal (Schneider et al. 2004). A consistent correlation has also been shown between experiences of engagement and the use of embedded narrative in videogames (Moser and Fang 2015). Branching narrative structures in videogames have been shown to lead to improved flow experience and enjoyment (when compared to linear structures), with the number of decisions augmenting enjoyment (Moser and Fang 2015).
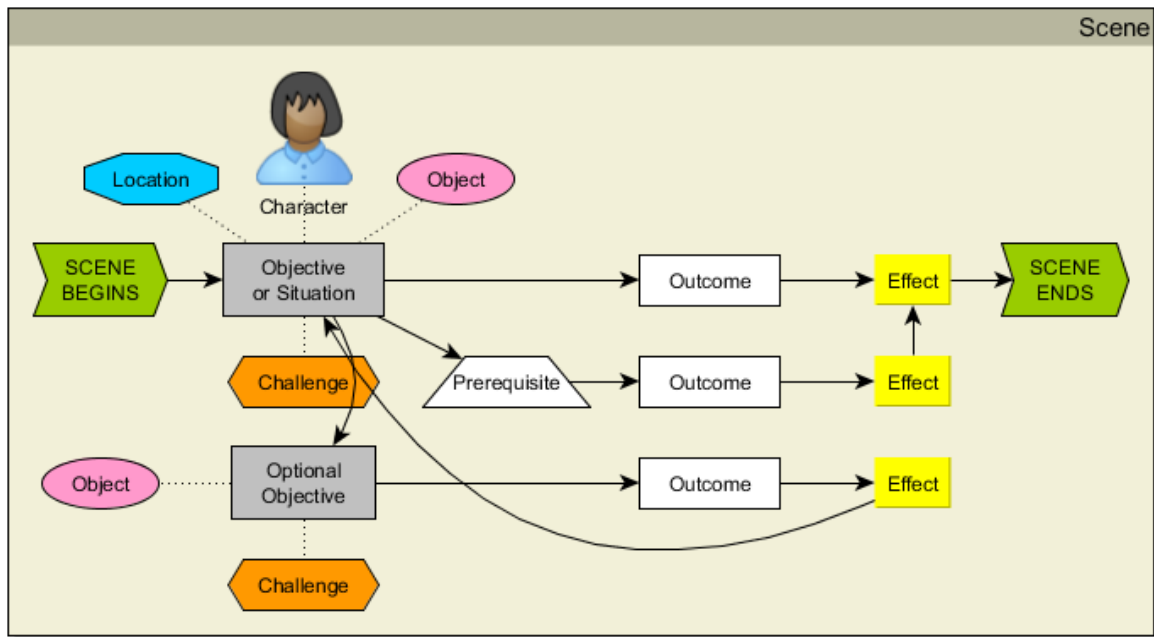
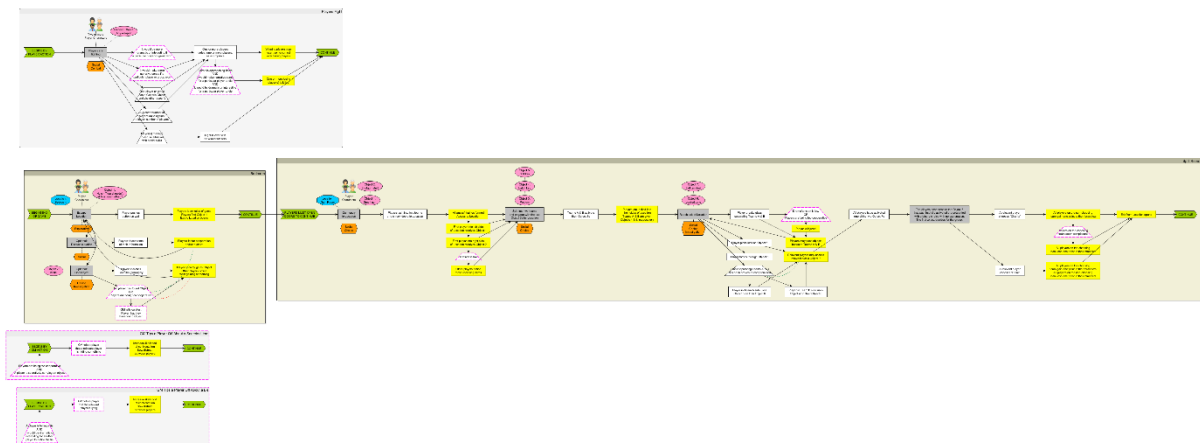*Figure 11 Game Narrative Structure Diagram Key (Wilbraham 2024: 308)*

Figure 12 Diagram of the Narrative Structure of some elements of Nil Escape (Wilbraham 2024:312)

Experiments as part of the practice research revealed the underlying branching structure of even seemingly complex RPG play (see the GMPD, pages 307-13). Figure 11 was originally devised to test mapping out videogame narrative structures, leading to diagramming an early section of *Dragon's Dogma* (Capcom 2012) – the diagram and reflections for which can be found on page 309 of the GMPD. It was later discovered that the same structure can be used to chart out the 'Basic Moves' of *Apocalypse World* and therefore similarly plot out a session of play, as covered on pages 309-12 of the GMPD. Finally, it was also used to chart out sections of 'Nil Escape' play, which is strongly driven by PC interactions, including indicators of GM decision-making relating to PC/player group dynamics, rather than purely fictional content such as the status of objects or NPCs within the world (see Figure 12 and GMPD, page 312). Laying out the structure of interactive stories in this way allows the

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planning of the story content, and perhaps highlights story elements in a way that reveals which could be altered in order to cater to players – for example, if an upcoming scene requires that an objective be related to an object or character, perhaps that object or character could be one that a PC has taken particular interest in, if other considerations allow. A related example is discussed on page 288 of the GMPD – while playing the 'Demons Below' campaign, a player expressed interest in playing in a forest setting, so the GM altered the location of the upcoming scenes to take place in a forest rather than a mountainous region, with few other required changes.

Making Adjustments to Story and Plot in Videogames

When videogame players attempt to direct a story, the systems can interfere where required, like a GM. This is fairly commonly seen in videogames that have invisible walls (or similar features) in their virtual spaces that prevent the player characters from travelling to places that are unrelated to the intended story. However, when player misunderstandings arise about fictional situations, there is the potential for videogames to concede to player assertions about their fictional status, like a GM might, perhaps by altering upcoming story elements. If this is not possible, the above techniques relating to narration and representation can be used to redirect player attention (Strugnell et al. 2018: 435).

The process is different to that of a GM, but it is important for videogames to record any changes or additions to story elements so that they can be factored into future scenarios. The incorporation of external factors to the game environment is likely to be less of a factor for videogames, but it may be beneficial to consider how they will handle occurrences like this, such as players dropping out in the middle of a multiplayer game, unexpected shutdown, and so on.

Manipulating Outcomes in Videogames

Similar to a GM, it may be beneficial for videogames to break the underlying game rules in service of enjoyable story outcomes. If the story would progress in an unenjoyable direction due to the rules, then it may be better to overlook them at that point (Fine 2002: 91, 102). This can be easier to accomplish when the true workings of the system are hidden from the player, like a GM secretly rolling dice to control their outcomes (Fine 2002: 102–3).

One way to mitigate the impact of unwanted rulings is to only allow the rules to intervene when any outcome would be interesting. A videogame, where appropriate, could allow automatic player success where this would be beneficial for the story. Frustrating player failures may, to some degree, be blamed on the videogame, much like how a GM may be held responsible for the outcome of any dice roll simply because they allowed it to happen.

As mentioned earlier, the rules alone can, at times, produce excitement from the uncertainty of outcomes that is a key trait of interactive storytelling, so this manipulation must be balanced with allowing the enjoyment of uncertainty.

Creating Settings and Scenarios for Videogames

Many of the considerations here are the same for videogames as RPGs, with some considerations listed below:

- A videogame must provide a fictional setting as well as scenarios within that setting to provide motivation for play. Though scenarios may be absent where the videogame intends to simply provide a world where the player decides on their own goals, sometimes referred to as "sandbox" games.
- A videogame may provide authored storylines or plots to be played through, but these should ideally be designed such that player choices and gameplay determine the story's direction (Cook et al. 2019: 435), perhaps by utilising a branching narrative structure.
    - Encounters can be considered to be the units of the story (Cook et al. 2019: 434), or the nodes of the branching plot. These could be the levels of a videogame, or smaller units within levels, such as quests, set pieces, and so on.
    - If the videogame is set in an established fictional world, players may bring expectations about that world to the game that could lead to some negative reactions if the representation of that world does not match what they expect.

Referee (+) (Videogames)

The Referee (+) sub-role of the GM is perhaps the most directly applicable to videogames, given their format as programmed software. A major part of a videogame's function is concerned with constant implementation of the rules of the simulation and any games that are in play within it. Where a GM can apply logic to adjudicate on where the rules make sense on a case-by-case basis (Cook et al. 2019: 412), this is something that videogames are currently less capable of. However, many of the functions of the Referee (+) role may be applied to videogames as discussed in Chapter 4.

Adjusting Challenges in Videogames

It may be that the challenges in a videogame are experienced by the player as easier or harder than intended. It may be beneficial to consider allowing systems of the videogame to intervene in challenges in order to align play with the intended experience, partly to access the enjoyment of the flow state (Csikszentmihalyi 2009), but also partly to match intended emotional temperament as

well as other factors. Again, the standard rules of the game may be overlooked to leverage these effects.

Dynamic Difficulty Adjustment

Dynamic difficulty adjustment is one method by which videogames can access the GM function of adjusting challenges during play. The concept has been well-studied and discussed in academia, and the specifics are not especially relevant for the purposes of this investigation, but the principle is that a videogame's systems are modulated over the course of a play session to respond to a player's abilities, to avoid the boredom/frustration that accompanies difficulty that is too low/high (Hunicke 2005: 429).

Example: *Left 4 Dead*

The AI Director system of *Left 4 Dead* (Valve South 2008) is an example of live challenge adjustment in a videogame that is in service of storytelling and emotional temperament. This system estimates the players' experience of tension based on their current game state (health, resources) and proximity to enemies and beneficial items. It then adjusts game events to alter the pacing of the experience in order to attempt to fit player tension to a satisfying arc – it does this by releasing more enemies towards the players and withholding beneficial items to increase tension, before giving them a period of reprieve with fewer enemies and more items, and so on (Booth 2009).

Acting as the Intrigant in Videogames

Videogames may benefit from considering the concept of the intrigant (Aarseth 1997: 114) – the representation of the intrigue being inflicted on the player. Personifying (some of) the game's systems can provide a target for the player's reactions to the system of rules being applied. It may be that some aspect of the videogame can "play up" antagonism and act in more direct opposition to the player at times where this would suit the intended emotional temperament, where generally it would likely be beneficial for most of the game's systems to not attract this negative reaction.

Example: *RimWorld*

RimWorld (Ludeon Studios 2013) features an element named the "AI Storyteller", which is one of the first elements that a player is introduced to as they begin a play session. The player is prompted to choose their preferred play style, as represented by various AI Storyteller characters. These determine the procedural generation systems that produce events for the players to respond to, including event difficulty, frequency, theme, and so on. By personifying these packages of settings that are effectively challenge adjustments, the game makes its intrigant clear.

Conclusion – The Functions of the Gamemaster

As this investigation has shown, a GM's role is comprised of myriad functions that they perform as needed. The primary goal is to ensure that all participants are being entertained as best as possible, but the methods by which this is achieved will vary greatly based on the system, group, current needs of the game, and so on. Many of the functions also overlap – for example, the adjustment of challenges will often be enacted in service of storytelling techniques, which are sometimes in service of catering to the players, and so on. But ultimately, there is a rough hierarchy in that the GM is Entertainer first, while Storyteller and Referee (+) are subservient to that role. Often, the Referee (+) role is subservient to the Storyteller role also (as reflected in its shorter chapter, as many of the functions stem from earlier discussions), but this is not always the case.

This investigation has provided the most comprehensive overview of a GM's role in academic texts, using an innovative practice-based approach. All functions that a GM performs have been investigated, derived and discussed. This holistic and comprehensive breakdown of the GM's role into its constituent sub-roles and functions is the contribution to knowledge offered by this project. While the previous chapters and their summaries offer more detail around the breakdown of their sub-roles and functions, the overall breakdown is summarised below, as the conclusion of this thesis:

RPGs, with their dual history in games and literature (Cover 2010: 8–9), tend to require a participant to take on the role of the GM, akin to a referee and storyteller, to control the pace and direction of the narrative and mesh the story with the players' actions (Laws 2002; Strugnell et al. 2018: 431). The GM is generally required to engage in significant labour to allow a group of participants to play (Zagal 2019), though the role and functions will vary by RPG systems. The GM is generally accepted to take on a position of control and leadership, but play will only continue for as long as the players agree to keep playing (because they remain satisfied by play, for example) (Fine 2002: 107; Tychsen et al. 2005: 215, 217).

It is common for the role and functions of the GM to be described as frameworks or lists of responsibilities, in both academia and RPG rulebooks and similar (Tychsen et al. 2005: 215–6; Wizards RPG Team 2014a: 4, and many others), though prior frameworks tend to prioritise certain aspects of a GM's role or seem complete when compared to others. Therefore, this investigation develops a complete breakdown of the GM's role.

The functions of the GM are commonly understood to be enacted within two distinct types of periods, in which they perform different responsibilities and functions: uptime (while the game is being played) and downtime (while the GM is preparing for the next play session). While this binary

is falsely simplistic due to edge cases and complex considerations such as bleed, it can be a useful lens through which a GM can divide their work into two types.
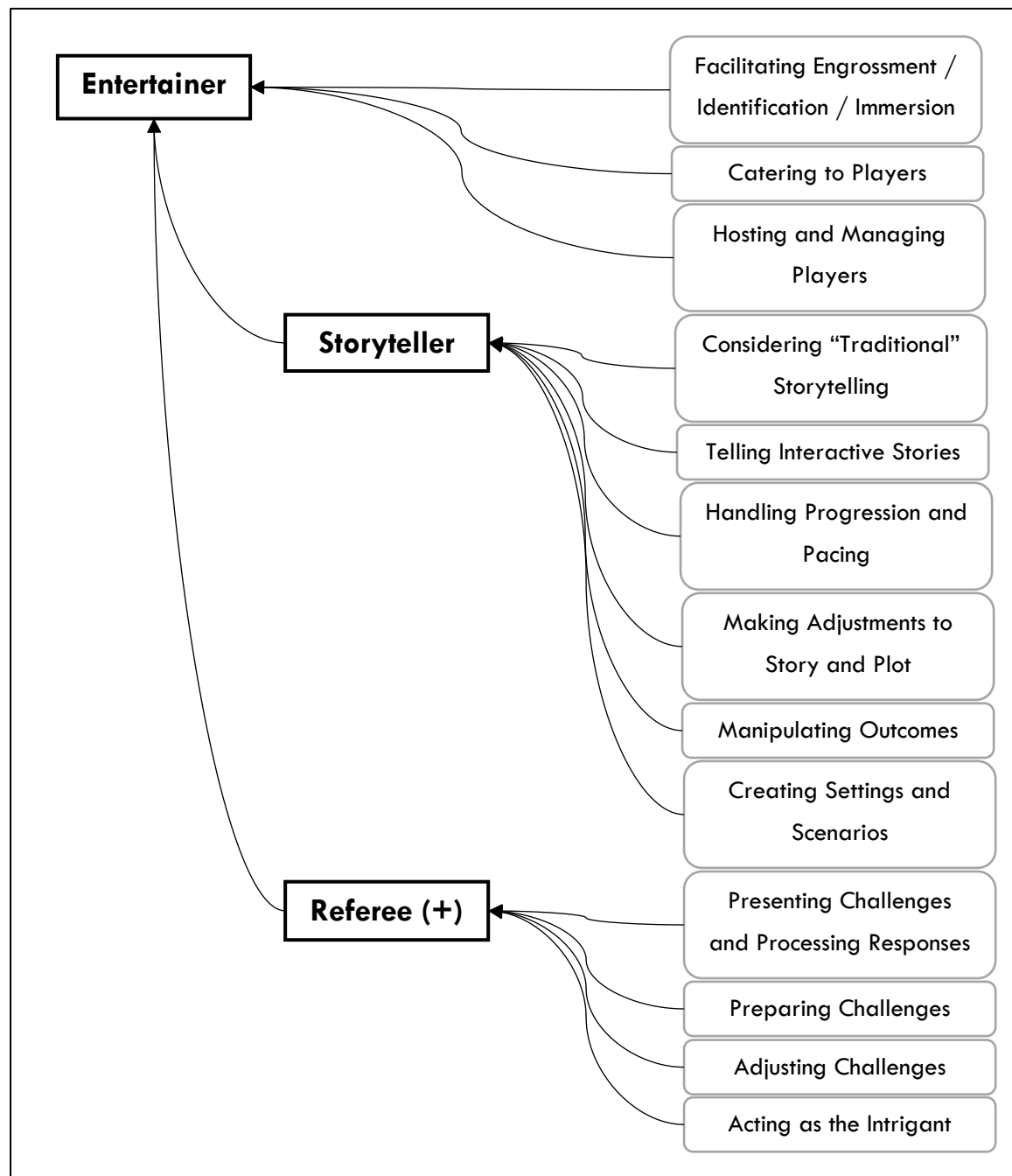

Figure 13 A depiction of the sub-roles and functions of the GM

An analysis of both academic and practice-focused sources, alongside the practice research logged in the accompanying GMPD, allows us to derive the three sub-roles of the GM: Entertainer, Storyteller, and Referee (+). It is established that the GM's primary sub-role is that of the Entertainer, given the importance of the GM entertaining all participants (Laws 2002: 3; McDowall and Law 2018: 258; Cook et al. 2019: 402; and many others). In service of this entertainment, the GM must act as

Storyteller and Referee (+), requiring functions relating to story and rules, respectively. Each of these three sub-roles is supported by functions that a GM must perform to enact the role. Of note is that the boundaries between these sub-roles and functions are not entirely solid (a GM might take actions in service of storytelling or adjudicating, for example, depending on circumstances). The complete deconstruction of the GM into three sub-roles and thirteen functions is depicted in Figure 13.

In their primary sub-role of Entertainer, a GM must perform three functions: Facilitating Engrossment/Identification/Immersion, Catering to Players, and Hosting and Managing Players.

Engrossment, identification, and immersion are three interrelated phenomena that are core to pleasurable RPG experiences. Engrossment can be primarily encouraged by a GM who maintains verisimilitude within the RPG's fictional world (Fine 2002: 80–2; Cook et al. 2019: 154–5, 413). Identification grows between a player and their PC as the player invests their PC with meaning, which can be aided by a GM who encourages "suturing player and character" (Voorhees and Klein 2024) through various methods. Identification may lead to bleed, an inherently neutral phenomenon in which psychological contents bleed-in or -out between player and PC that may have positive or negative impacts on a player (Bowman 2022), though a GM may be able to encourage positive outcomes of bleed by encouraging players to reflect on their play experiences (Bowman & Hugaas 2019, Kemper 2017, 2020, cited in Bowman 2022). Immersion is a complex and much-debated phenomenon that involves pleasurable "surrender of the mind to an imaginative world" (Murray 1997: 110). This may be encouraged by supporting the related phenomena of engrossment (because a sense of simulation of place is important (Murray 1997: 98–9)) and identification (because empathy with their PC may cause a player to more vividly experience the RPG's world).

To cater to their players, a GM may consider attempting to estimate their desires and preferences via player typology (despite criticisms of the concept). While it is acknowledged that most people will not perfectly match one player type, they can be useful shorthand for sets of interests and desires that a GM can aim to satisfy (Blacow 1980; Edwards 2001; Laws 2002: 6; *Different Kinds of Players* 2016). A GM may also attempt to estimate player engagement with aspects of the game to adjust their efforts to content that the players are engaging with. Any such attempts should be tempered with understanding of the needs of the group.

A GM is generally also called upon to host and manage their RPG group, establishing social rules, organising requirements for play, managing conflict, and so on. The use of safety tools such as Shaw and Bryant-Monk's *TTRPG Safety Toolkit* (2024) can be a great boon to these functions. Part of these GM duties usually involves teaching and onboarding their players – both explaining the rules of the

game and the themes, genre, setting, and so on. A GM may use "session zero" to "establish the basics of the setting in which your adventures will take place, along with the themes you want to explore and the heroes you will portray" (Galletto 2023: 145), which also makes a good opportunity to handle safety and accessibility concerns.

In their secondary sub-role of Storyteller, a GM must perform six functions: Considering "Traditional" Storytelling, Telling Interactive Stories, Handling Progression and Pacing, Making Adjustments to Story and Plot, Manipulating Outcomes, and Creating Settings and Scenarios.

Understanding traditional storytelling principles will enrich a GM's storytelling potential. Various guides exist to aid with traditional storytelling skills, but a GM will need to combine this understanding with a familiarity with the particulars of interactive storytelling. A constant challenge for the GM is the friction between interactivity and storytelling (Juul 1998; Murray 2005; Crawford 2012 and many others) – a GM must balance the needs of player agency and satisfying storytelling. A GM can use various techniques to resolve this, such as ensuring that the choices that the players make are always "dramatically significant" and "closely balanced" (Crawford 2012: 63), and that the GM only has the rules interrupt the fiction when any outcome of a roll (for example) would be interesting or meaningful (Alexander 2023: 28–9).

A GM needs to understand that their release of information guides their players' actions (Fine 2002: 117), and that this can be used to manage progression and pacing (which can also be controlled by switching between the various modes of play of the RPG system (Peterson 2012: 592)). Where players misinterpret GM information, a GM may wish to adjust their plans in favour of the misinterpretations to better satisfy the players. A GM may also consider manipulating outcomes where they would lead in an unenjoyable direction if left to chance, perhaps by fudging their rolls (though some sources disagree on this approach). When creating settings and scenarios, a GM should again consider player freedom versus satisfying storytelling – how these may be supported by the fictional world and circumstances.

In their other secondary sub-role of Referee (+), a GM must perform four functions: Presenting Challenges and Processing Responses, Preparing Challenges, Adjusting Challenges, and Acting as the Intrigant.

The rules of an RPG system generally focus on the types of challenges that PCs are likely to encounter, and the GM needs to decide when and how to apply these rules (considering circumstances such as storytelling needs and so on). When rules are applied, a GM is often called

upon to oversee the (potentially complex) process, perhaps teaching players. Once outcomes are calculated, the GM resumes narration, tailoring their style to the current play context.

A GM must usually also prepare required challenges ahead of sessions, varying by system, style, circumstances, and so on. They must consider whether to aim for balanced challenges, narrative focused challenges, or combinations of the two approaches, depending on various factors. Avoiding player boredom from challenges that are too easy, or frustration from challenges that are too difficult, is another important consideration (Fine 2002: 105) which may require a GM to make adjustments to their planned challenges during a session. A GM may also benefit from considering themselves as the architect of the intrigue of the game, like Aarseth's concept of the intrigant (1997: 114, 120–4). They can negotiate the conflict between the players' goals and the GM's goals to maximise experiences like tension or drama.

With this final summary of the three sub-roles and thirteen functions of the GM (supported by the greater detail contained in the previous chapters), the comprehensive breakdown of the GM's role is complete. While other implications of this project are discussed in the earlier sections of this chapter, this breakdown is to be considered the contribution to knowledge provided by this project.

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