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The Self-Reflexive Tabletop Role-Playing Game

ABSTRACT

Tabletop role-playing games combine performance, procedures, and improvisation to both tell stories and reflect on the nature of storytelling. This article discusses the three games *1,001 Nights* by Meguey Baker, *What Is a Role-Playing Game?* by Epidiah Ravachol, and *World Wide Wrestling* by Nathan D. Paoletta in terms of how their procedures of play and framing devices comment on the tabletop role-playing game medium. Taken together, these three “games on games” demonstrate the inherent tensions of player motivation, collective fiction creation, and selling a “performance” to one’s fellow players, and how RPG theory helps us to understand them.

KEYWORDS: *Analog games, Role-playing games, self-reflexivity, 1,001 Nights, World Wide Wrestling*

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary game studies frequently ignores analog (i.e., board, card, social, dice, tabletop and live-action role-playing) games in favor of video games (Torner, Trammell, Waldron, 2014). Yet the field does so at its own peril. TRPGs are formidable “simulation engines” in their own right (Dormans, 2006) and form the substratum of most modern video games (Barton, 2008; Peterson, 2012), including blockbuster titles such as *Mass Effect* (2007) and *Fallout 4* (2015). Affordances and constraints of video games have conversely impacted tabletop role-playing game (TRPG) design, such as *World of Warcraft’s* (2004) influence on 4th Edition *Dungeons and Dragons* (2008). Design principles and their ideological propositions cut across boundaries of gameplay. The below discussion of self-reflexivity in TRPGs thus has ramifications beyond just the small role-playing game theory community, offering a means of evaluating and interpreting the meaning of games as texts within broader social frameworks of reference. This article constitutes a reading of three indie TRPG games – *1,001 Nights* (2006) by Meguey Baker, *What Is a Role-Playing*

Game? (hereafter referred to *WIARPG*, 2013) by Epidiah Ravachol, and *World Wide Wrestling* (2014) by Nathan D. Paoletta – that deal with the very mechanisms of TRPGs themselves. Through the tale-within-a-tale oral aesthetics (*1,001 Nights*), improvisational satire (*WIARPG*) and performative fakery (*World Wide Wrestling*), the games demonstrate and critique how collaborative fiction is created, reinforced, and contested by groups of role-players gathered around a table. At stake is, as posited by Michael Hitchens and Anders Drachen (2009), the very definition of what a role-playing game actually is.

WHAT IS A ROLE-PLAYING GAME?

In 2013, TRPG designer Ravachol needed a business card, so he invented a new genre of TRPG: the nano-game. *Vast & Starlit* became a business-card-sized *Guardians of the Galaxy*-esque game about escaped space convicts on the run in a stolen starship. Narrative tension in the TRPG revolves around contested leadership and potential adventure in galactic exploration. The game, published on a piece of glossy, color-stock cardboard, sold for \$1 and sparked a burst of nano-game ideation and creation in global RPG communities. Then, inspired by years of responding to complaints about his Jenga-based RPG *Dread*(2005) “not being a role-playing game”, Ravachol released *WIARPG*, a self-reflexive nano-game in a similar vein that articulates through *Gedankenspiel* game rules the following definition of an RPG:

It’s a game you play with friends in a social setting. ...

It’s an exploration of intriguing or fanciful scenarios. ...

It’s a chance to be someone you’re not. ...

It’s a celebration of sticky situations. ...

It’s collaborative daydreaming. ...

It’s exercise for your personal sense of drama. ...

It’s a way to trick ourselves into creating interesting things. ...

It’s something you’ve been doing all along. (Ravachol, 2013a).

Collective fiction creation is already a messy procedure, and the game itself is suitably gonzo: 3–5 players take on the roles of bank-robbers who have the perfect cover, for they are also astronauts scheduled to launch that day. One player is the leader of the bank robbery, a second the leader of the space mission, and yet another is an astro-robber with a pang of conscience and wants them to turn them-

selves in. The game creates a *farce*, a form of comedy that uses highly improbable situations and crude characters to answer the question “How are they going to pull this off?” The TRPG itself presents no answer. Ravachol’s minimalist rules not only produce a series of absurd and increasingly silly play scenarios in the course of an hour, but also correspond with a specific argument about *what role-playing games are*. Playing the game means a confrontation with game theory in the raw, particularly with respect to emergence and improvisation.

As Felan Parker (2015) has recently argued, TRPGs can themselves function as forms of criticism and reflection on other media. Yet as Ravachol’s example proves, TRPGs can also critique and reflect upon themselves.¹ The rules for the game remain inseparable from the philosophical propositions made by the game designer about the medium, which means by proxy that the play itself remains in dialog with each stated premise. Playing the game means acquiescing to a specific vision of TRPGs as a medium: a chaotic form of group entertainment that can cut right to the most intense moments of a given narrative. In the TRPG community, an informal theoretical concept circulates called the *pause-play effect*. Characters that exist on a character sheet prior to gameplay are as if “paused” on a video, frozen in time as objects of sheer potentiality until they actually become used in play, during which emergent properties such as player unpredictability, and dice-roll outcomes will inevitably (and drastically) determine this character’s fate in the narrative (Costikyan, 2013). In *WIARPG*, the time from creating one’s character to gameplay is simply too quick to promote TRPGs as anything other than a form of improvisation with extreme narrative stakes.

TRPGs use presentation and implementation of rules to adjust temporality and how we frame time (Torner, 2015). *WIARPG* uses its rules to put players in the middle of the action as quickly as possible, with “the action” already pre-framed by potentially irresponsible decisions they have made which are then integrated into the gameplay without problem. Did someone choose to bring a rocket launcher to the bank robbery? Excellent. Does the traitor choose to remain loyal to her friends after all? Then the players at the table can appreciate the moment-to-moment dramatic irony, just as the traitor player experiences the emotional conflict as a first person audience.² *WIARPG* offers not only a written statement of criticism and self-reflection on TRPGs, but also presumably enacts this statement through the emergent properties of play. The game uses *explicit self-reflexivity* to give groups of players both a window into designer-based TRPG theory as well as a couple of hours of dumb fun.

SELF-REFLEXIVITY

The question remains: what is self-reflexivity and how do we locate it in TRPG products? Rey Chow (2011) defines reflexivity in theater as “conscious form of staging, an intermedial event that exceeds the genre of drama” (p. 138). Exceeding the medium or genre in question renders it unfamiliar for certain intervals, allowing the viewers and/or participants a glimpse and commentary

1. Ravachol’s game prompted several other games as responses, including Vincent Baker’s recent *What If a Role-Playing Game* (2015).

2. The first person audience is a concept in role-playing aesthetics that dictates the centrality of players both watching RPG events unfold as as player well as participating with and “feeling” them as a character (Stenros, 2010).

on its inner workings. A film such as *Contempt* (*Le Mépris*, 1963), for example, opens with a still shot of a camera on tracks sliding toward the camera, making conspicuous the process of the very film being watched. David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) makes conspicuous the processes and outcomes of literary storytelling by watching the influence of various texts as they impact disparate eras in the novel. In theater, Bertolt Brecht (1964) is held up as the standard-bearer for intellectual-political self-reflexivity. His *Verfremdungseffekt* [alienation effect] techniques, such as interrupting the action with song commentary or showcasing patchwork sets that call attention to themselves as sets, expose the inner workings of the theater medium itself. After all, the power of theater to immerse and persuade its audience captivated Brecht: "One has to admire the theatre folk who, with so feeble a reflection of the real world, can move the feelings of their audience so much more strongly than does the world itself" (Brecht 1964, p. 187). Interestingly enough, semiotics scholar David Myers (2003) grapples again with a related question. Myers claims that games toy with human systems of signification through *mimicry* (p. 51).³ Mimicry means that the system presents a semblance of accomplishing some real world task – shooting a target, running, negotiating – but the sign system often points to the *system* itself, rather than to some real referent. In *WIARPG*, for example, the act of robbing a bank is *mimicked* in such a way as to point to the TRPG as a medium: player uncertainty about the traitor's course of action and the high potential for any given character screwing up an aspect of the mission mean that the operant processes of the TRPG *themselves* are the main engine of suspense. The astrorobbers are only dangerous and volatile in the diegesis because RPG play is inherently characterized as "sticky" and chaotic.

As a new performing art (Mackay, 2001), TRPGs contain notable instances of design in which the mechanisms of the medium itself – and its corresponding capacity to move its organizers and participants – stand in the foreground. We can learn to recognize and interpret these instances. Furthermore, self-reflexivity in this medium resembles the self-reflexive video game in its having "no winning conditions, ... [being] roughly executed, short-lived and deliberately annoying" (Gualeni, 2013). For example, *WIARPG* states that TRPGs permit the "exercise [of] your personal sense of drama" (Ravachol, 2013a), which then corresponds with deliberately presenting one's fellow players with fictional adversity and invoking the rules only when even more complications in the already chaotic astrorobber sequence of events are needed. Indeed, Brian Sutton-Smith (2006) would likely locate RPGs as straddling "performance play" (i.e., inhabiting a character for others) and "informal social play" (i.e., gossip, jokes, potlucks). According to Mackay (2001), TRPGs consist of "role-playing performances, extraperformative conversations, and character planning" (p. 126). These performances, including our act of calibrating them and persuading other players to accept and play off of them, can be thematized in a game's procedures and content. A self-reflexive TRPG is one that, in the writ-

3. Myers' concept of *mimicry* requires distinction from Caillois' (2001) famous concept of *mimicry*, which itself is comparable to role-playing. Whereas Caillois speaks of *mimesis* — playing a pretend version of a real thing — Myers' definition talks of systems copying the function and outcomes of other systems, with play as an emergent property thereof.

ten text or play-as-text, renders conscious and unfamiliar these performances and the mechanisms that produce them. They expose the machinery, whilst keeping it running.

For game studies, this study reaffirms the importance of game ontology (Zagal, et al., 2007), which seeks “... generalizations across [a] range of concrete design choices as embodied in specific games” (p. 22). Such dimensions include “interface, rules, goals, entities, and entity manipulation” (p. 25). For TRPGs, *interfaces* include the actual table, dice, information sheets, and players themselves. *Rules* include the systems governing play. *Goals* include any player motivation encouraged by the system and social circumstances: competition (gamism), creating believable imaginary people in imaginary worlds (simulationism), and spinning an engaging story (narrativism).⁴ *Entities* are the various diegetic and extradiegetic “facts” established in the narrated fiction: a sword does 2D8 damage; Phyllis is mad at Marshall and won’t let him into the house yet; Skeletor has a “Climb” skill. *Entity manipulation* involves agency over and conscious experimentation with these entities: I hit him with my sword, Marshall uses his predicament to make his escape, Skeletor takes a penalty to climb Snake Mountain in the rain. Self-reflexive TRPGs accomplish a commentary on both all these elements, as well as on the hierarchy itself.

WIARPG comments on the TRPG ontology by explicitly directing the “system” away from the tiny business card toward the players themselves, such that all present are cognizant that it is their creative heavy-lifting that brings the game to life. The game argues that the moving parts (i.e., interfaces, rules, and goals) of TRPGs are neither opaque nor inaccessible to players, but rather hinge on the loaded statements players make around the entities as they manipulate them: “Can my brother be in the bank too? My brother’s now here” and “Let’s cut from the robbery to us in the cockpit of the spaceship”. *WIARPG* draws attention to the powers that players hold and that they need only the barest minimum of alibi to entertain themselves. But *1,001 Nights* and *World Wide Wrestling* draw attention to the fact that such shared imaginative space does not exist outside of pre-existing social relations, further highlighting and estranging the act of role-playing for the TRPG players.

STORYTELLING IN *1,001 NIGHTS*

The evolving cultural work *Arabian Nights* is a many-centuries-old collection of adapted, revised tales based around framing devices and embedded narratives. Night after night, as the story goes, Scheherazade tells the newly married Sultan tales with cliffhanger endings that continuously stay her execution at the hands of her husband. As a piece of self-reflexive fiction, the tale-within-a-tale structure allows us to see how humans shape tales to both comment on their society as well as to survive to tell more tales: storytellers cast themselves as wisefolk warning villagers, writers like Charles Dickens lengthen their stories based on financial models such as serial subscriptions, film directors use

4. The threefold model (GNS) remains a contested form of designer-centered theorizing based on the assumption that player motivations sculpt expectations of play and about the RPG system in question (Kim, 2008).

their current film as their résumé for their next film, and so forth. Meguey Baker's *1,001 Nights* systematizes these commentary and survival elements, as well as the more-than-passing-resemblance between a TRPG session and a group of storytellers. In *1,001 Nights*, a group of role-players play out a group of storytellers at the Sultan's Court who in turn act out their personal jealousies and desires through the simple tales they relate. The game's design and framing devices allow for even the most simple and/or incoherent tale-within-a-tale to become laden with interpersonal meaning, thematizing the inherent social borders and permeability of the "magic circle" of play (Stenros, 2012). It does so by folding player jealousies into the explicit rules of the game, as well as engaging with TRPG "stance theory".

1,001 Nights never calls itself a TRPG and, indeed, it does not have to. Instead, the rules tell us to "give each player a pencil and a character sheet ... [and] create your characters" (Baker, 2006, p. 9). Players sensually embed their characters in the diegesis by assigning them attributes related to the five senses – hearing, touch, sight, smell, and taste – as well as choosing Arabic and/or Persian names from a list and suitable clothing. But these superficial characteristics are then used as weapons against their characters. Each player must pick what her/his character envies about each other character, such as "Cassim his fine clothes" or "Kalima her innocence and youth" (p. 18), such that every character is in theory in a passive-aggressive antagonistic relationship with every other character at the table. Players complement these with Ambitions – overarching character goals that drive them onward – balanced with check boxes for their Safety and Freedom. Player-characters (PCs) tell stories in Court in which they cast each other as the stories' figures, but they may invoke the wrath of the Sultan and risk beheading (Safety), make progress toward their goals (Ambition), or seek a way out of this place (Freedom). In this fashion, the tale-within-a-tale enacts metaphors for the PCs' diegetic concerns. A story told by the licentious cook ostensibly about a Pied Piper of Hamelin figure may actually turn out to be about competing desires for the handmaiden whom he cannot woo. A Sinbad action-adventure tale might turn into a rags-to-riches slapstick when told by a poor character in envy of wealthier characters. The metaphorization of real material through fictional forms and the ambiguities that creates lies at the heart of this game.

David Jara has commented that the game "can be read (and played!) as a reflection on the practice of role-playing itself ... TRPGs can be understood as a practice where fiction is revealed as a mode of – and thus not in opposition to – real human interaction" (Jara, 2015, p. 7). The ambiguity of play identified by Brian Sutton-Smith (2006) interweaves with the very elements that make *1,001 Nights* "fun", namely identifying how humans meddle with and subvert the very stories they are using to make an argument or confirm a normative point. Jara sees "non-representational meaning" as an aesthetic feature of the TRPG, and *1,001 Nights* as one of the games that highlights it: that the fiction of TRPGs does not reflect reality on a one-to-one relationship, but

rather reflects upon, contrasts and compares its own mediation. Jara's framework divides the game world of *1,001 Nights* into "two narratological levels ... the diegetic ... being the palace court ... and the second, the "supernatural", hypo-diegetic, fairy-tale worlds of the stories told in court" (p. 4). TRPGs tend to foreground player motivation and choice as the main telos behind any in-game action. Even whilst playing in a meticulously designed dungeon or investigative mystery, players seem more likely to remember Ben's spontaneous haggling over a knife and rope, or the inopportune moment when he later failed a roll, than the overall plotline of the game itself. *1,001 Nights* thus invokes the metagame, or the external factors that affect regular game play. As Josh Call writes, most RPGs revolve around the "generation of a 'strategic map' that reveals how stakeholders can use their power to move from one scenario to another, and which moves are likely to occur in view of the stakeholders' preferences" (Call, 2012, p. 327). But while Call's "strategic map" invokes the importance of the metagame, *1,001 Nights* acknowledges and frames the metagame itself as a potential subject of commentary, distinguishing what we would see as self-reflexivity about the medium. Stance theory helps explain why this would be so pleasurable for a TRPG audience.

Kevin Hardwick (1995) coined stance theory on a thread with TRPG discussants on the `rec.games.frp.advocacy` (RGFA) newsgroup as a refinement of the "in-character vs. out-of-character" model to distinguish the player's own motivations from those of their character. The theory would later prove influential in the Forge theory forum discussions (Edwards, 2004; Boss, 2008), a body of work with which Ravachol, Baker, and Paoletta's games are in direct dialogue. Players assuming an *Actor stance* with their characters form decisions and actions "using only knowledge and perceptions that the character would have" (Edwards). Players assuming *Author stance* make character decisions based on what they as a player want, but "then retroactively 'motivates' the character to perform them" (Edwards). For example, a player who wants more action might have her character start an unnecessary fight, and then justify it as being something the character would do, given the circumstances. Without the retroactive motivation, players have assumed *Pawn stance* toward their character, akin to most computer RPGs: the character is simply a vehicle for fulfilling whatever the player wants without justification. Finally, *Director stance* means that players have the capability of framing one's environment, whole scenes, the kind and timing of events that happen to the character, and so on. The Director position in a TRPG provides one of the most powerful tools to reflect on the medium itself, as the player is able to frame their own interpretation of their performative acts into actual, diegetic TRPG performance. TRPG play often sees oscillation between Actor and Author stance, with Pawn stance perceived as poor play. However, *1,001 Nights* renders ambiguous all four stances, with each interrogating the other.

Metagaming and muddled stances infuse the very essence of *1,001 Nights* sessions. Courtiers are trapped in their milieu unless otherwise released, with all their sensory attributes, Envy, and Ambitions all transparent knowledge for all the other players (and possibly the PCs). One by one, each Courtier tells a story, assuming the role of the gamemaster (GM) and casting the rest of the PCs as characters in what amounts to a mini-session of a TRPG. As play unfolds, players get the chance to ask yes-or-no questions of the story such as “Will the blind man be hanged?” or “Will the duck find its mother?” and earn dice toward Safety, Ambition, and Freedom as these questions are resolved. The PCs-as-other-characters are more-or-less free to adopt whichever stance they see fit while trying to answer these questions within the scenario-within-a-scenario. Actor stance would delineate a character trying desperately to remain true to the character they have been provided, while Author and Pawn stance would, in this case, represent the PC steering their character toward their metagame goals and anxieties (Montola, Saitta and Stenros, 2015). In *1,001 Nights*, Author and Pawn stances actually represent “good” role-playing, insofar as the goal is to reveal one’s PC’s desires and envies through a character whom they are playing. But an engaging and enriching story can nevertheless be enhanced by someone assuming Actor stance, playing their character straight, and then applying the metaphor generated by the performance as metagame analysis on the PCs’ social conditions afterwards: perhaps the butcher hiding the Golden Fleece reflects how we keep close our darkest secrets, or perhaps the twilight of the fairytale sultanate reflects the *ennuifelt* by PCs unable to extract themselves from their milieu. *1,001 Nights* incorporates that very act of hermeneutic interpretation of fiction with respect to real life as a core game mechanic. Thus *1,001 Nights* teaches us how to read TRPGs as texts and performances. As Daniel Mackay articulates it: “Although the role-playing game is a performance and, therefore, becomes itself in the very moment of its disappearance, the performance contributes toward building an aesthetic object for contemplation after it has become a memory” (Mackay, 2001, p.121). We can read not only the tale, but the metagaming surrounding the tale, as rich material expressing the use of fiction in the cloistered, stifling society of the Sultan’s Court. Explicitly oscillating between the stances in game allow players to see human interaction for what it is, and our stories as instrumental means to an end that can be beautiful in their own right. Whereas *WIARPG* celebrates the gleeful chaos that core loops of the TRPG may generate, *1,001 Nights* permits us to read the TRPG in terms of the subtle positioning that people do within ordered realms of decorum and censorship. In this respect, *World Wide Wrestling* serves as a worthy third intervention, a sly commentary on the necessity of both order and chaos in selling fiction to one’s fellow players.

KAYFABE IN WORLD WIDE WRESTLING

Nathan D. Paoletta's *World Wide Wrestling* is a game about professional wrestling insofar as the sport itself offers a *portrayal* of combat independent of the actual requirement to physically defend oneself.⁵ That is to say: the TRPG acknowledges professional wrestling as a world of performative fakery, cultivating a relationship between performer, writer, and audience in which all are both simultaneously suspending and actively nurturing their disbelief. In Paoletta's words:

To play this game well, you need to get used to the double-think of the modern wrestling fan. There are always two concurrent stories. The obvious one is the story "on-screen" told by wrestlers, managers, valets and authority figures as they get into feuds, cut each other down on the mic and settle their differences in the ring (the kayfabe story, for you wrestling fans). The other one is the "legit" story that happens off camera, as the real people in the costumes try to advance their careers, attract more eyeballs to the product, and do what's... wait for it... *best for business* (Paoletta, 2014, p. 3).

In other words, players examine the process through which their characters take on wrestling-universe personas to then entertain an "imaginary viewing audience", which in reality consists of: themselves" (Paoletta, p. 3). The multiple levels of fiction satisfyingly layer on top of one another, with no binary – player/character, performer/audience, real/fake performance – remaining intact to judge the meta-levels of play. While the game's PCs-as-playing-characters may sound similar to *1,001 Nights* above, *World Wide Wrestling* reflects on the TRPG practice as social practice in different ways. Specifically, *World Wide Wrestling* sells the fellow players not on the delicate reading of each others' in-game performances, but on the socially acceptable feigned credulity surrounding those performances, the blurred lines between character motivation and action on display for all to see. In this regard, the game offers a nuanced mechanical comparison between TRPGs and professional wrestling, including the numerous frames through which meaning is generated in both.

Using the example of *Tomb Raider* (1996), Celia Pearce argues that characters in any game are by necessity only half-formed, and completed by play:

Lara Croft is a partially formed character; she is in essence a cartoon who serves as an avatar onto which the player is meant to project her – or more often, his – own interpretation. It is important that the character is incomplete, because if the character is too developed there is nothing compelling for the player to contribute. (Pearce, 2004, p.152)

Ordinarily, players do not highlight the moment at which one makes one's contributions to the character. In *World Wide Wrestling*, however, one does so in order to communicate vital information. Players play Talent, or rather, Pearce's

5. *World Wide Wrestling* is one of the many popular hacks of Vincent Baker's *Apocalypse World* (2010), which unleashed a wave of TRPG publishing activity once designers discovered that the system bridged well between conventions of traditional and freeform TRPGs.

“partially formed character” who then, her/himself, chooses a Gimmick that would correspond with what TRPG players would call a character class: The Monster, The Veteran, The Jobber, etc. These Gimmicks have both fiction and metafiction baked into them: The Jobber, for example, is a “nobody” who then will likely be playing a Heel – the scripted “bad guy” of a given fight – for someone more famous to beat up. Staring at this layered fictional creation would be nigh impossible without the socio-cultural framework of professional wrestling viewing practices: a player is playing a character (Talent) who is playing a persona embodying a current archetype (Gimmick) who is playing a wrestling-match role (“Heel”). Players receiving this performance are also playing the authors and audience, which means they are – as with *1,001 Nights* – invited to read all of the layers of performance and motivation as interweaving texts. The word “role-playing” strains to keep pace with the refracting roles being played. Yet play hangs together thanks to the “operational aesthetics” of pro wrestling: “it engages viewers in the illusion of the wrestling drama while it also allows viewers to scrutinize its operations” (Lipscomb, 2005, p. 154). Instrumental to professional wrestling’s dynamics of scrutiny and performance are excessive, over-the-top gestures that clearly broadcast the ring and ringside action itself, leaving the audience unambiguous material to put under the intense microscope of wrestling fandom.

Selling one’s wrestling performances and insightful fandom form the primary bases of play in *World Wide Wrestling*. This is encapsulated in the dynamics of “kayfabe”, or the self-contained fiction being generated by the Talent characters. Kayfabe through play-acted feuds and iconic redemption stories becomes the most legible textual unit through which the game might be read. Case in point: the game requires the use of a prop microphone to help amplify one’s grandstanding. Talent use Moves, which are important and memorable actions a PC can take, to drive the storyline that the imaginary audience is intended to enjoy and interpret. In practice, this means players playing a given Talent PC need to give a clear, resonant performance of their particular Gimmick to sell their overall character persona. If one’s Talent is doing the Gimmick of the Anti-Hero, for example, one has the Move “Mouth of the People” which encourages the PC to “speak truth to power” and roll 2D6. As an *Apocalypse World* hack, *World Wide Wrestling*’s Move system then dictates that something interesting happen regardless of the roll being a success (10+), partial success (7-9) or miss (6-). Positive results of “speaking truth to power” correspond with outcomes convincing in the kayfabe: “they shut the hell up right now; you get booked in a match with them; you gain +1 Heat with them. On a miss, you get beat down by their cronies” (Paoletta). Players have an incentive to yell at other players in wrestler-speak through a fake microphone, and both the system and player conspire to let this yelling have a mechanical impact on the storylines and Talent subtexts in motion. PCs build up a numerical Momentum score through Moves to help improve their later rolls. But a PC’s Momentum also

heightens the narrative stakes for an underdog to take her/him down in later matches. And since the results of performative and fictional failure fall onto a Talent character rather than on the player her/himself, then s/he has an alibi to “play to lose” (Stark, 2012), to enjoy tragic downfalls and sad wrestler declines as well as underdog victories.

World Wide Wrestling’s self-reflexivity emphasizes TRPGs as performing art (Mackay, 2001), rather than as diegetic enactment of player feelings (as in *1,001 Nights*) or as creativity engines powered by radical player agency (as in *WIARPG*). Whatever the game state, players are encouraged to perform their role, Gimmick, or Talent to excess as dramatic content for other players to enjoy. On the flipside, the other players get to adopt the imaginary audience role that situates them as expert readers of an ever-increasingly opaque wrestling soap opera. System, genre expectations, and player behavior collude to continuously mediate on the act of playing a role that is sort of like oneself and sort of a strategic performance to get what one wants.

CONCLUSION

Self-referentiality in media is nothing new, and the TRPGs discussed here are certainly not even the first analog games in recent history that have commented on the legacies of the hobby. RPGs are, in their most basic form, just people acting in a fictional game world through a playable character (Hitchens and Drachen, 2009). But rather than treat RPG player behavior as a kind of in-joke as per *Munchkin* (2001) or *HackMaster* (2001), *WIARPG*, *1,001 Nights*, and *World Wide Wrestling* celebrate the potentialities for self-examination and self-critique inherent in the medium. *WIARPG* reveals the basic conceits needed to create a role-playing game, and then leaves the rest up to the players in order to prove its own thesis. *1,001 Nights* frames tales within tales to show how players, given their own confined social milieus, move between stances and motivations with respect to the characters they portray. *World Wide Wrestling* envisions TRPGs as a trash-talking universe of collaborative media performance and feigned competition. *WIARPG* comments on the TRPG interface, *1,001 Nights* on the TRPG player goals, and *World Wide Wrestling* on the fluid player-to-character emotional space that brings TRPG groups back together week after week, begging for more. Most important of all, these games reinforce the idea that collaboration and what Karl Bergström (2012) calls “playing for togetherness” allow TRPGs to look at their own processes with analytic precision. Fiction can be brought into the world, debated without breaking character, and shifted according to the needs of the players and genre in question. Thus the self-reflexivity to be found in TRPGs informs broader discourses about how media are capable of reflecting on themselves. With self-reflection, comes analysis, evolution, and the long-term ascent of a medium, the human performative mechanisms of which have only begun to be explored in-depth.

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