BACK TO BASICS: AN EVOLUTION OF NARRATIVE AND COMMUNITY

IN POPULAR ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

By

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Abstract

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This work examines the narrative foundations behind multi-player role-playing games (RPG) and those foundations' ties to community formation. It develops a framework for understanding the multiple, competing narratives within the text of the game: a public narrative known by all participants, a secret narrative known only by the Game Master, and an occluded narrative that emerges through interactive storytelling. The framework rests upon bonding social capital between the participants of the game and provides an avenue for discussing the bridging social capital formed with newcomers.

The work uses four RPG narratives: *The Temple of Elemental Evil*, published for the *Dungeons and Dragons* role-playing game; the meta-plot of *Vampire: The Masquerade*, published by White Wolf; the Paladin epic-quest in the PC game *EverQuest*; and the *Gates of Ahn'Qiraj* quest and server event in *World of Warcraft*. Each narrative was chosen for its commercial staying-power and apparent response to real-world narratives external to the games. Although it is clear that social and economic climates dictate demands of consumers and success of products, I discovered that a game-narrative's rigidity and intrusiveness upon the player is dependent on society's apparent values of individuals and groups. I posit that an *occluded narrative* is the trait with the power to attract and keep players in a community.

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Chapter I: Introduction and Impetus

In J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, a shared goal among thirteen dwarves and a related goal in their hired hobbit helped generate a narrative that would eventually birth a game genre: the hobbit is out to satisfy "something Tookish" (15) in his blood, some need for excitement in his life. The dwarves intend to slay a dragon and reclaim their home. The competing goals weave a single narrative that would later spur *The Lord of the Rings*, a lengthy work that attempts to again weave the stories of heroes, nations and villains of several races into one epic. Two decades after *The Lord of the Rings*, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson created *Dungeons and Dragons*, an interactive narrative sharing many of Tolkien's tropes, in which "characters… may be dwarves, elves, halflings or human[s]..." (*Dungeons and Dragons Basic Set*, qtd. in Mona 29). Most commonly, these characters battle orcs and goblins, vile creatures whose names and descriptions are lifted directly from Tolkien's work. Although Tolkien did not invent the tropes of the fantasy genre, his Middle Earth provided a conceptual seed for many outsiders and newcomers to *Dungeons and Dragons*, an important tool for Gygax and Arneson's game of shared fantasy.

Far from plagiarizing, though, Gygax and Arneson were translating static fiction into interactive fiction. *Dungeons and Dragons*, and its myriad descendants, was a melding of game and narrative that brought interactive fiction to the forefront of the hobby industry, but interactive fiction would grow to something much larger than a pastime. Interactive fiction in the role-playing game[1] (RPG) genre works on a principle of multiple, competing narratives: each player potentially has his/her own tale to tell through the game, just as Bilbo Baggins and each of his dwarven companions had individual tales within *The Hobbit*. Because these narratives rely on and work against each other to tell the greater story, communities form among players, and in

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[1] I must point out now that a role-playing game need not involve more than one player. In fact, I will mention several popular RPGs that lack any capacity for more than one player. To reduce the number of bulky acronyms and phrases, "RPG" in this work will refer to those games that support or expect more than one player, unless specifically noted otherwise.

serial fashion, these small communities become a larger base for social capital formation. As my

analyses of various role-playing games will show, this turn towards individual character roles

within fantasy adventures (as opposed to the roles of armies or nations in the board games

Arneson and Gygax built from) is tied to the dynamic relationship between American

communities and community members. My interest here stems from changes in the genre,

turning table-top role-playing games into something closer to their board war-game roots and

turning online role-playing games into "Skinner Boxes" that diminish narrative's (and, as a

result, community's) role for most players. As American society has changed the value of

individuals and social actions over the past few decades, popular RPG has had to reinvent itself

to remain germane to the hobby industry, and it has not always done so successfully.

Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000) attempts to trace what he calls a downfall in

American community over the latter half of the twentieth century. He specifically tries to trace

this development through civic engagement, such as voting, organizational involvement, and

even regular nights out with friends. In this study, I look at the tools for community development

(and some consequent community development, where I am able) in popular RPG over the past

forty years to better understand what attracts players and to define what game designers can do to

revitalize a genre whose communities have been losing strength for some time. Community,

according to a simple definition by Putnam, is "social networks and the associated norms of

reciprocity" (21). I view community in interactive fiction as the reciprocity required to complete

competing goals within those social networks. Initial cooperation leads to "bridging social

capital" (22-24), in which actors from two unconnected groups begin to form social ties. These

ties are weaker than "bonding social capital" (Ibid.), but they allow for greater diversity within a

social body (in *The Hobbit*, the different races become less xenophobic as they interact with each

other). "Bonding social capital" occurs as actors become very closely tied to each other; the

importance of helping and protecting one another is a paramount concern for bonded individuals. On a basic level inherent to most narratives, reciprocity is demonstrated through the hobbit's cooperation with the dwarves because his "Tookishness" could be satisfied by aiding the dwarves in reclaiming their home. Without the initial bridging capital formed by their chance encounter, their social network, its bonding capital and the surrounding narrative could never have formed.

Reciprocity in interactive fiction and RPG is more complex than its counterpart in static fiction because it demands the cooperation of players and Game Masters, all individuals with free will and separate goals. The Game Master trusts that the players will put their characters at risk of death in their adventure, while the players trust that the Game Master's narrative has at least one plot arc that allows them to reach the conclusion. All creators of the interactive text must be ready to interject story elements and accept elements from others without compromising the integrity of their own, leading to a series of story components (characters, settings, and historical notes, for example) that are rigid and always intruding on each other.

Above all, a Game Master is responsible for describing and narrating the world with which the players interact, typically by providing some sort of setting or background narrative that creates the "ground rules" for play. This is analogous to the opening passages of *The Hobbit*, in which Tolkien lays out the nature of hobbits (and the novel's main character, as a result) through their lifestyle. Strong[2] background narratives are a necessary component to community-generated fiction, leading to either rigid-and-intrusive narratives in which characters thrive or rigid-and-intrusive characters in which narratives are born. Strong narratives create strong, persistent communities, and the reverse is also true: weakened background narratives in recent

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[2] I am borrowing the adjective from the definition of a Strong argument in philosophy: one that stands as-is, but is able to fluctuate with changing evidence. Here, a Strong narrative is one with the majority of its plot preconfigured, but able to bend with player-character input over time.

developments in the RPG genre leave communities scrambling to unite in single efforts[3].

Four texts in particular stand out as canon (if there can be such a thing in the hobby world) in RPG. Section II analyzes a narrative set within 1974's *Dungeons and Dragons*, released by Tactical Strategies Rules Incorporated. It does trace its roots through other games and narrative genres, but this game marks a foundation for all modern RPG in its systems for play and narrative creation. Because *Dungeons and Dragons* core texts are primarily a rule system for game play (players are expected to use their own creativity primarily, while the rules are a supplement), I will look at one of its early supplemental texts, an adventure titled *The Temple of Elemental Evil*. This story saw its first incarnation in a 1979 tale called *The Village of Hommlet*, which was expanded into a larger adventure involving the Temple several years later. When revised rules for *Dungeons and Dragons* were released in 2000, the adventure narrative was soon updated and re-released as *Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil*. The tale has also been released as a single player computer game, and most of the original story elements from 1979 have become cliché in the RPG genre – most notably that the end of the first adventure narrative, stopping a gang of bandits, reveals a second adventure to stop a much greater threat to the region or world. While *The Temple of Elemental Evil* is by no means a masterwork narrative, just as *The Hobbit* has its shortcomings, its persistence through several revisions and printings and its continual regeneration in other adventure narratives marks *The Temple of Elemental Evil* as a formative text in the genre.

Section III examines the life and historical moment of White Wolf Publishing's *Vampire: The Masquerade*, which breaks the tabletop RPG mold by packaging a background narrative with the rule book. The game is set in the modern world, though it is described in the dark, depressed tones of a noir text. *Vampire* holds canonical status through a series of growths and

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[3] See, for example, the issue of "pick up groups" and *instanced* adventures in Section V.

rebirths that mark any successful product. Released in 1991, *Vampire* pre-empted society's current undead obsession by a few years, but it was marketed as a different kind of role-playing game. Where *Dungeons and Dragons* and the majority of the genre typically focused on tales of heroism, adventure, and (above all) exciting fight scenes, *Vampire* focused on the masquerade concept of RPG by omitting as many rules for combat as possible. Character growth and game advancement was achieved primarily through playing the role of a single vampire in intricate political struggles (Rein-Hagen et al. 21, 24, 100). *Vampire*'s popularity led White Wolf to release other games, set in the same, modern world that all players already know and interact with on a daily basis[4]. *Vampire*'s opening pages hinted at a coming end-of-days for vampires (and perhaps the world), as did every other narrative in their line of games. In the early 2000s, White Wolf Publishing released an apocalypse supplement for each of its games to end their narratives, explaining how all of the creatures died or were otherwise removed from reality; afterwards, there were no new publications[5] or reprints of any game materials. The exception is the October, 2011, release of *V20*, a reprint of all core game material for *Vampire: The Masquerade* for the players who still enjoy a game that has been otherwise abandoned for nearly a decade. It forms such a strong undercurrent in tabletop RPG society that it must be discussed.

At the end of the 1990s, *Vampire* was winding down and *Dungeons and Dragons* was reformatting itself into something a little different. Verant Interactive and its parent company,

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[4] In many ways, this mirrors the earlier Palladium system of tabletop RPGs (first published by Palladium Books in 1983), a fantasy setting whose system became so popular that it spawned dozens of other games taking place in a concurrent narrative over several universes, with one key difference: new Palladium game books are still published, updating the narrative that began almost thirty years ago. All of which can interact with each other, thanks to the compatible rules system. This is very similar to *Dungeons and Dragons* over the decades, but Palladium had an early focus on science fiction, alternate histories and modern-day games. I do not analyze Palladium's games in this project primarily because *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Vampire: The Masquerade* accomplish the same goals. Also, Palladium has published so many works that a mere bibliography would be a mammoth undertaking on its own.

[5] *Vampire: The Reqiuem* and other games modelled after old White Wolf games are a separate universe, incompatible with their predecessors in both system and narrative. For the apocalyptic narrative of the original series to be successful, the game had to be ended. For the company to continue to be successful, they had to capitalize on previous efforts.

Sony Online Entertainment, released a computer role-playing game that I focus on in Section IV, *EverQuest*. *EverQuest* (1999) takes many of its narrative and generic cues from *Dungeons and Dragons,* but it sets itself apart from earlier computer RPGs like *Diablo* or *Baldur's Gate* through the number of players involved. *Baldur's Gate* was made for a single player. *Diablo* could put a handful of players into an adventure at one time. *EverQuest* saw several thousand players interacting at the same time[6]. Their actions did affect each other, but the notion of reciprocity (see Section II) changed drastically. There were no more Game Masters in the same sense as a tabletop RPG, but there were "GMs" (game administrators with a limited ability to manipulate the environment). The world was rigid up to a point: Sir Lucan D'Lere is and will always be commander of the Freeport Militia (see Section IV for more discussion of this character), but he could be slain, branding his attacker an enemy of the city of Freeport. However, after a set amount of time, Sir Lucan would reappear in his normal location as though nothing had ever happened. While an elaborate background narrative exists to be played through, and there is some interactivity, it lacks the reciprocity of tabletop role-playing games. Costikyan notes,

> Imagine that an MMO [massively multiplayer online game] comes to some sort of story climax, which could go either way, depending on the actions of the players. The live team must develop content to handle both outcomes. And on some servers, the event will go one way, and on others, the other… your new content development problem is now compounded by the need to develop *different* new content for the two different worlds on an ongoing basis. ("Games, Storytelling,

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[6] The game continues to run for subscribers today, and dozens of legally questionable "private servers" exist, allowing fans to play for free. The most famous is *Project 1999*, which was recently discussed in some gaming magazines and blogs. The server is technically a violation of copyright law and Sony Online Entertainment could sue or demand it be shut down. Speculation among players is that the private servers are allowed to exist because they do not use current game information. *Project 1999,* for example, is programmed exactly as *EverQuest* was at its release in 1999, and it exists primarily for nostalgia. The owners of the server take donations to keep the server running, but they insist that they do not receive an income from it. For more information, refer to < http://www.project1999.org >

and Breaking the String" 9)

However, despite the inflexibility in *EverQuest*'s narrative, reciprocity developed in a different direction as communities came together to complete tasks in order to discover the narrative.

Finally, Section V examines another online RPG that created many of the common aspects of online RPG, Blizzard's 2004 release, *World of Warcraft*. Where *EverQuest* was a major actor in moving RPG from the tabletop or the single-player computer game into a large, multi-player environment, *World of Warcraft* has become a foundation for marketing and gameplay, though its narrative has suffered significantly. *World of Warcraft's* development over time has seen millions of players flock to its fictional world of Azeroth, but recent changes have also seen millions leaving for other pastures (see Section V). This is likely a result of more factors than I can evaluate here, but a major note is the change in narratives between *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft* (and the ubiquitous *World of Warcraft* clones[7]). *EverQuest* functioned in many ways like a *Dungeons and Dragons* or *Vampire: The Masquerade* game, where the individual characters were actors in a larger world. Their actions had immediate consequences (the death of Sir Lucan D'Lere), but like the wake of a boat, the consequences would not be permanent (Sir Lucan would return, but one might conclude that a single assassination could not stop the Freeport Militia because a new leader always appears). *World of Warcraft* continues the narrative that writers at Blizzard began in 1994 with the single player strategy game, *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans*, but this global narrative is largely irrelevant to the game. Instead, there are many smaller narratives that are individual-character focused. For game purposes, these narratives give a character reasons to explore different regions or complete deeds that are the mark of a hero and adventurer. In terms of narrative style, however, the narration changes focus

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[7] After *World of Warcraft*'s rise to popularity, Blizzard made their interface programming available to other game developers. The result has been that companies develop a game that looks and plays like *World of Warcraft*, with minor changes. One example, discussed briefly in Section VI, is *The Lord of the Rings Online*, created in 2007 by Turbine. Unfortunately, *Lord of the Rings Online* was released too recently to track the game's and its rhetorical tools' lasting effect on communities.

from the environment and the actors within to the actor and his/her romps through the environment. The reciprocity that builds community is largely a result of completing individual tasks, and the automating features of the game[8] reduce the need for community. The result is that the game becomes more of a tactical exercise, what Costikyan calls a "skill-and-action game," something "less cerebral, more dependent on fine motor coordination and training in particular skills" (11), rather than an interactive narrative.

In the end, a narrative's intrusiveness on the character and the world's ability to respond to character actions (or the character's necessary responses to the world) are what build strong community in RPG. Putnam notes a growth of "small group" activity (148-180) after nationwide politico-social movements climaxed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. His analysis seems to point to the importance of recognizing and responding to individual input (such as second wave feminists' consciousness raising efforts) over being a small part of a larger cause. Historically, Putnam finds a similarity between the ends of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see discussion in Section III), suggesting that we may be entering an era similar to the end of the Progressive era. Similarly, I see the birth of *Dungeons and Dragons*, and the tabletop RPG world with it, stemming out of the earlier board-wargame genre, in which the individual fighting man was an important strategic piece, but not a decisive factor in the battle itself. Further, as I will discuss with *The Lord of the Rings Online* and other recent developments in the genre, tabletop and online RPGs seem to be returning to earlier *Dungeons and Dragons* narrative and game elements as a way to reinforce communal bonds.

Literature Review

Although I use Putnam as a guide to unpacking the role of and reasons for community in

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[8] To be discussed in greater detail in Section V. The primary tool I will discuss is a tool that automatically sorts players into groups for different adventures: there is no need for friendship, acquaintance, or even proficiency in the same language, so long as each player understands his/her character's role in the event. Cf. Sec. V n. 4.

RPG, I do not want to imply that my work is an extension of his (as an answer to where community went), nor am I replacing his findings with mine on a one for one basis (though there are many overlaps). However, his methodologies and sociological data were the impetus behind this project from the beginning. Just as Putnam began by questioning where community engagement went in American civic life, I began by questioning where community engagement went in my favorite pastimes. Following Putnam's example, I tried to find where community engagement in RPG came from and found many overlaps between the politico-social history of the United States over the past century and the history of RPG over the past forty years.

Because Putnam does not examine games in greater detail than evening card games with friends (93-115, especially), I rely on several pieces by Greg Costikyan. *I Have No Words and I Must Design* is a revised version of an essay printed in a British journal for game-studies. It is now a popular game-studies text and features a lengthy discussion of how *EverQuest*'s community differed from earlier RPGs played over the internet, as well as an analysis on the role of narrative within game. Another short essay by Costikyan, "Games, Narrative and Breaking the String" was printed in a collection discussing interactive fiction. This essay traces major developments in interactive fiction and RPG, arguing that the genre is heading toward a dead-end in its approach to narrative. Costikyan compares many popular interactive fiction titles to "beads on a string" stories (12-13). Every plot element is a predetermined stage to play through. In the years since this piece was published, however, I see the genre approaching that dead-end but displaying the characteristics of "breaking the string" and returning to *Dungeons and Dragons*' open-ended style.

Nick Montfort, in *Twisty Little Passages*, describes that open-ended style as a descendent of the riddle. In his discussion, the riddle is an interactive fiction that contains all the clues to its conclusion within the text itself. In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo Baggins defeats Gollum in a riddle contest

by asking aloud (though to himself) "What have I got in my pocket?" (73). Tolkien himself (through Bilbo) and other scholars note that this is not really a riddle as much as a guessing game. The only clue to the conclusion of the riddle was that Gollum's ring was missing. Although his guesses of hands, lint and nothing are all apt tries, only someone familiar with pockets could venture that far. On the other hand, Tolkien's door to Moria, inscribed with the elven phrase "Speak, friend, and enter" (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 297-300) works as a riddle because it contains its own answer: Gandalf says the elven word for "friend," which causes the door to open. Montfort sees interactive fiction and RPG as an extension of the riddle genre for many of the same reasons that Costikyan values it as a game style. Bilbo's question is an exercise in knowing what things are most likely to be found in pockets; it is a test of skill, technique or previous knowledge. A true riddle, and an enjoyable RPG, should contain the guide to its own conclusion inside the game narrative. This trait is one of the factors that leads to community as the Game Master must skillfully communicate the features of the world in an appropriate fashion for the players, who also pose riddles to the Game Master in the form of what motivates them to discover more of the narrative (see Section II).

J. Hillis Miller's short essay, "Narrative," provides an explicit definition for this project to work from. I rely on this definition over others because it provides a substantial amount of background for the definition while remaining succinct enough that it is a supplemental text. Although I will discuss this essay in detail in Section II, in which *Dungeons and Dragons* lays the groundwork for RPG to be a narrative more than a tactical exercise, here I wish to note that requiring a narrative to involve a starting situation, characters made from symbols, and a reversal of the starting situation from which revelation occurs (75) is the only definition I have found that is broad enough to include the traditional elements of a table-top RPG and an online RPG. Specifically, I refer to the fact that RPG narratives can lack a sense of climax (*Vampire: The*

Masquerade's politics-focused style often lacks critical turning points obvious to all interactors) or a denouement (if the adventurers all die fighting Zuggtmoy in *The Temple of Elemental Evil*, there can be revelation without falling action), among other traditional points along the narrative arc. Instead, I will discuss the multiple, competing and cooperative narratives surrounding RPG, as revelation may not occur for the character, but it can still occur for the player (or vice versa).

Competing and cooperative narratives are a primary feature of RPG. Erik Mona, in "From the Basement to the Basic Set: The Early Years of *Dungeons and Dragons*," cites an early description of play for *Dungeons and Dragons* as consisting of up to twenty players and a Game Master (a more typical game size is half a dozen people at the table). In this conception, the players were represented by a "Caller," one player that kept track of everything the adventurers were doing who would then relay the information to the Dungeon Master (28). In the game's development, this practice was rare at best – if *The Hobbit* was a *Dungeons and Dragons* adventure, the moment that Bilbo Baggins discovered his ring made him invisible, everyone else playing the game would know. This was not the case in the book narrative. Although many players would insist on separating "player knowledge[9]" from "character knowledge[10]," this is more difficult in practice than in theory. As a result, players communicate directly with their Game Master because they are, above all else, *individuals*. While the entire adventuring party might have the cooperative goal of reaching the Lonely Mountain and driving the dragon Smaug out from it, Bilbo is doing it for the adventure and treasure, while the dwarves see treasure as a secondary concern behind liberating their home. If Bilbo had been captured or killed when his individual goal drove him to seek aid from the men of Dale (241-245), the character would have had no revelation, but the player might have learned the important lesson of always keeping the

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[9] What is known to the player, including things the Game Master tells others whose characters are elsewhere. Fans of *The Lord of the Rings* know that Bilbo's ring belongs to Sauron, and that Sauron is able to spy on Bilbo through the ring.

[10] Things that the character should be aware of, but nothing more. Bilbo has no idea that his ring is the same ring that caused the downfall of the realms of Men in Middle Earth.

party together. The many smaller narratives (whatever their outcomes) weave together to form a master tale, and it is the coming together of this master tale that bolsters community.

Finally, I work from a series of sources that are game-specific. The anthology *Second Person* contains Costikyan's essay on the history of RPGs as well as several dozen other pieces regarding individual games. The website *Allakhazam* is a service originally dedicated to collecting lore and information about *EverQuest* to aid players in completing quests, and it has expanded in the past thirteen years to include many other popular online RPGs, including *World of Warcraft*. The "private server" communities I mentioned earlier often use *Allakhazam*'s databases of quests, items, character dialogue and other relevant information to make sure their copies of the game are as accurate as possible. For its legitimacy in the gaming community, I use it here as a resource for information I cannot verify myself[11]. As an extension to *Allakhazam*, I am using White Wolf Publishing's table-top RPG based on the online *EverQuest*. Although *EverQuest* was chosen for its place in history as a turning point for communities from table-top RPG to online RPG, and *The EverQuest Role-Playing Game* was released several years later, White Wolf's game developers worked to make the game world's overarching narrative more explicit. At the same time, they discovered several hurdles in translating the game back to a table-top model, discussed in Section IV.

The Project

This project is, in several ways, an extension of both Putnam's work and an earlier book by Lawrence Schick, *Heroic Worlds: A History and Guide to Role-Playing Games*. The work was the first major bibliography of table-top games, and no other printed text exists that accomplishes the same tasks, though a handful of websites attempt to catalogue RPG information

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[11] Some of the quest and character storylines I will discuss take far too much time to complete. Because these games require a monthly fee to play, time constraints are directly translatable to monetary constraints. I have verified as much of this information as possible in game, but I had to draw the line where I did because this is an unfunded, thesis-length work.

in a similar fashion. Unfortunately, Schick's work was printed in 1991, predating the majority of my game-narrative texts. While my ultimate argument, the "Lonely Mountain" of this work, is that group RPG narratives have very specific tools at their disposal to create and strengthen communities, the route to that argument is filled with historical and bibliographic notes of the genre's development.

Schick defines RPG as "quantified interactive storytelling" (10). It is quantified in the sense that all characters are defined in numerical terms which justify and inhibit the actions they may take, which separates the genre from *Choose Your Own Adventure* novels: the character either dies in the *Cave of Time* or survives due to narrative alone. The game is interactive in the way that I discuss reciprocity: "player decision-making drives the story forward and the outcome varies depending on what the players do" (10; see also the *Dungeon Master's Guide* instructions to successful Dungeon Mastering, in Section II). Finally, the games must not only include narrative, but they must "tell a story in which the characters are the heroes" (10). For this reason, *Monopoly* is not a RPG, no matter how hard I try to take on the role of the top hat. Schick notes that in games like *Monopoly* or *Risk* "plot is subordinated to score or position" (10), but in RPG, players rarely play against each other (11), instead weaving their many narratives into one tale.

Because of the reciprocity necessary for the game, the story grows "organically" as the players experience it piece by piece (11). That is the starting point for what Gygax and Arneson would call "something better" stemming out of their alternate rules for massive wargames (Mona 26), when they discovered demand for games centering on a small group of heroes rather than massive armies. As I will discuss in the next section, the game grew at the same time that informal, small-group communities were forming after the climax of nationwide social and political movements, unintentionally riding the *zeitgeist* of changing the world one individual at a time.

Section II: It Takes a Village: Gygax's *Temple of Elemental Evil of Elemental Evil* Sets the Stage for Role-Playing Game Communities

From the perspective of a regular role-playing game (RPG) group, *community* and *interactive fiction*[12] are close to synonymous. Even groups that meet for the odd "dungeon crawl" every now and again are often a firm circle: the adventures may be unconnected, but the players are typically friends rather than strangers, and a series of games produces the social capital necessary to form friendships. One year ago, I had the honor of serving as best man in the wedding of two friends I met through an RPG group; while eighteen months prior, he had been my best man. I mention this sappy anecdote to call attention to the social capital gained and grown through these types of connections. Robert Putnam would call these interactions *schmoozing* (93), social relationships that are informal, spontaneous and typically lacking in a directed purpose like philanthropy or politics[13]. Although many of these groups gather to save the world on a regular basis, the world saved is often imaginary, and the heroes are regularly motivated by perceived rewards. However, hidden within these shared hallucinations are the seeds of social capital, creating strong, communal ties.

Although *Twisty Little Passages* focuses on the electronic side of the genre, there is a close relationship between Montfort's objects of study and my own: these computer-based interactive fictions and the discussion-centered *Dungeons and Dragons* each present players a series of challenges that must be beaten in order to resolve the story, whether that narrative be the simple *Adventure* progression through caves or the overwhelmingly complex *Temple of Elemental Evil* quest to save the world. The overlap between Montfort's and Putnam's respective

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[12] Though the term seems to be up for debate, interactive fiction is a subset of fiction in which the narrative requires input from the reader/interactor, and varying input has the capacity to change the resolution (Montfort). RPG and interactive fiction are not interchangeable, but they are dependent upon one another. An RPG is one tool used to tell an interactive fiction (just as a book is one tool used to tell a fiction, just as an audio-tape or series of images may be).

[13] *Schmoozing* is the counterpart of *maching* (both taken from Yiddish). *Machers* are social groups like Kiwanis or Acorn.

works gives sufficient leeway to investigate community formation as a result of Interactive Narratives.

The primary, common tie is the riddle. Montfort's analysis of the riddle genre from its earliest known use until its incarnation in *Adventure*'s command line revolves around one of the central tenets of both games. Montfort notes that "the workings of the riddle are so closely tied to those of interactive fiction that the early history of the form [interactive fiction] should properly begin not with sessions of *Dungeons and Dragons* or with twentieth-century literary experiments but with ancient exchanges of riddles" (37). This ancient genre's power is tied closer to Tolkien's "Speak friend and enter" (*Fellowship* 297) than his earlier "What have I got in my pocket?" (*The Hobbit* 73, Montfort 40), as Montfort's analysis demands that every riddle must contain hints to its own answer (see discussion of Turco, qtd. in Montfort 38). Arguably, Bilbo's question could be a riddle in its context. What Bilbo has in his pocket is exactly that which Gollum has misplaced and must find in order to eat the hobbit. This distinction is what differentiates the riddle from interactive fiction because players must understand the puzzle presented to them in terms of what their characters are capable of, especially in terms of carried and forgotten items. This point is what Dan Pagis claims creates the necessity of an answer in the riddlee ("Toward a Theory of the Literary Riddle," qtd. in Montfort 40). It becomes as clear in *Temple of Elemental Evil of Elemental Evil*'s encounter descriptions as in Bilbo's encounter with Gollum as in the first command line prompt of *Adventure*, when the player is prompted with a short description of a setting, a list of nearby objects, and the instruction to input one or two word commands (along the lines of "go west" or "take food"). A puzzle's very existence seems to demand that it be solved.

interactive fiction becomes a riddle by exposing the interactor to pieces of the puzzle at each screen or encounter. The interactor always has the choice to walk away from the fiction (as

a reader does for other sorts of fiction), but the puzzle is supposed to create the motivation to finish the tale. In this way, *Dungeons and Dragons'* reliance on the riddle is a first step to creating community by drawing players together with a puzzle-story and motivating them to solve-complete it. Although community is furthered in other ways, these initial steps are crucial to the first bonds.

Along with these steps of using a riddle to draw interactors into the tale and necessitate its completion, early interactive fiction rode the wave of another inclusive phenomenon. Putnam notes that the 1970s saw a massive increase in small-group communities. As individuals moved away from the larger social phenomena like the Civil Rights Movements, they began to gather in smaller discussions for self-help and small clubs. The shift in the politico-social sphere is similar to that in the hobby gaming sphere: large scale Civil Rights actions were a *maching*-oriented activity, while smaller discussion and consciousness raising groups are *schmoozing*-intensive, which Putnam summarizes in the fact that "support groups substitute for other intimate ties that have been weakened in our fragmented society" (151-152). Likewise, *Dungeons and Dragons* saw its birth from the table-top wargaming hobby in the same era, with games moving from huge gatherings of a dozen or more competing players, each with a massive army of miniature warriors, to a small group of allied players, each with a single character. The initial rules for Dungeon Mastering the game gave suggestions to manage the imagined twenty-person groups, not atypical for wargames (Mona 28), though the game quickly evolved to a hobby amongst half a dozen friends at a time. The transition marked a departure from creative retellings of history[14] in a large group to fantastic imaginings of the actions in a smaller group. The more intimate

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[14] Many early wargames were focused on creating realistic battle scenarios. A medieval wargame might attempt to give realistic statistics and strategies to Normans invading England at the turn of the last millennium, while a modern game might use actual battle reports from the front-lines of World War II to put hobbyists into the shoes of the English and German forces. It's interesting to note that the most popular wargames today have all taken a fantastic turn – from *Warhammer*'s fantasy and sci-fi lines to *Warmachine* to *Lord of the Rings*, the largest selling games all take their cues from fantasy lore. Realistic wargames are still produced, but escapism is the focus of the hobby now. If this project were larger, the implications of this shift would merit its own chapter.

setting allows for greater amounts of social bonding to occur, and this social capital (and its resultant community) quickly becomes a focus of RPG.

The Temple of Social Capital

Social capital, as discussed by Putnam, is the coin of the realm in political economies of relationships. Social capital (hereafter, "capital") is developed in a community during any activity that reinforces the urge to act as or identify with a group. Although *Dungeons and Dragons*, and interactive fiction with it, cannot account for the loss of civic engagement in Putnam's work (and, sadly, I doubt it can increase voter turnout significantly), Erik Mona's brief history of the game shows neat correlations between *Dungeons'* development and social developments in U.S. society. Putnam charts the splintering of large, social movements like the Stonewall Inn protests in 1969, Vietnam protests of the late 1960s, and the first Earth Day in 1970 into the myriad self-help and personal groups that have burgeoned over the past four decades (Putnam 151-152). At the same time, Gygax and Perren's board-wargame, *Chainmail*[15], evolved into "a completely new type of immersive play experience" (Mona 26). As *Temple of Elemental Evil* demonstrates, the same factors that seem to drive huge movements into a tiny meeting room are those that, by necessity, appear in RPG-style interactive fiction: "We see self-help groups as vehicles through which…persons can claim and grow toward new identities, redefining themselves and society" (Katz and Bender, qtd. in Putnam 151). Further, "These communities are more fluid and more concerned with the emotional states of the individual… People feel cared for. They help one another" (Wuthnow, qtd. in Putnam 151-152). While Putnam's self-help groups adopted these personas spontaneously, *Temple of Elemental Evil* was explicitly designed to foster these ties.

The game's diction is a prime means to enter this fostering. I have addressed the natures

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[15] Though current editions of this game exist, the most prevalent modern corollary is Games Workshop's *Warhammer* and *Warhammer 40k*. cf. n. 3.

of RPG and interactive fiction already, so it is clear that the narrative rests upon the participants'

shared contributions to story events, creating an immediate community through bonding social

capital[16]. Role-playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* have two classes of player: the

several individuals around the table participating in the adventure (referred to as simply

"players") and the Dungeon Master[17] narrating the details of the adventure, to whom the

adventure book states:

> The persons that are met at the inn, along the road, and so forth, are you**;** for the
>
> Dungeon Master is all—monsters, NPCs, and all else but player characters. Play it
>
> to the hilt. Do it with flair and wit. Be fair both to the characters and to yourself.
>
> Be cunning but just and honest when in the role of a warding ranger. Be deceitful,
>
> clever, and thoroughly dishonest when acting the part of a thief…. But temper
>
> your actions with disinterest in the eventual outcome, and keep only the viewpoint
>
> of that particular role. (Gygax and Mentzer 5)

Bonding capital is created immediately. Although the Dungeon Master plays the game, s/he is the

antagonist as well as the means of advancing the narrative. The players are the interactors whose

input is necessary not just to move the plot along but to determine the eventual outcome (most

simply, whether evil is defeated in the region or whether the party of hopeful adventurers suffer

terrible demises). To complicate matters, players act as characters ("player characters," in the

common tongue of RPG), adding a level of removal from their own actions and a means to form

bridging capital[18] with their DM. The web will become more convoluted in later sections as

social capital extends beyond individual game groups, as a standardized narrative provides the

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[16] Bonding social capital (22-24) stems from events that cause an existing group to reinforce existing bonds. The group of friends that completes the *Temple of Elemental Evil* adventure, for instance, will develop immense bonding capital over the months of real time spent playing.

[17] The generic term is *Game Master*. Due to the particular connotations of the various terms within each system, I will refer to each by their preferred nomenclature.

[18] Cf. 3. Bridging social capital is that which extends from a defined group into a new individual or group. Here, the bonded "adventuring party" of players creates social capital with their antagonist and key to the world, the DM.

grounds for a community around the world[19].

In its development from board-wargames, *Dungeons and Dragons* created three tropes central to RPG and interactive fiction: the public narrative, the occluded narrative and the secret narrative (my terms). Arguably, these are as present in fixed narratives as interactive, but *The Temple of Elemental Evil* makes their roles explicit. Public narratives are known by all interactors. These narratives are the required knowledge to play the game, such as the racial backgrounds of any humans, dwarves or orcs among the player characters. The opening pages of *The Temple of Elemental Evil* include a note to Game Masters that "if the text is boxed, it may be read directly to the players.... Immediately following the player information is more detailed and often secret material, which you should not reveal to the players" (5, see also Figure 1 below). Earlier, the adventure book tells the Dungeon Master to "have one player read the… Players' Background to the rest" (4).While it can be assumed that a player will learn these narratives in the course of character creation, public narratives are also those that players may freely request from the Game Master during play. Public narrative also contains much of the basic background required to understand the narrative uncovered during play – for instance, player characters may not know that Hommlet's trading post owners are evil men in service of the Temple of Elemental Evil, but the descriptions of "Rannos Davl… as slow, fat, clumsy and placid" or "his partner Gremag [as] tall and thin, with sharp features and protruding eyes" (9) strike listeners as character traits of the untrustworthy, to say the least.

Secret narrative, by contrast, is the collection of possibilities known or imagined by the Game Master alone. Continuing with the example of Hommlet's trading post, *The Temple of Elemental Evil* notes that players may hire a man-at-arms from Rannos and Gremag. "If the group does not hire one, the traders will keep close track of their activities by any means

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[19] See Sections III and IV on the impact of a standard narrative within a rule-set and the impact of the internet, respectively.

possible, including following them personally if the situation warrants" (9). Only if the group encounters these men, refuses their hirelings, and works publicly to bring down the Temple of Elemental Evil will this event come to pass. It remains only a possibility until that time. Secret narrative is typically plot which only the Dungeon Master will ever know, primarily as a way to explain other elements of the story; aside from Rannos and Gremag's dark nature, Game Masters also know that the leader of Hommlet's men-at-arms, Rufus, will eventually be called away on a secret mission in a distant city (14), which is why players will have great difficulty ("20% chance" of success) convincing him to aid them in battle.

Part 1:
The Village of Hommlet

PLAYERS' DESCRIPTION

Your party is now approaching the Village of Hommlet, having ridden up from lands of the Wild Coast. You are poorly mounted, badly equipped, and have no large sums of cash. In fact, all you have is what you wear and what you ride, plus the few coins that are hidden in purses and pockets. What you do possess in quantity, though, is daring and desire to become wealthy and famous. Thus your group comes to Hommlet to learn. Is this indeed a place for adventurers to seek their fortunes? You all hope, of course, to gain riches and make names for yourselves. The outcome of this is uncertain, but your skill and daring, along with a good measure of luck, will be the main ingredients of what follows, be it for weal or woe.

The small community at the crossroads is a completely unknown quantity. What is there? Who will be encountered? Where should you go? These are your first explorations and encounters, so chance may dictate as much as intelligence. Will outsiders be shunned? Are the reports true—is the whole community engaged in evil practices? Are the folk here bumpkins, easily duped? Does a curse lay upon those who dare to venture into the lands which were once the Temple's? All of these questions will soon be answered.

bark at your approach, and a rosy-cheeked goodwife appears at the doorway.

The large goodwife is friendly, greeting all who call, while her four children look on. Inside, a young girl and her old granny do various chores. The lintel over the front door is carved with acorns and oak leaves. If politely asked, any adult in the family will state that the family is of the Old Faith (i.e. druidical).

The head of the house and his two full-grown sons are at work in the nearby fields. These three are members of the town militia. The elder has a bill-guisarme and a ring mail jack, while his sons have leather armor and shield and wield a flail and an axe (respectively). Each has a dagger at all times. They take arms only in self-defense or when called up by the village elder. The two farm dogs will attack intruders if their master or his family are attacked or even visibly threatened.

Farm dogs (2): AC 7; HD 1 + 1; hp 7; 5; #AT 1; D 1-4; XP 34; 30

Farmer; AC 7; Level 0; hp 6; #AT 1; D 2-8; XP 16

Sons (2): AC 7; Level 0; hp 5; 4; #AT 1; D 1-8 (flail) or 1-4 (axe); XP 15; 14

overfond of brew.

The elderly farmer is a retired fighter still somewhat in practice, equivalent to level 4. He owns a suit of scale mail, a shield, long-sword, and a light crossbow, all kept in a chest in the front room. He is, in fact, captain of the local militia, though he will say nothing of it.

Farmer: AC 5 (if prepared); Level 4 Fighter; hp 16; #AT 1; D 1-8 (sword) or 1-4 (crossbow, ranges 6"/12"/18"); XP 214; S 15 I 12 W 16 D 12 Co 16 Ch 11

Servant: AC 9 (shield); Level 0; hp 4; #AT 1; D 1-6 (club); XP 14

Underneath some rusty nails in a keg in the back shed are 172 ep, 51 gp, and 20 pp. A cupboard in the house holds a silver service worth 1,300 gp.

Elmo may (50% chance) return while the party is here, and may otherwise (25%) be encountered on the road after the characters depart. He will otherwise be encountered at the Inn.

Elmo will reveal his status (man-at-arms) to any who ask. While in town 'carousing', he is unarmored but carries (as always) his dagger +2. If asked about it, he proudly proclaims "My brudder Otis gave it to me!"

The "boxed" text is Public Narrative. The rest is Secret Narrative/information meant to help the Dungeon Master explain the Occluded Narrative as characters progress.

Figure 1: An example of public and secret narrative in *The Temple of Elemental Evil*'s opening

Of course, players may choose to hire Rannos and Gremag's men-at-arms, or worse, players may choose to actively aid the Temple of Elemental Evil. Such an eventuality is not

discussed at length within the guidebook, but it gives rise to the third narrative type, the occluded narrative. This middle ground lies between the public narrative and the secret narrative. While the Game Master keeps a sort of "God's Eye View" of the many possible storylines that can come from any event, ultimately, the players' actions will bring about one particular narrative. The party hires a man-at-arms, or they do not. The party must deal with Rannos and Gremag as adversaries, or they do not. The occluded narrative is the prime area for meaning-making within a role-playing game, as it is the place where existing knowledge and expectation (for players and the Game Master) meets uncertainty. Although players know whether they have hired men-at-arms or not, they will not know all the subtle effects surrounding that choice in the same manner that they know the effects of choosing to play a dwarf or thief. Returning to Schick's definition in *Heroic Worlds*, the occluded narrative is that content of the game crafted by all players at the table.

Occluded narrative is the plot which players discover and develop through their actions. For an example of all three elements together, *The Temple of Elemental Evil* features a strange room in the bowels of the Temple itself. The public narrative, which all players initially know, is that upon entering the "Pearlescent Room" in the Temple of Elemental Evil, the characters hear a booming voice (boxed text), informing them that the regional deity, Iuz, will magically enhance all of their equipment if they place it on the ground and leave the room for seventy-seven seconds (61). Dungeon Masters are given a piece of secret narrative: as it turns out, "Two werewolves lair [in the Pearlescent Room]. They serve the Fire Temple... The crystal sheet of area 207 is also visible here if a covering of gray cloth is pulled aside. It is a lens of transformation, actually placed here for evil purposes by Iuz" (Ibid.). The Dungeon Master does not know what the characters will choose to do, and no public narrative until this time gives the players any indication of the correct course of action. Again, Dungeon Masters are prepared for

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many eventualities (the statistics of the werewolves are given, as is a description of their preferred way of dealing with adventurers), but an odd choice by the player characters could change the string of events following this moment. The changes that occur within the occluded narrative become the accepted reality and interpretation of the game's story. This reality becomes public narrative once players and Game Master accept the mutual interpretation. If players convince the werewolves to join their fight against evil, there may be a series of different interpretations of the situation (perhaps they are luring the party into a trap, perhaps they have truly mended their ways, or perhaps they are just using the party as protection until they can flee the temple themselves). Once the event recedes far enough into the past and players test their various interpretations, the "truth" of the werewolves becomes known, or public narrative.

I assume that the narrative nature of interactive fiction and *Temple of Elemental Evil* in particular are apparent, but J. Hillis Miller's essay, *Narrative*, is useful to define the elements of narrative I find important in creating community. At the most basic level, narrative requires "an initial situation, a sequence leading to change or reversal of that situation, and a revelation made possible by the reversal of situation" (75). *Temple of Elemental Evil*'s initial situation is now cliché in RPG. The characters are poor strangers entering an unfamiliar town, hoping for adventure and fame:

> Your party is now approaching the Village of Hommlet, having ridden up from lands of the Wild Coast. You are poorly mounted, badly equipped, and have no large sums of cash. In fact, all you have is what you wear and what you ride, plus the few coins that are hidden in purses and pockets. What you do possess in quantity, though, is daring and desire to become wealthy and famous…. You all hope, of course, to gain riches and make names for yourselves. (Gygax and Mentzer 7, boxed text)

The initial situation is public narrative, boxed at the start of the adventure's chapter in Hommlet. Characters are wide-eyed and hopeful, ready to take on what awaits. Over the course of the adventure, characters will discover an occluded narrative that revolves around a demoness attempting to gain control of the countryside from her prison in the defunct Temple of Elemental Evil. This in itself is not true narrative, however, just as my initial situation in *Monopoly* (sitting on Go with a pile of paper money) followed by a sequence in which I lose all of my money does not create a true narrative. Narratives need a chance for "revelation" – meaning, understanding, noesis, or other synonym – to stem directly out of that sequence which alters the initial situation. Revelation is more difficult to track, so it shall sit on the back burner for now.

Miller's definition expands on the initial situation by noting that there must be "some use of personification whereby character is created out of signs" (75). As any table-top RPG's first order of business is character creation, using a sheet of paper and some standard symbols or statistics, this qualification is assumed. However, the final quality of narrative is the same trait which makes a riddle solvable, which gives revelation an entry point: "some patterning or repetition of key elements, for example, a trope or system of tropes, or a complex word… there must be some form of narrative rhythm modulating that trope or word" (Ibid.). Players are assumed to play the same characters throughout a campaign (a term borrowed from multiple-battle wargame scenarios). They encounter the same locales, the same non-player characters and the same types of monsters. Rhythm and modulation stem from gameplay, but they also come within the greater structure of the public narrative, what I refer to as a metanarrative[20], the combination of secret, public and occluded narratives that make up the whole of the story told by the players. However, rhythm alone (as a signifier of regularity and predictability) does not make a satisfying "immersive play experience" (Mona 26). Moreover, the various signs encountered

[20] Borrowed from the term "metaplot," describing the semi-secret narrative of White Wolf's *World of Darkness* games. See Section III.

by players carry their own narratives (cf. Rufus and Elmo), and the three types of narration make a single rhythm difficult to spot as the story progresses.

With competing but complementary plotlines, "rhythm" is a poorer word choice than another musical term, "harmony." *Temple of Elemental Evil* is designed to tell the story of a region's fight against corruption. Characters taking care of a nearby bandit problem (Part I) notice a path that "continues past the ruins for many miles—seven leagues, in fact, to Nulb," a small town that provides support to the Temple (21). There is no repetition to signify rhythm, but player-characters exploring Nulb discover "5-30 actual brigands are in Nulb, and turn out if their leaders see the situation [opportunity to rob the player-characters] as lucrative enough for their participation" (30). By the time characters discover that the owner of an inn in Nulb is selling slaves to the Temple (47), one harmonic cycle is complete; the bandits that troubled the roads around Hommlet were tied to the Temple of Elemental Evil! This narrative sequence takes place like a persistent bass-line beneath adventures into the Temple itself (largely unrelated to the bandits), errands for the inhabitants of Hommlet and Nulb, and personal development for each of the player-characters.

Where readers find the rhythm of Joseph Campbell's "Heroic Cycle"[21] in adventure stories like Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, players will find harmony in *Temple of Elemental Evil* through a set of clues laid out in the adventure book. Dungeon Masters are encouraged to introduce the following poem "at a convenient point," implying that basic understanding of *kairos* in story structure ought to be instinctive in many Dungeon Masters (though suggestions for a "convenient point" are listed).

> The Two united, in the past, / a Place to build, and spells to cast. / Their power grew, and took the land / and people round, as they had planned.

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[21] See Campbell, Joseph. *Hero with a Thousand Faces*. (1949).

A key without a lock they made / of gold and gems, and overlaid / with spells, a tool for men to wield / to force the powers of Good to yield.

But armies came, their weapons bared, / while evil was yet unprepared. / The Hart was followed by the Crowns / and Moon, and people of the towns.

The Two were split; one got away / but She, when came the judgment day, / did break the key, and sent the rocks / to boxes four, with magic locks.

In doing so, She fell behind / as He escaped. She was confined / among Her own; her very lair / became her prison and despair.

The Place was ruined, torn apart / and left with chains around the heart / of evil power—but the key / was never found in the debris.

He knows not where She dwells today. / She set the minions' path, the way / To lift Her Temple high again / With tools of flesh, with mortal men.

Many now have gone to die / in water, flame, in earth, or sky. / They did not bear the key of old / that must be found—the orb of gold… (Gygax and Mentzer 44).

Even in its entirety, the poem falls far short of Keats; however, the suggestions for a "convenient point" imply player-characters should have discovered the demoness Zuggtmoy and the demigod Iuz' involvement in the Temple of Elemental Evil (for instance, they should have encountered the Pearlescent Room mentioned above, which is inhabited by werewolves claiming to serve Iuz, 61). The poem is more than a simple narrative. It serves as a riddle. Montfort notes that all interactive fiction takes the form of riddle in the sense that a puzzle often blocks the way to the steps in the narrative, and that "'Riddle' comes from the Anglo-Saxon 'raedan' – to advise, guide or explain; hence, a riddle serves to teach by offering a new way of seeing" (*Twisty* 4). Both observations are true here. The Temple of Elemental Evil is more than a dungeon full of monsters and traps meant to test player ingenuity. The riddle-poem introduces the broken

alliance of two evil entities and an artifact necessary to destroy the Temple, keeping that alliance broken. A new "way of seeing" the adventure returns us to the first qualification for narrative we left behind: the state of revelation. Although revelation and "way of seeing" are synonymous (etymologically), that link only provides grounds for this argument, not proof.

For proof, we check the adventure pudding. If it is assumed that characters have entered the Pearlescent Room mentioned earlier, then they should at least have a hint of Iuz and Zuggtmoy's history with the Temple[22], making the first and third stanzas clear. The fifth stanza's reference to "confine[ment]" may not be entirely clear yet, but if it is understood that "He" is Iuz and "She" is Zuggtmoy, cautious players will have been implicitly advised that the demoness is stuck somewhere within the Temple. Full harmony does not appear until much later, as characters discover the meaning of stanza eight in the fourth floor of the Temple's dungeon – portals to other dimensions controlled by Zuggtmoy, called elemental nodes:

> If player characters venture into the nodes on their own accord,… they may suffer further defeat and even entrapment therein. If they have not received the special poem-clue (described at the introductory notes to Dungeon Level One), review that information and select a method for introducing it. If players ignore the fairly explicit instructions in the poem,… they will probably blunder into the nodes unprepared. (Gygax and Mentzer 95)

The "fairly explicit instructions" are the stanza "Many now have gone to die / in water, flame, in earth, or sky. / They did not bear the key of old / that must be found—the orb of gold" (Ibid. 44). The parenthetical note betrays interactive fiction's most common form of violating the riddle's definition. Dungeon Masters are told very early that the poem must be made available to the

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[22] Dungeon Masters are treated to a secret narrative explaining the construction of the temple as Zuggtmoy's plan to gain cultists, which translates to divine power. Her reach exceeded her grasp, however, as the cult grew large enough to attract the attention of neighboring Good nations, who crushed the Temple exterior in an attempt to destroy her (28-29).

player-characters before some or all of the signified elements are known, so the riddle inherent to the poem does not contain the clues for its own solution. Though characters might discover the nodes before the "orb of gold" (a special artifact hidden within the Temple), the lack of harmony between the competing narratives is meant to be a guide to steer players towards another "path of events," to invoke Costikyan. Even though a mistake on the players' part can result in the end of the story, the game's desirability means allowing that option to exist.

The mutability of the narrative from campaign to campaign stemming from each Dungeon Master's method to revealing elements like the poem returns the discussion to Miller's third criterion, the necessity of some modulation of tropes. But, active modulation is not possible for the skilled Dungeon Master, as s/he was told from the beginning to "Play [all non-player character roles] to the hilt. Do it with flair and wit. Be fair both to the characters and to yourself…. But temper your actions with disinterest in the eventual outcome" (Gygax and Mentzer 5). Although the Dungeon Master reveals the narrative as player-characters progress, s/he does not dictate the narrative after that opening public narration of the characters entering Hommlet. In fact, the 3rd edition *Dungeon Master's Guide* gives four types of story for "bad structure," three of which are centered on telling a story rather than creating a situation that must be resolved by the players (100). All three are solved by ensuring "Players… always feel as though what they choose to do matters," by "letting the [player-characters] do the work," and by defeating even smaller challenges "on their own" rather than letting a non-player character or trick of narrative do it for them.

Small Communities and Good Narratives

This particular mode of storytelling – interactive – is what creates community. *The Temple of Elemental Evil* is more than a call-and-response narrative, and it is even an expansion beyond *Choose Your Own Adventure* tales. I have already noted the correlation between

Dungeons and Dragons' growth from wargaming and the self-help/small-group movements' growth from the Civil Rights era. Putnam notes another correlation between the modern United States' loss of nationwide social capital (focusing on civic engagement) and a similar loss in the Gilded Age at the end of the nineteenth century. In the same time, just before the twentieth century's boom in civic engagement, fraternal organizations erupted from a little over ten percent of adult men in the late 1890s to over thirty percent in 1910 (Putnam 388-389). He notes that "fraternalism represented a reaction against the individualism and anomie of this era of rapid social change, asylum from a disordered and uncertain world. Fraternal groups provided both material benefits… and social solidarity and ritual. Mutual aid, resting on the principle of reciprocity… was a core feature of the groups" (389). It may be a stretch, but Putnam's analysis indicates that fraternal orders provided a "substitute for other intimate ties that have been weakened in [a] fragmented society" (152). The need for regular "social ritual" and reciprocation seems to be a major cause in these orders' growth. Likewise, the keys to running a successful *Dungeons and Dragons* game lie in such ritual and reciprocation. The "good structure" guidelines in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* are simply providing the players with choices that "have significant impact on what happens next," varied experiences that take advantage of the different abilities of every player-character, and the narrative arc (rising action, climax, resolution) emblematic of a good story (99).

What is most interesting about this list of traits is the subtle tie to "bad structure" on the following page and all of the traits' links to Putnam's perceived value of fraternal organizations a century ago. Because the action is always up to the characters, a narrative arc is difficult to maintain. If a group of player-characters understood the riddle-poem as a reference to two incredibly powerful, evil entities that they must defeat, the group could just as easily progress with the adventure as pack their bags and move to a more peaceful locale. Yes, the narrative's

introduction informed the party that they were "poorly mounted, badly equipped, and [had] no large sums of cash….What [they] do possess in quantity, though, is daring and desire to become wealthy and famous" (Gygax and Menzter 7), but that desire is tempered by the normal player's instinct to protect his/her character. The players can always decide to take up a safer profession, but the rules of reciprocity demand that they continue. Becoming a real-estate developer in a fantasy world is not likely to provide varied and exciting experiences, nor will it take advantage of every character's abilities. Although the choice would have significant impact on what comes next, in order to achieve a meaningful and entertaining narrative, the player-characters must submit to the events that create a rising and falling action, trusting that the Dungeon Master will not leave them to be spectators of his/her predetermined story. Reciprocity creates the social ritual of the game itself: players submit to encounters with monsters, traps and malicious townsfolk in the interest of modulating the various tropes of the game with their Dungeon Master (who is just playing the parts of the signs encountered), and the Dungeon Master may only tell his/her narrative as s/he motivates the players to uncover it.

Section III: Thicker Than Water: *Vampire: The Masquerade* Binds Communities through Shared Values

The *Temple of Elemental Evil* worked with three types of narrative – Public, Occluded, and Secret – to create a community at the table. Players led their characters from a glorified vigilance mob keeping the roadways clean of ruffians to a group of veritable heroes responsible for saving the region from another plunge into demonic control. However, not all heroes are appreciated, and the world of RPGs would come under fire during the era of *Dungeons and Dragons* largest growth for potentially corrupting the minds of its players, but they did so with the aid of spells, hexes and deities unknown to major religious institutions. While *Dungeons and*

Dragons worked to create bonding social capital amongst its players, interactive fiction suffered a break in its bridging capital with the rest of society[23]. Several years after *Temple of Elemental* was released, White Wolf Publishing formed in central Georgia, releasing its flagship game, *Vampire: The Masquerade* (hereafter, *Vampire*). Where *Dungeons and Dragons* came with the implicit purpose of challenging players to imagine fantastic battles and puzzles (Mona 26-27), *Vampire*'s creators answered Storytellers' potential concerns with killing immoral player-characters with "That's the point, after all. What is it to be human? Vampires are just a literary exaggeration to explore this question" (Boe 85). *Vampire* still works to create a community at the table with the same narrative devices *Temple of Elemental Evil* took advantage of, but it was created after and during a social upheaval that forced it to widen its community formation.

Where *Dungeons and Dragons* is packaged primarily as a rule-set for adventure games (cf. Mona 28-29), White Wolf's *Vampire* is a functional narrative with a rule-set. The differentiation seems minor on the surface, but *Vampire*'s use of a metanarrative (a persistent narrative that an individual series of games takes place within) reinforces notions of a player's place within a larger society. White Wolf's "World of Darkness" stemmed from games based around role-play, improvisational acting, and gothic/noir-punk. *Vampire* is no exception to this, as players discover within the first few pages of the main book[24], the only tool needed to run or play the game:

> The world of *Vampire: The Masquerade* is not our own… Superficially, the World
> of Darkness is like the "real" world we all inhabit. The same bands are popular,
> violence still plagues the inner city, graft and corruption infest the same

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[23] The stereotype of the RPG player as a recluse with little to no social skill survives long after this period. Many see this as a badge of honor, leading to the success of films like Dead Gentlemen Productions's *Gamers* (2002), which focuses on a *Dungeons and Dragons* group, and the ongoing web-series *The Guild* (2007-current), which focuses on groups playing an online RPG that only different enough from *World of Warcraft* to avoid lawsuit.

[24] Unless otherwise noted, all *Vampire* citations come from the 1999 Revised Edition book. I have not been able to obtain a copy of the first edition core book, printed in 1991.

governments, and society still looks to the same cities for its culture. The World of

Darkness has a Statue of Liberty, an Eiffel Tower and a CBGB's. More present

than in our world, though, is the undercurrent of horror – our world's ills are all

the more pronounced in the World of Darkness. Our fears are more real. Our

governments are *more* degenerate. Our ecosystem dies a bit more each night. And

vampires exist. (Rein-Hagen et al. 28)

Save for thematic and supernatural tweaks, the game world contains the narrative all players

know already. A *Vampire* game could easily be set in Seattle, Washington, in 2011. Barack

Obama is still the president, and the state of Washington is under a budget crisis. The gothic-

punk tweaks represent the individual Storyteller's (Game Master's) emphasis on horror; the

budget crisis might present itself through cuts in public transit and police budgets, leading to a

greater street crime rate. Except where important for the supernatural denizens and their origins,

however, the historical narrative of the world is the same as the players know. Also, as a seeming

afterthought, there are vampires in this game.

The real changes occur somewhere around Genesis 4. Vampires in the world of darkness

count their lineage from Caine (now sporting a stylish "e" at the end of his traditional spelling),

cursed with eternal life after slaying his brother Abel. This is assumed to be common knowledge

among player characters, making it a Public Narrative. However, the details get murky between

the curse and the present day. It is known that Caine created several other vampires, who in turn

created more. During the period of the world's history concurrent with Genesis 6, a great flood

washed over the Earth in the story of Noah, forever segregating characters into the godlike

antagonists called "Antediluvians" (literally, "before the flood") and younger characters

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Embraced[25] over the following millennia. This "most widely accepted history of the Kindred [vampires]" (53) is told over a three-page span of the core book. This history is also sandwiched within the introductory chapter, between a long description of the major players in the modern setting (beginning with the passage above) and a short discussion of what characters should expect their game-play to look like.

Incidentally, much of the general knowledge covered in those first thirty pages is irrelevant. A starting character is just as likely to know as much about the world as you or I stumbling into it – without purchasing specific traits at character creation, starting characters would be unaware of (or disbelieve) any accounts of werewolves, ghosts or fairies (52-53), nor would they know that Clan Tzimische "practice[s] a 'fleshcrafting' Discipline" to terrifying ends (48). So long as the player understands the meanings behind the dots[26] on his/her character sheet, the game could just as easily begin with a monologue from the Storyteller, "You are all sitting in a nightclub in Seattle, when a young boy, very out of place and too young to be there, approaches you with an object wrapped in an old sweater…"[27] Although the setting and motivations of the game are very different, the design hearkens back to Gary Gygax's and Dave Arneson's 1974 introduction to *Dungeons and Dragons*, "The most extensive requirement [of the game] is <u>time</u>. The [Game Master] will have to have sufficient time to meet the demands of his players" (qtd. in Mona, 27, underscore in original). Much of *Vampire* is requires exactly that: so long as players

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[25]Turned into vampires. That vampires are "Embraced" is idiosyncratic to the setting. Most vampire stories prefer the terms "turned" or "made." The traditional terms each imply very different views and would not be appropriate for the deeply personal horror stories that the game attempts to tell. To "turn" just implies a change of direction at the hands of another. To "make" a vampire mandates a creator/creation relationship; since Caine's damnation is founded upon a creation usurping a creator's power, this is also unacceptable. "Embrace," meaning to "hold close" as well as "to become one with" is acceptable because the progeny can overtake their sires, but they will always share a bloodline.

[26] Character statistics in the Storyteller system are measured in dots, typically between zero and five (or one to five, when a zero is not possible, such as measures of physical health or willpower). This simpler method does not have the realism of *Dungeons and Dragons*' design, but it claims to allow smoother storytelling, as players do not need to consult tables, charts or calculations to determine the success of their actions.

[27] I owe credit to Jason Tornicchio of Richmond, VA, for this story opener. Half of the individuals playing the game had never played *Vampire* before, but were able to get involved in the story very quickly thanks to the narrative's design.

and the Storyteller have ample imagination and time for the game, they can create social capital.

The creators of the game at White Wolf Publishing gave the metanarrative of *Vampire* Biblical roots for many reasons. Not the least of which are gaping plot holes, to be addressed later. For its historical moment, though, sharing its genesis with Genesis imparted a character to the game that many role-playing games were missing, by popular account. Romance and fantasy, the backbone of most role-playing game narratives, depend upon the reader's ability to separate reality from fiction, then opt for fiction. For years before *Vampire*'s release, role-playing games had suffered a negative reputation, due in part to the escapism necessary to play the game but due primarily to the subject matter of the game.

Fictional Metanarrative as Response to Non-fictional News

In 1994, Paul Cardwell Jr., current chair of the Committee for the Advancement of Role-Playing Games, noted that "between 1979 and 1992, [the Associated Press and United Press International] carried 111 stories mentioning role-playing games" (Cardwell Jr. para. 2), and more than two-thirds of those articles were "anti-game," based on a simple ratio of positive to negative value judgments within the articles themselves. Cardwell further describes that that led to and fed from made for TV movies and documentaries like the Tom Hanks masterpiece, *Mazes and Monsters* (1982). Rather than recount the controversial history of role-playing games, I merely want to note that by the birth of *Vampire* in the early 1990s, role-playing games' mere existence had already created two communities. In 1979, a Michigan State University student, reportedly a fan of *Dungeons and Dragons* went missing, supposedly during a live-action RPG in the university's steam tunnels. The negative publicity following Dallas Egbert III's disappearance occurred in the same year that TSR Inc., publisher of *Temple of Elemental Evil*[28], quadrupled its previous year's sales rather than the customary doubling they had seen since the

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[28] *Temple*'s starting-seed adventure, *The Village of Hommlet*, was released in 1979. I have no further analysis of this as yet, but it is a coincidence worth noting.

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release of *Dungeons and Dragons* (Cardwell para. 14, referring to the 1989 interview with Gary Gygax in *Familiar*), signaling an enormous growth in the player community, while advocacy groups against the pastime grew in clout. I would not claim that players bought TSR's products because of Egbert's story; rather, this moment serves to show that two public sides were growing around a hobby that had seen its growth primarily within existing game-enthusiast groups. Attacks on RPGs would continue after this incident over the next decade.

By attaching their first game[29] to Genesis, White Wolf begins the process of side-stepping these attacks. Although vampires have long been studied as symbols of sexual power and deviancy, Joan Grassbaugh Forry's essay on the creatures succinctly describes the ways that vampiric "[beauty] standards often shapeshift to challenge cultural norms surrounding gender and sexuality" (238). Moreover, the overwhelming majority of vampires are symbols of immorality, because their very existence is predicated upon the blood of the living (rarely given with consent). In the social climate described by Caldwell, *Vampire*'s rise to popularity seems implausible. Its title page claims the game as "A Storytelling Game of Personal Horror" (17). The copyright page of the 1999 edition features a small panel titled "The Inevitable Disclaimer," implying a legal necessity after the heyday of attacks on role-playing games in the 1980s. One of the game's primary character traits is a Humanity score, a measure of an individual's sense of right and wrong. An inevitable personal story of each character is the slide away from conventional morality as the vampire becomes numb to the accidental deaths caused by his/her feeding habits. If *Dungeons and Dragons* came under fire for creating games where players tried to save the world from demonic invasions and corrupt governments, then surely this drama of debauchery should have faced tribulations.

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[29] Incidentally, White Wolf also attached their final game in the old World of Darkness, *Demon: the Fallen*, to Genesis as well. Many of the publishing group's games are tied to religious imagery or metaphysical philosophies, granting them a brand of cultural authority not seen in the typical dungeon crawl.

Caldwell's account ends too early to make solid claims regarding *Vampire*'s place in the public eye. However, David Waldron's 2005 analysis of the issue indicates that the combined failure of any legal action against role-playing games and the academic discrediting of the largest anti-game groups stemmed the tide of bad press around the time of *Vampire*'s release ("Role-Playing Games and the Christian Right" paras. 21-26). He does note one break in my line of thought, that "In pseudo-Gothic games, complex rules and a focus on violence are eschewed in favour of role-playing, characterisation and amateur thespianism. In these games, protagonists deal with overtly dark themes and have become the new target of media antagonism against RPGs, but this is done through linking them to the Goth subculture rather than describing them as gamers" (para. 40). Indeed, *Vampire* situates itself in the "gothic-punk" genre (Rein-Hagen et al. 28), and the World of Darkness attempts to underscore themes of decadence and alienation its publishers see in the world. The 1990s certainly saw widespread criticism and attack of the Goth culture, and perhaps it is fair to say White Wolf seized that opportunity to release their games under different scrutiny.

Game Design as Ethical Call-to-Action

Though that may be the case, the community of *Vampire* players certainly continued to find itself in a region under fire. Shifting scrutiny to the Goth culture only made the gamers a section of the target:

> Another important effect of the anti-RPG campaigns was the major shift in gaming culture towards an open embracing of Gothic-derived cultural symbols and increasingly subversive themes in games. Most prominent in this shift was the popularisation of *Vampire: The Masquerade* and *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* by the game publishing company White Wolf… These games directly dealt with issues considered taboo for RPGs during the 1980s such as sex, horror and the occult.

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> The Gothic games originating in the mid 1990s also openly embraced cultural forms… such as Paganism, homosexuality and occult, and recast them as oppressed and misunderstood victims pursued by a bigoted, fearful and ignorant public. (Waldron para. 39)

Waldron identifies three major taboos within the role-playing game genre, though his focus on the anti-game movement necessarily ignores complexities within individual games. In fact, the taboos listed above are trees within the forest of the game's true scope. Faith, sexual mores and taboo knowledge all roll into greater issues of morality[30]. Early in the chapter on character creation, players are asked to define their Virtues, splitting points between Conscience, Self-Control and Courage, yielding scores between one and five. Where *Dungeons and Dragons* provides an alignment and asks player-characters to stick with it, *Vampire* pushes characters to really think about the gray areas between good and evil:

> *Virtues* are very important to Vampire characters, for they provide the moral backbone for the characters and determine how readily they resist the temptations of the Beast. A character's emotional responses are very closely tied to her Virtues; these Traits define how well the character resists frenzy and how keenly she feels remorse. Virtues are essential in resisting the urges of the Beast and the Hunger, and more vampires lose points in their Virtues as they grow older and more callous.
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> A Vampire character has three Virtues. *Conscience* governs a character's sense of right and wrong, while *Self-Control* determines how readily she maintains her composure and contains her Hunger. *Courage* measures the character's gumption

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[30] Many of White Wolf's Storyteller games can be compared to morality exercises, excepting a few self-satire publications. The two most closely tied with Biblical stories, *Vampire* and *Demon* (cf. n. 29), focus on redemption after sin.

and ability to withstand the proximity of fire, sunlight and other things that vampires dead. (106)

The rating indicates the strength of the Virtue within the character – one dot of Conscience implies that the character is cold and unremorseful, while five dots would leave a character weeping with every transgression (like Aristotle, *Vampire*'s creators believe that virtues and vices are matters of magnitude rather than opposed forces). All are meant to control the Beast, an elemental force within all characters akin to the Freudian Id. The simplest measure of a character's Beast is his/her Humanity rating: "A Character's starting Humanity score equals the sum of her Conscience + Self Control Traits… too low a score indicates that the Beast lies in close proximity" (106). Whatever a character's goals, motivation or personality may be, morality is the common string running between all *Vampire* characters.

At this point, the author must come clean. I have always been fascinated by the moral struggles within role-playing games, and I have always seen role-playing games as a prime opportunity to test ethical and moral theories. Due to their imaginary nature, the games are still in the realm of thought experiment, but the game allows a complex narrative to weave itself around individual struggles to retain or challenge humanist moral frames. Although I could point to the Humanity trait's physical location on the character sheet (just below dead center, right next to the supernatural powers and ties to the mortal world), my love for *Vampire* finds its link in a small caption in the character creation chapter:

> *Vampire: The Masquerade* is fundamentally about coming to grips with one's monstrous nature and, hopefully, overcoming it. As such, we strongly encourage beginning players to select the Virtues of Conscience and Self-Control for their characters…. Conviction and Instinct are presented [with alternate moral paths]. If you decide that your character is *sufficiently inhuman* to warrant these Virtues,

and if the Storyteller permits you to take them, you may circle the appropriate

Virtues on the character sheet. Be warned that in taking these Virtues, you have

effectively designated your character as a monster. (106, my emphasis)

From the outset, all players making a character must pass through this moral gate. As Waldron

observed, complex rules and violent combat are "eschewed" in favor of improvisational acting

and character development (Waldron para. 40). Whatever else a player wants his/her character to

be – street thug, penitent priest, industrial baron, seeker of occult lore – there must be a decision

to start as a human or a monster, to grapple with the effects of removing one's self from the

mortality that makes human beings *human*. When the title page declares *Vampire* a game of

"Personal Horror," it refers to moral dilemma more than a struggle against ancient, alien

monstrosities (à la Lovecraft-inspired *Call of Cthulhu*), more than a struggle against an

arbitrarily evil demoness with lots of hitpoints and minions (à la *Temple of Elemental Evil*).

Horror arises at the moment when a player-character accidentally kills or is forced to kill another

being (or merely harm another, if the character's Humanity rating is still high enough), when the

character is asked to make a Conscience roll to see how s/he feels about the situation and a

failure indicates that, although s/he *should* feel bad about what just happened (perhaps even

wants to feel bad), s/he in fact feels nothing. Horror lies within our empathy with these

imaginary characters, as we see our own moral slides reflected. Hopefully, regular murders are

not the empathic link, but slides from youthful idealism into jaded adulthood are commonplace

to the point of cliché.

This horror is where community arises within *Vampire*'s narrative. Players are not

vampires and do not engage in acts that regularly endanger the lives of fellow human beings.[31]

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[31] The latter statement is made with the usual exceptions for other role-playing games, video games, and violent
television, movies and literature. These individuals are the unfortunate reality that "Bothered About Dungeons
and Dragons" used to stereotype the whole of the hobby, but they represent the group as much as Jared Loughner
represents Nietzsche fans.

Players do live within our real world, though. As the Occupy Wall Street movement gained strength at the end of 2011, the disparity between the "1%" and "99%" highlights an economic horror the World of Darkness implied was fictional. The disparity has grown so large that many are using the Gilded Age – an era of intense economic divide from the late nineteenth into the early twentieth century – to mark the split. I have already mentioned that Putnam used the same analogy ten years ago when *Bowling Alone* was published, but he also noted the ways in which community was built in spite of (or in response to) such conditions. "No period of economic distress in American history had been as deep and traumatic as the years from 1893 to 1897. On the other hand, that depression was followed by almost two decades of nearly uninterrupted growth" which gave Americans the tools to combat "crime, violence, disease, urban squalor, political corruption, even the growing inequalities of wealth and power" (370). The cities of the period were characterized by Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*, which Putnam summarizes as "industrial wastelands; centers of vice, poverty, and rampant disease; full of dank, crowded slums; corruptly administered" (373). Except for the vampires, Putnam's description closely echoes *Vampire*'s description of the World of Darkness: "violence still plagues the inner city, graft and corruption infest the same governments, and society still looks to the same cities for its culture… [O]ur world's ills are all the more pronounced in the World of Darkness. Our fears are more real. Our governments are *more* degenerate. Our ecosystem dies a bit more each night" (Rein-Hagen et al. 28).

Ultimately, the game is very player-character focused – after all, it is a "Storytelling Game of Personal Horror," which contrasts sharply with *Dungeons and Dragons* "Rules for Fantastic Medieval Wargames Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures" ("Men & Magic," Volume I of the original *Dungeons and Dragons*, qtd. in Mona 26). The three pages of creation mythos noted earlier are the extent of "official" Public Narrative for

the greater World of Darkness storyline. There are snippets of history and legend told from fictional character viewpoints scattered throughout the book. Each chapter begins with a one-page tidbit of story that is meant to highlight elements of the following pages: the chapter detailing vampiric bloodlines starts with a letter detailing several vampires of different bloodlines using their powers to track enemies of another line (63), while the character creation chapter begins with thoughts from an experienced vampire cleaning up the mess of its "binge eater" childe (99). The opening pages of the book are a short story detailing the first nights of vampiric existence for a newly Embraced childe[32], which primarily serves to inform players of the game's mood.

A Common Narrative

A narrative of *Temple of Elemental Evil*'s prevalence in the Greyhawk[33] *Dungeons and Dragons* setting does exist in the World of Darkness, however. Stories of Caine's earliest nights as a vampire occupy a little over one hundred pages in *The Book of Nod*, while every sourcebook for the World of Darkness gives a little detail about the world, though always from a specific individual's point of view (resulting in several contradictory accounts of the same events). The difficult task in reading this narrative is the magnitude of the undertaking. *The Temple of Elemental Evil* is an adventure that takes over two hundred pages to tell in detail (including statistics for creatures and descriptions of the dungeon itself). *Vampire: The Masquerade* is a narrative told in hundreds of books published over thirteen years, giving the material a status somewhere between Public and Occluded narrative.

Because so much of the narrative is almost always told from limited points of view – even *The Book of Nod* "is not designed to be the definitive book on the nature of vampires and their founder, Caine" (Chupp and Greenberg 4) – it is difficult to say what the "true" story of

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[32] The Embraced vampire. The vampire who does the Embracing is called a Sire (gender neutral term).
[33] The default world for most *Dungeons and Dragons* publications.

history is (not to mention the compounding problem of overlapping narratives in all of the World of Darkness games). Even those three pages of creation mythos in the core book second guess themselves: "Skeptical Kindred have noted a lapse in the myth of Caine: If Caine's first childer are of the Second Generation[34], and thereby two steps removed from Caine, what, if anything, was the First Generation? Certainly, Caine himself is not… one step removed from himself" (56). Until 2004, there was no canonical narrative, owing in part to the system's Golden Rule. "[T]he most important rule of all, and the only real rule worth following: *There are no rules…* Think of this book as a collection of guidelines, suggested but not mandatory ways of capturing the World of Darkness in the format of a game" (195, emphasis in original). How aggravating, then, that the only canonical narrative is an adventure set in the apocalypse.

Gehenna was published to fulfill a promise. Since the first game books were published, Gehenna, taken from the Hebrew Gehinnom[35], has loomed on the horizon. The existence of vampires in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth generations (starting characters are thirteenth generation, unless they choose to begin at a disadvantage) are taken to be signs of Gehenna, along with other portents. Of course, apocalyptic and millennial hysterics read many events as signs of the coming doom, so it seemed as though White Wolf was merely taking advantage of the *zeitgeist* of the millennium's close. Even more aggravating is the fact that *Gehenna* features a small description at the bottom of the front cover: "A Time of Judgment Chronicle for *Vampire: The Masquerade*." Chronicle. Singular. However, the book contains four separate end-of-the-world stories to choose from.

Communities are founded upon shared history – note the development of immigrant communities in large cities. Language is a factor, but shared culture runs deep. The four

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[34] There are fifteen generations of vampires. Generations eight through thirteen are the most common starting points in modern nights, while fourteen and fifteen indicate flawed characters with blood so thin they are nearly mortal.

[35] A valley outside Jerusalem where followers of Babylonian and Canaanite sacrificed their children in fire. See 2 Chronicles 28and 33, Jeremiah 7 and 19, KJV.

scenarios offer a spread of possible stories that will fit the culture of any *Vampire* group, from intense personal horror and morality testing to an all out race across the world to avert the apocalypse. Given the book's opening from the creators' point of view, however, I will talk briefly about the chronicle that seems to fit the mood of the game as a whole, "Wormwood." This chronicle focuses on a slow loss of power among all vampires as a test from God to see if any are worth redemption. As the book's opening notes, "*Vampire* is the most tragic, at least at face value, among the games in the World of Darkness series… As such, *Vampire*'s end should evoke a significant sense of tragedy as well" (15). Since theatrical tragedy hinges upon character death as a result of personal flaws, it makes sense to use "Wormwood" as the characters who do not survive are meant to be punished because they do not fight their monstrous natures. Likewise, the introduction contains a short anecdote from a pair of game designers

> … imagining the End of the World involving the last vampire in it, sitting at a bar. He's one of the Fourth Generation, merely having a drink at the bar and wondering about his own fate… It's literally as if God turned His back on the "vampire experiment," writing it off as something that just didn't serve a purpose in the modern world any longer. (15)

The three stories following "Wormwood" all focus on epic, world-wide stories of vampires attempting to save themselves in the flashiest ways possible. Thirteen years of *Vampire* publications defined vampiric existence as one of stalking predators, wolves who know that a spooked herd could stampede them to death at a moment's notice.

"Wormwood" is a tale that focuses entirely upon the players: non-player characters exist to show that the story exists, but the true test is in the way player-characters weather the storm. The Public Narrative of the tale is left to the Storyteller in the same fashion as the poem-riddle in the *Temple of Elemental Evil*: as each detail becomes appropriate for the group, relay it. For this

reason, much of the story is also an Occluded Narrative. It should be made Public, but only through character action. The only differentiation from my earlier definition is that, in order for this story to work, the players and Storyteller must reciprocate each other's desire to see the tale unfold. The Storyteller cannot force the players into compliance by merely telling them that they enter the story's setting with a mind for salvation, as the opening of *Temple of Elemental Evil* did for characters entering Hommlet.

For forty nights, characters must remain within a small church in the city their game takes place in – God will not break his covenant with Noah, so he cannot send a second Great Flood to erase the sins of the world as he did with the earliest vampires. Instead, God sends a supernatural mist that drains the power of all vampires in creation, save those hiding in the church.

> This Gehenna is a morality play, and as such, it is heavily focused on issues pertaining to faith, humanity, conscience, willpower, self-control and courage. This ending replaces all the razzle-dazzle and concerns itself, fittingly, with the personal horror upon which this game was built in the first place. At its best, it offers Storytellers and players alike a final chance to examine what it truly means to be a vampire, to bear Caine's Curse and to perhaps even understand a little bit more about what it means to be human. (Boe et al. 44)

Although this description chooses to put focus upon character traits – humanity, conscience, willpower, self-control and courage – it does not capitalize them. The traits all along have signified the concepts that they named, but keeping the words in lower-case emphasizes the weight behind each of those concepts. For thirteen years, players may have been thinking of their characters' Self-Control primarily as the trait that kept them from frenzying. The lower-case de-emphasizes the notion that it is a trait, focusing instead on the fact that keeping the Beast under control is really an effort in self-control, for player and character. For forty nights, characters will

be unable to feed, bringing many close to death from simple starvation. To compound matters, the morality play features more than one act.

As characters hide within the church, they will be given a series of moral challenges. Simple "black and white moral dilemmas" will be laid in front of the characters: gun shots erupt from across the street or a young man climbs to the top of the bell tower to commit suicide (78-79). Characters can call 911 to save these mortals. "Gray moral dilemmas" will appear, in which there are no easy answers for salvation. Samples include a young woman who enters the church to attempt an abortion upon herself. When she botches the attempt, characters must decide whether to feed upon her because she is doomed anyway, attempt to save the mother by completing the abortion, or attempt to keep her alive and comfortable while calling 911 and risk exposing themselves (80). "No win" situations present themselves, in which characters have to choose between evil acts, as do "enigmatic dilemmas," in which there is no clear test of right and wrong (81-82). Storytellers are encouraged to pick or create eight scenarios to judge the characters' salvation, and on the forty-first dawn, the church collapses, exposing all vampires within to the sun. At this point, the virtuous become mortal again, while those who remained monstrous are to be destroyed without any chance of escape. "That might sound like a tall order, and it is, but if it weren't, it would denigrate the whole meaning of salvation and of God Himself, or at least the role he plays in this last *Vampire* tale" (Boe 85). Why forty nights in the first place? "The answer is as old as Abraham. God wishes those who are to be punished to fully understand why they must suffer" (54).

Although the game makes no overt gestures to blend anti- and pro-game communities, it does make the initial strides to paint itself as a something a little more complex than a fight between good and evil. The mother attempting an abortion, mentioned above, might be the most pronounced synecdoche of the inter-community conversation:

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One evening a young woman staggers into the church to seek shelter from the weather and the world outside. She is barely more than a teenager, and from her clothing and manner it is plain to see that she is probably the product of neglect and poverty. More important, however, is that she is pregnant, and she has come to this place in the hope of aborting her child, either by forcing a miscarriage or by performing a crude operation on herself. The misery and confusion that fills her is easy for any to see, and so are the signs of drug abuse and illness that haunt her watery eyes. Upon realizing that the church is not empty as she had hoped, the girl attempts to leave, but discovers that she has little strength left to do so, and she collapses upon the broken flagstones, praying that the strangers cause her no harm.

Do the characters recognize the futility of saving this doomed child and her unborn infant and sate their hunger instead? Do they try to help her terminate her pregnancy in the hope of saving the mother? Or do that just do what they can to make her comfortable for a while, and let fate determine what happens to her? (Boe 80)

There is no boxed narrative meant to be read aloud, but "misery and confusion" are as plain to see as "drug abuse and illness." This is not an entertaining scenario in any way, and even the first option declares any attempt to save the woman is futile. Does this violate the *Dungeon Master's Guide* for good and bad structure? It seems as though any choice the characters make will be moot – unless the characters have access to very specific abilities, the woman and/or her infant are probably going to die. But, the focus here is not on the outcome. "These scenarios [Gray Moral Dilemmas] force the characters to think carefully about their actions and the subsequent consequences. Such dilemmas are essential to being human" (Ibid.).

Depending on the reader's perspective, the expected course of play in this scenario should elate or disturb. What should follow is a very real discussion on the nature of this young woman's life, what she might have to gain or lose by surviving the night, and the nature of her original intention behind entering the church. This *is* a discussion about class, privilege and abortion during something meant to be entertainment. More importantly, the players are not the ones having the discussion. In any good role-playing situation, the characters are the actors for every situation. While I the player may not have had any moral qualms with the town of Nulb supporting bandits in *The Temple of Elemental Evil*, my character, a holy warrior of the righteous god Heironeous, would. While I the player might have certain feelings on the woman's situation, my character with a low Conscience score, middling Humanity and an age in triple digits will see things differently. This sample of the moral dilemmas expected to take place in a regular *Vampire* game only affects the players, but it serves to create bridging social capital by forcing players to routinely imagine and adopt different moral views. There is no easy scale of good and evil here, just actions taking place in a larger world and our views upon them. *Vampire* enforces notions of populism by putting several characters together who may be friends or allies but likely do not share the same morals or world view.

The metanarrative, then, works to blend communities. Where *Dungeons and Dragons* worked within Public, Occluded and Secret narratives to create communities at the table, *Vampire* is painfully conscious of its own attempt to cement community within humanity. For the creators at White Wolf, the purpose of the game all along has been to define "what [it is] to be human" (Boe 85) by placing ourselves in contrast to the inhuman monstrosities we play on Saturday nights. *Dungeons and Dragons'* narratives created community by showing players how they fit into a world made more explicit with the passage of time and adventure, but *Vampire* narratives create community by their profound lack of any explication. There is only the

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individual, his/her companions, and the management of the horrors of nightly existence.

Section IV: Our World, Your IP Address: The Table-Top Goes Online as EverQuest Ham-Handedly Weaves Narratives

Dungeons and Dragons' *Temple of Elemental Evil* and *Vampire: The Masquerade*'s *Gehenna* story built community through a pre-determined chain of events, but recent shifts in the RPG genre question this device's utility. The opening Public Narrative of the *Temple of Elemental Evil* told the players what their characters goals and motivations were from the outset – the bandits and demon queen were not revealed initially, but the need for adventure and treasure was clear from the beginning. The muddled Public/Occluded Narrative behind *Vampire* and its *Gehenna* stories created a world where characters' nightly existence would bring moral dilemmas and personal growth over time, regardless of external forces. However, in the move from small-group gaming around the dinner table to large-group gaming over the internet, the presence of these narratives seems to have diminished, almost to the point of imperceptibility, leaving these games in a state Costikyan calls a "puzzle" (*I Have No Words* 10) or "skill-and-action [game]" (11).

Some of this is an effect of design, modality and technology. Montfort's discussion of early, computer-based interactive fiction (from the 1970s through the late 1980s) looked at text based adventures. Much of the interactive fiction in this era was heavily text dependent – even the early *Final Fantasy* games required a substantial amount of reading to understand how the game was to be beaten (or how the riddle could be solved). As technology improved, however, electronic RPGs have become much more image dependent, changing the nature of the narrative behind the game.

Verant Interactive's 1999 release, *EverQuest*, was one of the earliest, successful

massively-multiplayer[36] online RPGs (MMORPG). As noted earlier, the game is still operating

today, albeit at reduced numbers, and Sony Online Entertainment (the parent company of Verant)

continues to update the game for subscribers. It and Blizzard Entertainment's 2004 release, *World

of Warcraft*, provide standards with which many MMORPGs are compared. Both games have

made astonishing claims about the communities available to players. A recent *World of Warcraft*

advertisement claimed 11 million players[37], and at the time I began playing *EverQuest* in 2000,

every server[38] managed to accommodate around two thousand players at a given time. This

figure, however, only included those online at any given time, and the practice of announcing

how many players are online ceased around 2004 when it became apparent that popular games

were losing subscribers to each other. Actual server populations, though, were much higher than

those numbers, and each player was allowed up to eight characters per server (only one could be

played at a time). This is a far cry from the character-development focus of *Vampire*, which

insisted that "As a player of *Vampire: The Masquerade*, you must create a character…. Like a

character in a novel or movie, this character becomes a protagonist in the stories you tell. Rather

than making up a new character for each session, you create a single richly detailed character,

then assume the role of that character every time you play" (Rein-Hagen 100). Where *Vampire*'s

reign in the RPG world focused on intense development of a single character, *EverQuest*

returned to the introduction of the 1977 box-set of *Dungeons and Dragons*:

> Each player creates a character or characters who may be dwarves, elves,
>
> halflings or human fighting men, magic-users, pious clerics or wily thieves. The
>
> characters are then plunged into an adventure in a series of dungeons, tunnels,

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[36] The difference between this term and the earlier Mutli-User Dungeon (MUD), like a cooperative game of *Diablo* over an internet connection, is the number of players involved. The MMO tag implies that there are several hundred or thousand players interacting at a time.

[37] Banner ad at Kongregate.com throughout November, 2011.

[38] Roughly equivalent to a game world. With a few exceptions, each server is identical in the game it offers players, but high populations are a strain on the host company. After a year of existence, *EverQuest* boasted about twenty servers, and this number remained constant over the next seven or eight years.

secret rooms and caverns…. The dungeons are filled with fearsome monsters,

fabulous treasure, and frightful perils. As the players engage in game after game

their characters grow in power and ability: the magic users [sic] learn more magic

spells, the thieves increase in cunning and ability, the fighting men, halflings,

elves and dwarves, fight with more deadly accuracy and are harder to kill. (Basic

Set, qtd. in Mona 29)

Even *EverQuest*'s slogan, "You're in our world now!" hearkens back to the image of a Dungeon

Master creating his/her own fantastic setting and adventures for players to participate in. The

game's design followed the box-set's declaration of the adventurers' purpose, to explore

dungeons and fantastic wilds defeating monsters and taking their treasure.

A Cacophony of Storytelling

Unfortunately, the notion of narrative harmony was lost in the cacophony of a game

world this size (travel from one "end" to the other took several hours). In 1999, there were

twelve playable races in *EverQuest*, compared to *Dungeons and Dragons'* four in 1977, and

characters began their adventuring lives in any of fourteen starting cities scattered across the

fictional world of Norrath. With limited exceptions, each city was a racial home, and the few

extras were the "other" starting point if a race had wildly incompatible religious or philosophical

ideals. Players could pick between thirteen classes or professions and seventeen

religious/philosophical outlooks. In the early years of the game, it was entirely possible to play

from creation to the maximum character level without travelling more than twenty minutes from

one's starting point. Despite some engaging narratives mixed in with the "hack and slash" game-

play, the game's title quickly became a joke to the player community: "do you 'Ever Quest?"

For a player, the balancing act between narrative and game is clear from the game's start.

The three images below are a progression of entry points for RPGs. Figure 1 is the opening

Public Narrative from *Temple of Elemental Evil*. Figure 2 is an approximation for the starting

point of a Human Paladin in the city of Freeport in *EverQuest* during its initial years. Figure 3 is

the current starting point for a Human Paladin in Freeport, altered to make the character's initial

motivation more clear.

Your party is now approaching the Village of Hommlet, having ridden up from lands of the Wild Coast. You are poorly mounted, badly equipped, and have no large sums of cash. In fact, all you have is what you wear and what you ride, plus the few coins that are hidden in purses and pockets. What you do possess in quantity, though, is daring and desire to become wealthy and famous. Thus your group comes to Hommlet to learn. Is this indeed a place for adventurers to seek their fortunes? You all hope, of course, to gain riches and make names for yourselves. The outcome of this is uncertain, but your skill and daring, along with a good measure of luck, will be the main ingredients of what follows, be it for weal or woe.

   The small community at the crossroads is a completely unknown quantity. What is there? Who will be encountered? Where should you go? These are your first explorations and encounters, so chance may dictate as much as intelligence. Will outsiders be shunned? Are the reports true—is the whole community engaged in evil practices? Are the folk here bumpkins, easily duped? Does a curse lay upon those who dare to venture into the lands which were once the Temple's? All of these questions will soon be answered.

Figure 2: Hommlet Public
Narrative

Figure 3: Original Starting Location

Figure 4: New Starting Location

It is clear that the online environment has not eschewed text entirely, but it is certainly lacking

direction. The chat box (lower left corner of Figures 2 and 3) features a welcome message, and

most communication is done through this medium – attacks and damage dealt or taken,

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communication with other players or non-player characters, spellcasting and environmental or climatic events. What it lacks is the opening gusto of Figure 1. My Paladin has entered Freeport, but to what end? Figure 3, a later version of the opening screen, features a Hints and Tips box as its only addition, but its contents are limited to instructions for movement, interacting with non-player characters or ways to find quests. Searching through the character's inventory reveals food, water and a note instructing the character to find a specific non-player character (the armored individual in Figure 3) and ask for further instruction, which is generally a variation of "kill monsters until you collect items, then return to me."[39]

Returning to Miller's definition of Narrative, then, we begin with a problem. The first qualification is that "there must be… an initial situation, a sequence leading to a change or reversal of that situation, and a revelation made possible by the reversal of situation" (Miller 75). In *The Temple of Elemental Evil*, the initial situations of each possible tale were Public Narratives, and the sequences leading to change and revelation were Occluded Narratives, made possible by a Secret Narrative that the Dungeon Master used to ensure the world consistently made sense. The reciprocity between players and Dungeon Master is what made the Occluded Narrative and revelation possible, and the interplay modulated the recurring tropes and signs to fulfill Miller's second and third qualifications. But, *EverQuest* and its MMORPG counterparts have no Dungeon Master, only a set of algorithms that exist only to process varying commands (and I hope no Game Master ever finds him/herself reduced to such a role). In order to create an adventure narrative that qualifies as "good structure" by the *Dungeons and Dragons Dungeon Master's Guide* (cf. Sec. II), there must be reciprocity between player-character actions and the controller of the game world's narrative.

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[39] It must be noted that in 2005, after World of Warcraft's release, all starting characters now begin as slaves in a mine otherwise unconnected with any narrative in the game. Characters can leave any time they like, returning to a point analogous to Figure 3 for their particular race/class/philosophy combination. The purpose is to provide a tutorial similar to the one I will discuss in Section V.

Greg Costikyan's differentiation between games and stories is the most illuminating here. Internal goals, endogenous meaning, personal motivation and the value of struggle (rather than competition) are what create games and contribute to Community within this branch of interactive fiction. Behind each of these traits lies a series of interwoven narratives. Although my character could advance through the game by slaying monsters, treating the game as nothing more than a skill-building exercise, Costikyan notes that his own experiences with RPG and *EverQuest* need more:

> As a roleplayer, there are times when I've been bored – when my character has been sitting around an inn with other PCs, arguing about what to do. In MUD[40]s, there are times when I've felt bored at the prospect of going out and killing more gnolls, and wondered what else there was to do.

> What's going on here? Just this: these moments result from the fact that goals aren't explicit in MUDs or RPGs. The goal of character advancement is implicit, but at times that isn't enough. I'm trying to find the next interesting thing to do; I'm searching for a goal.

> In other words: The game is failing me. (*I Have No Words* 14)

"Killing more gnolls," or whatever monster is handy, refers to the MMORPG process of "grinding," performing a mindless task repetitively until some goal (usually advancing a level) is reached. As in the regular denotation of the word, grinding results in slowly eroding a complex thing into its component parts. "Killing gnolls" is necessary to complete the "Zimel's Blades" story in *EverQuest*, but only when embedded in other narratives of racial essentialism and

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[40] Multi-User Dungeon. An early online spin on RPGs which, at its core, substituted an online message board or chat room for the traditional table-top. Games like *Diablo* (PC, 1996) added a graphical interface, but the focus of the game rarely deviated from "assemble a group of companions and clear the dungeon of monsters."

redemption. "Grinding gnolls" takes away that complexity, instead looking at gnolls as a monster with so many hitpoints that yields a set range of treasure and character advancement. Although Costikyan notes that character advancement is an inherent motivation for players (13), the activities to merely advance are not essentially different at any two points of the game. Each level requires slaying monsters[41], and before long, characters must band together to slay monsters. But, even if the necessity of grouping could help build Community, there must be narrative motivating players to get to that point.

The inherent problem in creating this narrative is the nature of the MMORPG. Costikyan declares that "players cannot be permitted to make real and meaningful changes to the game world" (*Games, Storytelling, and Breaking the String* 9) because all effects on the narrative and the game world must be accounted for by the developers (who occupy the role of Game Master through their codes and algorithms). If the adventuring group in *The Temple of Elemental Evil* had been composed of characters looking for personal gain rather than moral righteousness, they might have burned the town of Nulb to the ground for aiding their greater enemy in the Temple itself. The Dungeon Master would have to account for Nulb's disappearance from the game, but this action would only affect the half-dozen people playing the game. If my Paladin in *EverQuest* ever had the capacity to join a group laying siege to Grobb[42], home of the evil Trolls, destroying it in the process, the developers at Sony Online Entertainment would need to change the game world for several thousand other players – some of whom play Trolls themselves!

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[41] While it is possible to do some quests and non-murderous tasks to advance a character, the ability to do those tasks is predicated on the ability to slay monsters. Few MMORPGs have ever tried to do away with this mechanic.

[42] This event did take place in 2003 to herald the *Legacy of Ykesha* update to the game. The city returned to Troll control several years later, partly because of the difficulty in maintaining narrative continuity in Troll quests.

Voices in the Chorus: Community Becomes the Means for Experiencing Narrative

Reciprocity would be difficult, if not impossible, to maintain under this setting. Both Narrative and Community begin at a disadvantage in the MMORPG setting as a result of game design. The only way that this genre avoids heading down the unfortunate path of interface mastery – where advancing through the game is just a result of how well one understands the mechanics of slaying monsters for experience (*I Have No Words* 11) – is through the seeming good-will of the players themselves, supporting linear "mini-stories" of quests by encountering them in unique orders and participating in them in idiosyncratic ways (*Games, Storytelling, and Breaking the String* 10). Because reciprocity with the Game Master is impossible to achieve, players are forced to create it between themselves.

It is this support that gives so much strength to Community in *EverQuest* and many other MMORPGs. Costikyan contrasts *EverQuest* to its contemporary and primary competitor (whose following diminished much faster after *EverQuest*'s inception) in the early years of MMORPGs, *Ultima Online*, by noting one seemingly insignificant difference: *Ultima Online* allowed players to attack other players, while *EverQuest* did not.

> In both games, characters almost always have more valuable stuff on them than monsters of equivalent power. Thus, in *Ultima Online,* the quickest way to advance is to kill other player-characters. You get all those weapons and armor and magic items.
>
> As a result, *Ultima Online* is, under most circumstances, a Hobbesian war of all against all, the game filled with a palpable fear as people flee from one another, trying to avoid potentially deadly encounters. In *EverQuest,* by contrast, players frequently stop to help each other out, strike up conversations with random

passers-by and in general behave with a degree of social solidarity. (*I Have No Words* 20)

Changes in game structure change player-character actions. *Ultima Online*'s unlimited freedom led to "intense and personal" rewards for player-versus-player struggle (Ibid. 21), and there were few, if any, punishments for being a murderer and a thief. This stands in stark contrast to the game creator's previous *Ultima* games (single player RPGs), which "made careful, conscientious efforts to guide players into prosocial, moral paths" (Ibid.). As an early game to break the text-primary nature of online, multiplayer RPGs and MUDs, perhaps it was just an oversight, a freedom granted to players out of a belief that rampant anti-social behavior would not be the norm. Although it might be said that each game stemmed from a different belief about what players would do in a world with so few repercussions for anti-social behavior, these two types of antagonistic forces (Environmental in *EverQuest* or Player in *Ultima Online*) created two different kinds of Community in each setting.

Costikyan notes that *Ultima Online*'s ever-present danger led to Communities based out of shared strength. "Guilds," player organizations analogous to fraternal orders, formed like gangs. "[After] all, it serves to create virtual communities more effectively, since you have a much better chance of surviving if you join with a group of others" (Ibid. 20). Like Putnam's fraternal orders of the early twentieth century, the guilds of *Ultima Online* are a tool to survival, protection against the many foes of daily life. The guilds of *EverQuest*, on the other hand, have a different foe to band against. Players "are expected to *cooperate* with each other, at least under most circumstances, in mutual support of [their] goals. [They] have no 'opponent,' at least not in the form of other players. There is no direct competition among players…. Monsters and non-player characters (NPCs) [provide the struggle], for the most part. Your characters go 'adventuring' together; the adventure is a plot skeleton, a series of possible encounters and

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rewards" (*I Have No Words* 15). Struggle is the community builder in both situations, but *EverQuest* gains its strength through the fact that a player-versus-environment struggle demands a narrative for it to make sense, while *Ultima Online* was just an exercise in kill-or-be-killed. Engaging storylines are difficult to discover when a character is constantly dodging attacks.

But, there is a differentiation between guilds and an adventuring group. A guild is a permanent organization that a character is associated with but not always interacting with, very much like a fraternal order in structure. An adventuring group is often ad-hoc, formed for a short lived purpose of completing a single quest or clearing a specified area of monsters. In Putnam's terminology, an *EverQuest* guild is a *schmoozing* institution like a social fraternity. The members may organize large events for the betterment of the game world or themselves, but they are ultimately a group of like-minded friends. An adventuring group, on the other hand, is a *maching* structure because the individuals have come together with a specific purpose to accomplish.

But, it would almost seem like both structures and Community in general is superfluous given my explanation of *EverQuest*. When the first level Paladin noted above found the individual requiring his note, he was prompted through the following conversation[43]:

> Valeron Dushire says, 'I am Sir Valeron Dushire, leader of the order of the
> Knights of Truth. If your soul shines with purity and strength, I urge you to join
> our order. The might of Mithaniel Marr stands behind all who join. Soon that
> might will help us free this city from the tyranny of the [Freeport Militia.]
>
> You say, 'Who are the Freeport Militia?'

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[43] In more recent games, like *World of Warcraft*, quests are given by non-player characters with symbols floating above their heads. Players click on them and are given a text box with a short background of the quest and the details for completion. They may click an "accept" or "decline" button on the text box. In 1999, *EverQuest* did not have this technology available. Non-player characters would respond to any text with their name. Players found quests by responding to bracketed words and phrases in non-player character speech, as in the example above. This brought greater immersion in the game, as players were forced to read much of the quest text, and there was no in-game method of keeping track of what quests they had agreed to complete.

Valeron Dushire says, 'The Freeport Militia took control of this city long ago. They are nothing more than a group of thugs not worthy of respect. They follow the words of [Sir Lucan] D'Lere, He has been a thorn in this city's side for too long. If you wish to aid us in the fight against tyranny, go speak with Jemoz or Sir Theron. May the Truthbringer shine upon your soul.'

You say, 'Who is Sir Lucan?'

Valeron Dushire says, 'During one of our crusades into the lands of Norrath, we left Sir Lucan in charge of the remaining knights. He did much good and the people respected him. He was overtaken by power. He soon began to hire mercenaries to guard the city, calling them the Freeport Militia. His true downfall began when he killed Sentry Dillius, a paladin of the Priests of Marr. His divine powers were stripped from his soul. He was a paladin no longer. He and his militia now control the city. They treat it as their playground and bully the populace. Someone must [stop Sir Lucan.]'

You say, 'I will stop Sir Lucan.' ….

Valeron Dushire says, 'That would be good, but I doubt you can. We have been trying for years and are unable to get him apart from the militia. If you do the impossible and destroy Sir Lucan, bring me his testimony. Every knight of the Hall of Truth carries a signed testimony. Sir Lucan still holds his.' ("Zimel's Blades")

This is the first instance of Public Narrative and the first piece of external motivation the human Paladin from figures 1 and 2 received. Unfortunately, travelling directly to the Freeport Militia's

headquarters in another part of Freeport was the easiest part of Valeron's quest. Upon finding Sir Lucan, the first level Paladin merely following the structure of most opening quests ("Slay monster(s), return item(s)") would be greeted with a level 46 adversary, striking for triple the first level character's total health. Strategically, even when the player-character is at or above Sir Lucan's level, his own allies make defeating him incredibly difficult. When this quest, "Zimel's Blades" or "The Quest for Soul Fire" (*Allakhazam*), was introduced into the game, the maximum player-character level was 50, so defeating him and every Militia-man aiding him would require at least one full (six person) group, if not more. The lack of any real treasure, the high risk of death and the inability to ever enter Freeport again all make it incredibly difficult to imagine anyone signing up to help a Paladin character complete this quest. There must be an existing sense of Community for the Paladin to ask for help, but a thing's existence does not explain its cause. It takes more than just the drive of a narrative to create Community.

Costikyan cites Marc LeBlanc's taxonomy of game pleasures, eight different aspects of games that make them enjoyable. Two pleasures are Narrative and Fellowship (Community, in this research's terminology). Costikyan expands on this by invoking shared experience, because "shared intense experiences breed a sense of fellowship…. Even offline, where the experience is not shared directly, shared experiences provide points of contact with other people, and reasons to feel friendly toward them" (*I Have No Words* 28-29). Narrative is just a sense of tension and drama (Ibid. 28), and tension is typically produced as a result of another pleasure, Challenge. Aiding a fellow player-character in the assassination of Sir Lucan D'Lere may not yield anything in the way of treasure, little in the way of character advancement and may mark me as an enemy of the state of Freeport, but the Challenge in being able to defeat him is part of what the game is all about (recall the 1977 *Dungeons and Dragons* introduction, in which the game's purpose was primarily to get into deeper dungeons and face larger creatures). Even with these ideas in mind,

Fellowship/Community seems to just be the result of Challenge. The shared experiences of regularly getting together to slay monsters with unique defenses and defeat dungeons with puzzling or difficult layouts may produce longstanding online communities, but the initial impetus to find those monsters or dungeons must lay in the narrative.

To find *EverQuest*'s method of creating narrative harmony and various types of community, we must look to the narratives open to the individual character and some releases for an *EverQuest* table-top RPG released in several years after *EverQuest* was a popular online game[44]. Because *Temple of Elemental Evil* was a tale for goodly characters triumphing over evil, and because *Vampire*'s *Gehenna* story was a morality tale, I will focus on parts of the Paladin epic quest (of which "Zimel's Blades" is a chapter), a quest narrative now common in MMORPGs, consisting of many smaller quests over the character's advancement. I choose the Paladin not just because it is a holy knight and thus fits the theme so far, but because it is a class or archetype available in each of the four games I am looking at. As an RPG trope, the Paladin has remained a constant figure of valor, good, and self-sacrifice, and its treatment in *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft* will provide a standard element in the narratives I examine.

As I have already noted several times, changes in modality make it difficult for some elements of table-top RPG to transfer to the MMORPG. The 2002 *EverQuest Roleplaying Game Game Master's Guide* begins its first chapter with a small sidebar, titled "You're Not Online" (13, quotations below are from this sidebar). Although its intent is to show that online elements should not be a part of the table-top environment, it works in the other direction as well. Common sense story elements like "If a character dies, she does not immediately re-spawn naked at her *bind affinity* point" make sense to regular table-top game players, but *EverQuest* characters return to life after all deaths, though they leave a "corpse" at their death location with

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[44] The *EverQuest Roleplaying Game* was produced by White Wolf. It is interesting to note that a company focused heavily on the character development side of RPGs took on a game known for little other than wanton combat.

all items they were carrying. A part of the challenge online is the "corpse run," a naked dash through hostile territory to reclaim that gear, but that challenge has no real logic behind it aside from the rage players would feel if their characters were deleted upon death. A first level Paladin has no problem discovering that Sir Lucan is indeed a foe much beyond his/her capabilities because death is not permanent. Further, "Freeport is a huge city with thousands upon thousands of citizens, not 80+ online computer model citizens." The developers of the *EverQuest Roleplaying Game* at White Wolf Publishing went to a great deal of effort to keep the table-top narrative consistent with the online narrative, which makes this second point even more interesting: there *is* a secret narrative, or at least a less-public one. The two versions of the game also interacted with each other – when the table-top game was released, there were clues to a new quest in the game books. It could only be completed with the help of the books, and the quest was removed from the game after only a few months to ensure only table-top players could complete it.

Although the games are adamant that they are not equivalent to each other, the interplay is a good place to start looking for narrative harmony. Valeron Dushire tells starting Paladins some of the story behind Sir Lucan's fall and his murder of Sentry Dilius, but the *Realms of Norrath: Freeport* guidebook for the table-top game goes into greater depth.

> No one knows exactly how the confrontation got out of hand. Clearly Sir Lucan
> was tired and not thinking clearly, having driven himself too hard for months, and
> Sentry Dilius was not known as a diplomatic man. Perhaps they began shouting,
> perhaps they came quickly to blows. In the end no justification would ever be
> enough, however, for Sir Lucan killed Sentry Dilius in a fit of rage and fear. With
> that act, Sir Lucan angered his gods and was stripped of his power as a paladin
> forever. The remaining priests and knights turned Lucan out, and demanded he

return his Testimony of Knighthood. Sir Lucan refused. Of all the servants of the

twin gods of Marr, only one Brother Jentry remained loyal to Lucan. (20)

When the Knights of Mithaniel Marr went on their crusade across the sea, Sir Lucan was left in charge of the city and the stress broke him. Although the main elements of the story remain the same in both media, Sir Lucan is cast as a tragic figure in the table-top version. Given Mithaniel Marr's role as the god of valor and charity (*EverQuest Player's Handbook* 143), one might expect Dushire to call for a little less than Lucan's head from any passing Paladin. Further, while Dushire is perfectly willing to call for the death of his former compatriot, Sir Lucan's only quests in the game revolve around killing a traitor within the militia. The traitor is a spy for the Knights of Truth, but in the same dialogue that leads to this quest, the player-character is told that Lucan is equally opposed to the evil religious order hiding in Freeport's sewers ("Message Intercept"). The man keeps an uneasy peace in the city by being hated by all.

Now, players have stumbled into a real set of initial situations as Miller would want out of a Narrative, though they are all Occluded Narratives, and it would be nearly impossible to experience them all firsthand with a single character. Revelation is only possible when the competing narratives come together: a Paladin player-character interacts with an evil Player-character who has done Sir Lucan's quests, and both discover that the man exists only to keep the militia running, protecting the city. It would be nice for the Knights of Truth to be in charge of the city again, but *Realms of Norrath: Freeport* notes that the "benevolent dictatorship" (7) of the Knights of Truth and their Cleric allies would likely attempt to purge all of Freeport's lands of evil-doers (5), a holy war that would likely cost them their city.

This is only one intersection of narratives, however. The "Zimel's Blades" quest is the search for a holy sword named Soul Fire, and it begins with the very traitor that Sir Lucan wants killed. Low level Paladins are led to talk to the traitor for a short quest to find what he has

observed. Between that initial meeting with the traitor and killing Sir Lucan, Paladins are introduced to the quest "Sword of Nobility" in many of the common adventuring areas for good characters, through treasure that does not seem to serve a purpose and non-player characters who instruct Paladins to find former friends of theirs. Although the clues for "Sword of Nobility" are not enough to constitute a riddle (few contain the clues to completing the quest), they come close enough to encourage community. Once a Paladin has spoken to all of the friends, learning the tale of another Paladin who was given a holy sword, the final one informs him/her that "There are many [holy swords] rumored to be hidden all throughout the world, yet only a few have actually been found…. Perhaps by having this sword it'll bring you closer to finding your friend. Gather a ghoul's heart, Amstaf's Scroll, the Blade of Nobility, [and] a nobleman's hilt" ("Sword of Nobility," my brackets). The non-player character giving this information gives no other clues to where the items can be found, and none of the dialogue before this point gives any clues. The four items are scattered over two continents in areas that have no logical tie to each other. Players attempting this quest before the advent of websites like *Allakhazam.com*[45] would have to rely on either blind-luck to gathering the items or on the community of other players to help them. Intersecting narratives are what make this aspect of community possible by shedding light on Occluded Narratives, and most quests in *EverQuest* are built this way.

In the interest of time, I will focus just on the first item the Paladin must find, Amstaf's Scroll. From the narrative told by each of the friends, Paladins learn that Amstaf was the knight that was granted the holy sword, and this scroll was stolen by a goblin. While goblins can be found throughout the game world, this scroll (like so many quest items in MMORPGs) can only be found on a specific goblin in the city of Highkeep ("Sword of Nobility"). At first glance, this is a hunt for a needle in a haystack. However, Highkeep is on one of two routes across the

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[45] My source for quest dialogue, though I verified as much as possible in-game.

game's central continent, the route safe for good travelers. Any player-character passing through this area is likely to learn about the quest "Left Goblin Ears" from the captain of the city guard. While the quest itself is simple – return goblin ears to the captain for a bounty – it drives characters into the tunnels beneath the city to slay goblins, where they will inevitably find Amstaf's Scroll. Challenge and Narrative work together to uncover this item, but picking it up only reveals that it cannot be traded to other players, the standard marker for a quest item, but no other information. Community arises when players take advantage of the chat-box on their screens to ask if anyone knows what the scroll is for.

It is a simple, ham-handed narrative, but it is still a narrative. The initial situation, being given the riddle of the Sword of Nobility, leads to meaning-making through slaying monsters or stumbling into a conversation with someone who has found the Scroll along his/her character's own narrative. Here, reciprocity takes the form Costikyan describes in his differentiation between *EverQuest* and *Ultima Online*: an exchange of information between players, whether they seek a specific item or just the use of an apparently useless item they have discovered. Revelation is possible primarily through intersecting narratives, whether that revelation is the location of the component pieces for the holy Sword of Nobility or the true nature of the man that Paladins are sent to assassinate for the greater good of Freeport.

These intersections create bonding social capital, bringing players together by allowing them to share information about defeating the environment. Although technology has advanced enough to allow players to look up information on *Allakhazam.com* while playing the game, the information on the site is similar to what players encounter through in-game chat, as exemplified by the user Ariestarchus, an Allakhazam "scholar"[46]:

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[46] Defined as someone who has posted many comments on the site which were positively reviewed by others. A person must achieve a minimum rank of "scholar" to review comments. While this person is not necessarily a leading member of the community, s/he is trustworthy enough for this conversation.

The quest is still working with all for items dropping in the following manner:

Blade of Nobility: Location in Butcher Block Mountains is still 1330, -1500 with the three goblins around the dwarven tombstones. The item dropped off "a crazed" goblin. Total time camped: 12 hours.

Ghoul's Heart: Location was Unrest and the item dropped off "a ghoul." I simply kept clearing the house and within 4 hours the item dropped.

Amstaf's scroll: Location is Highpass Keep in the lower levels of an old mine area filled with goblins. The item dropped off "a goblin thief" of which only two appeared in the mines at fixed positions. One in the corner of the main larger room and one in the second largest room attached to the main larger room (you see what I'm talking about when you get there). Total time camped was 2 hours and, again, I just kept clearing the area of all the goblins.

Hilt of Nobility: Location is Najena lower levels around the pool where the goblin and black widow spiders are found. The item dropped off "a skeleton" within 4 hours. I only cleared out the "a skeleton" monsters for this drop.

It may take some time getting the drops, but as of the date of this post the quest was working perfectly. ("The Quest is Still Working" 1 July 2007, qtd. in "Sword of Nobility")

The diction is very much in the "technique mastery" mode, as Ariestarchus gives only the methods and times necessary to find all four items, but this is the type of community response an inquirer would find in the game. Although it costs Ariestarchus nothing more than time to spread this information, it forms the seeds of bonding social capital that lead to greater things for the questing Paladin. Without good will from other players, the knight returning to collect Sir Lucan's testimony would have a hard time completing the task.

As I mentioned earlier, both the "Sword of Nobility" and "Zimel's Blades" quests are part of the Paladin epic quest, "Fiery Defender." This quest genre is now a standard in many MMORPGs, and it signifies one of the highest levels of advancement for a character, partly for the number of smaller quests necessary to complete it and partly for the amount of team-work necessary for the task. Completing "Fiery Defender" requires a Paladin to sacrifice his/her two holy swords and gain the favor of Erollisi Marr, goddess of love and sister to Mithaniel Marr. In the process, Paladins learn about a fallen knight named Dirkog Steelhand and a retired knight named Inte Akera, both of whom reside in another plane of existence ("The Fiery Avenger," another quest leading to the epic quest). Where "Sword of Nobility," a quest for characters around level 25, was made easier by community interaction and "Zimel's Blades," for characters around level 45, was nearly impossible without community aid, the final stages of this series of quests is not possible without help from others. In order to converse with the knights, a Paladin needs the aid of another character to get to the other plane of existence, several allies to get to the location where those knights' souls reside, and one ally to stay at the entry point of that plane to summon the souls of the knights ("The Fiery Avenger"). Most players are willing to go through this sacrifice for another if they are members of the same guild, but it does not hurt that this

particular plane of existence is a common intersection for all of the game's first epic quests[47].

Intersecting narratives for the many epic quests of a small community bring entire groups to the

plane for the challenge of completing as many quest portions as possible.

The components work together, but much of *EverQuest* is still an exercise in strategy and

skill-building. Narratives and Communities build each other through the Challenges that they

produce (or the Challenges that produce them), but the total system lacks the subtlety of

Zuggtmoy's creeping influence over the Temple of Elemental Evil or a vampire's individual

slide into moral oblivion. But, my discussion of *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Vampire: The*

Masquerade focused on games working within established genres. The first adventures of

Blackmoor Castle were little more than TSR's *Chainmail* rules for large battles adapted to single

characters exploring a dungeon (Mona). *EverQuest* laid the groundwork for embedding an

engaging narrative within the challenge of an MMORPG, and it showed that the combination of

the two could form strong communal bonds within its player-base. After five years developing

the model, Blizzard's *World of Warcraft* would take these constituent elements to new heights.

Section V: Reducto ad Absurdum: *World of Warcraft* Grinds the Genre towards Perfection

EverQuest may have lacked subtlety in its attempt to weave narrative into a game that

was so largely skill and technique based. Its designers may have given up on narratives a bit too

easily[48], or perhaps as Carolyn Handler Miller notes, it is just too hard to create a narrative and

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[47] In a game as long lived as *EverQuest*, multiple "capstones" have become necessary. Recent additions to this genre still have a common intersection, however, making the general structure consistent.

[48] The history of the Dark Elf race, for instance, has a propaganda version and a "true" version. Dark Elf characters are told by NPCs that they were crafted by the God of Hate himself, in order to spread their hate and culture across Norrath. For the first few years of *EverQuest*'s existence, a series of high level quests (inaccessible by characters under level 46; at the time, the maximum was 50) culminated in an unexpected reward: a text file. Characters completing the quest, which centered in the God of Hate's extraplanar domain, received a book that told the "true" history of the Dark Elves, beginning with that deity stealing the king and queen of the High Elf empire and perverting them to his faith. The item and quests are known to exist because of entries in the game's databases, but the quests were deactivated. The full history was printed in *The EverQuest Role-Playing Game: Plane of Hate*, but only rumors exist explaining the quest's unavailability.

expect players to experience it as planned (61-67). Indeed, her textbook, *Digital Storytelling*, contains a short series of narrative samples that digital narrative designers should be aware of, narratives that help explain narrative's reduced role in Blizzard's *World of Warcraft*. Indeed, *World of Warcraft* reduces the roles of narrative, community and technique back to the absolute basics for the genre, to a minimalist perfection of B. F. Skinner's operant conditioning (Ducheneaut et al. "Alone Together" 409, 415-416), inviting the largest population of MMORPG players and paving the way for more variations on the theme.

Carolyn Miller, like *Vampire: The Masquerade*, sets a stage with Genesis (though she starts a bit earlier than Rein-Hagen). Setting: Garden of Eden, afternoon. Actors: Adam, Eve, Snake, Fruit. Plot: Eve talks to snake, eats fruit, is punished (61). In a static narrative, there is little concern about how this story can be expanded – Eve's motivation, the snake's potential identify as Lucifer, and the type of fruit all bear no real relation to the fact that human beings are punished for disobeying their Creator. Moreover, the story is the same every time it is experienced. To be an interactive narrative, though, some of those elements need the ability to make choices. The plot may be static, and the player of Eve may just need to explore the Garden until she finds the fruit; at which point, it is only a matter of time before she eats it (disobedience out of boredom or lack of other options). Perhaps the narrative designer could give options for fruit, each with its own consequences: "If Eve picks the pomegranate, for instance, she might immediately become pregnant; if she eats too many cherries, she might get fat; only if she eats the forbidden fruit would the narrative progress toward the results depicted in the Bible" (61-62). Every choice and option added creates a new narrative string for Eve to explore. Perhaps we are still working with the "beads-on-a-string" model Costikyan urges designers away from, but the narrative blocks of events and effects are an easy, organizational tool. The game designer needs to be aware that a player might not take Eve through the planned storyline; maybe s/he will

merely spend all of his/her time playing the game exploring the Garden if it is sufficiently well rendered. What Carolyn Miller fails to address, however, is the difference in the way a narrative arc appears to the author/designer and the reader/player:
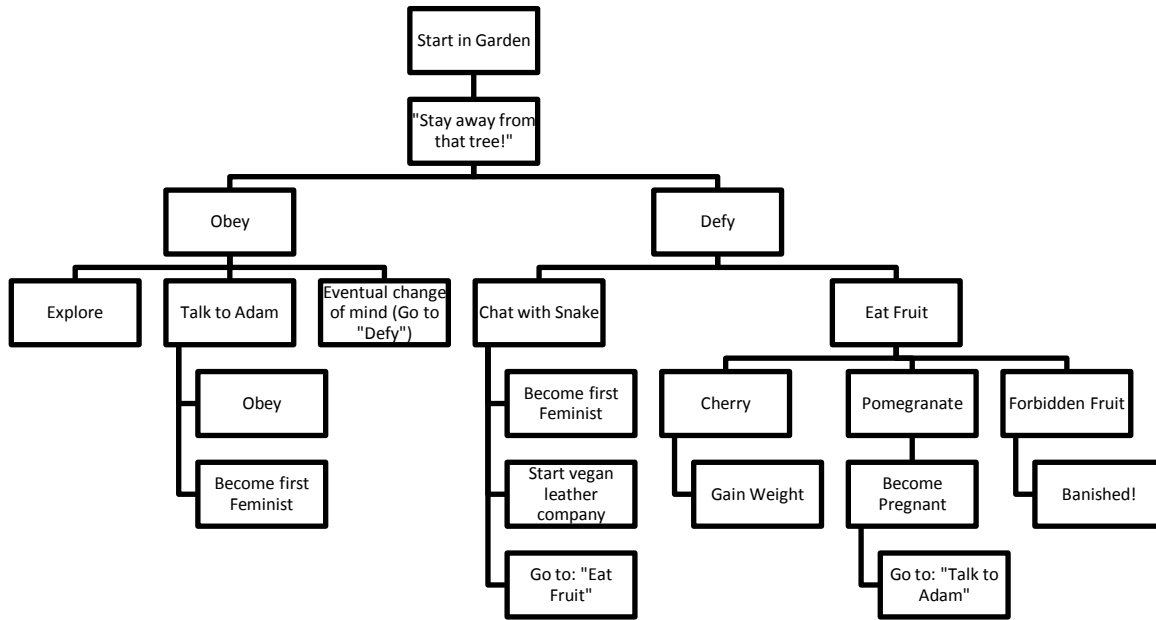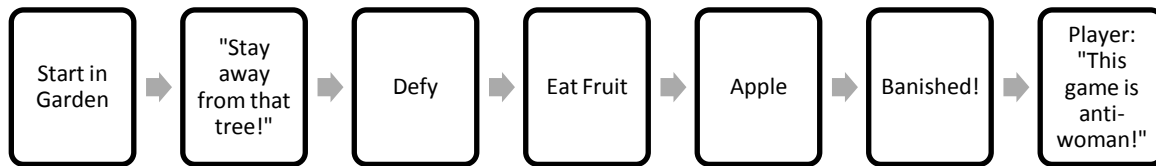

Figure 5: The Author/Designer's View

Figure 6: The Reader/Player's View

For the single interactor, Eve, there is only one narrative, and the interactor can realize the narrative of the game using J. Hillis Miller's notion of rhythm. The same is true of the

Warcraft universe before *World of Warcraft*. As a real-time-strategy game[49], the narrative arc packaged with the first three versions was simple enough. The player rose from a low-ranking ruling figure to a master tactician by winning a series of battles. There was no global narrative that could be altered by the player(s) (failing to win a battle merely forced the player to try again). Each battle had an initial setup, actors and elements defined by symbols/graphical representations, and a reversal of the initial situation that led to some understanding (typically, whether or not a particular strategy is effective). In effect, the above diagrams were applicable to this design. Players could act as designers and choose what race to play (Orcs or Humans initially, and later, Undead or Night Elves), determine a strategy, and make decisions along an increasingly complex narrative tree. In the end, the narrative of the battle would look like the lower diagram: the player *did* choose to play the Orc army, and so on, resulting in a victory.

When Blizzard turned the Warcraft universe into a permanent, massively-multiplayer world modeled after *EverQuest*'s design, the Author/Designer view became unwieldy. As Costikyan noted about MMORPGs, the genre is based around a series of short, quest narratives that can be experienced in any order and through different means ("Games, Storytelling, and Breaking the String" 9-11). But, it is unfeasible to create a complex narrative tree, in which Player A might decide to aid the Orcish leader Thrall in his quest to better Orcish culture while Player B decides to murder Thrall. Like *EverQuest*'s Sir Lucan, Thrall must be present[50] for the global narrative to continue unimpeded. Even in simpler cases, such as the Human Paladin's early moments discussed below, every choice a player could make must be programmed with its

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[49] Essentially, a hybrid *Monopoly-Risk*. Players manage different resources to create a small kingdom, raise an army and defeat opponents in a limited geography. Although the game can include several players, it lacks the storytelling component to make it an RPG by Schick's terms. For more information, see Sweetster and Wyeth, 11-22.

[50] Players can and do kill Thrall and other major entities in the world, but they all returned to life with no fanfare or surprise from the denizens of Azeroth. Likewise, a character can always "abandon" a quest and choose not to complete it, but this is akin to closing *The Lord of the Rings*. The narrative does not change, only the individual's experience.

own narrative bit and rewards/effects. For example, all Humans possess the trait "Diplomacy," which causes their reputation with the different groups in Azeroth to change more quickly than other races. Paladins are defined by Blizzard as virtuous warriors. When a starting Paladin is told by Marshal McBride that "Your first task is one of cleansing, [Paladin]. A clan of kobolds have infested the woods to the north. Go there and fight the kobold vermin you find. Reduce their numbers so that we may one day drive them from Northshire" ("Elwynn Forest Quests"), s/he might read the purpose behind the quest as the overriding goal. Drive the kobolds from the land. A virtuous knight could decide that the Human strength in diplomacy may be a better option, but that would require programming a separate progression for the quest. Although other RPGs, even massively-multiplayer ones like *EverQuest*, show that it is possible to have multiple endings to a quest narrative, Blizzard's designers decided that these narratives would have strictly laid out paths from beginning to end. For the majority of the game, the reciprocity and interactivity of the narrative stems from the order and manner in which an interactor experiences the quests.

As Ducheneaut et al.'s discussion in "Building an MMO with Mass Appeal" shows, *World of Warcraft* is broken into two factions (supposedly warring, but really just unable to cooperate due to game programming) with an equal number and availability of races and classes. The races and factions are largely cosmetic choices (Ibid. 293-294), and a quick perusal of *World of Warcraft* quest lists and guides[51] shows that each faction's short, quest narratives are very similar to each other. The characters and settings are different, but the opening chapters of a character's life (the Tutorial section) contain the same types of quests for almost identical rewards across faction lines. This remains true for much of the game, to the point that certain milestones for different classes overlap. *World of Warcraft*'s "epic quest" equivalent is a series of

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[51] I work from two websites in particular: Wowwiki.com, a site whose content is mostly user-generated, and Thottbot.com, a site associated with *Allakhazam*.

instanced[52] adventures; the quest-giver (starting point of the narrative) is the same for both factions, as are the requirements. In effect, two rival warriors could spend the majority of their existences fighting each other, complete the same quest at the same time (occupying the same space at the same time, unbeknownst to each other) for the good of their mutual ally, then return to fighting each other.

Although *EverQuest*'s narrative structure was much simpler than its table-top predecessors like *Dungeons and Dragons*, it contains a greater degree of reciprocity when compared with its successor, *World of Warcraft*. The Paladin discussed in Section IV could have decided to side with the Freeport Militia, severing ties with his/her order, and completing narrative lines related to the Militia[53]. *World of Warcraft,* by contrast, adheres more closely to Costikyan's "beads on a string" metaphor by creating singular narrative paths for a character to follow. However many strings a character may experience, they are ultimately strings, not trees.

Despite this simplicity in its narrative structure, *World of Warcraft* quickly grew to be one of the largest MMORPG communities of the last few years[54] and, as such, has come under close scrutiny for the ways it has developed that community. This scrutiny comes from sociological groups seeking to identify the ways social capital is formed (Ducheneaut et al. "Alone Together") and from game designers looking to replicate its success (Ducheneaut et al.

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[52] *World of Warcraft* was the first MMORPG to introduce "instanced" areas. Where *EverQuest* players attempting to complete the Paladin epic narrative might have to take turns interacting with the "text" in killing Sir Lucan, *World of Warcraft* players would begin the quest and enter a special area of the game created solely for them. As a result, millions of players could enter the same ruins seeking the same artifact held by the same adversaries, all on the same night, and everyone would get what they sought. While this means the narratives are more accessible to individual players, it also means that the world responds less to individual actions.

[53] This would be exceedingly rare simply because of the Paladin archetype. However, a Warrior who begins aligned with the Militia could have a change of heart and attempt to gain favor with the Knights of Truth, thereby allying him/herself with the Paladins' order. Ultimately, a greater variety in the choice of narratives experienced exists in *EverQuest*, while *World of Warcraft* Paladins and Warriors are locked into what is available from character creation.

[54] I emphasize all identifiers of the category here. Zynga's Facebook games are not RPGs, the massively-multiplayer *Zombies and Humans* game sweeping college campuses is not done online, and the internet-based components of *Dungeons and Dragons*' fourth edition do not allow for all players to interact, just small groups.

"Building an MMO with Mass Appeal")[55]. Little work has been done on the narrative structures of *World of Warcraft*, beyond an analysis of the structure of individual quests or quest chains (Costikyan "Games, Storytelling, and Breaking the String" for structure, Walker "A Network of Quests in *World of Warcraft*" on a quest chain). Because *World of Warcraft*'s equivalent to *EverQuest*'s epic quests are essentially "fetch quests[56]" and rather than a narrative adventure like *The Temple of Elemental Evil* or political struggle in *Vampire: The Masquerade*, I contrast them with something closer to an interactive narrative in the style of *Dungeons and Dragons*, a server-wide event titled "The Gates of Ahn'Qiraj." The event advanced a portion of the narrative from the *Warcraft III* real-time strategy game, and it allowed players to experience a story that explained the opening of new areas to explore.

The Gates of Ahn'Qiraj

Ahn'Qiraj is a city of evil, monstrous vermin, scuttling silithids and winged Qiraji. After a long war to keep the vermin within their homeland, a powerful group of Druids (nature-focused magic users) sealed their brooding city behind an enchanted Scarab Wall (Neilson) located in the Silithus desert (a dangerous region, populated by high-level monsters). The wall was meant to be a stasis measure, sealing the insect race away from the rest of the world while a new army was raised to fight them. Characters adventuring in Silithus will eventually run across a Night Elf

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[55] Scrutiny comes even from epidemiologists modeling the way illness spreads through a population, See Balicer, Ran. "Modeling Infectious Diseases Dissemination Through Online Role-Playing Games." [*Epidemiology* 18 (2): 260–261.], as in the case of a programming bug in *World of Warcraft* that caused a high-level, instance-bound monster's disease ability to escape from the dungeon into the wider world, affecting players and non-player characters of all levels. Economists have studied the game's use of a free-market trading system, and literature scholars look at its manipulation of narrative. The game seems to be a treasure trove for more than just entertainment.

[56] A largely derogatory term for quests that consist of a non-player character offering rewards for turning in a set of items.

quest giver[57] named Baristolth of the Shifting Sands. Interacting with him yields a short quest-

text:

> The embrace of death had all but overcome my being when he intervened. He
>
> breathed only once upon my maimed body and then waited patiently for the sands
>
> of time to cleanse my wounds. "Forever you will remain if you must," he said, and
>
> with those words I was bound as a Watcher. Look now to the desert. The second
>
> war is upon us. You must seek out the resting place of the Bronze. Venture to the
>
> Caverns of Time and see if the master has returned. I must be sure before I am
>
> able to proceed. ("Quest: What Tomorrow Brings")

The Caverns of Time is an entry-way to a series of instanced adventures throughout Warcraft

history, and the quest-chain to retrieve the Scepter of the Shifting Sands requires powerful

adventurers to correct alterations to history. In exploring the Caverns, characters learn that the

"the Bronze" is a dragon who worked with the Druids in creating the Scarab Wall and the means

to reopen it (the scepter and a gong left at the doorway). Despite the layers involved in

completing this quest, it is interesting to note that this snippet of dialogue from Baristolth is the

closest that players get to something akin to the riddle in *The Temple of Elemental Evil*. It

contains its own answer, but there is no more difficulty in solving the riddle than consulting the

in-game map to find the Caverns of Time.

Although "The Gates of Ahn'Qiraj" was a server-wide event initialized by a character

starting the Scepter of the Shifting Sands quest, it also took the form of a server-wide quest in the

form of preparations for war. Powerful characters completing a series of tactically difficult

challenges would receive a "Scepter of the Shifting Sands" ("Gates of Ahn'Qiraj"), and they

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[57] Quest-givers in *World of Warcraft* are like non-player characters in *EverQuest* and other games who respond when
interacted with. Where *EverQuest* used [brackets] to denote some sort of quest or required action to get a further
response, *World of Warcraft* uses large, orange question marks and exclamation points to indicate a non-player
character's purpose.

would be told that the Scepter was the key to opening the enchanted wall holding a city of monstrous vermin at bay. However, before the wall could be opened, the world would need to prepare for the outpouring of silithids and Qiraji by gathering supplies. This is one of few examples where reciprocity can be found across the game's entire population, as limited as it may have been. In total, both factions needed to gather slightly over three million separate items (all fairly easy, but time consuming, to obtain), which took several months on average to complete. Although aiding the war effort was a "fetch quest," it did result in a reward and it brought the opening of the gates one step closer. It is hard to say if any individual had a meaningful impact on the game (as the *Dungeons and Dragons Dungeon Master's Guide* said was necessary for a good game), as the easiest portion to complete still required 10,000 items ("Gates of Ahn'Qiraj")[58].

Once the scepter was constructed and the war supplies gathered, the narrative required that "Five days must pass while the supplies are sent by zeppelin" ("Gates of Ahn'Qiraj"), after which the scepter-holder could open the gates. This began the last server-wide portion of the event, as over the next ten hours, silithids and other creatures appeared randomly around the world to attack anyone they could find. However, if every player on the server logged out of the game (or changed servers) for that ten hours, the Qiraji would still be defeated and the brooding city would now be a playable area with its own narrative strings available.

World of Warcraft*'s Utilization of Storytelling, Skill, Community*
That *World of Warcraft*'s design makes it a powerful tool for building social capital is hard to dispute. Steinkuehler and Williams, in "Where Everyone Knows Your (Screen) Name:

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[58] To put this in perspective, the item, a Lean Wolf Steak, requires that the player have some skill in Cooking, which a possible skill for all players. The Steak requires one item found on slain wolves and one item bought from a non-player character, so the only limitation to completing the quest is slaying wolves. A player is likely to find one in every other slain wolf (Thottbot). Even if a character found one of the looted items every ten seconds, this task would still take nearly twenty-eight nonstop hours.

Online Games as 'Third Places,'" work from Putnam's and earlier sociological research regarding "third places," informal spaces for socialization. The "Gates of Ahn'Qiraj" quest provides a narrative that invites all players on a server, from those newly created to those obtaining the scepter, but it also demonstrates how far the genre has come from Gygax and Arneson's rules for individual heroes acting within a medieval-fantasy realm. Returning to Schick's 1991 definition of RPG as "quantified interactive storytelling," we begin to find that "interactive" is stretched thin. Returning Lean Wolf Steaks to the Quartermaster to help aid the War Effort, the player receives a small reward as a thank you and the number of collected items increases somewhat, but little else changes in the world. Opening the Scarab Wall yields a ten-hour invasion of Azeroth, but by hour eleven, the only change to the world is that the gate is open – no amount of silithid or Qiraji slain after this point affects any real change on the world (and those that were not slain disappear). As for storytelling, *World of Warcraft* is the epitome of "beads-on-a-string" storytelling (Costikyan "Games" 12). Once the string of "The Gates of Ahn'Qiraj" is activated by speaking with Baristolth, players merely attempt to finish the rest of the beads until the invasion ends, primarily in tests of skill rather than riddles.

World of Warcraft also has trouble with the initial categories of Public, Occluded and Secret Narrative. Although Baristolth gives players the starting clues for the epic journey they will undertake, the quest's introduction to the game was a game-update note and a short story posted on Blizzard's website. Under my rules for Public Narrative in Section II, these are all Public Narratives, since there is no in-game effort necessary to reveal them. Players who read all three texts would have little trouble discerning the storyline ahead (i.e. it had no truly Secret Narrative, as though *The Temple of Elemental Evil* told Dungeon Masters to share the book freely with players if they asked). *World of Warcraft* changes RPG form from a very active type of entertainment, in which characters seek answers to the game-riddle, to a very passive type of

entertainment, in which the algorithms of the game reduce the role of even skill and technique in the game[59]. Along these lines, Ducheneaut et al. ("Alone Together") and Putnam (221-235) found common issues between *World of Warcraft*'s construction and television entertainment, respectively.

Where Putnam finds "The single most important consequence of the television revolution has been to bring us home" (223), he tempers the notion of an "electronic hearth" with a warning that family members spend more time watching the tube than interacting with each other (224). The family may be gathered for an entertaining evening together, but they are only together physically – not mentally, not emotionally, and certainly not socially. Ducheneaut et al. also find that, despite *World of Warcraft*'s claims of a massive community, little is actually binding individuals together. "Grouping [acting as individuals within a unit, like players in *Dungeons and Dragons* or characters in *The Hobbit*] is apparently an inefficient way to level [advance through the game] and many players are not observed to be in a group until they are past level 55. Players prefer 'soloable' classes and it is only in the very late stages of the game, where dungeons are simple too difficult to enter alone, that the grouping rate rises" (410). In fact, Ducheneaut et al.'s data was gathered over several months by taking a "census" of server population several times an hour, which noted a character's race, class, level, location, group status, and guild association (guilds function similarly in *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft*). Although they imply that grouping is common after level 55, their own findings show that players are only grouped about 60% of the time (Ibid.), by which point the player has accumulated about fifteen full days of play time, the equivalent of playing *World of Warcraft* as

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[59] At the risk of running this discussion into one on game design over game narrative, I will instead refer the reader to Ducheneaut et al.'s discussion in "Building an MMO with Mass Appeal," especially pages 296-304. The different classes (the character creation choice that affects game-play and narrative the most) each have a specified role and play style in the game. Different strategies and techniques among these classes amount to very little.

a full time job for nearly two months (409). In other words, even at the upper end of time spent in groups, players are still spending quite a large chunk of time performing tasks alone.

The researchers' regular census data shows *World of Warcraft* as a world of adventurers "alone together" like the family gathered around the television set. Where groups serve as impromptu tools for "dungeons… too difficult to enter alone," their findings regarding guilds reinforce other research into the bridging social capital of the structures[60]. Although guilds provide the human capital necessary for regular sociability and regular accomplishment of group tasks (many guilds have set, weekly schedules to enter those dungeons "too difficult to enter alone"), Steinkuehler and Williams found that a primary purpose of guilds for many members was to provide a regular group of individuals to "chat" with across any game distance (893), rather than necessarily accomplish group tasks. *World of Warcraft* guilds do often emphasize their "raiding" abilities when recruiting new members, referring to the amount of time they spend entering and defeating difficult dungeons, and Ducheneaut et al.'s findings in "Alone Together" show that guilds draw players who have many quest narratives involving these dungeons (411), though they have a significant rate of attrition of members (a "churn rate") and only about 10% of the guild "truly engages in joint activities" (414). The data seems split between guilds-as-raid-tools and guilds-as-third-places.

This is exacerbated by the ways that players can form groups. The "Raid Finder" and "Dungeon Finder" tools, now standard interface features across many MMORPGs, allow a character to announce his/her wishes to join a group for specific purposes (e.g. to enter a particular dungeon) or general purposes (e.g. just to complete quests in an unfamiliar area), replacing the guild's function as a pool of human capital for the same ends. The game matches players with similar intents, and, in some cases, transports them where they need to go. Called

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[60] See, for example, Steinkuehler and Williams' research on the *Lineage* franchise and Hou et al.'s findings on the Push-Pull-Mooring aspects of games ("Migrating to a New Virtual World").

"pick up groups," these allow a player to play the game without truly interacting with other players. So long as s/he knows his/her role in the group (i.e. the Priest heals while the Warrior fights), verbal exchanges are not entirely necessary. In many ways, the left hand of "dungeons… too difficult to enter alone" is unaware of the right hand of "automated group assembly" – the game necessitates community at the same time that it bypasses it.

Grinding the Genre Back to Basics

Community formation and tests of technique are parts of *World of Warcraft*, but the structure of the game both encourages and undermines each of these aspects. The game contains a plethora of narratives, but they are all single strings, and even the most elaborate quest chain (the "Gates of Ahn'Qiraj, for example) is just a series of tasks to accomplish in experiencing the narrative. An effort to tabulate the number of quests available in the game brought the number to somewhere between 6000 and 7000 separate narrative chunks (Yukio) since the game's creation in 2004. Combined with the relative quickness of rewarding behavior (either by advancing a level or completing a quest), Ducheneaut et al. found that the game replicated the "Skinner box" of operant conditioning ("Alone Together"), paving the way for an enormous population draw.

However, Ducheneaut et al.'s findings point to a flaw in the system. Players not involved in a guild played the game up to 50% less than their guilded counterparts (411). Noted earlier, only 10% of members regularly contributed to guild activity, with a vast majority of guilds containing less than forty players (Ibid.). Later research found that only 30% of players encounter the extremely difficult content at the upper levels of the game ("Building an MMO With Mass Appeal" 315), even though guilds seem to be purposed entirely for these late-game adventures. The massive "churn rates" within guilds and "death rates" of small guilds point to a flaw within the system that Steinkuehler and Williams found. The informality of the "third

space" makes it difficult to bond with other players or the game itself. If communal ties are weak, if the classes have rigid tactical styles, and if the narrative structure is so simplistic, it is difficult to see what keeps players in the most popular MMORPG on the market.

And, it is exactly this problem that led Hou et al. to evaluate what causes or prevents players from "migrating" to other games ("Migrating to a New Virtual World")[61]. The researchers used a Push-Pull-Mooring framework, used in real-world movement studies, to understand why players change games: a Push factor is something that causes an individual to leave an area, whether a lack of employment or a lack of entertainment; a Pull factor draws an individual to a particular area, such as the promise of education or a well-designed narrative system; a Mooring factor is a trait of either location that negates or reinforces either of the former factors, often community strength (1893). This 2011 study noted that games increase in popularity during times of economic hardship (1868), mirroring Putnam's finding that financial difficulties drive individuals into isolation, "socially as well as politically" (193). If MMORPGs' status as virtual realms for playing "alone together," as Ducheneaut et al. insist, is a strong Pull factor, and economic hardship is a Push factor to move an individual into isolation, *World of Warcraft*'s growth should have continued in the recent past. However, according to internet advertising banners, the game's population has been slipping (from 11 million in the fall of 2011 to about 10 million in early 2012).

Because I have not played *World of Warcraft* in several years, and I have no experience with its various expansions, I cannot give a robust discussion of any of its current Push or Pull factors. Because there are a myriad of MMORPGs available now, it would be difficult to analyze the Pull factors of them all (or even a representative sample) in my available space. So, I will

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[61] An earlier study of the *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst* "diaspora" can be found in Celia Pearce and Artemesia's "Communities of Play: The Social Construction of Identity in Persistent Online Game Worlds" (*Second Person*. Ed. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2007. Print. 311-317). Pearce studies the movement of *Uru* players through other virtual worlds after the game servers were closed. In Pearce's study, the draw of community outweighed narrative in games.

look particularly at its Mooring traits, which Hou et al. define as (for virtual communities especially) switching cost, social relationships, need for variety, and previous switching experience. Of these, "previous switching experience" cannot be adequately defined for the several million lost subscribers over the past few years (Baker). "Social relationships" have already been examined, leaving only the switching cost (which encompasses more than financial cost) and a need for variety.

If it took about fifteen days of play time to experience the game from levels one to sixty (Ducheneaut et al.'s research is dated, but still valuable; discussions with current players indicate the progression is faster now), then a need for variety could be understandable. As noted earlier, the quest progression is linear, character faction does not change the narratives experienced very much, and the vast majority of the game's quests are not class specific. Although fifteen full days is a significant time investment, the time investment required to read both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* is also significant. The time investment for a *Dungeons and Dragons* group to experience *The Temple of Elemental Evil* is significant. The primary difference in experiencing *World of Warcraft*'s narrative as a Priest or a Warrior is the technique in completing quest narratives – a Priest will use magical attacks, a Warrior will use a weapon, but there will be few other differences. This is similar to reading different editions of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, some with pictures or differently sized text, as the aesthetic experience is the only difference, not the content of the experience. Even after investing such time in reading Tolkien's work or defeating Zuggtmoy, readers/players migrate to a new entertainment. Readers pick up Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* books, while adventurers move on to another supplemental text or create their own *Dungeons and Dragons* adventure. The only thing that might hold players back is the financial investment in the game, up to $20 a month, but the genre's evolution has reduced even that concern.

Over the past few years, subscription-based online games have dropped the subscription requirement to play the game, drawing an income from "micro-transactions" where players buy advanced content or power-ups. *World of Warcraft* is now free through level 20, so players can create and play any number of characters for free until they would reach level 21. *EverQuest* will adopt a similar model within the next few weeks. These games follow the lead of *Dungeons and Dragons Online* and *Lord of the Rings Online*, which offer a large amount of free quest narratives for the few hours of a character's existence, giving quick rewards and gratification. All of which, owing partly to the initial investment to play, are very popular, drawing hundreds of thousands or even millions of players. In terms of Push-Pull-Mooring effects on player migration, this new change to the genre's distribution Pulls players in many directions, but the community-reducing features of *World of Warcraft* have persisted across many of them. In effect, the commonalities that bind the genre are primarily in the ability to play "alone together" and the linear, universal storylines for all characters to experience.

Section VI: The Future of the Genre, Discussion and Conclusion

"Compared to most games, role-playing games are informal and loosely structured. The purpose of the rules is to define what may be done, rather than what must be done. The GM describes what the player character see, who they meet, and what happens. The players tell the GM what actions their characters are taking. Using the rules, the GM determines how successful the player characters are. In situations where luck plays a part, the GM and the players may roll dice and compare the results against tables or formulas in the rules....
Gradually a story emerges, as the heroes (the player characters) work toward their goal: following clues picked up from the GM, meeting characters who may help or hinder them, solving mental and physical problems, confronting opponents and defeating them, and reaping the rewards of achieving the goal. It is a story with a group for an author." (Schick 11). [1991]

"Electronic games work differently; much of their structure is invisible to the user. It's contained in compiled software code. In a boardgame, players are responsible for operating the game as well as playing it, if you will; when a calculation must be made or an algorithm applied, they must do so, referring to the rules if necessary. In an electronic game, the "rules" are incorporated in the software; a player gains understanding of them through experience, by playing the game, and may well remain in ignorance of their specific details, instead gaining a "gut," intuitive understanding of their operation. " (I Have No Words 19). [2002]

"While there is no dishonor in implementing an existing game style well, it seems to me that we've run the basic changes on what's possible with the 'beads-on-a-string' approach to combining games and narrative. If we want to get closer to games that also produce compelling stories, we're going to have to experiment with different approaches…
In general, it's important to think of story and game as discrete, if intertwined, entities, and look for novel ways of integrating them. And to find different ways to grant players 'freedom of action' while working within a constrained narrative – or ways of constraining player freedom in one area while freeing it in another to produce an emergent narrative.
Precisely because there is a tension between the demands of game and the demands of story, the attempt to resolve that tension has spawned a number of interesting game styles. If, however, we are to get closer to something that deserves to be called "interactive fiction," we need to break the string of beads and find other approaches to pursue." (Costikyan "Games, Storytelling, and Breaking the String" 12-13) [2007]

"World of Warcraft thrusts you into a central role of an ever-changing story. You and your friends will be active participants in events that are steeped in the rich lore of this fantasy universe. Fight for either the Alliance or the Horde, and experience a fully-realized fantasy world…..
In other words, your character progresses and gets stronger as you gain experience, new skills, and more powerful items and equipment. Your character's progress is automatically stored online, which means that you always pick up right where you left off when you start the game again. In fact, your character's data can be stored for as long as you want, so you can progress at whatever pace you feel most comfortable with. Some players blaze through the game's content at record speed to reach the endgame as quickly as possible, while others prefer to take the time to stop and smell the roses. The choice is entirely up to you." ("What Is World of Warcraft") [2012]

From 1974 to the early 1990s, the genre established a definition of something between game and story. From 1991 to 2012, the genre explored its wiggle room. *World of Warcraft* and other MMORPGs are still classed as role-playing games, even though Costikyan's "beads-on-a-string" metaphor shows them deviating from *Dungeons and Dragons'* model. *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft* are informal places to pass the time, but the rule structure enforces a certain reality on the players. In the beginning, *Dungeons and Dragons* demanded this rigidity because that created a realistic "story with a group for an author." However, even if *World of Warcraft* is an ever-changing story, the centrality of a player's character is debatable, and the player's ability

to be an author is negligible[62]. "The Gates of Ahn'Qiraj" is an event worth discussing simply because so few player actions have had such far-reaching effects on the game, and even that was entirely pre-scripted (the individual opening the gateway was a moot concern: it was merely an element of an if/then algorithm that needed to be plugged in).

In many ways, this project is suffering the slings and arrows to which any analysis is prone when it focuses on a current literature. In the time that this work has been researched, written and revised, *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft*, two foundational actors in the MMORPG world, have become free-to-play in at least some fashion[63]. While changes in access do not necessarily change the narrative of the game as a whole, the "Free to Play" model does change the narrative available to the players.

Due to the Free-to-Play movement in the industry, RPG has begun the return loop of its narrative-style cycle. Consider my description of *Dungeons and Dragons* as a rule set first and a narrative second (Cf. 4). The core rule books merely tell players how to play the game (specifically, how to arrange combat or other skill-based encounters rather than interaction with a narrative), but TSR and Wizards of the Coast have been kind enough to publish adventure books like *The Temple of Elemental Evil* – books that give Public and Secret Narratives for a particular city or region, with the intent of creating an interesting story out of the Occluded Narrative it generates. Next, consider my description of *Vampire: The Masquerade*, and White Wolf's other products, as a narrative packaged with a rule set. Now, the entirety of the modern world is a Public Narrative, with the Storyteller responsible for creating enough Secret Narrative for the

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[62] Many players create a historical narrative for their characters, but this is like the character background that exists at the beginning of *The Temple of Elemental Evil*. It has no real bearing on the game, nor on the story created by and through the game.

[63] "Free Plus" is a term for their status. EverQuest's model is to be released in March, but only some aspects of the game will be playable without payment. Certain races, classes and areas of the game will require either a subscription or a one-time payment to access. World of Warcraft instituted a "Free until level 20" policy several months ago. Both of these moves are a result of pressure in the MMORPG world from other Free to Play groups and games.

players to help author a group story. A rigid-enough world[64] exists that players and Storytellers discover the Occluded Narrative together[65].

Contrast these traits with the two, foundational MMORPGs, *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft*. *EverQuest* exists as an expansive world with fairly rigid rules in the form of its algorithms, but there are still significant ways in which a character can experience a narrative tree rather than a narrative line. The possible narratives are all programmed and await a character's progression through them; *EverQuest* is a stable set of rules with a series of possible narratives inside of it, like *Dungeons and Dragons*. *World of Warcraft*'s system of quest-narratives ensures that a character should always be experiencing several narratives at a time, though each is linear and independent of the interactor, save for the dependence any text has on its reader. In some ways, this is similar to *Vampire: The Masquerade*'s insistence that the story of a role-playing game should be of primary concern[66]. However, *Vampire* works to allow players as much choice and freedom as possible in the stories they tell, rather than expect the Storyteller to present a static narrative. It, as Schick demands, is a "story with a group for an author." *World of Warcraft*'s use of linear narratives has just made static, medieval-fantasy adventure narratives multimodal, rather than advance the genre as a storytelling medium

Things are not all dour, though. The Free to Play model has several major figures to draw

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[64] By which, I mean the basic understanding all players bring to the table in regards to the world's rules and constraints. A vampire may play by flexible rules according to our imaginations, but a vampire on the highway still drives by the same rules as any mere mortal, with the same repurcussions for breaking those rules. Likewise, my *Dungeons and Dragons* Ranger may be an errant descendant of kings, like Tolkien's Aragorn, but I would be hard pressed to explain that my vampire is somehow a descendant of Theodore Roosevelt, merely biding time until his prophecied Presidency.

[65] In regards to the previously noted explanation, *Vampire* has enough focus on dramatic narratives and tragic personae that a character may merely *think* s/he is a descendant of Roosevelt, destined for the White House. Regardless of the Storyteller's initial Secret Narrative, this character's goals and intentions will likely create its own Occluded Narrative, while the Aragorn figure is cliché enough in a fantasy RPG that it would likely not disrupt the intended narrative of *The Temple of Elemental Evil*. In his webcomic, *Goblins*, Tarol Hunt has insinuated that all characters that are similar to an existing mold might as well be that mold. < www.goblinscomic.com >

[66] The Golden Rule: "This is the most important rule of all, and the only real rule worth following: *There are no rules…*. Think of this book as a collection of guidelines, suggested but not mandatory ways of capturing the World of Darkness in the format of a game" (Rein-Hagen et al. 195).

attention to. Under the "Free Plus" model, a player can experience some of the game's content without charge, while the rest remains locked until a fee is paid. An analysis of Free Plus games' specific narrative structures, however, would mirror my previous work on *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft*. *Dungeons and Dragons Online*'s quest narratives are entirely dungeon based – a quest giver tells a character some reason to enter an abandoned building or series of caves, and the character does so for a reward. *Lord of the Rings Online* is almost identical to *World of Warcraft*, save that it takes place in Tolkien's Middle Earth, concurrent with the written narrative. Drawing the lens out to see the availability of the total narrative and its effect on community, though, we see a very different picture.

For example *Dungeons and Dragons Online* features 446 quests (according to the website's Compendium feature) in total. Each of these quests is a short, dungeon-centered adventure like the majority of table-top *Dungeons and Dragons* published adventures. While this game does not feature any of the *Temple of Elemental Evil* content (it takes place in another universe), the quest/adventure structure is the same. However, a player may only access 83 quests for free ("RoBi3.0's Free to Play Guide"). Similarly, *Lord of the Rings* has about 3500 quest narratives available in total, but only a fraction can be accessed without payment[67]. Because many of these narratives are clustered at low levels to get potential subscribers interested in the game, these games are much closer to *Dungeons and Dragons*' box sets than the rich narrative the genre evolved towards with *Vampire: The Masquerade*.

According to Mona, the original *Dungeons and Dragons* publications were meant for low-level characters exploring a simple narrative (28), closer to a short story than a novel. Additional content for the game had to be purchased in the form of adventure narratives like *The*

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[67] It is worth noting that both games allow players to purchase content with "Turbine Points," a reward for accomplishing different in-game tasks. While it is possible to purchase all game content with these points, the time constraints in doing so make it an effective non-option.

Temple of Elemental Evil or expanded rules like *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* (for characters over level four). An experienced Dungeon Master could invent his/her own narrative, and as Schick's description suggests, Dungeon Masters and groups were encouraged to author their own stories. Similarly, a player may invent his/her own story while playing *Dungeons and Dragons Online*, well after the free content has been exhausted. S/he can explore the few "wilderness" areas of the game, terms applied to areas that contain sites to explore and monsters to defeat. There is no internal, set narrative for these areas, just the narrative the player attempts to create. In many ways, these games are becoming a collection of rules (algorithms, databases and three dimensional models) in which narratives are placed, like the original *Dungeons and Dragons* (which featured charts and tables to determine whether or not die rolls succeed, as well as rules for understanding how character positioning could affect combat and skill use).

World of Warcraft's grind back to the genre's basics (a narrative for players to progress through rather than form themselves, as with *Chainmail*, Gygax's first move out of the board-wargame) is bringing RPG full circle. The massive draw of players from other game genres (Ducheneaut et al. "Building an MMO with Mass Appeal" 314) and to MMORPGs in particular has made the genre a $4 billion industry (Hou et al. 1892) in the U.S. alone, and an even more popular genre in the Asia-Pacific market. When Trion Worlds released their MMORPG, *Rift*, in 2011, the game's slogan was "We're not in Azeroth anymore." The game attempted to set itself apart from a perceived stagnation in the genre by introducing more dynamism and complexity in player choice. Its success is not my focus here, but its attempt to break the *World of Warcraft* mold is. Since that time, games like Salem (Paradox Interactive, unreleased), a World of Darkness MMORPG (White Wolf Studios, unreleased), and Guild Wars 2 (NCSoft, unreleased) all have announced intentions to create a world that can be physically altered by players, a world in which completed quest-narratives cannot be repeated by other players (so the world changes

for their accomplishments) and in which a character's death is permanent. In effect, the discussion has turned to creating something like *Dungeons and Dragons*, where the rules for a "good" game are based on reciprocity and player impact.

Conclusion

Narrative is not necessarily the only community-building tool available to RPG, but of Schick's three part definition to the genre – that it be "quantified interactive storytelling" (10) – narrative is the portion that separates the genre from board games and gives it life. As the genre evolved over time, narrative was also the component that gained more and more stature in the table-top setting. The transition to electronic formats has been difficult, and the MMORPG setting has grappled with interactor choice in narrative, reducing it to almost nothing in the latest incarnations of the genre, though designers are attempting to overcome this. In many ways, the MMORPG extension of the genre has returned it to its board-wargame roots: throngs of players fighting battles in linear storylines that test tactics and strategy first and provide an entertaining, immersive distraction second. As games move to the Free-to-Play and Free Plus models, more players will be drawn to the genre, and current players will continue to migrate from virtual world to virtual world, providing fertile creative ground for designers and interactors alike to rediscover the genre's open-ended narrative roots

This project is a chronology with leanings towards a bibliography. Although Schick's work clearly shows the explosion of RPGs before 1991 and defines a work twenty years later as nothing less than Herculean, I believe these canonical works in the RPG world clearly display the changes that the genre has endured. The historical backdrop has been helpful to see community's tribulations (in Putnam's formation) nationwide at the same time that it thrived or suffered in the RPG world. If Hou et al. are right and these games get a population boost from hard economic times; if Steinkuehler and Williams are right and these games act as "third

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places," similar to coffeehouses; if Putnam is right and such gathering places led to the rebirth of civic engagement and community involvement in the early twentieth century, then the genre is approaching a powerful rebirth with the announcement of so many MMORPGs attempting to return to a freer, more dynamic mode of storytelling.

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