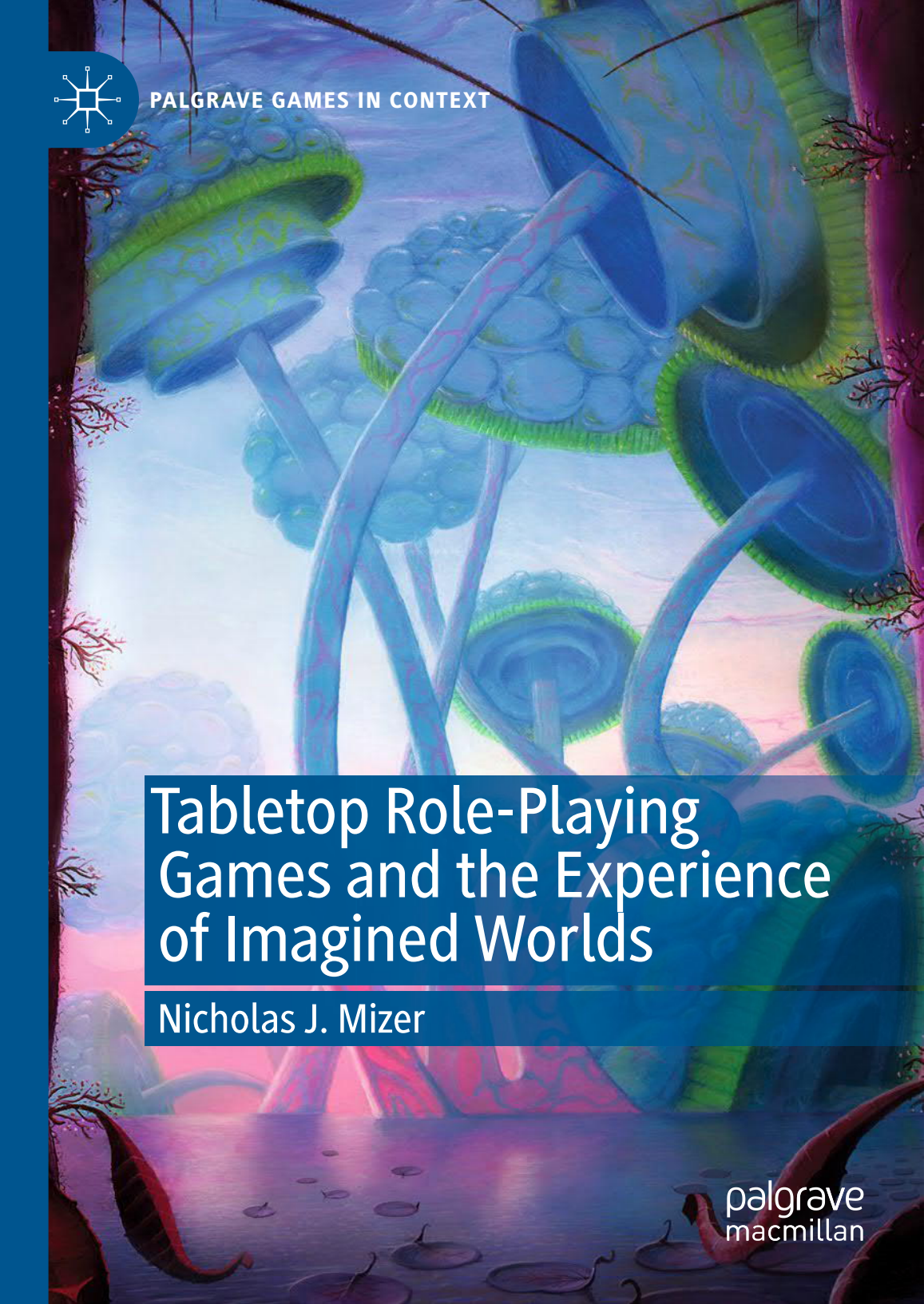
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Tabletop Role-Playing Games and the Experience of Imagined Worlds
Nicholas J. Mizer
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Tabletop Role-Playing Games and the Experience of Imagined Worlds

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To Shawna, who names me, and to Evelyn and Madeleine, who take the lid off my dreams

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Check for updates

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

He who seizes the greatest unreality, shapes the greatest reality.
—Giorgio Agamben

Be twelve. It is 1985 and you are walking into a B. Dalton bookstore. The smell of soft-baked pretzels fades as you walk past the registers. Bryan Adams's new song, "Summer of '69" plays over the speakers in the ceiling. Walking towards the fantasy section, you see a book that appears to be an encyclopedia of monsters. Pulling the hardcover off the shelf, you begin leafing through the pages. You see a number of illustrations and entries, each detailing a different creature. Some creatures you recognize, like dragons and vampires, and some you do not, like beholders and carrion crawlers. The book reads a little bit like the Audubon Society field guide to birds that your uncle got you last year for your birthday, except that instead of ornithological terms you don't recognize this book is full of strange terms like "hit dice" and "armor class." There are a lot of numbers. Slowly you begin to realize that the book is a game of some kind.

Be seventeen. It is 1990 and you are sitting in your friend's basement. The table in front of you is scattered with papers and half-empty cans of Mountain Dew. In just a few weeks you and your friends will head off to different colleges. Over the past five years you have spent countless hours in this basement, the faux-wood paneling reflecting back laughter and arguments in roughly

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equal measure. The dungeon master, Aaron, has decided to work up something special for this last game session you will all play together. After spending the past few months tracking your nemesis Lord Big Butt (who bears a strong resemblance to your sixth grade science teacher), you and your fellow adventurers have discovered his secret mountain lair. Once inside, you fight through hordes of enemies until you come to the final chamber, where Lord Big Butt has stationed his new champions. In front of the villain's throne stand four figures, each a mirror image of one member of your party. The battle that ensues is chaotic, but in the end Lord Big Butt is slain. None of the heroes are sure which of the survivors are originals and which are clones. You feel like the idea was a little contrived, and maybe not your best session, but a fitting end to a campaign that you will remember for the rest of your life.

Be thirty-five. It is 2008 and you are at work, scrolling through news headlines. "Gary Gygax, Game Pioneer, Dies at 69," (Schiesel 2008) you read, and your mind races backwards to a mall in 1985. That night, after you put your children to bed, you go down to the basement, rifling through old boxes until you find it. The Official Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Monster Manual by Gary Gygax. A weathered sheet of graph paper falls from the pages as you open the book. Unfolding the paper, you see that it is an adventure location you started writing during your freshman year of college but never got around to finishing. You look up Aaron on Facebook and message him to ask if he wants to get the gang back together to play D&D on a Skype conference call.

Conjuring Worlds

The narrative above is a fiction; that is to say, it is an amalgamation of experiences which conjures a world. Its world is not exactly our world. Although based on experiences described to me over the course of my research into tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs), those exact events never occurred in our world. We are always conjuring worlds, cobbling them together out of disparate experiences into makeshift wholes. To conjure those worlds for others, we create assemblages of words, or of images, or of sounds. Manipulating these twin abilities, to assemble disparate objects into worlds and to conjure worlds through disparate assemblages, is the central mystery of role-playing games.

Manipulating this world-conjuring power of words which, viewed from the reverse angle, is our human capacity for worlding disparate details into cohesive realms, drives what game researcher Markus Montola calls the

first invisible rule of role-playing, the world rule. As he puts it, "role-playing is an interactive process of defining and re-defining the state, properties and contents of an imaginary game world" (2009, p. 23). As players define and re-define a game world, they must take apart some of its pieces, make new sense of them, and then communicate the new state to one another by reassembling the words and images used to conjure the world.

Both scholars and poets have acknowledged the importance of imagining our world, and alternate possible states of that world, as a driving force in human experience. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, for example, said that "the imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order" (1996, p. 31). Coleridge called imagination "the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception … a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation" (1817, Chap. XIII). Despite this acknowledgment, we still have much to learn about how people, especially people in groups, interact with these worlds that we imagine. The way we experience imagined worlds, is not static. New cultural innovations shape our imagination, and vice versa. By considering tabletop role-playing games as techniques for shaping our experience of imagined worlds, this book explores and documents *how* imagined worlds shape the experiences of those who visit them regularly.

Theoretical Background

> [Role-playing games] are neither wholly games nor wholly narratives but use structures of both games and narratives. They are neither wholly immersive nor wholly interactive but, rather, both immersive and interactive. They both involve consumerism … and rebellion against it …. They complicate our understanding of the relationship between authors and audiences, and our definitions of these terms. (Cover 2010, p. 174)

Partially because of the complexity Cover references here, research on RPGs has been produced from a variety of disciplines, including sociology (Fine 1983), performance studies (Mackay 2001), psychology (Bowman 2010), and rhetoric (Cover 2010). Zagal and Deterding's handbook of RPG studies documents no less than ten different disciplinary perspectives which scholars have used in the field (2018). My approach here shares common ground with some of the perspectives described there, primarily performance studies and sociology, but my angle is decidedly

anthropological and ethnographic. Definitions of "the anthropological approach" vary widely, but the description of the anthropological endeavor as "make the strange familiar and the familiar strange" fits this work most closely (Melhuus 2002). In pursuing this goal, anthropologists embrace three perspectives: cultural relativism, a commitment to attempt to understand people on their own terms; holism, a commitment to treat culture as a complex whole; and comparison, a commitment to gain a wider perspective by looking at human variety. Not every work of anthropology enacts these perspectives equally, of course, but they guide anthropologists' angle of approach.

One way that anthropology guides my angle of approach to role-playing games has been to draw more toward the descriptive and exploratory than to the definitive and explanatory. In general, the understanding of play has been shaped by an assumed dichotomy between the serious and non-serious, or between work and play (Fine 1983; Goldman 1998; Schwartzman 1978). Using these divisions as a starting point, many theorists have attempted to explain "why people play as opposed to doing something serious" (Fine 1983, p. 5). Whether they find an answer in psychologically therapeutic effects or just needing to burn off excess energy, these researchers tended to treat play as a problem to be explained.[1] Instead of considering imaginary play as a problem to be solved, I view it as a complex phenomenon to be explored. In this, I follow sociologist Gary Alan Fine in focusing on the processual question of how people experience TRPGs rather than on teleological questions of why they do so (1983, pp. 5–6).

Experience and Phenomenology

Stated most broadly, the question I want to answer is the same that every cultural researcher must ask: Erving Goffman's "What is it that's going on here?" (1974, p. 8). While this is too vague to serve as a useful guide to the subject matter of a book, it has a lot to offer in terms of identifying my angle of entry. I have attempted as much as possible to avoid assuming that I understand even at the most basic level what is happening when a group of people experience a world together through a role-playing game. Even after years of participant observation and playing games, most of my interviews centered on trying to determine what it is like to play a role-playing game. This approach is phenomenological, in the sense that I have attempted to "bracket" all concerns external to the experience of play,

whether issues of power and identity or ideas like narrative, and try to convey in as rich detail as possible the quality of imaginative experience in TRPGs.[2] In the places where this has worked, I am left not with an understanding of games that is devoid of power and imagination but with a sometimes counterintuitive understanding of these things as they present themselves in experience.

One major result of this approach has been an increasing sense that one of the most important things going on in TRPGs is not character development or plot progression but the experience of imagined worlds themselves. When I say "experience" here, I mean it in a sense specific enough to deserve elaboration. For phenomenologists, as Harris Berger explains:

> Experience is not some mysterious substance that stands in opposition to the real, objective world of things; experience encompasses both the objective and the subjective …. As a first approximation, experience can be understood as the contents of consciousness: the ideas thought, the emotions felt, the sounds heard, the fragrances smelled, the flavors tasted, textures touched, and colors seen. By definition, therefore, experience is all we can ever know because it encompasses both the knowledge and the thing known. (1999, p. 19)

We arrive at this understanding of experience by means of Edmund Husserl's concept of the *epochē* (1931, 1960). Rather than making judgments between objectivity or subjectivity in our experiences, Husserl directs us to suspend those abstractions in a "set of brackets," or *epochē*, and instead direct our attention to a careful description of the concrete contents of our experience. "When we do this," Berger says, "we immediately stumble onto a thunderous discovery: *nothing has changed*: the objectivity of the world is retained in the pure experience the *epochē* establishes" (1999, p. 20).

If I consider one of the iconic twenty-sided dice used in *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)*, for example, not only its color and shape present themselves to my experience, but also the faces obscured from my vision and (even without touching the die) a sense of its weight and solidity. But my experience of the die contains even more than these physical properties; it extends to things like past experiences of playing with it or my knowledge of the history of polyhedrals in gaming. My experience is also inherently social, even if no one else is immediately present. Just as I am aware there is a side of the die that reads "20" even when it is obscured by the "1" currently on top, I am also aware of the existence of others whose

experience the die can also enter in ways similar to how it enters my own. In Berger's words, "pointing towards a world beyond the immediate givens, present experience entails the existence of other subjects: my self in the past or future, and others. The world is, in Merleau-Ponty's terminology, an *interworld*—a world partially drawn into the subject's experience and partially shared between subjects" (1999, p. 21). This partial sharing is an essential aspect of how players experience imaginary worlds in gaming. The minimal visual representation of these worlds highlights the fact that an individual's experience is highly mediated by the experience of the others at the table.

In applying these phenomenological methods to the investigation of gaming, my goal is not a thoroughly systematized phenomenology of gaming comparable to works like Edward Casey's *Imagining* (2000) or *Remembering* (1987). While such studies prove invaluable as grounds of comparison with experiences of gaming I have had or that have been reported to me in the course of my fieldwork, their more strictly philosophical approach tends to universalize the experience of the individual researcher to a greater degree than my ethnographic aims allow. In other words, this is not a phenomenology, but a phenomenologically oriented ethnography following in the footsteps of Katherine Young's 1984 exploration of the narrative worlds that drifted through an evening of storytelling in Devonshire, England. The intersection of phenomenology and ethnography demands, as Michael Jackson notes, "resistance to generalizations made on the strength of one's own self-understanding. This is not an argument against generalization *per se*; rather it is a refusal to accord generalization objective or omniscient status" (1996, p. 19). As an anthropologist and folklorist I am less concerned with what *must* happen or even what *usually* happens than with what *did* happen and how those it happened to make sense of it. In this work of ethnography I aim not to develop a new theory of role-playing games, but to communicate particular worlds that specific gamers have built and experienced, and to explore the broader significances toward which those gamers, worlds, and experiences gesture. The Vietnam War clearly did not necessitate the invention of TRPGs but, just as clearly, it is inseparable from a total understanding of the phenomenon. This approach leads me to dwell on and investigate what may at times seem to be chance details that others might dismiss as distractions. Yet these details form the very substance of experience that both I and my interlocutors "world" into sensical patterns.

As we synthesize disparate details into a cohesive experience, we inhabit not a singly unified world but instead a limitless number of worlds, each with their own unique characteristics. We access this multiplicity of worlds through attention or inattention to various aspects of our experience. These patterns of experience form the boundaries of worlds that Alfred Schütz has described as "provinces of meaning," each with a "specific accent of reality" (1970, p. 252). While Schütz lists certain diagnostic features of provinces of meaning, such as how inhabitants of the province experience causality or time, he offers only a minimal framework for conceptualizing the relationship between these provinces. This task was taken up by Erving Goffman (1974), who followed Gregory Bateson (1972) in referring to the Schützian provinces as "frames," by which he means internally coherent systems of meaning that serve as the definition for a given situation (Goffman 1974, p. 10). Goffman's primary innovation was his careful attention to how individuals pass from one frame to another (Fine 1983, p. 182), and he developed a labyrinthine set of terms such as "keys" ("conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else" (Goffman 1974, p. 44)) and "flooding out" (to "capsize as an interactant, and in this mode of self-removal fail to assemble himself—at least temporarily—for much of any other kind of organized role" (Goffman 1974, p. 350)) to describe some of the limitless ways that this occurs. Unfortunately, the gains offered by Goffman's attention to the structure of experience sometimes come at the expense of the richly textured sense of experience initially promised by phenomenology.

Phenomenology in TRPG Scholarship

These same difficulties have been with the study of experience in TRPGs since Gary Alan Fine's seminal ethnography *Shared Fantasy* (1983) where, drawing on Goffman, Fine skillfully identifies three primary frames involved in playing a TRPG. At the highest level of lamination, participants inhabit the diegetic frame as characters. On the other end of the continuum is "'the primary framework,' the commonsense understandings that *people* have of the real world. This is action without laminations. It is a framework that does not depend on other frameworks but on the ultimate reality of events" (Fine 1983, p. 186). Between these two

frames is the frame which participants inhabit as "players whose actions are governed by a complicated set of rules and constraints" (Fine 1983, p. 186). While this three-frame model serves as an accurate sketch for the structure of experience in gaming, it also fails to touch on much of the complexity of that experience. Fine does acknowledge that the model simplifies the "vast tangle of other possible keyings and fabrications," but from a phenomenological perspective, the difficulty with Fine's analysis is not that it fails to list all of the frames in play. Even when Daniel Mackay later elaborated the model by adding two new frames between player and character, "the narrative frame" and "the constative frame," the model remains structural rather than textural (2001, p. 56). That is, although Fine and Mackay accurately describe the structure of the frames, neither has much to say about the *quality* of experience in those frames. This thinness of description can be seen, for example, in the way that Fine's emphasis on the unlaminated nature of the primary framework simplifies the total situation of the participants as social and cultural interactants. Having established the three-frame structure of gaming experience, Fine offers useful insights such as the asymmetricality of knowledge between player and character, but this falls short of the sort of descriptive phenomenology necessary for a rich understanding of the quality of experience. Similarly, while Mackay (2001, pp. 85–88) offers a brief "phenomenology of role-played performance," he only considers the experience of self in his analysis, and does so only in very generalized terms. If Schütz seeks to describe the "accent of reality" in a frame, Fine and Mackay have taken the first step of describing the grammar of that reality. Jennifer Grouling Cover (2010, p. 175) has pointed out Mackay's tendency to focus on form over experience, and stresses the need for research "focusing on the experiences of the players rather than the structure of the game," something that I have attempted through this phenomenological ethnography.

The Hermeneutical Approach

Another model of role-playing experience, Harviainen's hermeneutical approach (2009), bears some similarities with both Fine's and Mackay's, but is distinct enough in terms of goals and assumptions about research into games to necessitate consideration on its own terms. Harviainen seeks to address three problems that he diagnoses as the origin of the

"state of chaos" in the study of role-playing: "the lack of general, shared research guidelines, the corruption of discourse tools, and subjective bias on the field concerning both practitioners and outsiders studying role-playing" (2009, p. 66). In response to these difficulties he proposes a "core system of hermeneutics, an adapted version of traditional hermeneutics, for the purpose of further analysis of role-playing" (Harviainen 2009, p. 66). Harviainen uses a broad definition of hermeneutics that includes phenomenology, including any "reduction of an event or an experience into a text, the interpretation (or meaning) of which is then studied through text and symbol analysis" (2009, p. 67). This leads to a call for treating role-playing games as a series of texts, with the researcher "analyzing role-playing as if it were a special form of metaphoric reading" (Harviainen 2009, p. 76).

Because this approach is strongly influenced by the work of Paul Ricoeur, it is not surprising that Harviainen's hermeneutic approach is in some ways similar to that of another theorist influenced by Ricoeur, Clifford Geertz. For Geertz, "the ethnographer 'inscribes' social discourse; *he writes it down*. In so doing, he turns it from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted" (2000, p. 19). Despite this similarity in method, however, there is an important divide between Geertz's interpretive anthropology and Harviainen's hermeneutical role-playing studies: whereas Harviainen seeks to create a sort of universal key into which all research on role-playing can be translated, Geertz views this sort of work as a generalization that leads us away from "the power of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers" (2000, p. 16). Harviainen claims that "valid models and findings that cannot cross cultural barriers are not valid research on role-playing itself, they are valid research on a particular type or way of role-playing" (2009, p. 76). From an anthropological perspective, the difficulty with this statement is that "role-playing itself" does not exist, only particular people role-playing in particular contexts. Yet for Geertz it is the very particularity of a cultural analysis that provides its explanatory power: "what generality it contrives to achieve grows out of the delicacy of its distinctions, not the sweep of its abstractions" (2000, p. 25). This leads to a distinct difference in how Geertz and Harviainen conceptualize the relationship between different studies. While Harviainen calls for "ways to translate findings, theories, and models

into forms in which they can be compared and possibly combined," Geertz argues that:

> Rather than following a rising curve of cumulative findings, cultural analysis breaks up into a disconnected yet coherent sequence of bolder and bolder sorties. Studies do build on other studies, not in the sense that they take up where the others leave off, but in the sense that, better informed and better conceptualized, they plunge more deeply into the same things …. A study is an advance if it is more incisive—whatever that may mean—than those that preceded it; but it less stands on their shoulders than, challenged and challenging, runs by their side. (2000, p. 25)

Following this, although I am indebted to Fine, Mackay, Harviainen, and others for providing a vocabulary for thinking about experience in role-playing games, I aim "not to codify abstract regularities … not to generalize across cases, but to generalize within them" (Geertz 2000, p. 26). What few models I develop over the course of this work are intended not to serve as models for "role-playing itself" but as tools for making sense of role-playing in the particular contexts in which I have encountered it through my fieldwork. My goal in this is not to define what TRPGs (always) are, but to expand the sense of what they can be. In Geertz's words, I aim "not to answer our deepest questions, but to make available to us answers that others … have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man has said" (2000, p. 30).

At times the answers that others have given about their experiences may seem to require translation into forms more compatible with pre-existing understandings about the nature of imagination and reality. In Chap. 4, for example, I present an understanding of gaming as a means of "taking reality hostage," one I encountered through interviews in Denton, Texas. Instead of translating these experiences into less enchanted, more mundane observations through what Harviainen calls "a special form of metaphoric reading," (2009, p. 76) I instead attempt to call into question the assumptions that make such statements seem surprising. "Rather than dismiss informants' accounts as imaginative 'interpretations'—elaborate metaphorical accounts of a 'reality' that is already given," Henare et al. suggest, "anthropologists might instead seize on these engagements as opportunities from which novel theoretical understandings can emerge" (2007, p. 1). Rather than domesticate these novel understandings, I instead attempt to leave them wild, allowing the worlds I encountered to unfold themselves according to their own sometimes messy natures.

Research Sites

Many works on gaming have been either primarily based on textual data or focused on a single community of gamers.[3] Fine (1983), for example, worked in the Twin Cities, while Bowman's (2010) ethnographic work presented the experience of nineteen gamers whose location is largely unspecified. While there are benefits to working exclusively with a single gaming group or community, not the least of which is increased time spent in participant observation with that group, such studies also run the risk of only detailing one particular, local culture of gaming. In my work, however, I have sought to capture a broader cross-section of gaming, expanding my fieldwork across multiple sites. While no study can claim to capture the complete diversity of any culture's expression, by playing with gamers across the United States I was able to expand my sense of what gaming can be in the lives of those who participate in it.

Over the course of four years my research took me to seven sites, including two gaming conventions that served as hubs connecting me to the home gaming communities of gamers I met there. Those two conventions are Gary Con, held in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin; and North Texas RPG Con, held in Dallas. Besides the conventions, I also conducted fieldwork in New York City; Portland, Connecticut; Denton, Texas; Madison, Wisconsin; and Seattle, Washington. These sites developed through what was essentially snowball sampling, in that I interviewed a number of people at each convention, then drew up into the study the home gaming groups of interlocutors who seemed both particularly engaged in the questions of my research and open to further interaction with their home groups. Each of the groups I played with and interviewed over the course of my research lives out gaming in a different way, although there are of course similarities that unite all of them.

While I sought variation in the regions I studied, I pursued a narrower focus in the type of games I studied. Different types of role-playing games represent different traditions of experience, different techniques of the imagination. Most of the gamers I worked with would identify themselves as "old-school" gamers, which they would contrast with two other approaches to gaming, "mainstream" gamers and "indie" gamers. To complicate matters further, some but not all of the old-school gamers I played with would describe themselves as part of the "old school renaissance," or OSR. The labels for these groups varies from person to person, and the borders are as fuzzy as any cultural divisions. White et al. (2018,

p. 80) describe "indie" and "OSR" as "communities of play that tend to focus on rules approaches that develop a particular style of play." From a phenomenological angle, those particular styles of play generate particular sorts of experiences, and focusing on OSR gaming here allows for a richer examination of the sorts of experiences generated by that style of play.

There are many ways that one could describe the OSR. From a publishing perspective, the OSR has been largely defined by "indie" publishers releasing products that take advantage of Wizards of the Coast's Open Game License to emulate or riff on older versions of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Wizards released the OGL in 2000 as a way to allow third party publishers to produce content compatible with their D20 system. Six years later, Matt Finch and Stuart Marshall released OSRIC, which was the first game to use the OGL to explicitly reverse engineer the D20 system to recreate an earlier version of D&D (First edition Advanced D&D). Games following in the OSRIC model (e.g., Labyrinth Lord, Swords & Wizardry) came to be called retroclones, while games that attempted to creatively riff on older editions (e.g., Lamentations of the Flame Princess, Adventurer Conqueror King, Astonishing Sorcerers & Swordsmen of Hyperborea) have been called "Second-Wave" retroclones.

The OSR is not primarily a publishing phenomenon, however. Like "mainstream" and "indie" gamers, the OSR represents a loose community of people thinking about gaming in similar ways. Unlike the indie game movement, which was originally concentrated in a single site known as The Forge, from its earliest days the OSR has existed as a diaspora of blogs and Google+ profiles. The OSR community is perhaps even less centralized than the Forge diaspora, and certainly less centralized than the Forge community before the forum closed. However, just as the Forge community has certain touchstone documents, like "GNS and Other Matters of Role-playing Theory" (Edwards 2001), and influential thinkers like Ron Edwards, the OSR has "A Quick Primer for Old School Gaming" (Finch 2008) and influential gamers like James Maliszewski, Matt Finch, and Zak Smith. Maliszewski served as enough people's entry point to the OSR that he was (half-jokingly, and sometimes derisively) called "the Pope of the Old School Renaissance."

As elsewhere, differing philosophies and goals often lead to animosity and misunderstanding. To give a sense of the state of relations between different segments of gaming culture, when news of my research spread on the Internet one Twitter user claimed that an ethnography focused on the OSR would tell "only the stories of white conservative males murdering

racial stand-ins" (WyattSalazar 2013). As this tweet suggests, the differences between OSR and other gamers are often mapped onto other aspects of identity, including race, gender, and political positions. The tweet also reflects broader problems of sexism and racism within broader geek culture (Salter and Blodgett 2017). Although not a central focus of this work, in my fieldwork I did find that OSR gamers come from a wider demographic niche than "white conservative males." White males do form a majority in a variety of gaming circles, OSR and otherwise, but I met and interviewed individuals of a variety of gender identities, few of whom would identify themselves as conservative. Admittedly, an overwhelming majority of the gamers I met in my research are white; however, this seems reflective of larger problems in gaming and other geek communities rather than particular to one set of gamers.

My decision to focus on old-school gaming came about like most things in research and gaming, as a combination of choice and chance. I was interested in the relationship between narrative and rules, something that forms a central topic of discussion in what I came to think of as the philosophical wing of the old-school renaissance (OSR), gamers whose writing I encountered through my early "surf sampling" (Tocci 2009, p. 122) research on TRPG websites: James Maliszewski, Matt Finch, Rob Conley, and Zak Smith, among others. As any story gamer will tell you, however, these topics are also important in other gaming communities, such as The Forge, a now inactive gaming forum that continues to exert influence through the work of designers like Ron Edwards, Luke Crane, and D. Vincent Baker. This is where the element of chance plays in, in that I encountered the OSR gamers before the story gamers, and had already begun fieldwork at the main OSR conventions before I fully realized the extent to which they are "two sides of the same coin," as gamer James Nostack[4] described them to me. My decision to continue focusing on the OSR came from more than just a sunk cost fallacy, however. Since Fine's ethnography, which focused on "old-school" because that was all there was, scholarship has mostly overlooked or dismissed older traditions of play, tending to focus on newer developments.

At each of the sites of my fieldwork I conducted ethnographic participant observation. Because ethnographic research has been adopted by many other disciplines since its development within anthropology, I should define what I mean by that. By participant observation I do not only mean that I have observed other gamers firsthand, or even that I have played TRPGs in the course of my research. I have done those things, but I have

also attempted, in Sherry Ortner's words, "to understand another life world using the self—as much of it as possible—as the instrument of knowing" (2006, p. 42). Although the specifics of what this means must adapt to the nature of the life world in question—as one of my colleagues has pointed out, there is no village of gamers where I could live for a year—the basic goal remains the same, "living within a community, and getting deeply into the rhythms, logics, and complications of life as lived by …. people in places" (McGranahan 2012).

At game conventions this meant arriving as early as possible, staying as late as possible, and throwing myself into the sometimes frenetic energy and bustle of what, for the few days of the convention, is the closest thing to a dense, geographically bounded community of gamers that one is likely to find. At the home communities of gamers I met at the conventions, participant observation meant staying for as long as my budget allowed, balanced by the need to cover multiple sites over the course of my research. In most cases I was able to stay for a few weeks, attempting to absorb not only the gaming discourses and practices of the gamers there, but also to get a sense of the rhythm and contours of life in that place.

Although there is an obvious limit to the degree to which this latter endeavor can be successful in the span of a few short weeks, I was able to obtain some sense of what it is like to live and play in New York City as opposed to the much smaller college town of Denton, Texas. Traveling through underground tunnels to a twenty-four-hour cafe built into the base of a tower where you will imagine you are a character traveling through underground tunnels and then grabbing a slice of pizza from a vendor at one o'clock in the morning is a different experience than driving through the night life of a college town to a freestanding apartment complex where you will play in relative privacy. In each city I frequented local gaming stores, visited the homes of gamers, met them at their favorite places to eat, and walked through the streets with them. In all cases, rather than trying to isolate these particulars as variables obscuring some essential reality of gaming, I have embraced them as constitutive of the experience of imagined worlds for those I played with in each location.

Beyond my physical engagement with places, I have also lived within these communities by maintaining a presence in the virtual spaces where they partially reside. Each of the conventions has a message board and Facebook pages, which I have participated in since the beginning of my fieldwork. In most cases I also interacted regularly with the gamers of my study through various social media, sharing not only gaming stories and

news but pictures of our children, reactions to current events, and the thousands of video clips and images that make up daily life on the Internet. Thus, although I may have only spent a few weeks in Denton, to some extent I have shared life with the gamers I know there fairly continuously in the three years since I first met them in 2012.

Interviews and Recordings

Although participant observation proved essential for developing a sense of the rhythms of life for the gamers I met, the bulk of my analysis depends on recordings of game sessions and semi-structured interviews, each of which require a brief note as to my approach. All of my interviews were informal, usually meeting the participant at their home or a bar or restaurant of their choosing. I conducted between one and three interviews with each individual, with sessions usually lasting approximately an hour. All told, I recorded approximately forty interviews. In early interviews I used a set of pre-written questions to serve as a guide, although I intentionally strayed from those questions early and often, treating them as launching points for a more free-form conversation partially guided by the participant. Later, I went into interviews with a rough template of three levels of experience I wanted to discuss, from the broadest to the most narrowly focused: the historical or macrosocial, the medial, and the perceptual (Berger 1999, pp. 27, 32).

At the historical and macrosocial level I asked participants about their life history, including where they had lived, their economic background, their parents' vocations, and their understandings of the history of gaming. By describing the second level of experience as "medial," I follow Berger in defining it as "typical activities described in general terms, habitually settings of face-to-face social interactions, everyday purposes and perceptual experiences and their meanings depicted in broad strokes" (1999, p. 32). I explored this level of experience with my participants by discussing such things as their daily lives, their work, how they became connected with their gaming groups, and particular stories that had come from their time playing TRPGs. At the final level of experience, the perceptual, I asked participants for detailed descriptions of their experiences in gaming, such as how they pictured (or in some cases, did not picture) the diegetic events of the game, their sense of time and rhythm as they played, and their awareness of the experiences of others at the gaming table.

While all participants were able to speak at length about the medial level of experience, not all gamers pay close attention to the micro-textural details of perceptual experience or have interest in the historical context in which their gaming occurs. As Berger explains, "Only artists or serious meditators examine the colors, textures, and meanings, for example, of their morning toast; only political activists and social scientists habitually reflect on the long-term consequences and complex social histories implicated, for example, in the act of buying fruit at the grocery store" (1999, p. 32). In the case at hand, I was aided in exploring these sometimes less accessible dimensions of experience by the fact that gamers share some similarities with visual and performance artists (indeed, many of them follow one sort of artistic practice or another) and that discourses about the historical context of gaming are so central within the OSR milieu.

Full participation in a game session often requires a high degree of focus that can make it difficult to make detailed observations. This participation is essential for understanding the experience of play, but can at times preclude detailed analysis. To handle this difficulty, at times I did not play in a session, instead stepping back from the experience and observing it as it unfolded. Even this level of observation can fail to capture the exact nature of how a game session progresses, however, and I have relied heavily on recordings of game sessions to consider the more fine-grained details of experience.

For a field so focused on structured oral interactions, surprisingly little scholarship on TRPGs has engaged in extended analysis of actual play transcripts. Fine (1983), for example, only offers excerpted field notes taken during game sessions. Cover (2010) is a notable exception to this, and William White has convincingly argued that analysis of actual play recordings "can tell us how people use language to play games" and "reveal role-playing as discourse—as an activity that carries and constructs meanings" (2012, p. 4). Within folkloristics and performance studies, both disciplines with long histories of engaging phenomenon very similar to role-playing games, transcripts have long been a central methodology. As will be seen in the chapters to come, I have found transcripts invaluable for exploring the complex processes at play in a game session, complexities often lost as participants and observers synthesize the details of the experience into more coherent and memorable narratives. I also found that the actual process of transcription has much to offer a researcher, in that it requires long hours of close engagement with the recording in a way that using speech-to-text software or third party transcription does not.

Compared to other forms of dialog, TRPG sessions are often chaotic, full of multiple overlapping (and sometimes incomprehensible) utterances. Numerous methods for capturing this level of detail in transcript form exist, and there is much to be gained from this fidelity. Because this also greatly increases the time required for transcription, however, I have opted to only provide fine-grained detail in excerpts where such information is immediately relevant to the analysis at hand.

Crowdfunding and Ethical Obligations

The financial context for my research has also shaped the observations that follow at least as much as my ethnographic methods. Although I received some funding from traditional academic sources, my fieldwork was made possible through a crowdfunding campaign using the Kickstarter platform. In crowdfunding a creator develops an explanation or pitch for something they would like to make and, rather than seeking traditional sources of capital from a small number of investors, releases the pitch publicly through a website like Kickstarter. Any number of individuals can then back the project with a commitment to provide a set amount of money if the project meets its funding goal. Typically the creator offers varying levels of "rewards" based on the amount invested. A game designer, for example, might offer the physical product for a pledge of $20, with lower pledge amounts purchasing a digital copy or an acknowledgment of support. Larger contributions might provide access to additional content or more intangible rewards such as inventing a name for a character in a story. In my case, the core reward was a rough draft of my research, either in electronic or hard copy. All backers received early access to *Spot Check*, a video blog hosted on YouTube that documented my fieldwork and research process. At higher levels of support, backers received a custom plushie crocheted by my wife to look like any character or monster the backer chose.

Although this might strike some as a crass commercialization of scholarly endeavor, I found that it only served to make me more aware of the already existing economic context of academic research. Whether funded by tax revenues funneled through a powerful institution like the National Science Foundation or by direct contributions from the broader public, for better or worse, most academic research produced is an economic object.

Funding sources create obligations for the researcher. In my own case, an overwhelming majority of the individuals who backed my project are

gamers. Anthropologists have long talked about the researcher's ethical obligations to the people whom they study, and being entrusted with research funds by the gaming community has served to make me acutely aware of those obligations. Because I have provided regular reports, summaries, and excerpts to backers throughout my research process, they also served as an extended source of feedback throughout my research. Whether through YouTube videos explaining portions of my findings or sending a chapter excerpt to an interlocutor, I have endeavored to make not only the product but the process of my research transparent and accessible to those whom it represents.

Structure of the Book

The gamers I worked with in my research have developed specific techniques for conjuring and interacting with imagined worlds. Like spells in *D&D*, these techniques consist of somatic, verbal, and material components. When performed in the proper way, in the proper setting, they enter into a mutual shaping of realities, collaborating with other objects, selves, and landscapes present to the experience of both players and characters. The worlds I conjure through my writing here exist in mutual shaping with those same fields of agents, and rather than strictly imposing questions and hypotheses onto my field sites, I have attempted to allow the sites to shape not only my questions, but my concepts of what it means to answer them. As Liz Larsen, one of my interlocutors suggested to me, my aim is to "let everything define itself without any preconceptions."

One effect of this method is that the final result is more episodic and serial than singular and novelistic. This is by design. The linked adventure structure of pulp fantasy shaped the conception of narrative and meaning in early gaming much more than the smooth plot arcs of novelistic fiction. Similarly, my research has been a series of linked adventures rather than a single journey, and each of the chapters presents one of those adventures. This book is a travelogue of worlds rather than an unfolding of an argument.

In this travelogue I imagine each of my field sites as cities that serve as base camps for exploring the labyrinthine experiences of imagined worlds that gaming provides. Before embarking on that journey, in Chap. 2 I consider the angle of entry that gaming affords into imagined worlds, one

defined by a tension between enchantment and rationalization. This tension goes back to the earliest origins of gaming and colors all that follows with the broader cultural issues surrounding the disenchantment and perpetual re-enchantment of the world. Having entered into the realm by way of this tension, I visit Gary Con, a gaming convention in Wisconsin in Chap. 3. Descending into the labyrinth from Wisconsin, I consider how the past shapes our experience of the present, cross-cutting between this world and the imagined worlds accessed through gaming. This cross-cutting nature of imagined experiences leads me to Denton, Texas in Chap. 4, where my explorations uncover techniques that gamers use to bring imagined worlds into our own. In Chap. 5 I end this journey in New York City and Portland, Connecticut. The regions of experience adjacent to these sites demonstrate how, once brought into our experience, these worlds take on concreteness and reality through the labor of players that dwell in them.

Traveling to other worlds is one of humanity's oldest dreams, from Shamanic journeys up the *axis mundi* to the Voyager space mission. Chapter 6 looks back across the worlds presented in the book and gestures toward the vast fields of worlds that remain to be imagined or explored. Each of the chapters between this one and the final conclusion opens onto a different region of experience created by an intersection of physical and imagined field sites. All of these regions connect through the shared angle of entry into other worlds afforded by gaming. Having mapped out these regions, I find a porousness between our experience of imagined worlds and our imaginations about the primary world we experience. By developing our understanding of the fantastic worlds of role-playing games we also develop our understanding of how we come together and collaboratively imagine the world around us.

Notes

1. For examples of extrinsic explanations of play, see Caillois (1961), Huizinga (1950), and Sutton-Smith and Roberts (1971). For intrinsic, see Anderson and Moore (1960), and Piaget (1962).
2. For similar (although "hermeneutical" as opposed to "phenomenological") approaches, see Arjoranta (2015) and Harviainen (2009).
3. e.g., Peterson (2012) and Tresca (2011).
4. In most cases, my participants have asked me to use their real names in my research, although in a few instances they requested I use a pseudonym.

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CHAPTER 2

Entering Imagined Worlds Through Enchanted Rationalization

Work It Harder Make It Better
Do It Faster, Makes Us stronger
More Than Ever Hour After
Our Work Is Never Over
—Daft Punk, *"Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger"*

The rules of *D&D* provide a resistance and concreteness that gives the imagined worlds of gaming a feeling of enchanted reality not present in less structured forms of imagination. Further, the rules create enchantment by using the very tools of rationalization and modernity that have so often disenchanted our primary world. This tension between enchantment and disenchantment is so central to the experience of imagined worlds in gaming that it colors all of the more specific observation in the chapters to come. This chapter is a history only in a limited sense of the term. It focuses on origins, believing that what Tocqueville said of nations is also true of cultural phenomena such as games: "They all bear some marks of their origin; and the circumstances which accompanied their birth and contributed to their rise affect the whole term of their being" (2003, p. 17).

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The Origins of Role-Playing Games

TRPGs began in the American Midwest, in the wake of the social upheavals of the 1960s, a time when the modern world seemed to be falling apart. René Reinhold Schallegger has rightly situated the birth of gaming in the "collapse of traditional dichotomies in the ethical and moral chaos" of WWII, but there were also more proximate pressures in the world of a 1974 Midwesterner (2018, p. 1). To the east, the Bronx was burning in the midst of racial tensions, with over 30,000 fires between 1973 and 1977 in the South Bronx alone (Chang 2005, p. 30). Further east than that the Vietnam War marched toward the fall of Saigon. Closer to home for Midwesterners, the 1973 oil crisis meant the dispelling of ideas about limitless energy supplies as residents waited in long lines for rationed gasoline. The following year would bring Nixon's resignation and the Boston police strike. It was in this context that a small group of Midwestern Americans developed a game organized around the collaborative generation of fantastic oral narratives firmly grounded in an imaginary version of the pre-modern world. In citing this context I do not mean to argue for a direct causal connection between the world events and the invention of TRPGs; clearly, the Boston police strike did not lead to the invention of role-playing games. But, just as clearly, it would be foolish to ignore their angle of entry, the shape of the world in which they came into being.

The more immediate backdrop for these games was the hobby of wargaming culture of the 1960s, in which players simulated historical warfare using miniature figurines and sometimes complex rules for determining the outcome of conflicts. Through collaborations I will describe in some detail later on, Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax combined concepts of conflict simulation from wargaming with the flexibility and multiple win conditions of games like *Diplomacy* and the worldbuilding fantasy tradition of authors like Robert E. Howard, Fritz Leiber, and J.R.R. Tolkien.[1] They published the results of their collaboration in 1974 under the title *Dungeons & Dragons: Rules for Fantastic Medieval Wargames Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures*. By 2004, an estimated 20 million people had played *D&D* (Waters 2004), hundreds of other games had been created, and TRPGs had indelibly shaped the multi-billion dollar video game industry, influenced a generation of film and television writers, and dramatically changed the broader position of geeks within popular culture. As historian Michael Saler said, "the habits of this minority have become those of the majority in the West:

we are all geeks now …. Even those who would never consider themselves as acolytes of Harry Potter or Luke Skywalker sojourn in imaginary worlds today, perhaps more than they realize" (2012, pp. 3–4). Developing better understandings of how TRPGs shape our experience of imagined worlds offers more than insights into the (quite sizable) subculture of gamers; it maps the tracings of imagined experience that run through nearly every aspect of contemporary culture.

D&D is built upon a paradoxical tension between the free, enchanted whimsy of narrative imagination and the restrictive chains of complex rule-based limitations. In the game each player takes on the role of a character, usually an adventurer styled after the tropes of pulp fiction. Game sessions tend to have between four and ten players. Many attributes of the characters, like strength, intelligence, or skill with a weapon, are represented numerically, providing a partial indicator of the likelihood of success in any given endeavor. Another player, originally called the referee, uses a set of rules to guide in almost divinatory interpretation of dice rolls compared against those numbers. This referee, most commonly referred to as the dungeon master (DM), not only adjudicates the outcome of characters' actions but develops and describes the world in which those actions occur. Most TRPGs contain a stylized example of play to demonstrate the process, such as this excerpt developed by neurologist J. Eric Holmes, who edited a revised edition of *D&D* in 1977:

DM The room opens out in front of you. It's thirty feet wide and sixty feet long. There's a wooden door in the wall across from you. In the middle of the room there is a stone dais three feet high. On it is a stone statue, winged, with a hideous face. A small fire is burning in a depression in the stone before it, and thick aromatic green smoke rise from it.

AL Anybody in the room?

DM No.

BOB Wingfoot the Thief advances cautiously into the room, probing the floor with his collapsible bamboo pole.

AL Egbert the Dwarf stands in the doorway, his crossbow cocked and ready.

DM With a clatter of stone wings, the gargoyles come off the wall and swoop at you.

AL Shut the door!

BOB Let me out first!

DM The gargoyle reaches the door, striking at the back of the retreating thief ….
BOB Who has vaulted out the door like a human arrow, landing cat-like on his feet.
DM What's the probability of doing that?
BOB I'd guess about the same as climbing sheer walls [a formally defined probability in the rules], (Rolls two dice) Look at that! I made it!
DM O.K. But probably knocked the dwarf and into the doorway. (Rolls dice.) The dwarf is knocked down. (adapted from Holmes 1981, p. 11–14)

As I will demonstrate through transcripts of play throughout these explorations, the actual process is often more confused than this excerpt suggests. Players struggle to understand the DM's descriptions, argue with the adjudication of results, or make jokes not related to the action at hand. Nevertheless, this simplified example gives a general sense of the way that *D&D* affords an exploration of imagined worlds through combining the free play of the imagination with rationalized rules.

Dungeons and Disenchantment

Max Weber famously described modernity as a phenomenon characterized by ever-increasing rationalization and bureaucracy. The spread of rationalization carried the assumption that the world was completely knowable, eliminating the human experience of mystery and unpredictability in what, following Schiller, Weber described as the "disenchantment of the world" (1978, p. 133). Weber understood this disenchantment as inextricably connected with the Protestant ethic and capitalism that shaped modernity, and in his memorably lyrical proclamation, he suggested that these trends would continue "until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt" (2010, p. 181).

Since Weber, scholars has investigated how his proclamations of total disenchantment and rationalization overlook the important ways that modernity has also been defined by re-enchantment. Richard Jenkins, for example, has argued that disenchantment and re-enchantment are mutually producing phenomena which cannot be divorced from one another.[2] "Formal-rational logics," he argues, "can themselves be (re)enchanted from within, or become the vehicles of (re)enchantment," and conversely, the enchanting elements of play and desire do not necessarily exclude "the

schemes and strategies of organized, utterly rationalized and disenchanted, capitalism" (Jenkins 2000, pp. 13, 18). The perpetual entanglement of these two seemingly opposed forces leads Jenkins to call for a discussion about the place of enchantment in human nature, especially in areas such as playfulness (2000, p. 29). Games like *D&D* give us a window into observing this relationship between disenchantment and (re)enchantment, in part because the tensions between these two forces are made so explicit. Schallegger makes a compelling argument for understanding role-playing games as "deeply postmodern cultural practice," but notes that they "did not start out as a means of cultural critique and the questioning of dominant discourses" (2018, p. 6). While this may be true in the sense that early gaming does not show many explicit signs of the sorts of cultural critique that Schalleger documents, even the earliest origins of role-playing games demonstrate a resistance of disenchantment, a transgressive turning of the structures of disenchantment toward the ends of (re)enchantment.

Given the connections that Weber traces between the Protestant ethic and rationalization, it is worth noting that *D&D* finds its distant origins in the wargames, or *kriegsspiel*, of the nineteenth century Prussian military. In these games, military leaders practiced military tactics using counters to represent troop formations. The outcome of combat was determined through a combination of umpire rulings and dice rolls to simulate the influence of chance (Peterson 2012, pp. 205ff). This abstraction of combat through rules, chance, and human intervention provided an efficient system for testing tactics in an environment that afforded more control than the vagaries and messiness of actual warfare. In games such as Reiswitz's 1824 *Anleitung zur Darstellung militairische Manöver mit dem Apparat des Kriegsspiel.* [Instructions for showing military maneuvers with the wargame apparatus], chance served as a means of immersive play. A fuller discussion of immersion will have to wait until Chap. 5, but here we can note that the use of chance allows the player to "immerse" themselves in some of the uncertainty experienced by a military commander. Whereas in a game like chess one need not fear that a rook will repel an attacking pawn, Reiswitz drew on experimentally-derived probabilities of war to represent this possibility (Peterson 2012, p. 233). Although the representation of firearm effectiveness in statistical terms certainly represents a Weberian rationalization, for Reiswitz it provided more than mere simulation: "If, therefore, we were to give fixed results for fire effect we would arrive at a very unnatural situation …. Only when the player has the same sort of uncertainty over results as he would have in the field can we be

confident that the *kriegsspiel* will give a helpful insight into maneuvering on the field" (quoted in Peterson 2012, p. 231). By adapting the tools of rationalization to provide his players with a means of experiencing the perspective of the generals they played in the game, Reiswitz used them as a means of enchantment, forever changing our experience of imagined worlds.

It should not be overlooked, however, that *kriegsspiel* takes something that was "just for fun," playing soldiers, and systematizes both its means and ends. In terms of Roger Caillois's typology, *kriegsspiel* moved from the free-form play of *paidea* to the rule-bound games of *ludus* (1961). This move also seems to fit Weber's description of Puritan asceticism turning "all its force against one thing: the spontaneous enjoyment of life and all it had to offer" (Weber 2010, p. 78). Both the rationalization of play and using that rationalization as a means of enchantment are thus entrenched habits in the history of *D&D*, stretching back to some of its deepest roots.

Around a century after the initial development of *kriegsspiel*, H.G. Wells wrote a book detailing an amateur war game he and his friends had begun to play. He describes *Little Wars* as "a game for boys from twelve years of age to one hundred and fifty and for that more intelligent sort of girl who likes boys' games and books" (Wells 2010, p. 2). Wells described the *kriegsspiel* of his day "a very dull and unsatisfactory exercise, lacking in realism, in stir and the unexpected, obsessed by the umpire at every turn, and of very doubtful value in waking up the imagination" (2010, p. 35). This seems a very predictable outcome after a century of rationalizing the game, and soldiers who wrote to Wells viewed *Little Wars* as a way of countering that trend, in that "a *kriegsspiel* of real educational value for junior officers may be developed out of the amusing methods of Little War" (2010, p. 35).

Wells's game re-enchanted the experience of imagined worlds in the war game. Instead of tokens, *Little War* placed toy soldiers and custom-made scenery on the nursery floor. Instead of the rulings of umpires and the rolling of dice, Wells and his friends shot spring-loaded toy guns at the soldiers, holding that "Rash is the man who trusts his life to the spin of a coin" and that the "inordinate factor of chance eliminated play" (2010, pp. 8–9). They developed the rules of the game through tinkering, making choices based not merely on simulation but on what they found fun (Wells 2010, p. 12). Perhaps as a result, a sense of whimsy pervades the text, as when he describes "The Battle of Hook's Farm" in character as "General H. G. W., of the Blue Army" (Wells 2010, p. 22).

Yet it would not do to overstate the derationalization achieved in *Little Wars*. As compared to the *D&D* tomes that came later, its ten pages of rules are impressively modest, but nonetheless constrain free play with rules such as "A gun is in action if there are at least four men of its own side within six inches of it. If there are not at least four men within that distance, it can neither be moved nor fired" (Wells 2010, p. 15). This is not the free play of a child as described by George Herbert Mead, in which the player "passes from one role to another just as a whim takes him" (1934, p. 153). In Mead's terms *Little Wars* is not play, but a game, for "the game has a logic, so that such an organization of the self is rendered possible: there is a definite end to be obtained; the actions of the different individuals are all related to each other with reference to that end so that they do not conflict" (1934, pp. 158–159). In this sense, although Wells derationalized his game relative to *kriegsspiel*, it remains a game in which each players' actions are constrained by both the rules and that which they partially present: the attitudes of the other players, which Mead describes as organizing into "a sort of unit …. the generalized other" (1934, p. 154). When writing his fictional "field report" Wells was free to assume the role of General H.G.W. with minimal constraint, but when actually playing the game this was far from the case.

We find, then, two important concepts in the prehistory of *D&D*. The first is a historical trend, in which a game becomes increasingly rationalized over time until it becomes dull and unbearable to the players. At this point an innovation is introduced which re-enchants the game, at least partially. The second concept states a similar point synchronically: there is a tension at the heart of a game like *Little Wars*, in which the players seek to exercise their imaginations through the rationalized constraints of rules. This is at least sometimes successful, as can be seen throughout Wells' descriptions of his games. The question remains whether these two habits, the free exercise of the imagination and the fascination with rules, are ever able to establish a kind of étente, or whether the latter inevitably chokes the vigor from the former.

Shifting our history to 1960s America, we find a situation with some similarities to the early twentieth century *kriegsspiel*. Miniature wargaming, as the amateur hobby growing out of Wells's game was called, had increased in both popularity and complexity (Peterson 2012, pp. 283ff). Specialized figures made of lead and pewter replaced general-purpose tin soldiers, and spring-loaded guns were laid aside in a return to resolving combat through dice rolls.

Like most systems, the wargaming community responded to increased density by developing a division of labor. Instead of the British Imperial setting of *Little Wars*, players could choose from any number of historical periods in which to set their combat, including Classical Rome, Napoleonic Europe, and the Middle Ages. This diversification created its own limitations through drawing attention to historical accuracy, however. This meant that players were constrained not only by the rules of the game but by the limits of realism.

Games set in the Middle Ages were underrepresented at the time, and medieval gaming was considered especially difficult to simulate through rules and probabilities (Peterson 2012, p. 28). The few medieval wargaming rules in circulation before 1971 came from fanzines and were not often considered successful simulations. One gamer in Wisconsin, Dave Arneson, would later call the medieval era "a very dull period of war games," perhaps because of these difficulties (Fine 1983, p. 13). As with Wells fifty years before, this dullness led to innovation that sought to derationalize the game and re-infuse it with a more free-form, *paidea* spirit that could induce a sense of enchantment. When Gary Gygax, a Wisconsin gamer, developed *Chainmail*, a set of rules for miniature medieval wargaming, he included an appendix that allowed for dragons, wizards, and other fantasy staples. Gygax promoted these rules through a variety of means, including a medieval wargaming association he formed with the help of Robert Kuntz: the Castles & Crusades Society.

It was through the Castles & Crusades Society that Gygax's rules found their way to Arneson, and in 1971 he issued an invitation to a new game combining *Chainmail* fantasy with a type of free-form game known as a "Braunstein": "There will be a medieval 'Braunstein' April 17, 1971 at the home of David Arneson from 1300 hrs to 2400 hrs with refreshments being available on the usual basis. … It will feature mythical creatures and a Poker game under the Troll's bridge between sunup and sundown. (quoted in Peterson 2012, p. 65). This marked the birth of what would come to be known as the Blackmoor campaign. Neither Gygax nor Arneson were the first to incorporate fantasy elements into medieval wargaming; British wargamer Tony Bath had developed a fantasy-based campaign in the 1950s which Arneson had likely read about in hobbyist publications (Peterson 2012, p. 44). Many gamers had been resisting the re-enchantment of gaming represented by these fantasy elements, however, and when *Wargamer's Newsletter* printed a report from a *Chainmail* fantasy game, one reader's response described it as "absolute rubbish"

(Peterson 2012, p. 46). Nevertheless, *Chainmail* and its use in Blackmoor appear to have struck a chord in the gaming community, given the events that followed.

Arneson was not, of course, operating in a vacuum. His group had already developed an interest in "multiplayer games, where different players have different abilities and goals, and nonzero-sum games, where players can get ahead without cutting each other down" (Schick 1991, p. 17). Another player in the group, David Wesely, had already experimented with changes that were revolutionary in their own way and possibly more important. Instead of just having each player take on the role of a general commanding troops, when Wesely ran a wargame set in the fictional German town of Braunstein, he also assigned other players non-military roles with individual goals (Fine 1983, p. 13). Although Wesely viewed the experiment as a failure because it descended into chaos, it was an important development in the tension between rationalization and enchantment because it led the players to adopt the role of the (in this case fictional) other in the game, emphasizing the play aspect of adopting roles rather than the game aspect of the generalized other (Mackay 2001, p. 14). Perhaps more importantly, the Braunstein games, and hence Blackmoor, developed the notion of a game in which anything can be attempted (Peterson 2012, p. 62). This contrasts with more completely rationalized games, where the players cannot attempt anything not specified in the rules (a chess player sending a bishop to preach against the rival king, for example). The Blackmoor players were intrigued by this possibility, and the idea of taking on the role of an individual character whose actions were only limited by the player's imagination was central to Arneson's campaign.

Arneson's and Wesely's games illustrate again the pattern of rationalization and re-enchantment we have already seen, although their attempt at re-enchantment was more successful than Wells's. By requiring the players to take on the motivations and personality of another, their games engaged the imagination in ways that abstract troop movements could not. Yet something more was also at work in Blackmoor Castle. Rather than taking on the role of a banker or mayor, as in Braunstein, Arneson directed the players to take on the role of adventurers. Georg Simmel describes the adventurer as someone who "treats the incalculable element in life in the way we ordinarily treat only what we think is by definition calculable" (2011, p. 194). In playing adventurers, then, the players take on the role of individuals who mix spontaneity and predictability in much the same

way that the game they play mixes the rationalization and enchantment. One way of understanding this parallelism is to posit that the players' habits of play came to shape the content of the game.

To state this in psychological terms, the importance of adventuring to the development of *D&D* can be viewed as a sublimation of the general pressures of Weber's iron cage (2010, p. 87). Simmel describes the connection between adventuring and everyday life:

> When the professional adventurer makes a system of life out of his life's lack of system, when out of his inner necessity he seeks the naked, external accidents and builds them into that necessity, he only, so to speak, makes macroscopically visible that which is the essential form of every 'adventure,' even that of the non-adventurous person. (2011, p. 191)

The adventurer takes a lack of system and domesticates it into a "system of life". Using the systematic rules of a game to experience "naked, external accidents" of an adventurer's life reverses this relationship. Sigmund Freud describes the way civilization inflicts trauma on its members through requiring "the non-satisfaction … of powerful instincts," an insight remarkably similar to Weber's idea that Puritan habits seek to eradicate spontaneous enjoyment (Freud 1995, p. 742; Weber 2010, p. 78). Because the iron cage inflicts rationalization on individuals through an ever-increasing body of systems and rules of behavior, the attempt to use similar systems and rules to model the free life of adventuring could be seen as part of what Freud calls a compulsion to repeat. Speaking of children's play, Freud says that they "repeat unpleasurable experiences for the additional reason that they can master a powerful impression far more thoroughly by being active than they could by merely experiencing it passively. Each fresh repetition seems to strengthen the mastery they are in search of" (1995, p. 611). Similarly, the habits of play developed by Wesely and Arneson exemplify these themes in Freud and Weber's work. By repeating the rationalization around them in the imagined worlds of their games, they began to find ways to turn rationalization into re-enchantment, with implications for their experience, not only of imagined worlds, but of the primary world.

The final pieces of the *D&D* puzzle came together through Arneson's correspondence with Gygax. By connecting Gygax's rules with the Braunstein-style games and the dungeon exploration adventures, Blackmoor had become something other than the original *Chainmail*.

Gygax was very interested in this new game, and in 1972 Arneson and fellow Twin Cities gamer Dave Megarry traveled to Wisconsin and "put on a show for the Lake Genevans" (Peterson 2012, p. 71). Following this meeting, Gygax and Arneson began to organize and elaborate on the basic premise of the Blackmoor campaign, leading to the 1974 release of *Dungeons & Dragons: Rules for Medieval Wargames Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures.* These three short volumes (The Little Brown Books) formally combined the Arneson's concept of adventurous, free-form dungeon exploration with Gygax's *Chainmail* rules.

The combination of rationalized structure and imaginative flexibility is infused throughout the Little Brown Books. The introduction explicitly states the connection: "[The rules] provide the framework around which you will build a game of simplicity or tremendous complexity—your time and imagination are about the only limiting factors …" (Gygax and Arneson 1974, p. 4). Although the rules span over one hundred pages, and are often highly technical (e.g., "A Sleep spell affects from 2–16 1st level types (hit dice of up to 1 + 1), from 2–12 2nd level types …"), the emphasis is on flexibility and imagination (Gygax and Arneson 1974, p. 23). It was assumed that individual groups would maintain the creative spirit that produced the game: "New details can be added and old 'laws' altered so as to provide continually new and different situations …. If your referee has made changes in the rules and/or tables, simply note them in pencil (for who knows when some flux of the cosmos will make things shift once again!)" (Gygax and Arneson 1974, p. 4).

Despite this emphasis on imagination, flexibility, and limitless possibility, *D&D* is also a very American (i.e., Puritan) production in many respects. As with the Prussian spirit of *kriegsspiel*, it seems that Gygax's inherited habits as a second-generation Protestant Swiss-American and Arneson's similarly Protestant Scandinavian heritage influenced the development of the game. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the rules for character advancement. As a result of their adventuring, characters in *D&D* become increasingly powerful over time, a progression modeled through the accumulation of "experience points:" accumulate enough points and you advance to the next level. This quantification of human development already carries hints of rationalization, but the true Protestant twist comes with the linking of experience points with the accumulation of treasure. Characters receive some experience points from killing monsters, but the vast majority comes at the rate of one experience point for one gold piece collected (Gygax and Arneson 1974, p. 18). This can be seen

as an application of the Protestant ethic that Weber describes as epitomized by Benjamin Franklin:

> [Making money] is thought of so purely as an end in itself, that from the point of view of the happiness of, or utility to, the single individual, it appears entirely transcendental and absolutely irrational. Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate person of his life. (2010, p. 13)

From this perspective, character advancement in *D&D* makes literal and visible the Puritan connection between accumulation of wealth and divine favor.

Indeed, if we are to take Thorstein Veblen seriously, the connection between personal development and conquering monsters is equally notable in this regard. Veblen describes the attribution of merit to wealth accumulation as a development of the "predatory spirit" that expresses itself through warfare and holds that "A honorific act is … little if anything else than a recognized successful act of aggression" (1994, pp. 14, 17). Tying achievement to combat, then, is a more direct application of this ethos than the "gold-for-experience" rule. As Peterson (2012, p. 140) points out, it is ironic that dragons became the iconic creature for *D&D* adventurers to conquer, given the proverbial warning offered by their greedy treasure accumulation in much of the folklore and fantasy literature sources. Later versions of the game eschewed offering experience points for treasure, but did not change the established habits.

Looking at the birth of *D&D*, we see an intensification of the adventurer's paradoxical approach to systems. On the one hand, the proliferation of rules represents a further extension and organization of rationalization. On the other, we have a system that encourages the players to attempt whatever their imaginations can conceive, and the creators of that system encouraging players to shape and modify it to their needs. Gygax and Arneson note: "We are not loath to answer your questions, but why have us do any more of your imagining for you? Write to us and tell about your actions, ideas, and what have you. We could always do with a bit of improvement in our refereeing" (1974, p. 36).

The first thousand sets of *D&D*, assembled by hand in Gygax's basement and funded out of pocket by Gygax and his business partners, Don Kaye and Brian Blume, took eleven months to sell (Gygax 1977, p. 5). The second run sold quickly, taking only six months, and growth continued

geometrically from there, reaching 7000 copies per month in March 1979 (Fine 1983, p. 15). In between those two points, something very interesting began to happen. As *D&D* became more commercially successful, players began to inadvertently answer Gygax and Arneson's parting question from the end of the Little Brown Books. In 1976, the publications editor for TSR (Gygax, Kaye, and Blume's company) explained the problem:

> As originally conceived, D & D was limited in scope only by the imagination and devotion of Dungeon Masters everywhere …. But somewhere along the line, D & D lost some of its flavor, and began to become predictable. This came about as a result of the proliferation of rule sets; while this was great for us as a company, it was tough on the DM. (Kask 1976)

The paradox between the iron cage and the enchantment at the heart of the game had at least partially resolved itself in just a few short years and, as has happened in so many other areas of civilization, it happened at the expense of enchantment (Ritzer 2000; Weber 2010). Although not speaking of *D&D* directly, Ritzer phrases the difficulty well: "It is difficult to imagine the mass production of magic, fantasy, and dreams …. The mass production of such things is virtually guaranteed to undermine their enchanted qualities" (2000, p. 88; cf. Benjamin 2008). One answer to the question "Why have us do any more of your imagining for you?" then, is that the game carries within it the seeds of its own disenchantment.

Yet this is perhaps unfair to both TSR and *D&D*. Not only was *D&D* partially a *product* of Protestant ethics, it was also released *into* a world suffused with those values. In order to experience the free play of imagination promised by *D&D*, players not only had to navigate the paradox inherent to the game, they had to overcome their own habits as members of a rationalized society. To the extent that *D&D* sought to invert the adventurer's paradoxical approach to systems, it required the overthrow of established habits. Yet such an overthrow is not easily achieved, and as William James reminds us, even "the most violent revolutions in an individual's beliefs leave most of his old order standing" (2000, p. 31).

From James' perspective, what this early history of *D&D* demonstrates is not that the claim to play limited only by the imagination was false, but that it *failed to become true* for many (although certainly not all) players. For James, "the truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events" (2000, p. 135).

To the extent, then, that players failed to graft new habits of play "upon the ancient body of truth" they possessed, the ideas behind those habits failed to become true. In the face of this failure, *Eldritch Wizardry* and other supplements represent the repeated efforts of game designers at "fulfilling the original premise of danger, excitement, and uncertainty" (Kask 1976).

Meanwhile the struggle between rationalization and enchantment took a new turn with the release of *Advanced D&D* (*AD&D*). *AD&D* represents a move toward standardization that has shaped the game down to the present day. In the first announcement of *AD&D*'s pending release Gygax claimed, "We know the limits of the game and how best to expand its parameters without sacrificing uniformity from campaign to campaign. Imagination and variety are desirable, but a thousand variant games are anathema" (1977, p. 6). The religious language of anathema is notable here, as it invokes a standard of orthodoxy in the game, in which too much deviation is not radical innovation but heresy.

In the *AD&D Dungeon Master's Guide*, Gygax explains some of his motivation in seeking to standardize the game: "If ADVANCED D&D is to survive and grow, it must have some degree of uniformity, a familiarity of method and procedure from campaign to campaign" (1979a, p. 7). This connection between the growth of the hobby and the need for rationalization fits Weber's observations about bureaucratization in the political sphere: "Bureaucracy inevitably accompanies modern *mass democracy*, in contrast to the democratic self-government of small homogenous units" (1978, p. 983). It is not surprising that the massive growth of the body of players (estimated at 150,000 in 1979) led to a more bureaucratic approach to the game (Gygax 1979b, p. 29).

In many ways, the *Dungeon Master's Guide* represents the pinnacle of the rationalizing efforts of this edition of the game. Within its pages, Gygax not only works to set a standard to which all players would adhere, he also further rationalizes the process of play. The introduction to the work states this as one of Gygax's explicit goals: "I have made every effort to give the reasoning and justification for the game …. How much rationalization can actually go into a fantasy game? There is some, at least, as you will see …" (1979a, p. 9). "Some" may be an understatement here, as Gygax proceeds to spend over 200 pages of densely packed text developing a rationalized system of play. Here it is appropriate to turn again to Mead, whose thoughts remind us how far this development has come from the unrestrained play of the imagination: "There is a definite unity, then, which is introduced into the organization of other selves when we

reach such a stage as that of the game, as over against the situation of play where there is a simple succession of one role after another" (1934, p. 159).

Perhaps the most striking example of this, as in the previous version of the game, comes from Gygax's handling of character advancement. As before, the gaining of experience points is tied to treasure accumulation and monster slaying, but Gygax also adds a recommendation for standardized evaluation of the player's performance:

> Briefly assess the performance of each character after an adventure. Did he or she perform basically in the character of his or her class? Were his or her actions in keeping with his or her professed alignment? Mentally classify the overall performance as:
>
> E—Excellent, few deviations from norm = 1
> S—Superior, deviations minimal but noted = 2
> F—Fair performance, more norm than deviations = 3
> P—Poor showing with aberrant behavior = 4
>
> ……
>
> Award experience points normally. When each character is given his or her total, also give them an alphabetic rating—E, S, F, or P. When a character's total experience points indicate eligibility for an advancement in level, use the alphabetic assessment to assign equal weight to the behavior of the character during each separate adventure—regardless of how many or how few experience points were gained in each. The resulting total is then divided by the number of entries (adventures) to come up with some number from 1 to 4. This number indicates the number of WEEKS the character must spend in study and/or training before he or she actually gains the benefits of the new level. Be certain that all decimals are retained, as each 0.145 equals a game day. (1979b, p. 85)

Weber says that the characteristic principle of bureaucracy is "the abstract regularity of the exercise of authority, which is a result of the demand for 'equality before the law' in the personal and functional sense," and this passage perhaps represents that aspect of *AD&D* more than any other (1978, p. 983).

Ironically, Gygax's ambition for systematizing the game may have actually helped to preserve some of the enchantment of the game. If only because of the sheer breadth of topics considered, in many ways the tome is more of an esoteric meditation on the art and science of running *D&D* than a step-by-step instruction manual. The book is full of rarely referenced formulae for things like determining the effectiveness of various polearms against various types or armor or generating random condiments and sea-

sonings. Around the time of the publication of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, Gygax often compared the *D&D* books to Aristotle's *Poetics*, implying a philosophical approach to the topic with ambitions toward rationalization rather than a fully systematized work in itself. In this sense, some of the adventurer's approach to rationalization remains within the text: Gygax sets his imagination loose on the paradoxical hope that a systematized game can also be an enchanted game. Unfortunately, in so doing, he also loosed a suggestion that resonated too strongly with established Puritan habits to be ignored: perhaps the reason that *D&D* continued to struggle with disenchantment was that it was only imperfectly rationalized, and all that was needed was to continually develop this rationalization. This appears to have been inadvertent; writing in 1979, Gygax spoke out against the idea:

> Americans have somehow come to equate change with improvement. Somehow the school of continuing evolution has conceived that D&D can go on in a state of flux, each new version 'new and improved!' From a standpoint of sales, I beam broadly at the very thought of an unending string of new, improved, super, energized, versions of D&D being hyped to the loyal followers of the gaming hobby in general and role playing fantasy games in particular. As a game designer I do not agree, particularly as a gamer who began with chess …. I envision only minor expansions and some rules amending on a gradual, edition to edition, basis. (1979b, p. 30)

In his optimism Gygax underestimated the extent to which "truths have once for all this desperate instinct of self-preservation and of desire to extinguish whatever contradicts them" (James 2000, p. 39). As later developments demonstrate, the Puritan ethos into which *AD&D* was released could not leave the game only partially rationalized.

McD&D: The McDonaldization of *Dungeons & Dragons*

With the *Dungeon Master's Guide* Gygax charted a course for the further rationalization of *D&D*. At some point, this process is perhaps more accurately described as McDonaldization, that subspecies of rationalization famously described by Ritzer to elaborate "the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world" (2000, p. 1). We now turn to a particularly McDonaldized time in the history of

the game rather than analyzing each step in the decades-long progression. It is likely that new insights would be gained along the way, but proceeding directly to the recent past offers a starker contrast in which to view the changes that have occurred in the thirty-odd years since the publication of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*.

D&D is now produced by a subsidiary of international toy corporation Hasbro, Wizards of the Coast. Much to the chagrin of players who had invested time and money into the (incompatible) previous edition, Wizards published the fourth edition of the game in 2008. The game described itself as "New and improved!" which is a sentiment that Gygax had hoped to avoid: "This is the 4th Edition of the D&D game. It's new. It's exciting. It's bright and shiny" (Heinsoo et al. 2008, p. 7). Fourth Edition D&D displays all four of the main features that characterize McDonaldization (Ritzer 2000, pp. 1, 12–15): efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control.

Efficiency

In a McDonaldized system, the rationalized structure provides "the optimum method for getting from one point to another," allowing "workers in McDonaldized systems [to] function efficiently following the steps in a predesigned process" (Ritzer 2000, p. 12). The fourth edition *Dungeon Master's Guide* provides just such a process for aspiring dungeon masters, listing point-by-point steps for preparing a game session. Furthermore, it provides a separate process depending on how much time the dungeon master is able to invest. In a recommendation comparable to being offered a value meal, the first step for a one-hour preparation is to "Select a published adventure to run" (Wyatt 2008, p. 18). Within four hours, the dungeon masters will be able to develop their own adventure according to their simple formula: "Design a major quest to lead the characters on the adventure, a handful of minor quests to spice things up, and at least two or three definite encounters and a like number of possible encounters" (Wyatt 2008, p. 18).

By way of comparison, Gygax forewarned the readers of his guide that "What lies ahead will require the use of all of your skill, put a strain on your imagination, bring your creativity to the fore, test your patience, and exhaust your free time" (1979a, p. 86). He too mentions published adventures, but it carries the tone of a concession: "There is nothing wrong with using a prepared setting to start a campaign …. On the other hand, there

is nothing to say that you are not capable of creating your own starting place" (1979a, p. 87). Even though Gygax's work contained the seeds from which the efficiency-oriented model of development would grow, he emphasizes craft where the fourth edition streamlines process.

Calculability

McDonaldized systems also lead those within them to "emphasize the quantitative rather than the qualitative aspects of their work", and this is perhaps the area where the fourth edition of *D&D* displays the greatest degree of McDonaldization (Ritzer 2000, p. 13). Early dungeon masters were given rough guidelines for design principles such as stocking dungeons with creatures of varying ferocity and treasures of varying value or how long characters might take to advance in level, but in the fourth edition all of these concepts are reduced to numbers. In the section on encounter design, dungeon masters are told that "on average, it takes a character eight to ten encounters to gain a level," and presented with a table (Table 2.1).

Furthermore, each encounter is constructed by spending an XP (experience point) budget, with each monster in the combat costing a set amount of experience points. To further simplify the process, dungeon masters are presented with "encounter templates." A hard version of the Commander and Troops template, for example, calls for a "Commander of level $n + 6$," "3 troops of level $n + 1$," and "2 artillery of level $n + 1$" (Wyatt 2008, pp. 57–58). The numbers crunch extends even down to the level of monster design, by which dungeon masters can create new monsters through meticulously balanced formulas (Wyatt 2008, p. 184). In this system, the essence of the monster or encounter is the formula; the qualitative aspects are like a skin overlaid on this framework.

Table 2.1 Quantified encounter design in the fourth edition (adapted from Wyatt 2008, p. 104)

Level of encounter	*Number of encounters*
Level – 1	1 encounter
Level + 0	3 encounters, 1 major quest
Level + 1	3 encounters
Level + 3	1 encounter

Of course, quantitative calculation has always been a part of *D&D*; a business partner of Flint Dille, one of Gygax's friends and collaborators, has said that "to understand D&D, you have to understand that Gary thought like an insurance actuary. D&D is fantasy fiction through actuarial science" (Macris 2011). In the fourth edition, however, the quantitative aspects have expanded to cover aspects of the game that even this "actuarial science" left to the free play of the imagination. Through a mechanic called "skill challenges," the game converts a role-playing event such as negotiating with a local duke into a quantitatively governed dice-rolling session, described as "Level: Equal to the level of the party; Complexity 3 (requires 8 successes before 4 failures)" (Wyatt 2008, p. 76). Gone is the uneasy treaty between rationalization and enchantment; here, the system is all-encompassing.

Predictability

One of the most compelling features of McDonaldized systems is their predictability. When a customer walks into a McDonalds and orders a Big Mac, she know that the product she receives will be the same every time, whether she is in New York City or New Orleans; she also knows that it will be delivered with the characteristic McDonalds speed (Ritzer 2000, p. 13). To a certain extent, the calculability of Fourth Edition *D&D* creates this predictability; players know that each level of their advancement will consist of eight to ten encounters and that they should receive ten "treasure parcels", one of which will be a magic item four levels higher than them (Wyatt 2008, p. 126). Yet this predictability is not limited to the game system alone; it also extends to the approach to play encouraged by Wizards of the Coast.

In 2010 Wizards launched a new program called "D&D Encounters," "an exciting weekly campaign that plays out one epic encounter at a time" (Wizards of the Coast 2012a). The idea of the program is that each week players around the country gather at their local game store to play in a short adventure distributed by the company. Because the adventures are centrally distributed, on any given week every game store running an Encounters event has the same adventure as every other. Just as the customer ordering a Big Mac knows that they will get the predictable McDonalds product, so too a player attending an Encounters event knows that they will be getting the official Wizards of the Coast experience. Advertisement of D&D Encounters also emphasizes the ease with which

players can fit the game into their busy schedule: "Each session only takes 1–2 hours to play, so it's easy to fit your game in after school or work. And each week there's a new and exciting challenge. Jump in anytime!" (Wizards of the Coast 2012b). In more ways than one, D&D Encounters represents a fast food version of the *D&D* experience.

Control

If a McDonaldized system is going to be maintained, it is important that an efficient means of control is employed over the elements of that system (Ritzer 2000, p. 15). Attempts at maintaining control over *D&D* go back to Gygax, but his means of achieving that goal were relatively limited, requiring that he convince players of his own personal expertise: "TSR desires to maintain quality and consistency of play in D&D. We know the limits of the game and how best to expand its parameters without sacrificing uniformity from campaign to campaign" (Gygax 1977, p. 6). This desire for control is, of course, tied up in issues of intellectual property and copyright, which form an important aspect of modern rationalization. Controlling *D&D* through legal means goes back as early as 1976 (Peterson 2012, p. 522), and continues to this day, but Wizards of the Coast also used technology to maintain control over the game in a more subtle and perhaps more effective way:

> Finally, you can enhance your game with a subscription to *D&D Insider* (D&DI) … an online supplement to the pen-and-paper game. D&DI gives you a ready source of adventures, new rules options to try out, and an array of online tools to make your game go more smoothly. (Wyatt 2008, p. 7)

If Wizards can succeed at convincing players that D&DI is *convenient* ("make your game go more smoothly"), they need not necessarily convince them that the content provided is *better*. One important aspect of D&DI is the D&D Compendium, a searchable database of all the games' rules. If Wizards wants to change a rule, they do not need to convince players to change the way they play, they simply update the entry in the database. Everyone subscribing to the service will see the new rule as written the next time they access the database. This system also connects with their Character Builder ("Building and editing your characters has never been easier!"), which only lists powers, skills, races, etc. that exist in the database (Wizards of the Coast 2012b). Players can theoretically develop

customized, homebrewed characters and rules, but once they have bought into the McDonaldized system, they often find it too inconvenient. Wizards even provides the extra-convenient "Choose for me" button every step of the way for the player who is overwhelmed by the pre-cooked options presented to them.

We have arrived, then, at the point where *D&D* exemplified the Weberian dictum that "rational systems inevitably spawn irrationalities" (Ritzer 2000, p. 16). Pursuing the phantom of a completely rationalized game that Gygax inadvertently summoned, developers created a situation in which players were supposed to exercise their imagination by selecting (or having selected for them) pre-packaged fantasy characters and sending them into ready-to-explore "adventures." Speaking of the previous version of the game, which is not even as fully rationalized as the fourth, game designer William Connors has said that "the heart and soul of the game was gone. To me, it wasn't all that much more exciting than playing with an Excel spreadsheet" (quoted in La Farge 2006). To Weber's "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart," perhaps one could add "players without imagination" (Weber 2010, p. 87). Just as in other areas of society, this rationalized system does not necessarily exclude all enchantment, but it does produce certain tendencies that threaten to extinguish the spark.

The situation seemed quite dismal for imaginative expression in *D&D*. Recent years have also brought promising developments that reflect Weber's belief that while the iron cage is "bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production" it can only do so "until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt" (2010, p. 86). While it is not clear what the *D&D* equivalent of fossilized coal might be, or how it could be exhausted, changes to the economic conditions in which the game is produced have helped to reinstate the game's uneasy truce between rationalization and enchantment. A growing collection of players are using the internet to publish simulacra of older versions of the game. These "retro-clones" are often made available free of charge, which could free them from some of the rationalizing habits built into the standard economic models of game development.

The community that supports and plays these games is loosely referred to as the "Old School Renaissance" (OSR). Although many gamers have continued in "the old ways" without ever having embraced the more rationalized forms of play, the OSR represents a surge of interest in the different balance between rationality and enchantment represented by

older styles of play. One common rallying cry, for example, is "rulings, not rules," emphasizing the imaginative flexibility of relying on a DM's improvisational judgments in unexpected circumstances rather than on extensive rules that attempt to codify every situation. The Old School Renaissance has not been the only source of revitalization, however; another example has been the "story game" movement represented by games such as *The Burning Wheel* (Crane 2002) and *Dogs in the Vineyard* (Baker 2004). The connection between economic factors and gaming principles can be seen here in commonly referring to "story games" as "indie games," referring to the small independent creators of these games. While there is definite overlap between the two groups, particularly in the ways that they reimagine the economic conditions of game design, they often differ in how they seek to re-enchant the hobby. While the indie/story game movement largely seeks to re-invent the relationship between rules and enchantment, however, the Old School Renaissance seeks the "great rebirth of old ideas and ideals" suggested by Weber (2010, p. 87). Principles of both the OSR and story gamers have been cited as influential on the newest edition of the game, 5E. The head of research and design on D&D, Mike Mearls, commented on this during an "Ask Me Anything" session on popular website Reddit.com:

> The concept behind the OSR—lighter rules, more flexibility, leaning on the DM as referee—were important. We learned a lot playing each edition of D&D and understanding the strengths and weaknesses each brought to the table. Similar to the OSR, I think indie games bring lighter rules via focus and an emphasis on storytelling to the table that we learned a lot from. While a traditional RPG like D&D by necessity has a much broader focus than traditional indie games, there's a lot to learn there in being clear and giving people a good, starting goal or framework to work within. For OSR stuff, we drew directly on older editions of *D&D*. (2014)

Both approaches may have their merits, but what the history presented here suggests is that even if they are successful in pushing back the rationalization of the game, they are not likely to fully exorcise it. It may be that completely solving the paradox between rationality and enchantment at the heart of the game is not desirable. This enchantment-through-rationality is the role-playing game's angle of entry into imagined worlds. It has shaped the experience of imagined worlds throughout *D&D*'s history. As we will see in the next chapter, it also shapes how players communally experience the intertwining of their own pasts with that history.

Notes

1. For a detailed history of these collaborations, see Peterson (2012).
2. Ritzer (2000) calls this "disenchanted enchantment," and assesses it with a Weberian pessimism. Saler (2012) takes a more optimistic interpretation, recasting this as "the ironic imagination."

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Check for updates

CHAPTER 3

A Life Well Played: How the Past Shapes Our Experience of Worlds

Arcane science of temporal exploration
known to no one of his kind
Immortality through artificial transformation
To rule a world that soon will die
—The Sword, *"The Chronomancer I: Hubris"*

Role-playing games allow players to explore worlds through a combination of imagination, rules, and techniques. Taken as a whole, the practice of gaming presents a stance towards experiencing imagined worlds. As I would learn through Gary Con, this stance can be directed not only towards fantastic worlds such as Greyhawk or Mystara; the past is also another world. We access the world of the past, especially the past that extends beyond our direct experience, through shared imagination. Gaming, then, can shape our engagement with the past, and imaginations about the past can shape the experience of imagined worlds through play.

Conventions have held an important role in gaming culture from the beginning of the hobby. Dave and Gary first met at the second Gen Con, and *D&D* made its first public appearance at another Gen Con five years later. Like the science-fiction conventions that preceded them, game conventions have served as what historian Michael Saler calls "public spheres of the imagination," spaces in which gamers develop and promulgate new

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ways to experience imagined worlds. For many gamers, attending a convention exposes them to a much wider diversity of gaming styles than their more insular home games.

As one convention-goer, Jason Azze, related to me, "you realize it when you come to these things and play at other DM's tables, that none of us are actually playing the same game as far as rules." Once exposed to a new game, style, or technique, gamers take those experiences back to their home groups. In this way conventions can be seen as the hearts of gaming culture, circulating new ideas and practices out to the scattered gaming groups and back again.

This circulatory function remains important in spite of its partial diffusion through online communities, because many of these techniques are embodied spatial practices. While techniques can certainly be described in text, conventions provide irreplaceable physical experiences. For example, at one convention, DM Matt Finch reorganized the players at my table so that we sat according to the relative dexterity of our characters, and experiencing that bodily technique for managing a large group of gamers helped us to understand it much more concretely than if he had simply written a blog post describing the technique.

Gary Con takes the long-standing tradition of the gaming convention and combines it with a multifaceted commemoration. First, and most explicitly, the convention memorializes the life of Gary Gygax. When Gary passed away in 2008 his friends and family gathered together in the Foreign Legion Hall in Lake Geneva after the funeral to play games in an act of commemoration. The following year marked the first official Gary Con, which took the motto "celebrating a life well played." This motto succinctly captures a deeper sentiment held by many gamers: playing games constitutes an essential feature of a life well lived, one that not only provides a healthy diversion but that enriches the entirety of one's life. Paul La Farge, an author and gamer I met at my first Gary Con, expressed this sentiment in a piece he wrote after visiting Gary not long before his death: "You could conclude, I guess, that games are everything for Gygax, or that everything is a game; but I don't think that would be quite right. I think that he has found a way to live" (2006). Gaming here is experienced not so much as an activity sprinkled periodically through one's life but as a mode of living, one that colors all of your experience. As Brian Skowera, a Connecticut native who makes the annual trek to Lake Geneva, told me,

> I mean, what is life except a series of experiences? So you should probably find those experiences that are pleasurable to you for whatever reason. You can't control your makeup, you can't control your personality, your state of neurons from, you know, are you born with a chemical imbalance? Are you born to see everything optimistically or pessimistically? Are you born at an advantage or a disadvantage? There's so much you can't control. You can, however, seek out experiences that are tolerable or even pleasurable and avoid those which are painful, and try not to inflict [pause] bad things on other people. So, gaming's pleasurable to me, it helps distract from thoughts like that [laughs]. So. Yeah. No meaning except what we make of it.

The "life well played" of Gary Con, then, is not the one that plays the games of modernity best, but the one that uses imagined worlds to find enchantment, or as Brian put it, to make meaning, in the midst of a world which tends to disenchant. This puts the spirit of Gary Con in line with Schiller's famous remark that "Man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays" (2004, p. 80). Playing games at a funeral, as Gary's friends and family did in 2008, makes sense not only because it honors his life as a gamer, but because it helps us to approach a funeral with levity and to make meaning of, to enchant, the loss. In other words, the combination of commemoration and play at Gary Con provides participants with an enchanted experience not only of the particular loss of Gary, but of the loss of the past in general. Because the convention deals with the lost past, nostalgia runs through nearly every aspect of the convention. This nostalgic commemoration allows attendees to access the world of the past through a paradoxical combination of rationalizing and enchanting the experience of time, just as the combination of rationalization and enchantment at the heart of the game allows players to experience other worlds.

The Journey to Lake Geneva

My first introduction to Gary Con came through a link on *Grognardia*, James Maliszewski's blog that also first exposed me to the Old School Renaissance. Looking at the convention website, I could see that this would be an ideal place to learn about both the early days of gaming and how current gamers' experience that passed through shared experiences of imagined worlds. The website describes Gary Con as "a living memorial to E. Gary Gygax, the father of role-playing games …. a time for family,

friends, and anyone whose life was changed as a result of the work of Gary Gygax to gather, remember, and toss a few dice around" (Gary Con 2012). The description piqued my curiosity by combining a casual, almost dismissive description of gaming ("toss a few dice around") with the claim that gaming has the potential to change lives. This juxtaposition of seriousness and play, both in the context of remembrance and shared imagination, is a recurring theme throughout Gary Con: the funeral and the game, the shrine and the dice.

Introducing myself on the official Gary Con forum, I experienced some of the anxieties associated with a "first contact." Although I had been gaming for five years, I had no established credentials with these gamers and knew very little about the old school games that they played. These anxieties led me to cautiously title my post "Any room for a gamer anthropologist?" but I quickly found that my apprehension was unfounded. I had enthusiastic responses from a number of attendees, including Tim Kask, the first editor of *Dragon* magazine whose signature playfully proclaimed him "Pundit of the Old Ways, Advocate of Common Sense, Father to *The Dragon*." That thread also introduced me to many of the gamers who would become my friends and interlocutors over the next few years of my fieldwork: Jason Azze, or Spaartuk, who would later show me a picture of his twelve-year-old self playing *D&D* in a friend's basement and confide that all of his gaming is an attempt to recapture that lost moment (Fig. 3.1); Derek White, or GeekPreacher, whose avatar gave me a cartoon preview of his trademark fedora and Methodist minister's collar; Allan Grohe, aka Grodog, one of the most knowledgeable people in the world when it comes to Gygax's original dungeon, Greyhawk; and Tavis Allison, who years later would skip a day at the Popular Culture Association conference with me to attend a beer fest and speculate about how a *D&D*-style thief might infiltrate the building. All of them eagerly offered to help me in whatever way possible, suggesting potential contacts and in one case offering a friendly warning that "you're going to collect a very scattered set of data."

The forums on the Gary Con website, together with the official Facebook group for the convention, serve as a continuous back channel for the event throughout the year. Interacting in these virtual spaces helps to create a sense that Gary Con does not stop at the end of the four days of the official event, but merely becomes more diffuse. The 900-plus members of the Facebook group regularly post articles of interest, such as

Fig. 3.1 Carlos Garcia, Mari Ciccarini, and Jason Azze gaming in Carlos's basement

historian Jon Peterson's "Ambush at Sheridan Springs," (2014) which provides a detailed history of Gary's last days at TSR, Inc.; photos of themselves wearing Gary Con shirts at other conventions; plugs for new gaming kick-starters or products; and inside jokes. This activity tends to reach a fever pitch in the hours surrounding the start of event registration. Many of the more popular events fill up within minutes, and attendees will triumphantly post a list of the games they will be playing.

In registering, attendees often focus on who will be running the game at least as much as which game is being played. The registration system reflects this, awarding each registrant a limited amount of "GPs" (gold pieces) and "SPs" (silver pieces) to "spend" on events. Games run by well-known figures like Tim Kask, Frank Mentzer, or Jim Ward require the more limited currency of GPs, while others require only silver pieces. The

importance of personality also comes through as people describe the events they will play. In response to the common question, "What are you playing this week?" a gamer is as likely to say "One of Mike Curtis's games" as "Dungeon Crawl Classics" or (even less frequently) the name of the adventure. Besides deciding with whom they want to play, registrants must also consider the schedule, choosing between conflicting events and deciding how much of their time at the convention they want to spend locked into a game. Sessions typically run between four and six hours, with the first games of the morning beginning at 8:00 and the final games of the day running to midnight or later. Making it through an entire convention of gaming can be a test of endurance, especially once late-night socializing over drinks figures into the mix.

The connection that shaped my initial Gary Con experience, however, was with Luca Carbonini, an Italian gamer who to this day has only been to America in order to attend Gary Con. Luca offered to share a room and to pick me up from O'Hare so that we could make the drive up to Lake Geneva together with Emanuel, who traveled from Norway to attend. The journey to Lake Geneva forms an important part of framing the experience for those that attend, combining aspects of the great American road trip with a pilgrimage to the birthplace of the game that has shaped so much of our lives.

Lake Geneva is a summer resort town that offers an escape from the busyness of urban living just a few hours' drive from Chicago, but for those that attend Gary Con the city takes on an almost mythical significance. As fantasy authors Andre Norton and Jean Rabe put it when they made the city an *axis mundi* in their novel *Return to Quag Keep*, "'Lake Geneva' …, 'Why Wisconsin? … I think because there's still magic here …. The magic that's left on earth is strongest here" (2008, p. 298). For me, that first drive and every subsequent retracing carried memories of growing up in the Midwest. The hour-and-a-half journey from the airport, through gently sloping fields often still covered in snow, served as a medium allowing me access to hazy days of my childhood, much like how the sacred time of the convention call the earliest days of *D&D* forward from a time before I was born into the present. This experience of "nostalgia for things I never knew," as Tavis has described it in his blog, becomes intertwined with the landscape of southern Wisconsin and of Lake Geneva in particular (Allison 2012). Place, time, and imagination all blend together in the experience of the convention.

The Family Reunion

Like so many D&D characters, my adventure at Gary Con began in a bar. Arriving in Lake Geneva around dusk, we drove through the carefully cultivated Americana of the resort town's main strip, past vintage signs advertising the diners and shops that form the base of the three-story buildings. Luca pointed out the former location of TSR headquarters and the Dungeon Hobby Shop. We headed to the bar right off the main strip, where the convention organizers had arranged a party on the last night before the convention officially began. They had set up in the back room, where attendees mingled over pints of Spotted Cow, a local brew favored by Gary. I stepped out to the adjoining smoking enclosure and found Geek Preacher, who enthusiastically showed us his electronic copy of the newly released *Hacklopedia of Beasts*, a supplement for a game called *Hackmaster*. Preacher struck me as a sort of G.K. Chesterton imbued with the rich baritone voice of a southern preacher, an impression that has only grown with our friendship. We made introductions and quickly fell to swapping stories and opinions about gaming, continuing on until the event drew to a close.

From the pizza shop Luca and I headed over to Ernie's house. As Gary's namesake and oldest son, Ernest Gary Gygax, Jr. holds a special place at Gary Con, and until he suffered the misfortune of a house fire in 2013 he would open his house for gaming in what he called "a general Ernie the Barbarian atmosphere (drinking, storytelling, as well as movie watching)" (Gygax 2011). Each night of the convention, and often on the nights leading up to and following, gamers would drop by to eat, drink, chat, and play whatever game fit the mood and size of the group. That first night we played Liar's Dice while classic period movies like *Horatio Hornblower* played quietly in the background. Posters from previous Gary Cons hung on the walls, and a portrait of Gary smiled down on the gathering. Like many gamers' houses, Ernie's was lined with shelves filled with paperback science-fiction and fantasy novels, and various mementos of gaming history sat tucked away in nooks and crannies. Ernie speaks quickly and laughs often, and he made it a point to welcome each guest that came in, whether newcomer or old friend.

In all of this, Ernie explained that he was trying to "do it like Dad used to do," explicitly marking the festivities' commemorative aspect, the way the convention serves as a conduit between the world of the past and the world of the present. Especially in Gary's later years he was known to play

games on his front porch with anyone who dropped by, a fact often related to me by gamers lamenting their failure to make it up to Lake Geneva before Gary's death. This idea of open acceptance and hospitality, not just by Gary but as central values of the gaming community, recurs in many gamers' stories. Posting on the convention's Facebook page, attendee Thomas Valley captured this sentiment well:

> You know what impressed me most about my first Gary Con?
>
> Generosity of spirit.
>
> I'd like to think this Con attracts a certain type of gamer: Someone willing to think of others; someone who wants to lend his or her voice to honoring the memory of a man that gave so much to all of us.
>
> .....
>
> People talk about Gary's gift of gaming, but Gary Con is an exhibition of his gift of generosity of spirit. I'm proud to have taken part in this weekend's festivities, but I'm even prouder still to have met you all and to have experienced everything that gaming is really about.

By offering to share his room with me, then, Luca acted very much in the spirit of the convention. That year we stayed at the Colony Suites hotel just down the street from Ernie's house rather than the main convention site outside of town. As a result, it wasn't until the next morning that I had my first glimpse of The Geneva Ridge Resort, a sprawling two-story hotel. March in Lake Geneva is not exactly peak tourism season, which means that the convention is usually the hotel's busiest week of the winter, and rooms often sell out months before the event. During the convention, the glass entrance is often flanked on either side by a handful of gamers sharing a smoke break, cigarillos (one of Gary's favorites) being especially popular among some of the old guards. Many of the convention-goers have attended since the first Gary Con, and shouts of greeting erupt when a veteran steps into the lobby-cum-gaming-area. As "The Keeper" explained on the convention's forum, "Look at it this way, Garycon is like a GIANT family reunion, including 3rd & 4th cousins." (2011).

Besides the front gaming area, which consists of a dozen tables set up in lieu of the standard lobby furniture, the upstairs of the hotel holds two other important areas for the convention: the restaurant and the bar. Picture windows in each of these rooms provide a view down the hill to the frozen lake. The restaurant also doubles as a board game area, with stacks of classic games on tap for attendees to pick up and play. Tom Wham, a game designer most famous for his game *Snit's Revenge* and his

train conductor overalls, can often be found here offering demos of his most recent designs. In addition to serving as a watering hole, the bar also hosts talks by special guests like Rob Kuntz or Ernie Gygax on the history of *D&D*. Dan the Bard performs the traditional geek convention art of filking here, strumming his lute and singing songs about gaming while dressed in Renaissance-era garb. In the evenings, convention-goers crowd the bar until it closes, sharing stories and befriending the locals who serve as bartenders.

My First Adventure

My dungeon master that first morning, Jon Johnson, was suffering the ill effects of one of those late-night sessions, and arrived a little late to our assigned table nursing a cup of coffee and a headache. While we waited for him I took in the early morning bustle of the convention. Our table was in the most crowded of the three main gaming areas downstairs. Next door, players arranged miniatures for various wargames or beat two empty halves of coconut together as they played a jousting game designed by Gary. Across the hall in The Virtual Porch, well-known figures such as Frank Mentzer (editor of the BECMI series of *D&D*, 1983–1986) and James Ward (creator of *Metamorphosis Alpha*) began their morning games next to "The Table of Honor," a small shrine with Gary's gaming paraphernalia and possessions laid out as if he had just stepped away for a moment and would be back to run another game momentarily. At each of the twenty-odd tables in our room, gamers pulled gaming books, dice, and pencils from their backpacks.

The number of attendees has grown each year I attended the conference, from 400 at my first visit to 675 in 2014. Since the time of my fieldwork, the convention has continued to grow, and has even had to switch to a larger venue. As with the broader gaming community, the attendees tend to skew towards adult white males, and my own status as a white male should be taken into account as I explain my experiences at Gary Con. Based on my informal count, roughly 16% of the attendees were female. Interestingly, the predominance of males was most pronounced in the miniature wargaming area (5% female) and least pronounced in the registration area (28.5% female, many of whom were volunteers) and among those playing board games in the restaurant area (26.4%). Some attendees also bring their children to the convention, and among the younger attendees the gender gap was much smaller, with females comprising

around 40% of that population. The gender gap has been closing, all too slowly, in the broader gaming culture, such that in 2016 Gen Con had more female speakers than male speakers, and it may be that Gary Con has participated in that trend since my initial research (Mettler 2016).

Sometimes the six to ten players at a table might introduce themselves, but often they are content to rely on the name badges everyone wears or even not to learn the names of the others at the table. This lack of introduction may stem from a few sources. It may be that gamers adhere less strictly to social expectations of interaction; that is to say, maybe gamers are just awkward that way. Many players who do not introduce themselves are quite gregarious and socially adept at the game table, however, and many will introduce themselves readily in the bar or during a break. Instead, I see this habit as indicative of the nature of the event. First, as Keeper suggested on the forums, the convention is like a large family reunion, one at which you can sociably interact with your more distant "relatives" in a familial atmosphere without necessarily placing how exactly you are related to that third or fourth cousin. Second, a significant portion of the time at the table is spent in game, where characters rather than players take the foreground of attention. A lack of personal context about others can at times facilitate an easier transition into the character's persona, just as the anonymity and darkness of a dance club can facilitate social interaction. In any case, I had to break the social norm that morning and introduce myself and my role as an anthropologist at the convention. As was almost uniformly the case throughout my research, the other players expressed interest in the study and were happy to allow me to record the session. One of them, Brian, even went so far as to invite me to a *D&D* session he had convinced Ernie to run at his house later in the week. This would be the first time Ernie had run a game in over ten years, and the session proved to be one of the highlights of my first year at Gary Con.

When Jon did show up, he was distressed to learn that his copy of the adventure for our session, which he had helped to write, was missing the character sheets that should have been included in the back of the book. This minor mishap provided me with an excellent opportunity, however, because Jon was able to demonstrate the degree of familiarity that gamers develop with the fictive worlds they create and inhabit. Each of the characters in the adventure were drawn from Jon's home gaming group, where he had been running a campaign in the same fictive world for fifteen years. Over the years he had gotten to know the characters quite well, to the extent that even in his groggy state he was able to describe each of the

characters to us, in terms of appearance, personality, and even numerical statistics.

At times dungeon masters will plan a dramatic, almost ritualized beginning to a session, but Jon began our game with a more prosaic, less marked transition once he felt that we knew enough about the characters to begin:

> All right. You folks are all well versed with each other, you're- you've been traveling and adventuring with each other for quite a while. Um, you heard that news from this particular area north of Stoyne. It's a small town called Windere. Windere has been having problems with goblins lately.

As the session progressed we learned that the goblins had taken up residence in a nearby gnome barrow after forcibly evicting the previous residents. Our band of adventurers was, of course, more than happy to assist the Sheriff of Windere with this problem. After navigating some political intrigue in the town we successfully cleared out the goblins and even had opportunity for our half-orc member to comically, if ignominiously, urinate on a shrine to the goblins' dark deity.

While we played, people wandering through the convention space would stop from time to time and listen in, perhaps smiling at a joke or offering a bit of commentary. This semi-public aspect to convention gaming sets it apart from the home environment, where gamers most commonly meet at one of the members' homes. The hovering can be a bit unnerving to the uninitiated, as in other contexts the presence of someone standing quietly by your table would merit at least an acknowledgment, if not an invitation to join in. In the convention context, however, such an invitation is not expected if the table is "full," a flexible status that depends on the dungeon master, the game being played, the identity of the onlooker, and how far the session has progressed. At one session, for example, a member of the Gygax family stopped by the table to look at the impressive setup of three-dimensional dungeon tiles and was immediately invited to join, an offer that might not have been extended to a less well-known passerby or from a less freewheeling dungeon master.

Celebrity and Nostalgia

As that incident suggests, Gary Con celebrity status plays a role in the experience of the world of the convention, the past it conjures through memorial, and the imaginary worlds explored there. Part of the appeal of

the convention includes the presence not only of the Gygaxes but numerous game designers past and present. Each year the convention announces a list of "VIP guests," and name badges are color coded by status, with designators for TSR employees, Game Masters, and Gygaxians. Despite this, I found the VIPs very approachable, a fact that other attendees emphasized in our conversations. In one of my conversations with Jason Azze he captured the combination of respect and camaraderie most common at the convention:

> At this convention it's, I mean, it's strange that we're standing here, uh, twenty feet away from Bill Willingham and Jeff Dee. Who are just playing at a table, you can go shake hands, talk to them. They're just guys in t-shirts. Um, I've played in Frank Mentzer's game. That's the guy who wrote the book! When I started playing! I didn't know it then! I had no idea who he was then, I was nine years old. Who's Frank Mentzer? They've all been really nice. Kind of happy to hang out with us. Uh, this con is small enough where they don't need to be ferried around through, y'know, secret entrances and exits, they're walking about freely.

Not all of the celebrities at Gary Con are industry veterans, however. Some, like Jon Johnson, are well known at the convention because of their regular attendance and large personalities. Michael Browne is another staple of the convention, recognizable at a distance by his shoulder length silver hair and penchant for running games in costume. As my game with Jon progressed, Michael stood across the room dressed in the full regalia of a Grand Moff in the Galactic Empire, running a game set in the Star Wars universe. A professional costume and replica designer, Michael has provided the convention with such memorable game sessions as "Nightmare on Sesame Street," a horror adventure set in an eldritch version of Jim Henson's creation, complete with hand puppets for each of the players and an original 1970s Sesame Street play set as stage dressing.

Although I never had the opportunity to formally interview Michael, as we have gotten to know each other over the years he has come to stand in my mind as an embodiment of the nostalgic aspects of old school gaming, the way that some gamers use games as a way to encounter the past. While some gamers express this nostalgia implicitly through their affection for older games, Michael fully and explicitly embraces a nostalgia not only for 1970s gaming but the whole of the seventies in which he grew up. I had the opportunity to glean some of his seventies expertise one year at Gary Con during a late-night marathon viewing of "Battle of the Network

Stars". As I sat listening to Michael and the other members of the Dead Games Society ("an eclectic group of RPG enthusiasts who enjoy playing and promoting games that are no longer in print") swap forty-year-old gossip about their childhood heroes I was struck by the similarities to how old school gamers approach their hobby (Dead Games Society n.d.).

Gary Con brings the past of gaming into the present experience of the attendees, and that experience is tinged with nostalgia, but the object and nature of that nostalgia is not easy to parse. As Spaartuk once commented to me, a blurry line runs between "whether it was a sense of nostalgia for what I was doing or how I felt at that time or was it the game itself." Although he concluded, laughing, that "it must be the game, because it's not like I was particularly happy as a fourteen-year-old," even that answer carries ambiguity. "The game," that he feels nostalgia for refers both to the act of playing, the rules used to play, and the imaginary world.

I once asked Michael what the seventies meant to him and he replied, simply, "Warmth, and safety." That answer continues to strike me, not only for its apparent incongruity with the historical turmoil of that time period, but for its similarity to the words that the writers of the drama *Mad Men* put in the mouth of 1960s ad executive Don Draper:

> Nostalgia—it's delicate, but potent. Teddy told me that in Greek nostalgia literally means "the pain from an old wound." It's a twinge in your heart far more powerful than memory alone. This device [the Kodak slide projector] isn't a spaceship, it's a time machine. It goes backwards, and forwards … it takes us to a place where we ache to go again. (Weiner 2007)

As a living memorial, Gary Con allows gamers to access imaginary worlds shot through with the colors of the past, and this allows them not only to commemorate the loss of Gary but the pain of a lost home, one that is at times self-consciously mythologized. Writing on the memorial of Gary's death in 2012, Tavis wrote a blog entry titled "When Someone Great is Gone." In the post he explains the personal meanings he has developed around a song by some of his fellow New Yorkers, LCD Soundsystem:

> But I always thought "Something Great" is about the death of a mentor, and the reason I'm thinking about it now is that its personal meaning for me is tied up with Gary Gygax. Maybe it's the timing of when the song came out and Gary's passing four years ago today. Maybe it's lines like this:
>
> I miss the way we used to argue,
> Locked, in your basement.

> In that I hear my nostalgia-for-things-I-never-knew for the days when arguing about wargames over a sand table was an imaginary haven from the real war in another country. In my mind that time seems to have a purity and innocence that ended after D&D's success cracked this world open. The war outside was over, to be replaced by dirty civil wars within TSR that were soon to be mirrored by the culture wars in which D&D was the devil. That's the era I remember, in which the AD&D books seemed already artifacts of a magical time long past.
>
> The video does this well as the shadow moves through the aisles between crates of records and adventure modules. Pulling out any one of them would teach me about how it felt to be alive in a time of magic, and that time had to be now because I was holding some of it in my hand. But I had the sense that the wizards who could teach me how to perform that magic on command were gone, even when I was young and this wasn't really true. (Allison 2012)

Tavis's elegiac meditations here expose some of the still raw wounds that Gary Con, and old school gaming in general, commemorates. These wounds penetrate through multiple levels of experience. On a personal level we commemorate lost childhood, as with Jason's picture or when Rob Kuntz described his experiences at the birth of D&D by saying they had rediscovered childhood. Yet the nostalgic draw of gaming goes deeper than childhood memories. Culturally, as Tavis notes, D&D came out of the American Midwest at a time when the modern world seemed to be falling apart and it was not always easy to find a story to believe in. Given this historical context it seems far from coincidental that the original role-playing game was set in a fantastical version of the pre-modern world. The words, images, and actions of gaming enact what Paul Connerton calls a "habitual skilled remembering" of the disenchanting and disempowering wounds of modernity (1989, p. 72). Even deeper than these cultural wounds, gaming deals with a nostalgia more broadly human. The idea of using pictures and stories to visit a better past, after all, did not originate with either Don Draper or *Dungeons & Dragons*. Mircea Eliade identified this as one of the central experiences of myth and ritual: "they emerge from their historical time—that is, from the time constituted by the sum total of profane personal and intrapersonal events—and recover primordial time, which is always the same, which belongs to eternity" (1987, p. 88). The place of the ritual or convention, the mythic or fantastic past, and the ancestral or historic past, all blend together in experience.

The Shrine on Center Street

There is a touch of religious awe in the way they interact with the legendary artifacts and sites of the convention. Besides the Table of Honor, the convention also features a small exhibit of Gary and Dave's personal effects, including their briefcases and the typewriter Gary used in typing of the first version of D&D. Two men, Paul Stormberg and Kevin Maurice, take on the task of serving as the artifacts' curators. To call someone a curator is to place them only a step removed from the more religious term "curate," and Paul and Kevin's role often seems to be a hybrid of both. Paul's side-parted hair and clean shaven face contrast with Kevin's Gandalf-style beard and long gray hair, such that standing back to back they would create a sort of Janus-figure that encompasses the spectrum of white male gamer appearance. Each year Paul and Kevin also bring a sand table, modeled on Gary's description of his own table in much the same way that someone might create a replica of the Ark of the Covenant using the original measurements from Deuteronomy. Even the miniature figures at the table were made following Gary's original modifications of non-fantastic figurines into an army of orcs led by the Giant King Verdurmir.

The zenith of these re-creationist endeavors came during the final convention of my field work, when the organizers obtained permission to set up the sand table in the basement of the Lake Geneva home where Gary lived when he first wrote *D&D*. The little white two-story at 330 Center Street sits on a corner lot just one block from the Horticultural Hall, site of the first Gen Con. Although Luca had pointed out the house to me on my first visit to Lake Geneva, at the time no one had contacted the current owners (who use it as a vacation home) to explain the significance of the location and we contented ourselves with gazing thoughtfully at the structure from the street. Thus it was with some excitement that I stepped onto the porch. Finding the front door locked, I followed the characteristic sound of laughing gamers around to the side of the house and heaved open the cellar door. Descending the stone steps, we knocked tentatively at the interior wooden door, which still bears an inscription in Gary's hand: "ENTRANCE: WARGAMES ROOM."

Paul greeted us warmly, ushering us into a typical unfinished Midwestern basement complete with a cold concrete floor and exposed metal support poles. A small collection of gamers huddled over the sand table to our right. Among them were Mark Clover, the unofficial photographer of

Gary Con, and Terry Kuntz, who had attended enough of Gary's basement games to help Paul recreate the original layout. Kevin and Paul had labored long into the night getting everything just right, even mounting shelves for the miniatures in the exact location that Gary had done—the same. The table, Paul explained almost apologetically, was a few inches too close to the far wall in order to shift it away from one of the support beams.

That basement game was more than simply a historical recreation, however. Mark, Terry, and the others at the table were re-enacting one of the oldest archetypal images of gaming, one exemplified by the Tavis's interpretation of the lyrics, "the way we used to argue, locked, in your basement." In my eight years of researching role-playing games, this visit to Center Street was the only time that I ever actually observed gamers playing in a basement. Despite this, the basement endures as the prototypical location for gaming, to the extent that when journalist Ethan Gilsdorf reported on the Center Street game he called that basement "the original geek lair" and confided that "yes, the stereotype of a nerd gamer in the basement has a basis in reality" (2014).

Paul led us upstairs for a brief tour of the small house. As we stepped off the narrow staircase into the kitchen, he pointed out that you could hear the wargamers beneath us throughout the entire house, prompting us to imagine similar acoustics from forty years ago. The sound of dice rattling up out of the basement realm of the unconscious into the world of the everyday and domestic provides a suggestive symbol of the position of gaming in the broader culture: often tucked away and out of sight, but shaping the rest of experience with an undercurrent of noise.

The living room had been set up for a *D&D* game that Alan Grohe would run later that evening, set in Gary's famous dungeon, Castle Greyhawk. To play Castle Greyhawk in Gary's old living room creates a layering of spatial experience highlighting the interplay between physical space, imaginary space, and the personalities that become invested in those spaces. Alan has painstakingly recreated the original dungeon in much the same way that Paul rebuilt Gary's sand table, but there are also other legendary dungeons that a convention-goer can visit in the original, so to speak. Although imaginary, these spaces retain a remarkable degree of persistence, especially when run by their creators. Tavis once told me a story of exploring Rob Kuntz's El Raja Key in a session run by Rob, in which the adventurers discovered a secret passage. Rob explained that Gary's character had walked by that same passage hundreds of times without finding it. This imaginary doorway, then, had existed only in Rob's notes

and mind for decades, unknown to anyone else until Tavis and the other players stumbled across it as their characters retraced Gary's footsteps through that imagined space.

The Dungeon Hobby Shop Dungeon

Although I did not join in on any of the Greyhawk sessions at Center Street, I experienced a similar session during my first Gary Con when I played with Ernie Gygax in his "Dungeon Hobby Shop Dungeon," whose title combines physical and imagined spaces in yet another way. The Dungeon Hobby Shop occupied the ground floor of the building in downtown Lake Geneva where TSR had its headquarters, and the title of the dungeon preserves the fact that the imagined space of the dungeon was first explored as Ernie led adventurers through it at the shop in the late seventies. My experience at this session highlights the intertwining of the historical past, the imaginary world, and the techniques used to experience that world.

Like Gary Con, this session found its origin in a desire for commemoration. The primary initiator of the event, Brian Rubin, related his story to me in the kitchen of Ernie's house. In 2009, when Dave Arneson died thirteen months after Gary, Brian was driven to his attic to pull out his gaming books. In reminiscing over these old tomes, he began to reflect on how important *Dungeons & Dragons* had been in his life. Like many gamers, Brian did not fit in well with his peers when he was young, and he told me that Gary and Dave's creation helped him through those times when he did not feel accepted. This led him to contact Ernie, with whom he formed a friendship. Ernie encouraged him to come to Gary Con, and Brian convinced Ernie to run a session of *Dungeons & Dragons* for him during the convention, something Ernie had not done since 2001.

My invitation to play with Ernie came privately, almost covertly. Brian had organized the session with Ernie, and wanted to ensure that he had a group of fellow players that he thought would work well together. After playing in Jon's session with me, Brian (perhaps swayed by my status as an anthropologist studying the event) decided that this included me, and told me of the plan to play with Ernie. The invitation carried with it a sense of honor, of being included in the secret center of the event. This appealed to me as both player and researcher: having the "first player of *Dungeons & Dragons*," as Brian called Ernie, run a game for you is an exciting opportunity as a player, and Luca demonstrated that the enthusiasm was

not isolated to me when he had Ernie sign his character sheet. As a researcher, the opportunity was equally exciting: if the stated purpose of the convention is to memorialize Gary, to bring the past into the present through experiencing imaginary worlds together, then what better source of data than getting to play with his son?

All of this worked together to create a sense of anticipation for the session. I rescheduled an interview that was to take place that night, and Brian decided not to attend a scheduled game at the convention in order to clear more time to play with Ernie. This anticipation is an important aspect of any enactment: "We anticipate them, knowing that they involve planning …. We attend them putting ourselves in the hands of those who we trust to evoke and focus our energies, but who we also feel may betray our trust" (Abrahams 1977, p. 100). In this case, the tension was perhaps heightened by the fact that the session took place on the final night of the convention. If the session failed to meet our expectations, most of us would not get another chance that year.

These expectations, at least in my own case, were somewhat vague, however. Each of us had played before, but none of us knew what style of game Ernie would employ, what the substance of our adventure would be, or in what particular sense our experience would be heightened by the auspiciousness of the event. In terms of Casey's phenomenology of the imagination, these unknowns shaped the image, or "mode of givenness pertaining to the total imaginative presentation" (2000, p. 55). In anticipating the event, I imagined it, but as an indistinct set of images rather than with the given clarity with which I have anticipated other events with a smaller range of likely events, such as a wedding. This sense of indistinct anticipation then, shaped our entry into the experience by demanding a trust in the other players and in Ernie working together to create a memorable game, one that went beyond a regular play session in some yet-to-be-determined way.

Although each year I attended Gary Con added new layers to my understanding of the event's ludic commemoration, in many ways that session with Ernie continues to form the core of the experience, with other sessions and conversations providing elaborations on its central themes. Because of this I close my reflections in this chapter with a phenomenological analysis of our experience of time during the expedition to the Dungeon Hobby Shop Dungeon. This experience of time, as was the case with much of experience at Gary Con, cuts across multiple levels,

blending the passage of historic time, the time of the play session, and the time of the imaginary world.

Tightening Springs and Pluridimensional Still Frames

The anticipation and uncertainty progressively tightened our sense of time as the night went on, like a tightening spring. Players in a role-playing game navigate two overlapping but non-synchronized time streams, the diegetic time experienced by the characters within the imagined world and the ludic time experienced by the players at the game table. The relationship between the two shifts in response to events in each province, a phenomenon that parallels the dynamic relationship between inner and outer time Schütz observed in music, saying that to the beholder of a piece of music:

> It is not true that the time he lived through while listening to the slow movement was of 'equal length' with that which he dedicated to the fast one. While listening he lives in a dimension of time incomparable with that which can be subdivided into homogeneous parts. (1964, p. 171)

Similarly, the more intensely we direct our attention towards the details of events in the diegetic realm the more slowly they pass in the ludic. In a combat encounter, or when dealing with a deadly trap, every detail matters and minutes of diegetic time may take an hour or more of ludic time; conversely, four hours of diegetic time may pass in seconds when the characters are resting. This slippage between diegetic and ludic time mirrors the slippage between inner and outer time. In other words, the cognitive style of the game takes a strip of experience (the difference between inner and outer time) and provides a critical re-experiencing of that experience in the context of the imagined world.

The directedness of our reframed experience of time, the forward momentum of the tightening spring, came from the concern for finding a "real encounter" within the dungeon before we ran out of time. According to the design techniques used in old-school dungeons such as Ernie's, roughly half of the rooms are "empty," in the sense that they contain neither a pre-planned challenge nor treasure. As adventurers, the characters explore these empty spaces in search of treasure, mysteries to uncover, or challenges to overcome. This created a sense of hurry on three levels: on a diegetic level, the characters needed to move quickly to achieve their goals

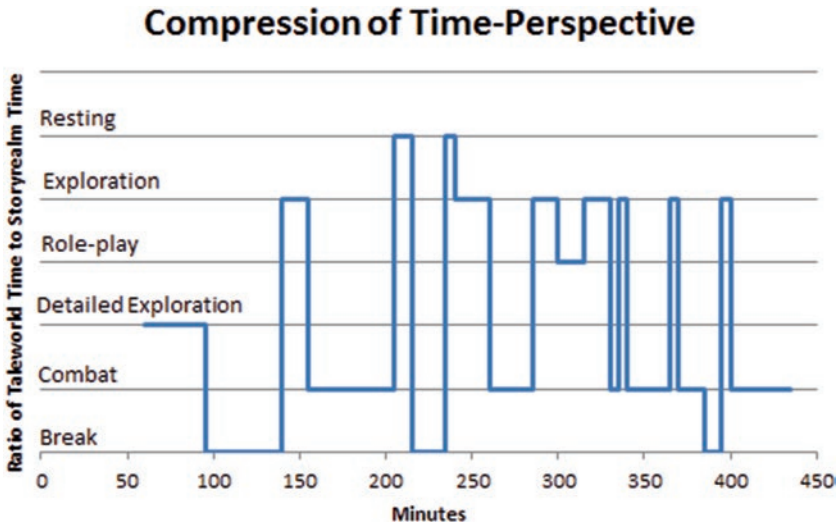

Fig. 3.2 Rhythm of temporal experience in Dungeon Hobby Shop Dungeon session

before monsters wandering through the dungeon found and killed them; on a ludic level, this translated into the players' need to balance risk and reward as their resources slowly diminished; on the level of the commemorative enactment, we all knew that eventually we would have to end the session and go back to our homes. The other players repeatedly spoke of this as a need to press forward as quickly as possible, and the rushed sense can be seen in examining the form of the event. The two dominant time relationships we experienced in play were exploration, in which ten minutes of diegetic time elapse in approximately a minute of ludic time; and combat, in which roughly the reverse relationship holds. The alternation between these two modes created a rhythm to our play, and as the night progressed the rhythm increased in tempo (Fig. 3.2). That is diegetic time kept speeding up and slowing down relative to our experience of it, and it switched back and forth at an increasing rate as the session progressed. The increasing tempo of this alternation created a sense of forward momentum, compelling us forward through the session. Towards the end of the night, players began to announce that they had to leave soon, increasing both the time pressure and the forward drive.

This rhythmic alternation between diegetic and ludic time seems to accomplish in a different medium the "speech narcosis" identified by McDowell as produced by acoustic rhythms found in the commemorative discourse of ballads:

> Commemorative discourse, with its movement toward regular prosodies, plays upon the rhythmic susceptibility of the human nervous system to engender in the individual, or in a group of assembled individuals, an altered state of consciousness characterized by the wholly engaged brain and autonomic system components. (1992, p. 419)

McDowell suggests that the importance of rhythm to commemorative discourse is not limited to verbal expression, but that "regular and periodic arrangements of the material substance of the host medium" should also be observable in non-verbal commemoration (1992, p. 420). What Ernie's session helps to reveal is that the site of rhythmic arrangement is not limited to the verbal, material, and kinetic, but can extend to the more difficult to measure aspects of the performance. Our experience of the diegetic time of the imaginary world as alternating and rhythmic shaped our experience of the play session, and Ernie had carried these rhythms forward from the earliest days of the hobby, the very times we had come to the convention to experience.

Of course, the reframing of inner and outer time as diegetic and ludic time does not erase the lived experience of inner and outer time experienced by each participant in the paramount reality. Each player's attention to either the diegetic or the ludic waxes and wanes throughout the session, and the subsequent variations in the experience of inner time were not always synchronized between us. As the player assigned to map the dungeon based on Ernie's description, I experienced the exploration time differently than those not mapping, for example, and there are various points in the session at which I had to re-synchronize with Brian, who acted as the caller (the player who relays the decisions of the player group to the dungeon master). In my experience of the session, exploration time was event-laden and continuous as I translated oral descriptions into lines on graph paper, each ten feet a single square. Consider this excerpt of Ernie narrating our passage:

1: Alright.
2: Ten feet (0.5)
3: Twenty feet (0.5)

4: Thirty feet (0.5)
5: Forty feet (0.5)
6: Fifty feet (0.5)
7: Sixty feet north.
8: Passage continue:s. Large oaken studded door to your west. About eight feet wide.

Speaking from my experiences as a non-mapper in other sessions, attention tends to lapse from lines two to seven, which can either speed or slow the temporal experience depending on the affective state. If the non-mapper is bored they many find the description tiresome and lengthy as they wait for the point at which they make a decision. If they are more engaged, that same waiting can speed the sense of time as anticipation drives the imagination forward. Ernie's narration, with its ritualized, rhythmic pauses, created a sort of metronome marking the tempo of the relationship between diegetic and ludic time. Each player's experience of inner time as related to that tempo varies based on their role in the group and their varying sense of engagement.

Serving in a role comparable to both the conductor of a musical performance and of a ritual practitioner, Ernie used techniques that served to unify "the fluxes of inner time and [warrant] their synchronization into a vivid present" (Schütz 1964, p. 177). That is, he aligned the players' experience of diegetic time in order to create a shared experience of the imagined world. Whenever the characters came to a door that was stuck closed, Ernie would call on the players with the two strongest characters to each roll a die. This was standard, by-the-book gaming. Ernie, however, drawing on practices he had learned in the memorialized past of the hobby, insisted that they roll their dice simultaneously. When Brian and Luca counted off, "One, two, three, POP IT!" and tossed their dice, we were all drawn into the same experience of that event. Young describes this phenomenon: "If the other gestures, then the world I had drawn in around me torques away from me and tilts toward that other subjectivity" (Young 2011, p. 66). The gesture of rolling the dice drew us all in towards a shared subjectivity directed towards the imagined world. Our joint experience was synchronized with the diegetic experience of the characters: the moment that the dice hit the table, their shoulders hit the door and we all cheered at their success or chuckled at their failure, concerned that their ineffectual banging might draw unwanted attention. This helped to heighten and develop the relationships in the game in a way very similar to what Schütz describes in musical performance: "the social relationship

between performer and listener [or between fellow players] is founded upon the common experience of living simultaneously in several dimensions of time" (1964, p. 175). By aligning our experience of time, we drew together into a shared experience of the imagined world and, given the context of Ernie's apartment and the convention, of the past that had brought that world to us.

If we experienced exploration time, when diegetic time moved faster than ludic time, as a meandering time stream periodically synchronized, combat time presented itself to experience as a series of still frames and short bursts of movement. The late seventies edition of the rules we used that night divides combat time into a sequence of rounds representing one minute of diegetic time. While exploration time is similarly divided, the division between exploration turns is fluid and each turn flows into the next without clear boundaries. Combat rounds, on the other hand, are clearly demarcated. A dice contest between Ernie and the players to determine which side has the initiative, marks the beginning of each round, and the round comes to a clear end once every character and monster has acted. Thus combat time cuts a one-minute segment out of the diegetic time stream, pulls it out of that stream for ludic experience as an isolated unit, then reattaches it to diegetic continuity before moving on to the next round.

Events that occur within each round are understood to occur roughly simultaneously, but they are not experienced as such. Instead, each diegetic perspective within that minute is experienced sequentially. As one player describes their character's actions and Ernie adjudicates the results, the other simultaneously occurring events fade to the background of awareness, reaching a virtual stasis relative to the movement of the active character. When the next character's actions move to the fore, the minute is looped again, like a second viewing of a movie scene from a different angle. This is a complex time-perspective, and the unity of the scene is often lost in the intertwining threads of experience. When this happens, a player might ask for clarification, giving Ernie space to reassemble the dissected moments:

Nick: Is he right at the door, is that what-
Brian: Initiatives?=
Ernie: =>No no< that's the point he still has you one more time. It was a total surprise. He just jumped right in. As you gu- As these guys come forward to the door he hits- And let's see if he's staying on, he's staying on Luca, he's trying to knock down, finish him off.

As in exploration, Ernie acts to re-synchronize our experiences in combat time. Through much of the combat sections, multiple threads of overlapping conversations take place across the table, mirroring the threads of diegetic experience. In the moments when Ernie stitches those threads together, however, the side talk dies out and we all reconnect through the narration. The time-perspective of this play experience, then, could be described as multidimensional and dynamic.

The Perduring Time-Perspective of Commemoration

In turning towards the commemorative mode of our play, the way we used it to bring the past into our present experience, a broader perspective comes into view. The lives and times we commemorated took place decades ago, and it may be useful to conceive of this aspect of the event as a macro-perspective of time, in contrast with the minute-by-minute micro-perspective experienced in the event as play. The macro- and micro- intertwined, however: we experienced the tightening of the play time-perspective, and the synchronization of disparate experiences, within the context of the broader history invoked by our commemoration. Where the play domain demanded a fairly intensive (although fluctuating) attention, its commemorating aspect did not require a conscious awareness. This background, group level awareness is a key feature of commemoration, according to Casey: "it is almost as if the absence of recollection on my part—and doubtless that of other individuals—was somehow being compensated for by an activity that occurred at the level of the group" (Casey 1987, p. 217). A proper understanding of the commemoration time-perspective, then, will consider how it arose out of the group's play activity at the same time that it shaped our experience of that activity.

Yet if this commemoration occurs without active recollection, where are we to look to understand this process? The fruitfulness of examining the dice rolls in the play domain suggests that our commemorating time-perspective might be observed through our gestures towards objects. Casey confirms this suspicion: "It is as if this past were presenting itself to me translucently in such media—as if I were viewing the past in them, albeit darkly: as somehow set within their materiality" (1987, p. 219). The physical environment of the commemoration was certainly rich with time-laden objects: rule books published in the late seventies littered the table, shelves of old pulp fantasy novels lined the walls, the television played the

old *Dungeons & Dragons* cartoon, and a portrait of Gary looked down over the scene.

Although at first it might be tempting to suggest that the dated objects served to provide a sense of being transported to the commemorated past, of recreating it. I did not feel that I was experiencing 1978 *Dungeons & Dragons* in the twenty-first century, however, and later conversations with my fellow commemorators confirmed that they did not think this either. Instead, I find that Casey's concept of perdurance fits more closely with our experience (1987, p. 228). Casey calls perdurance a "via media between eternity and time," a blending of the timeless and the time-laden. From this perspective, "we participate with [commemorabilia] in honoring a common commemorandum through "carrying the past forward through the present so as to perdure in the future" (Casey 1987, pp. 247, 256). Here we experience (and act against) the "corrosive action" of time that threatens to destroy the memory of the past (Casey 1987, p. 226). Here we use the game, the imaginary and physical objects, as a way of bringing the past into the present, rather than using them as a time machine to escape into the past.

Normally we perceive the past as receding from us and the future as approaching. Commemoration reverses this sensation. In our commemorative play, we gestured towards the dice, the books, and the imagined world in such a way that the past was "allowed to perdure—to last as coming toward us" (Casey 1987, p. 229). Thus our commemoration, like our play, created a sense of the forward drive of time, not as a source of dissolution but as a generative force. In exploring the dungeon, our characters were not seeking to escape from the past but to press forward into meaningful encounters in the future. In attending the conference, attendees were not seeking to escape the present, but to bring the past forward into it in a way that allowed them to press forward.

Here we are able to return to the sense of identification experienced through our play, for Casey describes the essence of commemoration as the "incorporation of the other into myself … [and] a con-fusion of self and other thanks to identification, itself a form of inter-psychic participation" (Casey 1987, p. 247). While I did not know anyone else in the session when I began, I now feel a sense of connection with each of them along the lines that Casey describes. This is not just limited to the session with Ernie; through playing and commemorating together, Gary Con attendees come to share an important understanding about the past of our hobby, the way that it serves to enchant our experience of the present, and

important hopes about its possible future. In the context of this forward-looking aspect of our experience, it is perhaps fitting to mention that our characters never escaped from the dungeon. The game session dissolved, pausing the game time indefinitely and leaving our party of explorers perpetually (perduringly?) together and ready for the next adventure.

Chains of Commemoration

Towards the end of his discussion of commemoration Casey remarks, "We can even say that all remembering has a commemorative component" (1987, p. 253). Following this, we can see the possibility that all play, or at least all role-playing, also has a commemorative component. Conversely, remembering the convention's slogan of "celebrating a life well played" suggests that there may be an element of play to all commemoration, in that the commemorandum is imagined as present even as its absence is remembered.

The commemorative aspect of play may not be at the foreground of experience in all cases, and would not often be so to the same extent as in our session with Ernie, but any time that gamers get together and "throw some dice around" there is a sense in which they are connected to forward the legacy of Gary and the other "old ones" of the hobby, even if that connection is antagonistic. Although not the focus of these less commemorative sessions, the perduring nature of the act of play, connecting past visits to the imagined world, and the world of the past in which those visits occurred, is still accessible to experience. Similarly, this chapter is itself an act of commemoration, a new piece of commemorabilia. Its commemorative aspect is perhaps clearer now than when I began transcribing the game session, because between then and now a fire consumed Ernie's apartment. He and his roommate escaped safely, but the commemorabilia that surrounded us that night are gone, survived only by the perduring memories of those that participated in Ernie's game nights. Placing such a concrete loss next to the more intangible losses we commemorated in our play that night might make the latter appear trivial, the insights derived from them of little significance. But when Ernie faced the concrete loss of home and possessions it was a community bound through commemorating play that came together and staged a charity auction to support him at the next Gary Con.

On one level, the auction demonstrates little not already known about the tendency of communities developed around any common experience

to take care of their own. This very commonality with broader social facts, however, suggests that these observations from my session with Ernie might also connect with more general truths about the nature of both imagination and commemoration. It is not only contemporary enactments of imagination that commemorate. Within the history of *Dungeons & Dragons*, the first campaigns run by Gary and by Dave Arneson can be understood as acts of commemoration to the pulp fantasy which inspired them. These pulp fantasy works can in turn be understood as acts of commemoration to an (imagined) pre-modern world, thus connecting contemporary players in a long chain of commemoration. This is also true of other acts of imagination, whether childhood make-believe or social reform. Thinking about this long chain of past commemorations rushing forward into the present act of imagination seems to be an important way forward for understanding the experience. It is a chain of imagined worlds, held together by shared techniques for experiencing them. The commemorative aspect of Gary Con brought temporal techniques to the foreground, In Denton, Texas I would find a group that emphasized techniques of tone and texture that bring the imagined world into the space of play, just as the techniques of Gary Con brought the past into the present.

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Check for updates

CHAPTER 4

Color, Song, and Choice Diction: Using Chromomancy to Summon Worlds

Everything you think shows
Hanging round your head
Underneath your long hair
Tell me what you feel there

You hear me
But I don't see you
You feel me
One day I'll be you
—Gong, *"Radio Gnome Invisible"*

In reflecting on my fieldwork in Denton, Texas, I continually find myself slipping through the cracks of that college town and into Nabonidus IV, the asteroid that formed the location of the three-session mini-campaign that a dungeon master named Liz Larsen ran during my visit. The two worlds interpenetrate in my memory, as if the surface of Denton funneled downward toward the Larsens' apartment south of town, swirling my recollections around and depositing me on the slope of a lunar mountain, looking down over a forest of purple mushrooms. This chapter captures my experiences in Denton as an ethnography of at least two dimensions: first, and primarily, it is a description of Liz's practices as a dungeon master; second, and inseparably, it is a description of a sub-universe that Liz

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created with those gamers and our negotiation with that place. Liz's primary techniques are different from the worldbuilding techniques explored in the next chapter; here, the central concern is not how to build a world, but how to summon one, to experience an imagined world as a thing separate from yourself.

Enter Chromomancer

When I first met Lars I didn't know he was a chromomancer. This term, which I developed to describe his views of using techniques of color to divine the contours of imagined worlds, would come later. He came to the game table at North Texas RPG Con with what I learned is a characteristic softness topped with thick-framed rectangular glasses. Ian, the cheerfully smirking redhead with the foresight to bring a flask of whiskey to the table, sat next to me as our party gracefully stumbled our way through Lars's conjuration of the Tower of the Star Gazer. When, more by luck than skill, we recovered the treasures of the tower and somehow escaped its crumbling destruction, Lars's eyes glimmered with excitement no less than ours. There was something enticing about the miniature world that he had conjured from the grim Scandinavian texts of *Lamentations of the Flame Princess* (*LOTFP*), a remix (or retroclone) of Basic *D&D* that he used as the underlying game engine throughout our sessions together, even when using it to explore worlds very different from the standard *D&D* milieu, like Nabonidus IV.

We talked a lot that first weekend, but I wasn't taking notes at the con that year, and all I remember besides running down the outside of a crumbling tower and, later, awakening an army of the undead, is learning that the conservative Christianity of his childhood had kept him, like me, from *D&D* and instead drove him to Middle Earth, which was considered a safer fantasy world.

The next time I met Lars he took my wife and me to an island of his own creation, just off the coast of an unexplored continent, again. Sitting in the house he and his wife came to hate because of its compartmentalized internal structure, Shawna and I were welcomed as guests at their gaming table. This was the last time I saw Lars[1] before his transition, and maybe it's partially because of this that I cannot visualize his face looking out from over the weird creatures that lovingly adorn his custom DM screen.

If I picture Liz now she is smiling, more with her eyes than her mouth, her short black hair matching the leather jacket that covers the Alice in Wonderland tattoo on her right shoulder and the Erol Otus illustration adorning the left. I am imagining her at our first formal interview, and always seem to do so, sitting across from me at the wooden booth in Cool Beans, a local Denton pub. The smoke from our cigarettes lightens the deep browns of the all-wood interior in swirling light gray patterns as we discuss the session of the previous night, the session where I got my first real sense of her chromomancy, her ability to communicate with and through color. She explained the importance of the gaming space in shaping the experience of the imagined spaces of play:

> I mean, the living room is our gaming room, we wanna put things that are evocative of gaming. I think just the third floor, like treehouse feeling of the whole place, like, really gives it probably an imaginative sense of play to gaming there. Climb up the ladder and go into the space that seems very segregated from the outside world to, like, create.

As I sat cross-legged next to the Larsen's low coffee table, made of some dark glossy wood, the soundtrack to *Fantastic Planet* drifting around the room while Liz lounged back in her recliner and described the characters' hovercraft journey through a forest of towering purple fungi, I knew what she meant. There was no hurry to the entire session. Like the music, we just languidly drifted through the world. Even though I didn't play that night I felt a part of the session, going to this strange asteroid and seeing the events unfold with them. Somehow, although we were inside and the darkened windows only reflected the room back at us, we still knew that we were three stories up, ensconced in the quiet safety of what Liz and Heather both called a treehouse. And it is a treehouse, even though it isn't decorated in imitation of one. The light brown of the carpet and slightly deeper brown of the walls, the fairies perched on the walls in their picture frames, the warm glow of the lights.

This serene treehouse contrasted with the environment of the asteroid that Liz brought into the living room through her descriptions, an environment bright and stark with its blue aquatic colonists, purple mushrooms, and dusty white lunar plains. Many of the scenes of their adventure hinged on the experience of color, strips of experience that I will reassemble through reflection over the course of this chapter. Transparent color, floating toward their craft as an orb filled with swirling matter,

bristling with electric energy and deaf to their communications. The horror of transparent faces, thin strips of skin that refuse to decently reflect the light and obscure the musculature and skeleton that lay beneath. Black reaching up from a blue planet, bringing chitinous blue insects, carapaces gleaming. Diseased darkness spreading veinlike (treelike?) through a translucent blue membrane.

Liz has told me that performance, whether on stage performing her psychedelic rock or leaning back in her recliner at the gaming table, is about taking the other participants (and reality itself) hostage and taking them to a world in her head, one that she usually first sees as the image of a landscape. To do this, she says, is "to force the fictional reality inside my head onto physical space and project it outward." She accomplishes this imposition, this taking hostage, through asking herself how the location should make us feel, then using "color or song or choice diction" to evoke that emotion and space.

Color or song or choice diction. As she tells me this at Cool Beans, she maintains her quiet, even tone, letting her excitement come through her eyes and choice diction rather than through marked variations in volume, speed, or pitch. So different from her onstage persona, which I have never seen but others have described to her as a mouse becoming a lion. But Liz is not mousy, at least not as people normally mean the word. The lion is still there in an assertiveness that comes through even when, as at our second con together, you are straining to hear her voice over the commotion of other voices, bombastic by comparison, in a crowded room. And this DM persona, one in which she says she cultivates a judicial, otherworldly sense, is closer to the Liz I experience in our interviews.

Otherworldly and judicial. And mystic, too, because like many shamans Liz uses her cross-cutting experiences of gender to mediate not only between the genders at the table, but between worlds. Although Liz does not identify as a shaman, she acknowledges and discusses some of the parallels with me in our conversations. Through both her psychedelic video art and her gaming, Liz creates what she has described as "navigational tools and viewscreens into pocket dimensions." In some ways, my attempts to fix and describe my experiences of the pocket dimensions into which she has taken me hostage run counter to her preferred mode of experiencing them. In creating a piece of temporal art, one that is gone once it is finished, Liz feels a sense of freedom to live in the present, to be comfortable with the experience as it exists in that moment rather than needing to polish it and make it perfect. She will spend hours alone in a locked room

making visual art, manipulating electrical vibrations all the way from the circuits she built herself to the cathode ray tubes of her screen, producing colors that dance from the screen to her face until she turns off the screen and, mandala-like, they disappear, never to be experienced by anyone else. Gaming is more of a shared experience, of course, but although I have recorded, transcribed, described, and analyzed our gaming sessions, the experience itself has vanished as much as the colors on her screen.

A Chromomancer in Training

Choice Diction

Born in 1984, Liz grew up in a small town of about 10,000 souls, between Fort Worth and Wichita Falls. Her mother educated Liz and her four younger siblings at home, a decision which subjected their family to some controversy in their church and local community. "We were always the odd one out I guess," she explained, a role that only intensified when she took up role-playing games later, always having to convince friends' parents to allow their children to play. Although in some areas of the country, especially today, home schooling can be a mark of true conservative status, at that time in her town it was considered abnormal, "you know, old lady at church finds out about it, they have a million questions and judgments."

The self-directed nature of that home education shaped Liz's entry into fantasy literature, Internet culture, and eventually role-playing games:

> Our schooling approach was kind of based around just reading stuff and writing reports about it. And then, like, a math book. And that pretty much describes every day of my childhood. To a large extent I was able to choose the things that I read, as long as they were in the categories of things that I needed to learn about.

She grew fascinated by the ancient history and mythology of Greece, Egypt, and Rome, and geography was her favorite subject, but two discoveries at the local public library would indelibly mark the trajectory of her future career, art, and hobbies. While spending hours "just walking down the aisles and reading the back covers" of books at the library, she discovered *The Lord of the Rings* at age nine, reading the trilogy twice in that year. Around the same time, the library began to offer paid access to the

Internet through a dial-up terminal. Like so many discoveries of childhood, the exact way that Liz discovered role-playing games is lost in the overall impression of the time period. The way Liz describes those experiences is more suggestive of slowly tuning in to a signal on the radio than of having a single moment of discovery. Gradually, through hours spent browsing fan sites for her favorite computer games, the Sierra adventure games, she became more aware of role-playing games. *D&D* had only held a vague place in her consciousness as a game that some of her church friends' older brothers played. "I remember knowing that it was, like, evil and satanic. Because my mom would tell me." Through these Internet excursions, however, Liz discovered a wide variety of role-playing games. She began printing and modifying copies of Swedish live-action role-playing games (larps), convincing the neighborhood kids to play with her: "I was more about just the social structures and hierarchies and all of the social organization of it all. So I would, you know, orchestrate—I mean, most of the neighborhood boys were just interested in, you know, kicking things over and stuff. I would manipulate that to my ends."

As the "patient zero" for gaming among her friends, Liz drew on the autodidactic training of her homeschooling and taught herself these games, convincing people to play with her whenever she could. Lacking an established community of gamers to step into and learn the social norms and techniques of play, Liz had to build up her understanding of gaming solely from the rulebooks:

> It's overwhelming for a twelve-year-old to pick up a Rolemaster variant and try to decipher—all I had as an example of how the game was supposed to be played was the play example in the core rulebook, you know. So I took that very literally and modeled all of my GMing off of that original play example description in the MERP (Middle Earth Role-Playing) rulebook.

Besides having to learn how to play the games, Liz also had to fight for the ability to play with her friends, becoming what she calls "a small fish activist" for fantasy literature and gaming, writing rebuttals to the parents of her homeschool group when they would send group emails denouncing fantasy and trying to run games of Middle Earth Role-Playing (deemed less dangerous for its connections with Tolkien) at church retreats and camps. "There was definitely something punk about being an RPG nerd in that environment. You know, not that my life was devastated by the oppression [laughs] of not being able to play D&D, but I definitely felt

like I was vouching for something that was outside the culture that I was immersed in at that point in my life."

The local resistance to gaming and fantasy, combined with her early love of technology, made the online gaming scene of MUDs (multi-user-dungeons), MUSHes (multi-user-shared-hallucinations), and MUCKs (multi-user-chat-kingdoms) particularly appealing to Liz in her early teens. MUDs added a networked multiplayer component to the tradition of text-based adventures represented by earlier games like *Colossal Cave Adventure* and *Zork*. By inputting text commands, a player navigates their player through the game world, with the computer taking on the role of the dungeon master. MUSHes and MUCKs kept the text-based format but jettisoned most of the automated combat systems of MUDs in favor of free-form role-playing between characters. Here Liz found a community whose social rules of story and play she could learn and a medium whose expressions of imagined space she could internalize:

> You'd create a character, or multiple characters, and you'd set up a scene with another player or players and then you'd just take turns posting a paragraph. And that—sit and do that all day for hours, basically, just collaborative writing. And there's all these, sort of like, social etiquette and rules associated with how you were supposed to do it. Like not including description of things that happen to other characters in your description.

These rules of interaction, explicitly set up as safeguards for players' narrative agency (Cover 2010), translate fairly closely into the norms of tabletop role-playing games.

Perhaps more influential even than the social norms, the presentation of space in MUDs continues to shape how Liz interacts with and presents fictional worlds. Eventually she would go on to start her own MUDs, taking on a variant of the DMing role she had already pursued with neighborhood friends:

> So I would spend long summers just writing worlds, you know. I'd have like a giant graph paper map on my wall of all the nodes and how they were connected … And then I'd sit there and type two-paragraph descriptions for every single room in, like, a two-hundred room world. And when you're writing two hundred descriptions of a forest and trying to make them all unique, you develop a very good vocabulary [laughs] pretty quickly. I've lost a lot of it over the years, but that's definitely—I still go back to, like, thinking about writing a description for a room on a MUD whenever I describe a scene.

This habit of imagining a space you have never seen and then using words to allow others to enter that space is common to many kinds of fiction. More distinctive of MUDs is the treatment of space as a series of discrete nodes:

> I also like just the idea of translating space into—like a room on a MUD is—it can be a clearing, it can be someone's closet, it can be, you know, the countryside outside of a city, it could be, you know, a patch of dense forest, it can be any of those things. But within the narrative construct of the MUD, they're just a single node with a paragraph description of what's in there. And the exits off … so I guess this idea of being able to mentally translate fictional space into singular locations was something that I developed in that.

For Liz this models the way that we take a continuous experience of physical space and "encapsulate the ideas behind certain spaces as single entities," creating a link between memory of place and the way that MUDs organize space as a series of nodes. In a MUD, you cannot move within a node, only move from one node to another. Espen Aarseth describes this as a rhizomatic model of space, "in which links may connect any place to any other" as opposed to a strictly geometric model (1997, p. 160). In tabletop gaming this rhizomatic mode of spatial experience comes most to the foreground in what is typically called hex crawling, invoked when characters are exploring outdoors at a much larger scale than the more minutely rendered grids of dungeon crawling. While a typical dungeon map follows a scale of ten feet per square, overland maps use hexes to represent either six-mile or twenty-four-mile spaces. Thus a room in a dungeon includes multiple instances of the minimal unit of representation, and characters can meaningfully move around within that space. Above ground, the unit of representation is larger than the point of interest: we move into and out of those spaces rather than within them. If a hex contains a point of interest, Liz represents that as a new node accessible from the hex, one whose position within the hex is both abstract and irrelevant.

As for many, Liz's high school years involved a number of personal transitions. Around age thirteen she began to experience a then-undiagnosed gender dysphoria: "It was very alarming to see yourself morph into this kind of monster that you don't recognize." Given the value Liz tends to place on being able to communicate and evoke experiences through her performances, it is notable that one difficult aspect of these dysphoric experiences was not being able to translate them into

words: "You know something's wrong with it, but you don't have any sort of language or thought process with which to understand it." For someone who could use language to evoke hundreds of unique spaces within an imagined world, this difficulty in putting language to her experiences proved especially difficult.

These challenges coincided with a shift in her religious experience, from conservative Church of Christ brotherhoods to charismatic churches, notably places where practices such as speaking in unknown tongues acknowledge the limits of choice diction to encapsulate extreme forms of experience. Looking back, she describes these charismatic churches as:

> Kind of my stepping stone outside of Christianity altogether … Once I finally started having gay friends and realizing how people in those—any of those churches, kind of treated those people, or thought of them as diseased and sick … And of course, at the time I just saw myself as an ally, but I knew it was hurting me at the core of who I was. In some way that I just couldn't explain at the time. I still consider myself a spiritual person, I just, you know, the story of Jesus [pause] and the whole thing is very personal to me, you know—it's where I got most of my sense of morality and understanding of the world.

Given that it was negative treatments of gender and sexuality within these churches that served as a major impetus for Liz moving outside of them, it is notable that she now considers her cross-cutting experiences of gender to be a resource for a somewhat mystical understanding of performance: "In a way I consider myself in that way as like, kind of a modern—as a DM, as a modern mystic in that sense. And the idea that I can kind of have this duality to me that enables me to communicate story in a way that I wouldn't be able to otherwise."

Song

Besides changing experiences of gender and spirituality, Liz also took up a new medium of performance in her late teens, buying a bass guitar and joining a punk band. As with gaming, the concepts of ambience and space formed central parts of her musical performances: "I had just started seeing shows and concerts and was fascinated by the idea that the band creates that sort of space in the room." Liz describes the music scene in Fort Worth at that time as dominated by the idea that "creating an ambience or a space for the performance in a physical sense de-emphasizes the quality

of music," an idea she attributes to a reaction against the "visual glitz and glam" of eighties performers. Once again, Liz found herself fighting for the value of imaginative performance, although in a slightly different form than her earlier emails to homeschool mothers:

> I mean the whole goal of the band was to not stop playing until our audience left the room. So it was very confrontational. We'd play in the most invasive sort of environments, any sort of, like coffee shops or Mexican restaurants [laughs]. And, like, if we were kicked out before we stopped playing that was—that was the whole goal of the band. So once the music started developing as actual music [laughs] I had had lots of experience, you know, shrieking at people and scaring them in strange places.

Whereas with her MUD coding Liz had to rely entirely on language to invoke the spaces she wanted to explore, these performances added aural and visual elements to the repertoire, song and color to go with her choice diction. Moving to Denton to study film at the University of North Texas, Liz became a singer for a band called The Undoing of David Wright. Compared to many bands, Undoing emphasized the visual aspects of performance, experimenting with that process of space creation that Liz had initially found so appealing: "We didn't even have band practice, we just had costume and stunt invention sessions." Despite Liz's avowed lack of technical skill, the band did well enough on the local scene to make a mark, with one musician I spoke with claiming that Undoing was among the best bands the area had produced.In any case, Liz's approach to music shows influences back and forth between her ideas about gaming performances, highlighting not only the creation of space but the interactivity of that process:

> It's about an ambience of feeling, a space that exists in my own head and I want to project outward into the room. And I don't like it when anyone feels like they are a spectator when they are watching me perform. I want them to feel like—not that they're part of the performance, more like they've been taken somewhere and are being held hostage there. You know, and are being beaten up, you know [laughs]. In an auditory sense. So it's like kidnapping someone into my own world—or kidnapping the real world with that fictional one … But, I mean, music always starts and then stops and ends with the idea of like, space has mood and atmosphere and geography to it. I can't make music without some sort of geographic image in my head. Even if it becomes very abstract.

Color

The abstract nature of some of these landscapes took on concrete form in the early 2000s when Liz connected with local Denton artists exploring analog video art. She began to research devices used in the sixties and seventies that had been eclipsed by the emerging computer age, and moved to Austin to found LZX Industries, designing and producing new versions of these devices for the re-emerging art form. Using these synthesizers, Liz manipulates electronic signals to produce shifting colors and shapes on a screen. Importantly for her approach to this art, the signals are never converted into digital form:

> With my video art stuff, the way it works, it's all analog, so it's like literally just manipulation of vibrations all the way to the cathode ray emitter that, like, vibrates the light at a specific frequency so you see the color. And it never gets digitized at any point, you know, so it's—[pause] it's very immediate in that sense, and I think, I mean, immediate art that just kinda goes away the moment that it's—right after it happens is important to me.

The immediacy of the art also involves a relinquishing of control that Liz finds freeing, learning that "you can't control every little pixel and transformation that happens" as you can in digitized forms of video art. In her gaming, Liz expresses a similar approach, citing "the transitory experience of throwing creative energy into something that doesn't really matter outside the experience my gaming group is gonna have with it … without having to worry about publishing anything or making it perfect." Just as the video art disappears once Liz turns off her monitor, the gaming experience dissipates at the end of the session. While experiencing those spaces, Liz revels in the human tendency to find patterns, playing with the blurry line between creating meaning and discovering it:

> My work with video synthesizers is very much based on visualization of music, that a lot of people make art for. And people will think that the visuals are synced up to the music when they're not, just because their brain, the brain wants to make the connection between what it's seeing and what it's hearing. So it sees two things that are divorced from each other, even if they're in your head or it's imaginary, your brain is consciously trying to create a link between the sound you're hearing and the object you're imagining or seeing at the same time. And um, so if there's any way to make a link there will be.

Michael Taussig describes this linkage between color and sound as shamanic, claiming that "what the shaman supplies as regards the capacity of seeing … is music, along with the dreaming that passes you into the image that enters you … Vision and song are one and at one with the shaman's body" (2009, pp. 48–49). Here we have two-thirds of Liz's triad, color and song, with the choice diction perhaps implicit. Given the similarities between Taussig's wild thoughts and Liz's explanation of her practices, I could not help but ask for her take on some of his more imaginative claims. For example:

> Color walks. And as it walks, so it changes. It is not something daubed onto a preexisting shape, filling a form, because colors have their own 'form,' giving life and light to the world.
>
> Is color an animal?
>
> Sounds unlikely. But what then is an animal? And why does thinking of color as an animal throw us off, maybe down those same windy streets where we run the risk of getting mixed up with blown newspapers and shreds of music and silver paper in the wind? (2009, p. 36)

I tentatively offered a summary of this section, saying "he actually describes it as an animal sometimes, that has, like, this existence." Without missing a beat, Liz simply said, "It does, you know," and went on to explain the peace she finds in letting go of complete control over the colors on her screen, "to allow myself to create a piece of art that just exists in a temporal space only … to be comfortable with the idea, the experience of it." She pursues this same relationship in all of her interactions with "the dreaming that passes you into the image that enters you," whether that passing is through color, song, choice diction, or some combination of the three.

In many ways, then, Liz's experience contradicts a common perception of gaming as escapism in which players use the game as power fantasy, offering them a virtual control not experienced elsewhere in their lives. Liz acknowledges that performance is stress-relieving for her, but the release is from a continuous pressure to create enduring projects, attempting to achieve the "mastery of space over time" de Certeau describes as the characteristic of strategy, as opposed to the temporary tactics of so-called "consumers." As Liz says, "It's not that I feel a lack of control in my daily life or in my environment and that I need a space in which I can be in control. It's—[pause] maybe it's more about the description of the environment and the world."

Even as Liz increasingly grew to enjoy the spatial explorations of designing, creating, and manipulating these video synthesizers, the synthesizer repair work that originally drew her to Austin grew increasingly tiresome, and eventually she moved back to Denton, where she has worked a variety of computer-related jobs. Returning from Austin also led to Liz starting a gaming group in earnest, seeking to establish a regular group of players "that would show up every week for multiple weeks in a row. Something to build on." Liz never had a long-running campaign in childhood or adolescence, partially because just getting parents to let her friends play these games at all had taken so much effort. To this day, Liz has little interest in campaigns that run for years, preferring more bite-sized campaigns that allow the group to explore a space or an idea before moving on to another, in much the same way that a band will explore musical ideas over the course of an album. While not disparaging other styles of play, she explained that "I like having specific end goals for campaigns. I don't like games where you're just obligated to do another session of whatever campaign it is. I like breaking things up into tiny chunks, or smaller chunks." But developing a regular group of gamers allows Liz a greater level of performative continuity across the various "chunks" the group explores.

One of the most continuous elements in the group that Liz established on returning to Denton has been the presence of Ben and Kim Vail, who participated in the Nabonidus IV games. Like Liz, Kim had contributed to the local music scene there, and although her band never performed with Liz, they shared mutual friends through that community. When Liz returned to Denton and began putting a regular group together, Ben and Kim jumped at the opportunity. For their first game as a new group, Liz ran the (at the time) newest version of *D&D*, fourth edition. Although Liz enjoyed the campaign, that Halloween she decided that it would be fun to try the original Ravenloft, a classic horror module released for first edition *AD&D* in 1983. She planned the game as a sort of gaming equivalent of a bad movie night, thinking "this will be fun and hokey and we'll realize why, you know, the game has evolved since then." While preparing for the game, however, she came across *A Quick Primer for Old School Gaming*, Matt Finch's popular midrash on old-school gaming which holds that "what makes [old-school] different from later games isn't the rules themselves, it's how they're used" (Finch 2008, p. 2).

Liz latched on to Finch's "zen moments" of old-school play, concepts that "sound completely and impossibly wrong to the modern gamer's ear" but make sense "once you accept the mirror-image logic of this approach"

(Finch 2008, p. 2). Adopting those principles in her approach to the Ravenloft game would shape her gaming for years to come:

> That really helped me get it, you know. Why you would wanna play this way. And then once I realized that, I started to focus on the hex maps and the basic style of play, and the more judicial rules callings, and saw how it worked in play and how much FUN everybody had with that Ravenloft game. Some of my players say that's the best four sessions of D&D that they have ever played in their life.

In old-school gaming, Liz found similarities to her experiences coding MUDs, playing music, and creating video art. Each of these types of performance creates imaginary spaces and draws others into them, inviting them to make the experience cohere into a world:

> I always look back to the early teens in the MUDs, which was my experience of creating—or being a DM in a sense, giant graph pads hanging from all the walls in my room … Maps and descriptions, that was my game world. So [pause] it's nice to let the plot happen.

Over the course of our conversations, this concept of gaming as pursuing an alternate mode of experience and the correlating rejection of gaming as escapism grew increasingly concrete, and after our second interview Liz crafted a statement summarizing her goals in all her forms of performance, posting it as a status update on Facebook:

> I've been thinking a lot about the nature of escapism and D&D, and how that relates to my habitual indulgence in running the game and committing intense amounts of mental processing to thinking about the interlocking mechanisms that are game systems. Fuck escapism. I play D&D to force the fictional reality inside my head onto physical space and project it outward. I kidnap reality and hold it hostage for a few hours … I don't run from it. Ambience and landscape are vital to me, and I approach performance with the same end goal, and my video tools are designed as navigational tools and viewscreens into pocket dimensions.

A Chromomantic Ontology of Imagined Worlds

Liz describes performance in general, and gaming in particular, as "kidnapping reality." Since common understandings of reality do not typically allow for the possibility of kidnapping it, this claim presents a quandary for

me as an anthropologist: what am I to do when faced with a claim that seems unlikely or impossible? Considering this question with regard to an Amerindian claim that peccaries are human, Viveiros de Castro proposes that we take this thinking seriously enough to "use it, draw out its consequences, and explore the effects it may have on our own" (2002, pp. 113, 129). This type of analysis resists either explaining away seemingly impossible claims or domesticating them by "translating" them into the anthropologists' own categories through theorizing them. Instead, in a move that Holbraad (2012, p. 46) calls "recursive analysis," Viveiros de Castro points toward a different set of questions:

> I am an anthropologist, not a swinologist. Peccaries … are of no special interest to me, humans are. But peccaries are of enormous interest to those humans who say that the peccaries are human … The native's belief or the anthropologist's disbelief has nothing to do with this. To ask (oneself) whether the anthropologist ought to believe the native is a category mistake equivalent to wondering whether the number two is tall or green … When an anthropologist hears from his indigenous interlocutor (or reads in a colleague's ethnography) such things as "peccaries are human," the affirmation interests him, no doubt, because he "knows" that peccaries are not human. But this knowledge (which is essentially arbitrary, not to say smugly tautological) ought to stop there: it is only interesting in having awoken the interest of the anthropologist. No more should be asked of it. Above all, it should not be incorporated implicitly in the economy of anthropological commentary, as if it were necessary (or essential) to explain why the Indians believe that peccaries are human whereas in fact they are not. What is the point of asking oneself whether the Indians are right in this respect— do we not already "know" this? What is indeed worth knowing is that to which we do not know the answer, namely what the Indians are saying when they say that peccaries are human … Hence, when told by her/his indigenous interlocutors … that peccaries are human, the anthropologist should ask her or himself, not whether or not "s/he believes" that they are, but rather what such an idea could show her/him about indigenous notions of humanity and "peccarity." (2002, pp. 134–136)

Following this, the interesting question in response to Liz's claim is not "Can one kidnap reality?" but rather "What is Liz saying when she speaks of kidnapping reality?" Phrased another way, what is the nature of a world which is able to be kidnapped, and what are the workings of that process? As an anthropologist, my task here is not to theorize Liz's statements, but to communicate as best I can Liz's theory and praxis. She speaks of this

kidnapping process from two primary angles. From one angle, she is kidnapping reality (including anyone present with her at the performance) into a reality that she describes as existing in her head, which she also calls the fictional reality. This reality is comparable to Young's Storyrealm, or the diegetic frame, but rather than conflating the two, I will assume that Liz's "in-head" reality has its own ontology which need not match Young's Storyrealm point for point. In order to better understand the nature of the in-head reality and how it relates to the ontology of what Liz calls reality, I find one of her phrasings of the process of kidnappings particularly helpful: "it's like kidnapping someone into my own world—*or kidnapping the real world with that fictional one*" (emphasis mine). This was the first time Liz expressed the kidnapping concept to me, and I love it for the odd, almost ungrammatical, usage of that word "with." Later, as she refined her phrasing, that "with" disappears, perhaps because of the way it doubles down on the ostensible nonsense; what does it mean to not only kidnap reality but kidnap it "with" a fictional reality?

In describing a minor feat of carpentry we might say that we hit a nail "with" a hammer; that is, we used the hammer to hit the nail. Taken in this sense, we might think of the fictional reality as a tool that assists Liz in her kidnapping. Yet there is another usage we might consider, as when we say that we went to the hardware store "with" a friend. Here we have an expression of co-action: my friend and I both went to the store together. Lastly, we might combine the two usages, as in saying that we hit the board "with" our fist. The fist here is both the tool and the co-actor, which seems commonsensically meaningful partially because I consider my fist as an extension of myself. Yet the hammer, too, can be considered an extension of the self, as Mcluhan (1964) would remind us. We might even expand this further to say that, in the act of hammering, my body, the hammer, the nail, and the laws of physics act together in a "field of forces" (Ingold 2000, p. 345) to create a world in which two boards are nailed together.

To work my way from hammers back toward Liz's kidnapping, I consider Ishii's claim that "divine worlds are created through interactions and connections among various actors including persons, things, and deities/spirits" (2012, p. 375). Drawing on arguments from phenomenological psychiatry and systems theory, Ishii describes the Akan rituals she encountered in Ghana as creating divine worlds through the interactions between priests and magical objects known as *asuman* (spirit, singular, *suman*). A *suman*, however, is "a thing which refuses the dichotomy between things

and spirits, or between materiality and power" (Ishii 2012, p. 379). This description echoes the anthropological claim (Henare et al. 2007) that, to steal a line from Keats, things are concepts, concepts things. Ishii's "acting with things" takes Henare et al.'s "thinking through things" a step further by promoting things/concepts to the status of co-actors, rather than following Gell (1998) in describing them as "secondary agents" (Ishii 2012, p. 378). In the *suman* rituals Ishii finds things acting equally with the priests, with the divine world emerging through the co-actors' mutual autopoiesis. That is, as the priests and *suman* interact, they remake themselves, and the divine world emerges through that process.

Numerous statements made by Liz lead me to connect her "kidnapping the real world with that fictional one" to Ishii's "acting with things," and her fictional realities with Ishii's divine worlds. For example, she tells me that she tries "to let everything define itself without any preconceptions," and explains her role as DM as "I'll just be the asteroid," indicating a comfort with the agency of the things and the interpermeability of things, concepts, and people. Yet the ontology of Liz's fictional reality departs from Ishii's at an important point: Liz does not talk about "creating" the fictional reality, but about working with it to kidnap reality. The line between creation and discovery is perhaps as arbitrary as the line between things and concepts. As Liz says, "D&D is very much about discovering something that may have never even been there before you discovered it." This idea has some connections with possible worlds' theory, which Cover (2010) has explored in connection with imagined worlds, but Liz's approach seems closer to putting a phenomenological *epochē* around the question of the world's status. Liz's techniques help creation and discovery to enter experience in the same way. The fictional reality may or may not already exist, even if only as a potentiality, but the central problem is not how to tune into it and then kidnap reality with it.

Liz's language of kidnapping connects her understanding of performance with Gell's idea of art as trap: "Every work of art that works is like this, a trap or a snare that impedes passage; and what is any art gallery but a place of capture, set with what Boyer calls 'thought-traps,' which hold their victims for a time, in suspension" (1996, p. 37). To kidnap is to abduct, to lead away, and once Liz has led reality away into the fictional reality, she also seeks to "hold it hostage for a few hours," to bind it in place. The general movement, then, is from freedom to confinement. But Liz also describes this process from the reverse angle when she says "I play D&D to force the fictional reality in my head onto physical space and

project it outward." Here the fictional reality takes the lead, with Liz behind it, pushing it out onto physical space. These two motions, the kidnapping and the projection outward, are the same. To kidnap reality is to coerce it to receive the fiction as Liz forces it out. To kidnap reality into Nabonidus IV, then, is to make Nabonidus IV on earth.

Understanding exactly how this kidnapping takes place involves understanding Liz's co-actors and how she works with them. "Ambience and landscape are vital to me," she says. Color, song, and choice diction, the three aspects of ambience she identified to me, work together with her in kidnapping one reality and replacing it with the fictional one she discovered in her head. In the rest of this chapter I will consider examples of the kidnappings that occurred during the three game sessions of Liz's Nabonidus IV campaign, but some preliminary reflections on these co-actors will help to frame those specific instances.

Liz explained to me that when presenting a specific moment of the game she tries to follow a two-stage technique. First, she imagines what each of the characters' five senses would detect and "give them each something to engage with." This helps her to make the reality in her head more concrete. She describes the initial experience of the fictional reality as "very vague and amorphous in my own head … but it's a strong core idea." Going through the mnemonic of the five senses helps her to organize that "abstract jumble." As she says, "I have to make the idea clear in my own head and then when it's clear in my own head I'm easily describing things, I'm not reading anything off that I've already imagined. I'm imagining it right then." All of this initial step occurs "internally," experienced as an interaction between herself and the fictional reality and not accessible to anyone else present with her.

Having tuned in, so to speak, to the fictional reality, Liz then considers how to use ambience to bring that reality out of her head so that the others at the table can enter into it. Rather than relying primarily on sensory data, this is an affective question:

> The emotional context is important too. Sometimes I'll just think, how—how should the—how should this location that the players are in make them feel? How should seeing this monster make them feel? Um, and then I'll use color or song or choice diction in order to kind of convey that, like, when the giant blob, like, lit up really bright and I described the shadows on everybody's face I wanted to evoke a sense of, like, holy shit moment, you know. In a way other than describing the thing getting really bright. And

> that was because I was concentrating more on what the characters are supposed to feel when this happens more than I was what was actually physically going on.

Liz describes these three elements of ambience as a way to "convey" the affect of the fictional reality out of her head and into the space around her. Color, as Taussig (2009, p. 34) says and Liz agrees, walks. Or to put it another way, color is "*polymorphous magical substance*. It affects all the senses, not just sight. It moves. It has depth and motion just as a stream has depth and motion, and it connects such that it changes whatever it comes into contact with. Or is it the other way around? That in changing, it connects?" (Taussig 2009, p. 40). Liz's gaming performances demonstrate that a color need not be seen with the eyes in order to connect and change things and people. Her description of color helped to convey it out of Nabonidus IV and connect it to her living room. Color and choice diction, as experienced at Liz's table, are at times the same substance. In other words, when dealing with Nabonidus IV, the description of a thing, like color, is in fact the thing.

Even before she explained this to me, I experienced the music in her session as a medium of conveyance. In my notes on the music she played during our first session, before I had discussed any of this with Liz, I wrote, "It's not necessarily music that would exist in the fiction, It's music that serves some of the same purpose as Liz's descriptions. It's something in this world that serves to connect it with another." The music originated in our reality, in Liz's living room, but drifted freely in and out Nabonidus IV, carrying some of the ambience of the dusty landscape with it. As Liz later told me, "I wanted to create that very—you know, weird—weird fantasy synthesizer land sort of feeling to it."

These two steps, the sensory concretization and the conveyance through ambience, are remarkably similar to Kimura's (2005) concept of actualizing reality which Ishii (2012) uses to describe the creation of divine worlds. For Kimura, a person first experiences an environment in sensory terms as a prepersonal bodily self-relating to an environment. This non-cognitive experience can then be actualized, or made available to conscious experience, through "the coactions of body and things/environment" (Ishii 2012, p. 374). Similarly, Liz experiences the fictional reality as a jumble of impressions, then actualizes them through an imagined bodily experience. Only then is she able to project that experience outward and take reality hostage with it.

The important difference in Liz's gaming, however, is that her initial experience of the fictional world, that vague and amorphous swirl around a strong core idea, is not a tactile experience in the same way as the experience of the ritual practitioners Ishii describes. The initial non-human thing in the *suman* ritual, despite its thing/concept status, is something the priests can hold in their hands. It presents itself equally to the experience of anyone co-present with it. If the priests have a preceding non-tactile experience of the intangible aspect of the *suman*, Ishii tells us nothing about it. Although she includes spirits in her list of co-actors, she actually describes very little that the spirits do apart from their instantiation as *asuman*. Yet if we can fruitfully experience concrete things like *asuman* as concepts, we can also experience concepts like Nabonidus IV as concrete things. If we are to take seriously the claim that divine/imaginary worlds actualize through the co-actions of things and people we must also account for the actions of intangible things, and of collections of things which are sometimes so organized that they can best be described as worlds. While it may be, as Gell would argue, that the agency of these worlds is actually the secondary agency of those that build them, in the players' experience Liz's role as artist recedes into the background, and the world is experienced as having an evolving agency all its own (1998, p. 21). In experience, it is the world that acts, and the bracketing of Liz as origin of that agency forms an important part of the *epochē* of gaming. Part of Liz's technique of abduction is also a disappearing act, a partial erasure of herself into the world. Like a trap, the world abducts most successfully only when the agency of its builder is least abduced. Thus, the worlds announce themselves to the players as acting, with Liz's color, song, and choice diction only serving as the medium of their action.

These worlds act in conjunction with Liz to take hostage the performance space through the ambience of color, song, and choice diction. Yet to bring the entirety of another world into our own at once would require a chromomantic skill surpassing even Liz's. This is where Liz's description of gaming as a viewscreen comes into play. Although the viewscreen may seem more passive than kidnapping suggests, to be seen is not a passive act. The fictional world is not just passively viewed through the viewscreen, but makes itself seen as Liz pushes it out through the viewscreen's narrowly framed borders. As Husserl would describe it through the concept of intentionality, it is not just that we see the things in the world but that the things "announce themselves" (1931, p. 52). The viewscreen brings together Liz's chromomantic ontology of gaming with the nodal

experience of space that she learned from playing MUDs. Through MUDs Liz learned to "mentally translate fictional space into singular locations," or nodes, something that she says "makes it easier for me to know what to focus on when describing a scene." Rather than forcing out the entirety of a fictional world at once, Liz pushes it out node by node. Once a node enters our reality through Liz's use of ambience it can be bound, or "held hostage," to our reality through the actions of the other players. As Liz puts it, "when I'm DMing I'm seeing my world reflected back through the eyes of the characters and players that are interacting with it." If Liz describes an object, the players bind that object by interacting with it through their characters. Objects or other nodes not interacted with have a way of fading out of experience, forgotten. As Liz, the other players, and the fiction work together in binding these nodes of the fiction, more and more of reality is taken hostage through their efforts.

Nabonidus IV

Having established the ontology of Nabonidus IV as envisioned by Liz and experienced by the players, I turn now to a brief ethnography of Liz's world understood in terms of that ontology. In writing this ethnography I willingly activate a pretense. However, that pretense is not to invent a fiction in which I live among the Azure People in the same way that Malinowski lived among the Trobrianders. Instead, it is the same pretense that we activated when we played the game, the same activated by visitors to other imagined worlds from Tékumel to Faerûn: to treat the universe *as if* it were real, although only accessible through our imaginations and the rules of the game. I take seriously Liz's claim that gaming can serve as "a window into another dimension." Just as in our experience of quotidian reality, when considering the pocket dimensions of gaming the boundary between creation and discovery of reality can appear quite blurry, and thus I am not concerned with separating the two aspects of the experience. Similarly, my approach here follows Liz in rejecting the notion that, as she put it, "if the intent does not exist before the detail, that the end result will somehow be arbitrary." Instead, I embrace every bit of meaning I find in reflecting on this universe, whether its source was an intentional design decision on Liz's part, the result of a random roll of the dice, or improvisationally generated through the group's play. Given my presence each of the three times anyone from our reality has ever imaginatively visited the place I describe below, and the hours spent transcribing those sessions and

writing this chapter, I may surpass even Liz as the world's foremost expert on Nabonidus IV and the Azure People.

Azure People Physiology

The Azure People of Hau'oli are an amphibious humanoid species with viscous, membranous skin. Although primarily aquatic, they have the ability to manipulate the mucus of their bodies to create bubbles of breathable liquid, permitting them to travel on land for quite some time. The permeability of their skin allows them to draw sustenance from surrounding liquid, primarily by soaking in nutritional ponds developed for this purpose.

Compared to most humans, one notable feature of Azure People's physiology is the acknowledged existence of four sexes. Only two of these sexes, the maternals and paternals, reproduce. Reproduction occurs from eggs that develop as luminescent bumps on the arms and spine. Both maternals and paternals produce eggs, always either of the opposite sex as the parent or one of the non-reproductive sexes. After the eggs grow to the point at which they detach from the skin, the opposite sex fertilizes the egg in a birthing pool containing a delicately calibrated blend of minerals and chemicals. Thus, maternals gestate and nurture the future generations of paternals, and vice versa. Some maternals and paternals, however, choose to forgo reproduction by ritually burning off their egg follicles. These individuals, known as either Sentinels or Specialists, devote themselves completely to the protection of the colony through either martial or technological means, respectively.

Some eggs do not develop into maternals or paternals but into one of the two non-reproductive sexes, the neoton and the ka-born. Both of these sexes are generally considered to be a-gendered. Neotons are usually not identified until adolescence, when their physical development stops, maintaining the tail and large aqueous eyes common to all juvenile Azure People. Ka-born, on the other hand, are born sterile and are generally considered to form their own class, taking the role of mystics and seers in the colony.

Liz explained to me that part of the appeal she feels in creating aquatic people comes from an anthropology class she once took about cultures of the Pacific Islands. Additionally, the story arc of amphibian life has held a lifelong attraction for her: "The idea of being spawned in the water, experiencing youth in one dimension before leaving the water for the land, a second dimension, a story I really like." This seems autobiographical in

multiple senses for Liz, who has left behind both the conservative Christianity and male gender of her youth, while still maintaining aspects of those pasts in her current identity. With regard to gaming, at least, Liz embraces this "amphibian" approach to gender as something that enhances her ability to manage the group:

> And I enjoy being trans person as a DM, cuz it—it puts me more in this sort of like, um, kind of, judicial, otherworldly sort of perception of the DM … I'm a woman but I know what it's like to be a guy, and so, um, guy players—and then I'm gay so guy players aren't threatened by my trans-ness so it's like, um, and then girls aren't generally threatened by gay people anyway, so I get kind of like, there's not a lot of bad gender weirdness that happens between, like, being a male DMing for a group of girls or being a girl DMing for a group of guys.

Similarly, although perhaps even more personally, Liz still considers herself a spiritual person and still holds that, "most of my sense of morality and understanding of the world" comes from "the story of Jesus." On multiple levels, then, this idea of the amphibian life history and liminality resound with Liz on a personal level.

It would, however, be the height of reductionist folly to treat the Azure People as merely a personal projection of Liz's gender and spiritual identities. To do so would be to do violence to the developing complexity of our understanding of the Azure People, to Liz's artistic vision, and to the collaborative contributions of the other players in the Nabonidus IV games. As Liz's creative discovery, the Azure People indubitably carry some of her image, but once set into the game world they take on a life of their own that shares aspects of any who experience them.

The New World of Nabonidus IV

Nabonidus IV is a small asteroid roughly thirty-five miles long at its longest point, one of many small bodies orbiting a watery planetoid hanging in the midst of cold starlight. Many of the Azure People, who have recently colonized the asteroid, believe that this planetoid is "the blue sphere" prophesied by oracles on their homeworld of Hau'oli.

In our reality, "Hau'oli" appears to be a conjunction of the Maori word "hau," meaning "the spirit of things" and "oli," the Tamil word for "light" or "splendor." According to Jessie Mercay, chancellor of the American University of Mayonic Science and Technology, "oli" refers to

"that which has concealed itself in light and sound … by shooting forth from within itself" (n.d., p. 3). Thus, "Hau'oli" could be translated as "the spirit of that which has concealed itself in light and sound," that is, the divine.

There is a wrinkle in this etymology, however: historically, the name of the Azure People homeworld did not come from Maori or Tamil, but Hawaiian. Among the papers from our sessions that Liz gave to me I found a listing of "Traditional Hawaiian baby names and their meanings" which includes "Hau'oli," meaning "Joy, happy." Yet the Maori-Tamil meaning cannot be discounted, because I accidentally introduced it into the canon of the universe when I asked Liz about the origin of the name (Fig. 4.1).

This mix-up reveals the amorphous, malleable way that the sub-universes of gaming enter experience. The Maori-Tamil meaning is congruent with the established constants of the Nabonidus universe, and as its primary co-creator Liz is authorized to establish such details. Despite its tenuous sources and questionable etymology, this definition of Hau'oli now has the stamp of canonicity.

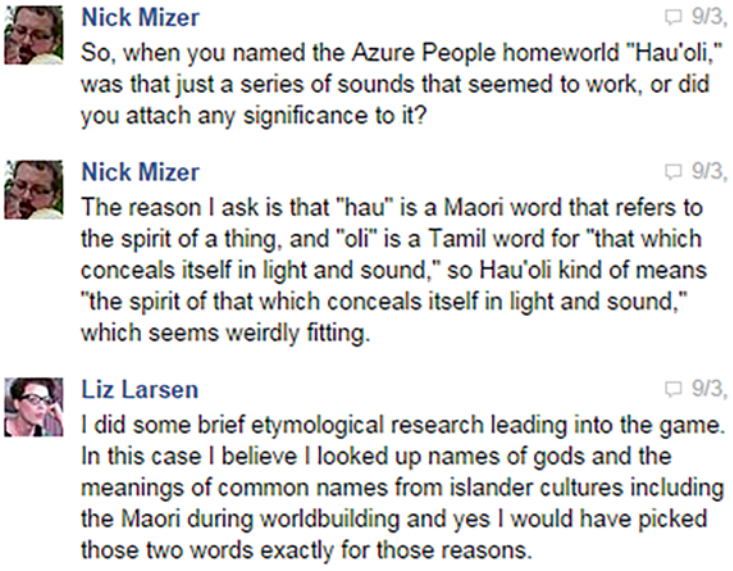

Fig. 4.1 Facebook discussion about Hau'oli

For Liz, this process of meaning creation is central to the practice of gaming: "Like just searching for a cool name for an asteroid can give me a meaning that adds more into the world or story. I think the idea of 'casting the lots' and 'interpreting after the fact' when it comes to worldbuilding is really what the whole old-school renaissance (OSR) thing is all about." Thus, as of the time of writing, Hau'oli can be expressed as "the joy(ful) spirit of that which conceals itself in light and sound."

As sometimes happens with homeworlds, Hau'oli grew too dangerous for its inhabitants. An unspecified plague destroyed much of the population, and the forty-three colonists of New Blue represent the Azure People's only hope for perpetuating the species. The Azure People, then, came from Hau'oli to Nabonidus IV. This colonialist theme runs through not just Nabonidus IV but many of the worlds created through *D&D*. In a common piece of advice for dungeon masters, for example, game designers Macris et al. (2012, p. 236) advise that a campaign start on the borderlands of civilization and wilderness, and much of the character's explorations can be said to repeat European expansion, with orcs and goblins as stand-ins for indigenous populations. This can, of course, be quite problematic, as in the classic Gygax (1980) module "Keep on the Borderlands," when an infamous room brings the adventurers to an orc nursery, leaving them with the decision of how to treat currently harmless baby orcs. While some gamers might ignore or deny the problems of this theme, others cite it as a primary reason they left old-school gaming. Liz, however, follows a different tack and instead keeps coming back to this theme, playing with variants of colonialism and exploration with awareness of the politics of doing so.

Scholars among the Azure People theorize that asteroids like Nabonidus IV were originally islands on the planet below that somehow left the atmosphere and entered orbit. Each asteroid has its own atmosphere and despite their small size possess a roughly earth-like gravity. The terrain of Nabonidus IV is riddled with tunnels and passageways, like a piece of Swiss cheese flying in space.

The terrain is also suffused with the psychedelic music that Liz played throughout the sessions. The soundtrack to *Fantastic Planet*, composed by Alain Goraguer, features prominently here, the ethereal wordless vocals sliding high and smooth over sometimes discordant, always meandering, instrumentation which draws on a mixture of psychedelia, jazz, and funk. This music does not, to my knowledge, exist in the universe of Nabonidus IV, but it indelibly shaped our experience of that place, and seemed to drift

back and forth between the worlds more freely than any other aspect of our experience. Whenever I need to conjure that world, as I do while writing this chapter, I use that soundtrack as a catalyst.

On the dust-covered surface, forests of towering purple mushroom form the primary form of vegetation, although numerous other species of flora and fauna thrive there as well. Currently little is known about most of these species other than a list of their names: chalk worm, psychic ghostfish, kelp-strand mangler, jelly tumor, poisonous spaceweed, moonbaby, red star reptile, luminous urchin, ash-shroom, bubblecrumpet, floatatious cro, cancerous tongue, siren, large goom, spider barnacles, and trapezoidal mollusk. It is worth noting that after crafting this evocative bestiary, Liz did not present any of them to the characters as they explored the asteroid, instead inventing new creatures that fit the aesthetic suggested by the list, and in one case directly importing Rover, a mysterious orb entity, from the 1967 British series *The Prisoner*.

The Bleem

In an inversion of the history of colonialism in our world, the natives of the "New World" of Nabonidus IV possess highly advanced technology relative to the Azure colonists. These natives, known as the Bleem, live in the asteroids surrounding the unnamed aqueous planet. To them, Nabonidus IV is a remote outpost, potentially useful for mining. Not long before the Azure People arrived, however, a large Bleem ship came under attack from an unknown source, marooning the survivors on the small asteroid. In appearance the Bleem resemble bipedal lorises reimagined by Jim Henson. Although Liz offered the Bleem as a potential character choice, basing their class on the dwarves of *D&D*, all players instead chose to play Azure People. This placed the Bleem firmly in the "other" category, and although the colonists had some contact with the Bleem before the beginning of the campaign, when the players met them in the third session the scene had all the markings of a first encounter, complete with cultural misunderstandings.

Although Liz had offered some general descriptions of the Bleem in the first two sessions, these details were not tied down by the players and shifted in their particulars until the characters approached the camp. The idea of kinetic expressiveness as central to their communication, however, remained consistent throughout. In early descriptions, the Bleem com-

municated primarily through complex facial expressions, but in the third session Liz offers a more detailed bit of color and diction:

> They have some sort of flowy garments made out of like silken [pause] silken strands. Some sort of, vegetation [unclear] like imagine like if you, um, like wove [pause] spider silk into these long flowing sort of like banners and—and streamers that kind of come off of their necklaces and beads and stuff. And they kind of float around them in a [pause] way that wouldn't really mimic Earth gravity. Um. As they move. Um. [pause] And, um, they blend in well with the terrain of the asteroid. They're very dark and smoky colored. With like burgundy and auburn patches on their fur. Their fur's not really made of fur, but it's—it's more like a—like a very thin fine quill. So they can stand it all out like a sea urchin or let it lay flat at will. You know, kind of like a—like very obvious movement. So they can kind of puff up.

Ben, seeking to have the characters approach the Bleem in a culturally meaningful way that minimized misunderstanding, asked for more detail:

Ben:	Okay. [pause] Well, um, [pause] last time when they approached, did they have any, uh, [pause] greeting? [pause] Hm. How do I try to say this?
Liz:	They—they, um, gesture a lot with their hands while they're talking, makes the streamers that are coming off their bracelets kind of move around in these like, [pause]
Heather:	[laughs]
Liz:	These like patterns that just kinda like stay in the air.
Livvy:	[laughs]
Liz:	Almost. So it's like they can, like, gesture these glyphs that just kind of like fade out of the light next to them. If the light's reflecting right. It only works in kind of the light that, um, they [unclear] The lights they use in their spaceship or inside their household pods.

Attempting to emulate this, the characters spent a few hours parked just in sight of the Bleem camp, weaving their own streamers. We did this (for I did play in the final session) in spite of multiple cues from Liz that the meeting would not likely be fraught or tense. We soon learned, however, that our partial understanding had led us to a misstep: the type of streamers we made, and the way that we approached waving them in a sort of

procession, marked not a diplomatic envoy but a troupe of comic performers. Thus, in an inversion of the Western legend of deified explorers like Cook and Cortez, our Azure colonists were received as clowns.

The Shamash-Nadin and the Dark Trail

Like the Azure People, the Bleem had their own prophecies and legends. One of these legends helped the colonists to make sense of a harrowing encounter from the end of the first expedition. Returning from a day of exploration, presumably as weary as the players reaching the end of a night of gaming, the Azure explorers found a group of figures operating a strange machine on the edge of the colony, New Blue:

Ben: She's rolling [dice]! Something terrible just happened.
[laughter]

Liz: Yeah, you, um, you—the hovercar flies up. And you know—the asteroid's about to turn away from the sun so you can see that, like—it looks like a white line on the horizon. Um. On the edge there. That's the kinda blind spot. That's always in that white line. But you see the white line of searing light—which it's very difficult to look into the horizon at this point. And, um, and you like, soar across, back out of the forest. But then you notice that, um, you see that—you know, the dome. The home dome.
[laughter]

Liz: Kind of on the horizon and as you get near to it, you see that, um, that—something is like—something has clawed up the side of the membrane on this side of the dome.

Ben: NO!

Liz: And is like, um, it looks like the veins under your skin, you know, some

Heather: Eww …

Liz: Sort of like [pause] blackened um, veins are kind of like pumping up towards the lattice work of the filmy membrane that protects your city. And, um, as you draw nearer to it, you see half a dozen figures along some sort of machine. Are, um, kind of camped out along the perimeter of the membrane and they have these giant, like, um, they look like, um, fire—fire engine hoses. With uh, big long probe needles at the end of it that they've kind of like, inserted up into the membrane.

One of Liz's goals in running a game is to "let everything define itself without any preconceptions," and this encounter with the strange hooded figures demonstrates how disparate details about the universe can converge and define a situation, seemingly on their own. When Liz rolled the dice, which told her the colonists had a hostile encounter on their return, she turned an evocative name from her list, "Shamash-Nadin," into these figures. This blending of chance and imagination was the first thread of the synergy. The next two threads came from the player side. During character creation Liz allowed each player to invent an artifact that their character possessed. Ben, for example, chose a holographic recording device. Heather chose a bubble-windowed moon rover that we took to calling the Space Mystery Machine, while Kim gave her maternal a cone of silence, used back on Hau'oli to mask the sounds of the infants from large aquatic predators. When the characters saw these figures, then, they were in the Space Mystery Machine, which jumped to the foreground of everyone's experience when Ben suggested they simply run over the Shamash-Nadin. Liz introduced a wrinkle into the plan, however, providing some resistance to this simple synergy: surely the Shamash-Nadin would hear the vehicle approaching and move out of the way, since in an earlier joking moment someone had decided that the Space Mystery Machine made sounds like a car from *The Jetsons*. When the players realized that Kim's cone of silence could be adapted to silence the Space Mystery Machine, they erupted in excited overlapping speech and laughter, creating the most energetic moments of the entire evening. Finally, Liz subjected the perceived synergy to a final test, judicially ruling that they would succeed in hitting between one and six of the figures, depending on the throw of a single die.

Here I must pause briefly, with that oracular cube still bouncing on the table, to reflect on how the interaction of creative synergies and chance shaped our experience of this story. When gathered together, at a convention, for example, gamers often complain about having to listen to "gaming stories" very similar to this one. Something vital drops out of the experience in the retelling, something not present in our experiences of traditional narratives but central to the experience of everyday life: the awareness that events did not have to play out the way that they did. When Odysseus manages to draw back his bow, we are not surprised that he manages to thread the arrow through the twelve axe heads. In retelling the scene, a storyteller might try to recreate a sense of the hero's prowess or the suitors' surprise, and perhaps Odysseus himself was not sure he could achieve the feat as he held the bowstring to his cheek, but

in the experience of the story there is no sense of chance because the telling is governed by logics of narrative and genre rather than probabilities. In old-school gaming, however, narrative logic does not automatically trump the probabilistic rules that determine the outcome. We come again to Liz's insistence that gaming is not about giving her a sense of control lacking in life, but about giving up some control in order to experience the present. That sense of uncertainty, the slightly bated breath, like the pause at the peak of a roller coaster track, so central to the original experience, is lost in the retelling. I cannot recreate it here as I describe the pell-mell assault on the Shamash-Nadin, only comment on its absence.

The die settled, and Liz announced that the car would be able to hit all six of the figures. Kim let out an excited "OHHHH!" and everyone else burst out in explosive laughter. The group made quick work of the Shamash-Nadin, even taking a hostage. Pulling back the dark hood, they found that their captive presented a sort of horrifying inversion of the color that suffused the rest of our experience of Nabonidus IV: "What you see is a humanoid face but the skin is completely clear and you can see all of the bones and muscle tissue and internal organs underneath its skin. Um. Very bug-eyed because—you know, you can see right through its eyelids." In a world of purples, blues, and greens, the Shamash-Nadin are colorless, and inflict an inky absence of light on the world. Later, in the meeting with the Bleem, we learn that the Shamash-Nadin are connected with the Dark Trail, which Liz described for us:

> You can see off in the distance, you know, this giant whirling black tornado, light-sucking funnel. That's kind of landed in this one hex that you're heading towards. Is just getting bigger and bigger. You can see that it kind of whips around. And it is like it's—it's like there's almost a, um, [pause] it look—it looks like it [unclear] like it'll like—it's almost kind of a life form of its own, it will like go slack, and then just kind of whip around, recoil, as if something on the other end, like you'd imagine like some giant creature at the other end like, trying hand over hand to like, tug of war this thing and lasso it back onto the planet.

The Dark Trail, "almost kind of a life form of its own," again leads back to the idea of color as something more than a passive quality possessed by objects.

In Bleem legends, the Shamash-Nadin are six ghosts sent from the blue planet to "engulf all the asteroids, tie ropes around them, bind them, and

pull them back into the oceans from which they originally flew." According to these tales, only half-believed by the Bleem technologists, once these transparent-skinned ghosts "pull the last asteroid down beneath the surface of the waves … the planet will be transformed into a new paradise and the world will begin again."

Here we had come to the crux of our experiences in Nabonidus IV. For the Azure People had their own prophecy of a new world, their own reality that had brought them to the asteroid in the first place. The Star Road Prophecy said that the "great blue sphere," understood to be the aqueous planet below Nabonidus IV, would become the new paradise of the Azure People, but said nothing of destroying a race of space lorises to do so. Again, Liz plays with the colonial themes implicit in the game, but the conflict between the two prophecies is more than political. The two prophecies present two imagined realities to be projected onto the spaces of Nabonidus IV, two ways to "take reality hostage." For the residents of the asteroid, the two futures exist as imagined worlds, with a relationship to their world similar to the relationship between our world and theirs. Had we continued the campaign further, we would have seen the Azure People and the Bleem bringing one of those worlds (or another, yet unimagined) into existence through their own color, song, and choice diction.

This, in broad strokes, is the world that Liz, the players, the dice, and the ambience worked together to produce. I have presented it here largely in its completed form, synthesizing small details defined over the course of three sessions into a cohesive whole. This masks, however, the actual process by which Liz kidnapped the space of that living room with the nascent world we both created and discovered. In closing the chapter, then, I consider Nabonidus IV as a process rather than a completed product.

The Incident at Hex 0607

While tracing the kidnapping of reality with Nabonidus IV across all twelve hours of the three sessions would try both the patience of the reader and the skills of bookbinders, detailed examination of a particular incident helps to illuminate the process. This incident occurred toward the end of the second session of Liz's campaign, comprising roughly an hour of time in our world and five to ten minutes of time in Nabonidus IV. Throughout the incident, Liz draws on color, song, and choice diction to convey Nabonidus IV into the gaming space. Further, she and the other players

interact with the things of Nabonidus IV, experiencing them as things which define themselves in the context of the overall ambience that Liz evoked in their summoning.

The tenor of the second session was hectic and distracted compared with the peaceful explorations of the previous week. While the Larsens had secured a babysitter for the campaign opener, at the second session their three children and my daughter shared the space of the apartment with us. While this did not particularly bother anyone, the children did periodically interrupt the flow of play, necessitating refocusing efforts not needed in the previous week. If gaming is a process of taking reality hostage, that night the hostage struggled and slipped free more than the previous week.

The second session also brought a change to the player line-up; Livvy, a player new to the group in the first session, was absent, and two new players attended. Billy, who knew the Larsens through the local music scene, did not know anyone else in the group when he arrived. Although he had played video games for most of his life and some newer tabletop RPGs, Billy had never played an old-school game before that night. The second addition to the group was my wife, Shawna. Shawna had met the others in the group before, and has played tabletop RPGs for quite some time. The remaining players, Heather, Ben, and Kim, were staples of the group.

After some initial socializing and wrangling of children, Liz marked the beginning of the session by slightly dimming the lights and playing "The Octave Doctors and the Crystal Machine," a synth-heavy track by psychedelic rock group Gong. As people began to settle down on the couch and around the coffee table, Liz drew on the music to begin pushing Nabonidus IV out into the space of the living room:

Liz:	Okay, you can meditate on this thematic music for a moment.
	[laughter]
	[long pause]
Liz:	Take yourself to a world of lavender moonscapes and—
Heather:	Screaming toddlers.
	[laughter]
Liz:	Screaming toddlers. Wailing spectral figures in the distance.
	[pause]

Shawna: Crazy ooze-like substances.
[pause]
Liz: That must be why parents, when you DM you sort of [unclear] slime substances. Mucusy.

Although the invocation proceeds jokingly, both Heather's and Shawna's interjections serve as opportunities for Liz to take more of the surrounding reality hostage into the fiction. Screaming toddlers replaced with "wailing spectral figures" and children's mucus replaced with "crazy ooze-like substances." Following a failed interrogation of a hostage Shamash-Nadin, the players decided to send their characters out to talk with the Bleem. They plotted their course using the hex map of Nabonidus IV (Fig. 4.2):

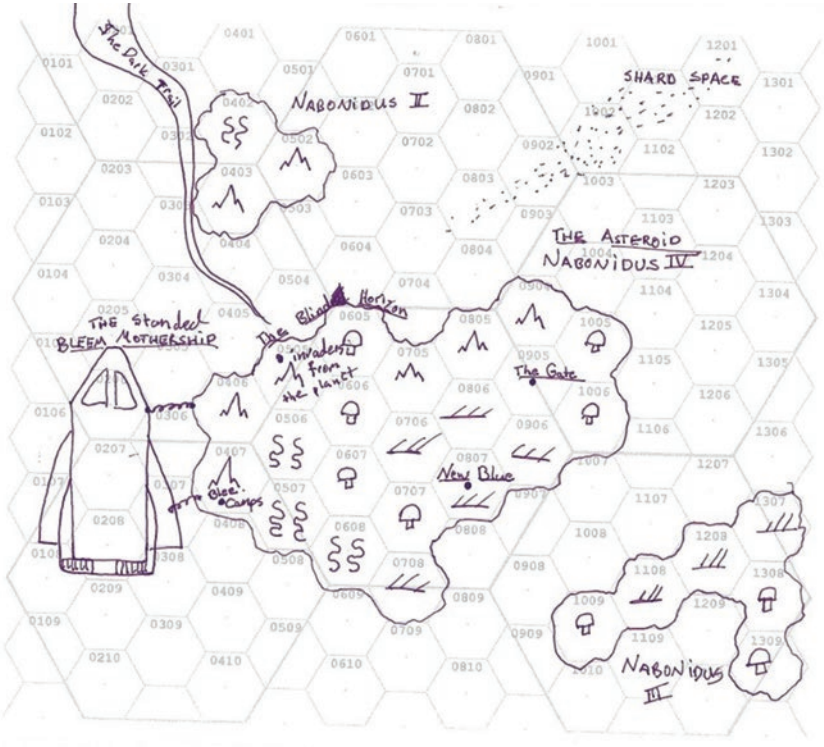

Fig. 4.2 Map of Nabonidus IV

from New Blue at Hex 0807, they would follow the mushroom forest through 0707 and 0607, then cross the tunnel-ridden landscape of 0507 before arriving at the Bleem encampment at 0407. Liz began the journey with an opening invocation:

> It's kind of a—um, an odd day. The sunlight filters, um, through the atmosphere with more of a mottled hue than on the clearer days of the past. You know, it's like there's obviously some sort of hazy substance in patches along the top of the atmosphere, creates these sort of like refracting—be like a shadows, that's like, there's spots of sparkly and there's spots of black on the moon dust around you. And the beams that kind of pierce down through the—the, uh, heads of the mushrooms—hey Loki. The beams of light that come down through the clouds, um, [pause] through the mushrooms kind of appear and disappear. It's a little disorienting.

The invocation demonstrates Liz's use of ambience to bring Nabonidus IV into the living room. The description is bracketed on either side with explicit affective cues: "odd day," which progresses to "disorienting" in the final sentence. Between those two points Liz abducts reality with an ambience composed primarily of patches of light and shadow diffused through "hazy substance" (clouds) and the mushroom forest. Interestingly, Liz does not describe the mushrooms themselves but the light and atmosphere that surround them.

While Liz projected the journey into the living room, her son Loki entered the room ("Hey Loki"), disrupting the abduction when he did not want to leave. Liz uses the music, which has transitioned to a staccato, Morse code-like synth beat at just the right moment, to reopen the connection:

Liz: On musical cue, you are—
[laughter]
Liz: Um, [pause] there um
Livvy: [unclear]
Liz: Um, it appear, you kind of turn a section of the forest cuz you're exiting a different way than you came out the other time you ventured into this hex. You pass by multiple clearings of the amber substance dripping down. Uh, and you find a barricade of the stuff after a while. Uh, where you're going to have to find a way to—to hack through or go around another four hours.

Here Liz conveys the world factually, with little color or sensory data, as if the viewscreen is still coming back into focus after Loki's disruption. But this factuality also serves to highlight the solidity of what would become the central focus of the incident: the barricade of "amber substance." This substance drips from the mushroom trees like sap, with the phallic connotations noted in the previous session when the group first discovered it. Although here the sap forms a challenge for the characters, impeding their progress, they have also identified it as a vital source of nourishment for their eggs. Following this initial description, Billy seeks clarification, prompting a more ambient conveyance of the entire scene:

Billy: It's made out of this amber stuff?

Liz: Yes. This amber, it's—it's like these have like stacked up so high, um, that they like reach the tips of the giant mushroom trees that they're kind of falling off of. And the ground is like really sticky all the way around. Um. It's also—because of the kind of blockage here, the light is much dimmer and darker. So you've got the headlights on—the headlights on in your hover car. Um, and you can kind of see through along the forest floor. Um. And you notice that the ground here, it seems to be, um, free—free of all dust. It's like—it's kind of been hollowed out. So it's like volcanic rock. Um, the mushroom stalks that grow here. Um, appear to be a little more wilted. You know, maybe they move a little bit more in the asteroid wind.

The stickiness of the ground is never bound to our reality, and fades out of existence later when the characters actually step out of their vehicle. The changes to the light and mushrooms here, however, act strongly in the conveyance. Here light itself become dimmer and darker, and the mushrooms wilt and sway in the newly discovered wind of the asteroid. Clearly, something haunts the place. Billy senses its presence, while the others treat the barricade as a passive environmental feature:

Kim: Maybe we'll chop through it I guess? We need the sample anyways.

Shawna: Yeah.

Billy: Yeah, it makes me nervous.

Here the barricade begins to change slightly as the other players begin to shape it through their imaginings and words. The barricade only exists through interactions with Liz and the other players; their speech about the barricade is not a signifier of it but the thing itself. Thus, when the players change their description of the barricade, the thing itself changes, evolving over the course of the encounter. The first step in this particular evolution comes once the barricade is securely bound to our reality through its restatement by one player to another. This transition is important: the barricade no longer presents itself primarily to Liz and secondarily to the other players, but is accessible to the experience of all the players. When Heather, who had been pulled out of the frame by Loki, asked for clarification, the increased permanence of the now securely bound barricade results in a change of terminology:

Shawna: No, there's just a big wall. Of it.
Ben: Yeah.
Shawna: Like it's a—
Heather: Oh, there's a wall of it.
Ben: Stalagmites—
Shawna: A wall of amber.
Ben: —have reached stalactites making giant towers and walls of ambergris pulling on these mushrooms.
Billy: How sure are we that this wall is natural?
[pause]
Shawna: Mmmm.
Billy: That's what I'm concerned about.
[pause]
Ben: Uh.
Billy: That it could be—trying to break through some of this could be taken as attacking something.
Kim: Right?

A barricade suggests impermanence and improvisation, rightly so because Liz improvised it into existence. Once bound by the other players, the barricade takes on permanence and becomes a wall. The newly formed wall immediately acts on the scene in new ways, with the implication of careful construction and permanence suggesting to Billy that perhaps the thing is not naturally occurring, and might in fact be a trap (in both the literal and Gellian senses). Ben introduces two new mutations in his

binding: the references to "stalactites making giant towers" and "ambergris." No reference to stalactites, towers, or ambergris had yet been made; the wall developed those characteristics as Ben spoke them. Ambergris, an evolution of the previous term amber, highlights the ambiguity of the substance forming the wall. It is, of course, neither amber nor ambergris, but because Ben's innovation goes unchallenged, it takes on aspects of both and heightens the strangeness of the mushrooms and Nabonidus IV in general. Liz soon bound the towers but transformed them into bars: "It's like lumpy frozen bars kind of a thing. Barricading your path … Bars with, like—places where it's fallen so close together it almost forms like a solid wall for a little while." This statement, which embraces the ambiguity developed thus far ("*almost* forms *like* a solid wall"), served as the final description of the wall until the end of their interactions with it. Having firmly bound it to the space, the players can interact with it apart from further description. The wall, in turn, acts on the space by serving as a central anchor point for the entire scene. This anchoring becomes literal once the characters attach a rope (actually, an "anti-graviton emitter") from their vehicle to a withered stalk embedded in the wall. Once they accomplish this, they attempt to pull down the wall, prompting its final transformation and highlighting its active role in the scene:

Liz: Okay. Uh. You floor it in your hovercar, you—you hear the [whirring noise], you know, like the engine revving up, you know, the back jets on the hover car just light up the whole clearing, kind of green-blue flame tendrils. Um. Although it's light. It's some sort of propulsion device that doesn't actually emit rocket fire or anything. It's more like a UFO. But. And the underside of the car lights up as well. Um. You feel like, the car buckle as the tether between it and the mushroom tree, like pulls taut. And that the light the under—the inside lighting inside the car, kind of like jolts on and jolts off. You almost think you've lost the control systems for a minute. You—um, you feel the steering mechanism just kind of jerk back—

Heather: Right.

Liz: In your hands. Um. But then you hear this lou … d screech. And, like [pause] um, those of you that are outside the hover car, it's even more alarming, because instead of muffled you hear this shrill crack. And you luck over at the mushroom stalk

> and there's this like crack running up it from the base. All the way to the top … Splintering, um, splintering chunks along the big amber wall just start kinda like crackling around. It sounds like you're in the middle of a fireworks display. Um. And the fireworks are going off all around you.

Liz marks the importance of this transition with an expanded description, using choice diction (tendrils, propulsion device, emit) to take hostage with the color of the "green-blue flame tendrils" and the whirring song of the hovercar, punctuated by the "shrill crack" as the wall transforms from a passive barrier to an active threat. The trap has sprung. From that point forward in the incident the wall acts as shrapnel: "Anyone who's outside of the hover car, um you're going to be attacked by shrapnel." As previously, the wall continues to project a dual nature of artifice and nature, with shrapnel's implication of explosive devices. The barricade, having become firmly fixed in the form of a wall, completes its action on the scene in an explosive and destructive burst of action.

The wall was only one of the main co-actors in this incident, however. As the characters exited the hovercar, Liz brought another aspect of Nabonidus IV into the gaming space, first as an invisible source of danger that confirmed Billy's suspicion of the scene:

Liz:	What do you do when you get out of the hover car?
Kim:	I, uh, I've got my, uh, space gun drawn and I'm just [pause]
Liz:	Looking side to side?
Kim:	Yeah, I'm doing the pop in the corner thing, and—
Liz:	Okay.
Shawna:	I mean …
Ben:	Yeah. Bolt caster in one hand, anti-graviton emitter in the other.
	[pause, with Gothic-sounding organ music]
Billy:	He's ready to party.
Liz:	What are your ACs?
Ben:	DAMMIT!
	[laughter]
Heather:	Ha, ha.
Ben:	Seven.
Kim:	Uh, seven.
	[pause, with Gothic-sounding organ music]

Ben: Yeah. She's wearing a [pause] latex repulsor suit.
[pause]
Liz: What's your favorite color, blue or yellow?
[pause, with Gothic-sounding organ music]
Ben: Blue.
Liz: Okay. You're the one that gets attacked.
Ben: Dammit.

Liz's use of color here refers to special dice that she has with colors and shapes rather than numbers. Her initial idea in the campaign was to use the color dice for interacting with more otherworldly effects such as magic. Although she rejected the initial system as unwieldy, this represents a small experiment in allowing color to act along with the dice in conveying the fictional events into our world. By introducing the fact of the attack before the source Liz heightens the mystery and unease of the scene, with hidden attackers. Soon after, however, the mushrooms act in much the same way as the wall, producing active threat from the ostensibly passive environment:

Liz: Okay. As you near the stalk of the tree, you're starting to wrap it around it. And, uh, you can't really hear all that well inside of your mucus bubble, but you feel a vibration. You're tying it around the tree. And you feel the stalk vibrate. And before you're able to wrap up, you kinda look around, you look up—you know the—on the underside of a mushroom cap where those, like, frills—
Ben: Gills.
Liz: Gills? Yeah. You see those just kind of like fall down [pause] like rain and like flap out into wings and, um, some, like winged, um, [pause] creature that disguises itself up there inside the mushroom cap, just kind of a swarm of them just drop like rocks down. One of them landing and popping your mucus bubble.
[gasp]
Liz: And doing three points of damage to you. Um. It feels like a cannonball was just dropped on your chest. You're pinned to the ground. This thing has claws, wings, teeth. You can't really see. But it's dark and it's active. Okay. Roll me initiative.

Although the attacking creatures will eventually resolve into entities distinct from the mushroom, because they *are* their description, they enter our world as the winged gills of a giant mushroom that fall like rain and (in an omen of the wall shrapnel to come) drop like rocks. Once one of them makes contact, Liz heightens their ambiguous nature, presenting them as a jumble of sensory data that only partially resolves into identifiable components: it *has* claws, wings, teeth. But it *is*, like most of the threats on Nabonidus IV and most notably the Dark Funnel, "dark and active". She closes her invocation with the ritualized "Roll me initiative," marking the start of careful tracking of time and space through the combat rules. As discussed in Chap. 3, here we have strips of experience peeled out node by node and then reassembled. For a time, this active, dark bundle of claws, wings, and teeth acts on the characters in its jumbled state, with the rules of the game allowing the players to interact with it even in this unresolved form. The players display remarkable comfort in dealing with winged "things" that do not resolve into solid bodies, in part because their aspects as bundles of numbers determined by the rules come to the fore of experience:

Kim: Yeah, I'm gonna defend him and try to shoot as many off as I can.
Liz: Okay. You've got your bearings now. The surprise attack is over. One of them missed you. Looks like there's only two. You're a little bit lucky. Uh, so, are you gonna fire at the one—
Kim: Yes.
Liz: You're gonna—
Ben: Don't shoot the one on my face.
[pause]
Kim: Okay, then I'll shoot the other one.
Liz: Okay.
Kim: Yeah.
[pause]
Liz: Yeah. It—that first one is engaged in melee with—
Kim: Okay. Yeah, I'll shoot the other one that's flying around.
Liz: Okay.
Kim: Yeah.
Liz: Make me a d20.
Kim: Oh, d20? Okay. [pause] Sixteen?

Liz: That's a hit.
[pause]
Liz: [unclear]
Kim: One point of damage.

As targets of violence the winged creature maintain this unresolved form, although Heather specifies them as animals at one point, until they next act against the party, giving Liz an opportunity to bring them more firmly into our reality. Her description comes from the viewpoint of Meliani, Ben's character, who has just re-extended the mucus bubble that protects her from the atmosphere when her partner comes under attack:

Liz: Um, you, um [pause] you hear the phaser blasts going off and you spin around, you're fighting the thing off, um, and then, um, you hear—get distracted and by the time you look up and the film kind of [pause] goes up over your eye—pupils to where the haziness that happens whenever the bubble gets erupted. Um, goes away, you see. Um, Laula has one of these things like wrapped around her like a tendril. Like, it's like, it feels like a plate of sheet metal like crumpling—
Kim: [pained] Oh …
Liz: —around your body. Um.
Heather: Oh my gosh …
Liz: And constricting. Um. So it makes a loud, like crackling pop as each segment of its wings, its like copper plates almost. Just like [crunching noises]
Kim: Yikes.
Liz: It does six points of damage to you. And it's like, um, hooked fangs that are somewhere on a part of its body that you can't quite see, you can feel them. Just kind of dig into your ribcage and latch themselves around a bone.

Notably, the haziness over Meliani's eyes echoes the "hazy substance in patches along the top of the atmosphere" that framed the beginning of the expedition, marking haziness and obscured vision as another recurring actor in the scene. The atmosphere, the wall, the mucus bubble, and the jumbled mass of active darkness all highlight the difficulty of tuning the viewscreen to provide clear visions of this reality. From this haziness, the

creature wraps itself around Laula, simultaneously a tendril and a sheet of crackling sheet metal. The creature still refuses to reveal itself entirely, however: in a mimicry of both the tether attached to the mushroom stalk and the binding of one reality to another, the hooked fangs wrap around her ribcage and anchor to the bone. The fangs come from somewhere "you can't quite see, you can feel them." As the winged creatures act on the scene, they simultaneously reveal and obscure, just as the reality reveals and obscures itself. Heather seeks to give the creatures more definition, however, and asks Liz to measure them:

Heather: How big are these things out of curiosity?
Liz: Um. [pause] With wingspan, um, um, completely unfolded in all segments kind of pulled apart from each other, you would guess that the largest one is about twelve foot wingspan. [pause] And the smaller ones are around six to eight feet. There's some like, some kind of like—you see some fluttering around, you know, eighty foot up at the top of the mushroom they've like stirred—
Heather: They're like copper bird bats?
Liz: Two of them have dove to attack you.

As the creatures take on definite size, they also develop specific anatomical mechanics, in that the metallic segments can be "kind of pulled apart from each other." This prompts Heather to offer the first of multiple attempts to bind the creatures with a singular name, "copper bird bats," with their bat nature presumably coming from the resolution of the segmented wings, which suggest the webbed wings of bats. Ben picks up the binding attempt soon after, and also makes it explicit:

Ben: Kay. Well, uh, I'm gonna call Meliani's action. Uh, Zed will [pause] pull the, um, vibro sword and click the crystal in the hilt, which causes the, uh, microfilament along the edge of the blade to start vibrating and humming. Uh, charges towards the um [pause] what are we calling this thing? The giant space bat?
[pause]
Kim: Sure.
Ben: The giant plasma bat.
Heather: Plasma bat.

Ben: And [pause] no, I got a smirk outta that one. We're sticking with plasma bat.

Liz: Ben knows that I just write down whatever the players describe it as—in my notes, as the name of the monster.

By this point, the creatures have clearly become some sort of bat, and the group reaches to determine what kind of bat they are. Both "space" and "plasma" draw on the ambience of the place in different ways, first in the literal location, and second in the broader science fantasy milieu, in which Nabonidus IV floats. In the final line of the excerpt, Liz reinforces the idea of binding coming through the reflection of the world in her players' eyes. More importantly, however, she makes reference to the most absolute form of binding that can occur at a game session: inscription in her notes. Liz organizes her notes meticulously, a process she once described in a detailed blog post. The importance of inscription in a well-organized set of notes is that an inscribed node of fictional reality does not dissipate when forgotten, unlike the sticky ground surrounding the wall. The inscription binds the bat to our reality for as long as the inscription exists. Yet, in spite of referencing inscription, Liz did not write down "plasma bats," and the creatures did not actualize as such. If the name had stuck, if they had been successfully been bound as plasma bats, we would expect them to begin manifesting plasmatic qualities, perhaps emitting beams of energy or phasing through solid matter and leaving scorched holes. Instead, after a single appearance as plasma bats, the metallic nature of the creatures reasserted itself at the shrill crack of the wall becoming shrapnel: "A whole burst of these copper bats just kind of just [pause] fly out from under the mushroom tip."

From that point forward, the newly named copper bats began dying or fleeing, as if being forced to clearly reveal their nature weakened them in some way. When Meliani destroyed one with her vibro sword, it underwent a final transformation:

Liz: And then the vibro sword comes in and just du—bisects the whole thing in half. And it falls to the ground like a bunch of rusty plates. You can finally see where its head reveal—is revealed. And you can see something that looks like, kind of like a manta ray's mouth. It's on the underside.

Kim: Oh …

Heather: Gross!

Liz: And, um, it's got—

Heather: Space rays.
Billy: [laughs] Space ray.
[pause]
Billy: [laughs]
Liz: Yeah. And it's—it's got, um, [pause] um it looks like, uh, it's got these sharply chiseled teeth. The, um, symmetry of the whole thing is so, um, perfect, you wonder if it might be some sort of mechanical or constructed device. Rather than an actual creature.
Ben: Hm.
Liz: But you're not sure. It—it could, um, [pause] it—but it doesn't look like anything that you've seen. On your home-world before, that's for sure.
Billy: Could be a Bleem construct.
[pause]
Heather: Could be.
Shawna: Hm.
Liz: Um.
Heather: Could be. Definitely.

Like the barricade/wall/shrapnel, the winged creatures/copper bats/space rays glide along the line between creature and construct, just as the scene as a whole combines discovery with invention. As Liz would later tell me, "D&D is very much about discovering something that may have never even been there before you discovered it … looking back, you know, in situations where I've allowed, like, and let the situation unfold, the creation, you know [pause] that's—that's how I create stuff." In the space of the gaming performance, when the ambience is right and the players tuned in, things act alongside them, defining new spaces and taking reality captive in surprising ways.

At Hex 0607 this meant allowing the wall and the bats to assert themselves in the scene, cooperating with the group to move from a world of significant events, to participate in the process of worlding. And the worlding we accomplished alongside the things was this: Melani, a Ka-born sworn to uphold the traditions of the Azure People, tried to shelter Laula, a maternal, from the wall-turned-shrapnel, but arrived a moment too late:

Liz: Laula.
Kim: Seven.
[pause]

Heather: Aw, gosh.
Liz: It's a crit.
Heather: Oh!
Kim: Awwww, she's dead.
Ben: Oh it's—
Heather: You're killing us! No!
Liz: Four hit—four points of damage.
Kim: Yep. That's negative one.
Heather: Aw.
Liz: And what does it look like?
Heather: Rest in peace.
Kim: Yep.
Liz: What does it look like?
Kim: Uh, so she's jumps and she's diving down to hide. And just as she goes into the dive it like pierces through her neck.
Heather: Ohhhh.
Kim: The back of her neck.
[crashing noise]
Kim: And then out through the jugular.
Liz: One of the shards of—
Kim: Yeah. One of the shards of the—
Liz: Of the amber shards.
Kim: Blood spurts—
Liz: What does y'all's blood look like?
Kim: It's green?
Heather: Oh.
Kim: We have green blood and it just like [spraying noise].
Heather: Nice.
Liz: Oh, god.

……

Ben: So obviously Melani is like, running, and diving and at the very end she runs and lands on the back of Laula right as a spray of green blood.
Heather: Oh, yeah.
Ben: Hits her in the face. And it—she screams out at—at the sky NOOO! NOOO! IT SHOULD'VE BEEN ME!

……

Ben: Uh Jahzuul limps over to, uh, the fallen form of Laula. And uh, drops to his knees and starts singing the mourning song of his people.

Liz: Okay.
Ben: Which is like a long undulating, um mostly vowels. Sounds like whale song.
Kim: [laughs]
Liz: Um, we've got a
Kim: We know whale songs?!
[pause]
.....
[whale song noises]
[laughter]
Ben: Yes. Canon.
Kim: Exactly!
Ben: That is canon.
Heather: Oh my god.
Ben: That is exactly what just happened.

Throughout the scene of Laula's death, Liz repeats the key question that drives everyone in the session: "What does it look like?" The aim of the campaign was to see something new through the viewscreen of the game and to bring those things into the world of our experience. The next day I asked Liz what it all meant, and she told me:

> It means that our existence is all about stories about our existence, you know. It's just part of our consciousness to, you know, make up human stories, you know. Because we're constantly thinking about our own acts. The decisions that we make and how circumstances brought us to certain points in our lives. And the brain's trying to make those connections too. Um, [pause] I mean, the reason we evolved to dream is so that our subconscious can process problems or anxieties or questions that we have during our conscious life and try to prepare itself for solutions, um, as a survival strategy, you know. [Pause] That's—I think that that's what our brains are doing when we play D&D, at the same time. It's not any—[Pause] Like, it's something that our subconscious mind interacting with our conscious mind is very used to doing. Sort of [unclear] it's why kids, you know, play and pretend. And as adults we have to have more of, like a structure—structured way to play. Um. [Pause] I mean, the reason stories exist is [pause] to [pause] to, you know, explore different things that could happen in your life, that could happen in other people's lives, and understand [pause] different ways and [pause] and then it—as a result the brain takes that information, encapsulates it, encodes it back into your experience of reality. And

> stories are a way of kind of expanding your experience beyond experience. There's … that logic in D&D is like lucid dreaming in the sense that you're—you're dreaming and you're in control and [pause]. But at the same time, you know, making all the decisions with your conscious mind. [Pause] You know, and that's why we play games. It's the same reason why we ever evolved to dream. We just have to do it.

As Liz suggests here, narrative is a central aspect of gaming. In the style of gaming that Liz practices in Denton, however, the story emerges from the world accessed through the game. In dreaming, even lucid dreaming, the world construction is largely unconscious. To jump immediately to the question of story is to ignore the complex middle steps of assembling a world whose events can be narrativized. In gaming, and perhaps in other areas of collaborative imagining, that world must be wrangled and kidnapped through active participation with the things of the imagined world and the ambience that conveys that world into our own. We must bind those imagined things to the world around us through description and interaction, building a new world within our own node by node. As the things, the imaginers, and the ambience cooperate to produce this new world, unexpected patterns occur. As the world develops, those patterns grow increasingly complex even as they become increasingly familiar to those that dwell in them.

Note

1. Since my fieldwork, Liz transitioned back to Lars, and has asked me to use names and pronouns that correspond to the different times of our interactions.

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CHAPTER 5

Responsibly and Accurately: Dwelling in Imagined Worlds

Home—is where I want to be
But I guess I'm already there
I come home—she lifted up her wings
I guess that this must be the place
I can't tell one from another
Did I find you, or you find me?
There was a time
Before we were born
If someone asks, this where I'll be … where I'll be
—The Talking Heads, "This Must Be the Place" (Naïve Melody)

Early in my fieldwork Tavis Allison told me a story about a game that he once played with Rob Kuntz. Rob participated in the historic session when Dave Arneson introduced Gary Gygax to the house-ruled version of *Chainmail* that would become *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) (Peterson 2012, p. 71). He also played regularly in Gary's original campaign, Greyhawk, taking on the role of the infamous fighter Robilar, who was the first to descend to the deepest level of the Greyhawk dungeon. Besides contributing to the development and refereeing of Greyhawk, Rob also ran a game for Gary in Castle Raja Key, a dungeon that Rob had designed.

Tavis's game with Rob took place in Castle Raja Key, and in the characters' explorations one of the elves discovered a secret door in an otherwise

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nondescript passage. At the end of the session Rob revealed that, although Gary's character, Mordenkainen, had walked through that corridor hundreds of times, he had never discovered that passage. The secret remained hidden behind Rob's dungeon master (DM) screen just as the passage lurked behind the wall of the corridor. Rather than hint Gary toward the discovery or simply remove it from the design, Rob preserved the secret, unvisited and unknown. Even as the world built up an accumulation of history through what deCerteau might call Mordenkainen's "chorus of idle footsteps" whose "intertwined paths [gave] their shape to spaces," this secret remained untouched by the sedimented decades (de Certeau 1984, p. 97). Many years later, the dungeon that Tavis visited was haunted not only by Gary's perambulations but by the occulted concreteness of that unseen passage.

Another gamer I met during my fieldwork, Victor Raymond, played for many years with linguist M.A.R. Barker, creator of the World of Tékumel. Barker began developing Tékumel roughly two decades before the release of *D&D*, and his adaptation of that world for role-playing, *Empire of the Petal Throne*, was either the second or third role-playing game ever published, depending on how you calculate the release date (Peterson 2012, pp. 518–519). Tékumel is a notoriously detailed and complex world, comparable in complexity to Tolkien's Arda (the setting for *The Lord of the Rings*). Victor played in Barker's game for many years in the Twin Cities, some of which were contemporaneous with his participation in Fine's (1983) research with the pseudonymous "Golden Brigade." Over many years of play and study Victor's familiarity with Tékumel grew, to the point that in games he ran for me he could close his eyes and visualize each street in the city of Jákalla. The official website for Tékumel describes this characteristically vivid experience by asking "At what point does a world become real? You can detail the languages, cultures, personalities, political systems, histories … but beyond all this is something more that can bring a world alive in the imagination … and make it *almost exist*" ("The World of Tékumel" n.d.).

Whereas Liz and her group tend to visit the worlds of their campaigns for short periods of time before moving on to another, other gamers like Rob and Victor come to dwell in their game worlds over many years. As they do this, their experience of that world shifts, and the world acquires a feeling of reality that shorter-lived worlds do not achieve.

My first dungeon master at Gary Con, Jon Johnson, has run a campaign in Portland, Connecticut, for twenty years, with characters and players coming and going but the world continuing in a persistent state. Similarly, the Glantri campaign of a group known as New York Red Box

(a reference to the popular 1983 Basic D&D boxed set) has continued for well over two hundred sessions spread over roughly seven years.

Besides their duration, these campaigns share a similar approach to the imaginary world, one which seeks to experience the other world as concrete. In other words, they seek to allow the imagined world to unfold itself according to its own terms, providing resistance rather than molding to externally imposed demands such as strict narrative constraints. Drawn by the imaginary world, players develop techniques of play that aid conceptual immersion in the world. One of the most important of these is the call to treat the world "responsibly and accurately" as James Nostack, the founder of New York Red Box put it. Over time this habitual mode of approaching the world, building and cultivating it through their play, leads the players to a form of imaginative dwelling, to adapt a term from Heidegger (1993).

In this collaborative experience of imaginative dwelling they develop strong relationships not only with the worlds of their dwelling but also with one another. Dwelling can be understood as an enchanted relationship with a world, one pervaded by a sense of wonder and an interpenetration between self, place, and other. Like other gamers, these players use not only free-form imagination and awe, but an at times subversive utilization of the tools of rationalization. Whereas the chronomancy of Gary Con dealt with the relationship between past and present, and Liz's chromomancy created short but powerfully affective connections between worlds, these long-term games enchant through long processes of binding together worlds and people through the work of dwelling.

New York Red Box: "Where It's 1980 for Another 2D6 Turns"

I met with James at one of his favorite New York pizzerias. Coming straight from his day job as a lawyer, James sat across from me in the standard gray suit of a New York professional. "I was radicalized by what was going in Guantanamo," he explained when the topic of his career came up, "and I ended up going to law school to fight that shit. I ended up working in a clinic where we represented guys who were being tortured at Guantanamo. And even though I couldn't get a job in international justice, which is an extremely competitive field, I then worked in criminal defense here with people who were being subjected to horrible civil rights violations on a daily basis." James sees a direct connection between the ways that gaming encourages him to "identify with other people who are radically different"

and his work, as when he writes a sentencing memorandum explaining a client's life story to a judge with the goal of helping the judge achieve that same identification with the defendant. "If I were my client as a kid, growing up in these circumstances, why would I make these terrible decisions?" James's reflections on this aspect of gaming come from his return to the hobby through founding New York Red Box (NYRB).

NYRB emerged out of the context of a broader geek community in New York City, NerdNYC. Founded in 2003 as a "nonprofit social club dedicated to making friends and playing games in NYC," NerdNYC hosts regular game nights and small conventions, attracting "an ever-shifting cloud of folks that relate through things deemed by the mainstream as 'nerdy' or 'geeky'" (NerdNYC n.d.). James's group originated, like so many aspects of the Old School Renaissance, with Gygax's 2008 death. As described on the group's website, "We wanted to pay our respects by breaking out the ol' red box we loved so well when we were children. Turns out, though, that the reason we loved the old game is because it's incredibly fun, and we're playing a couple more sessions until we all get bored and move on to other pastimes" (New York Red Box 2012) This jest, combined with the site's tagline, "where it's 1980 for another 2d6 turns," carries an air of perdurance in many ways similar to the memorial practices I found at Gary Con.

The majority of role-playing game (RPG) campaigns don't last more than a year or two, so it is worthwhile to consider the circumstances that lead to a long-running campaign. While NYRB has hosted several campaigns, the Glantri campaign has been the most successful. After just five or six sessions of James's initial game, his preparations for the Bar exam began taking up too much time to allow him to continue. At that time, a member named Eric Minton approached James and asked for permission to run his own campaign through the site. They played the first session of the new campaign, Glantri, on May 28, 2008. By the time that James finished the Bar and considered restarting his own campaign, he found that there was not "enough oxygen in the room for both these flames." As the group organizer, James had to make a decision about the social organization of the group:

> And so at that point, really what happened was there was a real firm—commitment to, um, small group anarchist principles, at least on my part as the organizer of the site. And the notion that what I wanted to do was I wanted to build agency among the different people who were playing that A, that could all work together collaboratively. And that—that any time that anybody wanted to organize something they could get up and they could feel perfectly

> comfortable saying hey look, I'm organizing a game, I'm gonna do it, and so on and so forth. And we're gonna recruit, and we're gonna be public, we're gonna be open and everything's gonna be out there and transparent. And there's no central authority, you know, it's—it's self-organized. Right?

Rather than reasserting control of what the group would be playing, then, James decided to leave the group open to anyone who wanted to start a game under the NYRB umbrella. What they found, however, was that Glantri increasingly took up the bulk of the group's resources:

> Occasionally someone will pop up and they'll do two or three sessions of something. But it's—it's really Eric's players who are doing that and they are all committed—I mean REALLY, seriously committed in terms of the number of hours—to the Glantri game. Um, and so they—none of them, none of them want to, what's the word? None of them wanna diversify because they know that there's not quite enough oxygen in the room for—for Glantri to survive and their own personal projects.

James describes a sort of tipping point at which the players have invested enough time and energy into developing and experiencing Eric's world that they refrain from starting other ventures that might threaten its continued existence.

As it turned out, the Glantri campaign had its 200th session on the night I arrived in New York. I carried my luggage on the subway straight from the airport to Cafe 28, where the group meets on a weekly basis. The store is of a type common in the city, a sort of combination convenience store and deli, often with a mezzanine seating area overlooking the main floor. The semi-public nature of the mezzanine shapes the experience of gaming there, as compared to the more common practice of playing at a member's (often the dungeon master's) home. While signs posted among the tables forbid using the space for too long, the management generally tolerates the gamers' presence as long as they make purchases and do not disrupt the other customers. This policy draws not only the New York Red Box group, but other gamers as well. On the night I attended, two other groups played on the mezzanine. One group played the notoriously complicated GURPS (Generic Universal RolePlaying System), while the other played Dungeon World, a game that NYRB founder James Nostack described to me as designed to "explicitly formalize, in a way that story gamers could understand, some of these old school gaming practices" such as sandbox play. The different groups did not interact much, although at one point one of the Dungeon World players wandered over to the

NYRB table and introduced herself, telling us what games her group had been playing (a Call of Cthulhu game set in 1930s Paris, with each player taking the role of a Surrealist artist).

By numbering the sessions, a practice Tavis speculated might come from the comic book fandom of many of the members, the group created a standard for communicating about participation in the game world, such that a player can say "I came in at session 59," or "I haven't played since session 130." It also creates a perception of milestone sessions: both session 100 and the session I attended were viewed as important events in the history of the world. While the dozen or so players got settled in at the tables, one of the long-standing players, Eric Coumbe, went downstairs and returned with a bottle of champagne, leading to a series of toasts:

Eric:	Here's to two hundred sessions of Glantri!
Multiple:	[Here!]
Eric:	Chip, chip, great DMing by our beloved Gwendolyn.
?:	Yes?
Eric:	To, uh, former and future lovers.
Misha:	And many more!
Eric:	To three hundred sessions!
?:	Three hundred sessions! [laughter]
Eric:	May we die with our dice in our hands. ……
?:	Yeah. So I am going to say, while we're all here present. Uh, this campaign has run longer than any campaign I am aware of. Here or in the fabulous day, uh, when I was a kid we played AD&D for a while but not this long. We never played Call of Cthulhu this long. And. So this is the longest campaign I've ever been a part of and I have enjoyed every minute of it. More or less. [laughter]
?:	We have had plenty of [unclear]. Uh, in the last two hundred sessions, but we have overcome them all. And despite the fact that everyone else thinks we're insane, we continue to play this horrible, fatal, dangerous game. Because we are true role-players all. [laughter]
?:	And I salute everyone here.

It is notable that the players refer to the campaign as "Glantri," because this follows an old tradition of naming a campaign after the world which the game explores (or a notable location therein) rather than after the characters or the plot. As Old-School Renaissance (OSR) blogger James Maliszewski recalls from his youth, "You didn't ask your friends, Hey, you want to go over to Bob's place and play *D&D* tonight?" You said, "Hey, you want to go over to Bob's place and play in his *Everwhen* campaign tonight?" (2011). Gary Gygax's campaign was titled Greyhawk, Dave Arneson's Blackmoor, and so on. This practice highlights the centrality of experiencing the imaginary world as a high-ranking goal among groups like NYRB, marking a distinctive stance toward imagined worlds that becomes more apparent when looking at both how Glantri is played and how the players reflect on their experiences of the game. Before considering this in more detail, however, I will introduce the second of the long-running campaigns that I encountered in the Northeast.

FoJ Is Fond of Justice

Roughly one hundred miles northeast of New York City, the town of Portland, Connecticut, sits across the Connecticut River from Middletown, home of Wesleyan University. In the sort of curious twist that only occurs in worlds which, like ours, have long-established histories, most of the Brownstone buildings I passed on my way to the NYRB game have their origin in the Portland Brownstone Quarries. The fact that the proto-D&D game of *Braunstein* (i.e., Brownstone) connects the two campaigns with a fictional version of the same substance must, again, be relegated to the overwhelming accumulation of serendipitous connections that occurs when humans dwell in a world for any notable length of time. Yet when these connections present themselves, we find a tendency toward wonder, as the narrator of P.T. Anderson's film *Magnolia* expresses after relating a series of surprising coincidences in a murder case:

> And it is in the humble opinion of this narrator … that this is not just "something that happened." This cannot be "one of those things." This, please, cannot be that.
>
> And for what I would like to say, I can't. This was not just a matter of chance. These strange things happen all the time.

This impulse toward wonder at chance events depends in part on what Heidegger might call a "rich world," one saturated with potentially

meaningful details. Over the course of eighteen years (four years of diegetic time), Jon Johnson's Greyhawk campaign has developed more of those details than most imaginary worlds, whether gaming or other media. Spending eighteen years of real time to cover four years of diegetic time means that on average the players have spent four and a half years experiencing each diegetic year.

Jon Johnson, the dungeon master of this old-enough-to-vote campaign, ran my first game session at Gary Con, drawing on characters from his home game as templates for the convention's stand-alone adventure. The degree to which these characters are concrete to Jon was apparent when he was able to spontaneously generate their statistics and characteristics after realizing he did not have character sheets for the game. Because of this I already knew a few snippets about Jon's version of Greyhawk before I arrived at his house, affectionately called Hovel House, for a game session. A small white wooden home less than a hundred meters from the old quarry, Hovel House has been in John's family since the 1960s. Despite the chill of that November evening, the group decided to play in the garage, heated by a space heater, rather than cram the ten players into the small dining room.

A large color map of the world of Greyhawk provided a backdrop to their gaming space in the garage. Whereas the Glantri session I observed was significant in the sense of being the 200th session, the FoJ do not number their sessions, and this evening was only one unmarked stretch of dwelling in the world. The group was in the process of seeking a legendary artifact that appears in many D&D worlds: the Rod of Seven Parts. The Rod, first introduced in the 1976 supplement *Eldritch Wizardry*, has accumulated lore around itself in the years that followed (Williams 1995, p. 67). Although the artifact's origin in the great battle of Pesh between the forces of Chaos and Law falls outside our present interests, the status of the Rod as an artifact can provide insight into the nature of the imagined world the FoJ players explore. In traditional *D&D* terminology, an artifact is a "singular thing of potent powers," with the emphasis on "singular" (Gygax 1979, p. 155). Despite its proliferation across many imagined worlds, there is only one Rod of Seven Parts. As Gygax put it, "regardless of how any of these items [artifacts] come into your campaign, only 1 of each may exist" (1979, p. 155). The presumption, then, is that this Rod, broken by the forces of Chaos into seven parts, has traveled across the multiverse of imagined worlds to

reside in the version of Greyhawk represented in Jon's campaign, just as it has in many other worlds.

By drawing the Rod into his campaign according to its established characteristics, he further connects his world to the many variants of Greyhawk that have developed through individual campaigns since Gygax first created the world in the early seventies. It is also important to note, when considering the sort of world in which these players dwell, that the FoJ was not destined to find the Rod, nor did it seek them out. The Rod is simply understood to exist, and the FoJ happened to find it. Even though, non-diegetically, Jon introduced the Rod because he thought it would be an interesting item to encounter, this is not understood to translate into a diegetic sense of destiny for the characters who seek the other parts, and the players could easily have left the Rod and turned to other parts of the world. As Brian, one of the most long-standing FoJ members, put it:

> I do not like a game where the entire world revolves around the actions of the characters. I prefer a more sandbox world where the world—there's gears spinning, and the party is the people who either fix the broken gears or break gears. And that the world would continue if the entire party was dead. And, like, we're making a mark on the world.

The Rod, then, is one of the broken gears of the world, and the FoJ decided to put it back together. But what Brian suggests is that his primary goal is not to obtain the Rod, but to see a world of moving parts that operate apart from his agency and then to act on those parts, to make a mark on the world. Both aspects of this goal, to experience the spinning gears and to influence them, gain potency as the campaign gains longevity. Again, Brian discusses this: "It just seems like we've done a lot of world-building, and just because we're tired of this section of the world doesn't mean we should throw away, like, eighteen years of like, actually historical narrative. Because it gives us so many things to think of."

This accumulation of details leads to what Wolf describes as "conceptual immersion," which depends on sufficient detail and description for the reader to vicariously enter the imagined world" (2012, p. 48). This is a markedly different form of immersion than, for example, the character immersion discussed by RPG scholars Pohjola (2004) and Bowman (2015). Character immersion falls much closer to method acting, and

"involves embodying lifelike performances by creating in the self the feelings and thoughts of the character" (Bowman 2015). Conceptual immersion, on the other hand, is always tied to a *world* rather than a character, depending on the combination of what Cover (2010, p. 107) calls spatial and temporal immersion and placing it closest in RPG studies to what Bowman calls "immersion into environment," "exploring the difference aspects of an alternate game world" (2018, p. 384). I use Wolf's term here only to better connect with his thinking on the concept of "absorption" later in the chapter. Knowledge about characters may form a part of the conceptual immersion, and often leads to affective experiences, but those affects are distinctly different from the affective state of the characters in the world. Both types of immersion fall under what Ermi and Mäyrä (2005) describe as imaginative immersion, "this dimension of game experience in which one becomes absorbed with the stories and the world, or begins to feel for or identify with a game character" (2005, p. 8; cf. White et al. 2012). The fact that players in both FoJ and Glantri tend to pursue conceptual immersion over character immersion helps to explain many of the quirks of the play style they represent, such as how common it is for characters, even beloved ones, to die.

What Kind of a World Is This?

One of the most infamous features of old-school-style campaigns is a high level of character mortality. One OSR game, *Dungeon Crawl Classics RPG*, for example, gives each new player a roster of four 0-level (i.e., completely mundane) characters, stating that "it is expected that each player will lose some or most of his characters. When mere peasants and yeomen explore deadly dungeons, a high mortality rate is a matter of course. By the end of the first game, the players will be left with a motley crew of survivors" (Goodman 2012, p. 16). Similarly, both Glantri and FoJ maintain minor memorials for deceased characters, with Glantri's death toll reaching over sixty deceased at last count. One of the FoJ members has even designed a T-shirt that reads "Hovelhouse: where good characters go to die." While this level of character mortality can impede character immersion, it can also enhance conceptual immersion and shape the nature of the world as experienced by the players.

Although some players, like James, find the imminent threat of mortality "profoundly unfun," other players in both campaigns embrace it. Pete,

whose character nearly suffered an ignominious death in the infamous Glantri session 100, says that DM Eric Minton "keeps, like the lanes pretty tight. But again, that creates stakes … It's always—if you're not on your shit you'll die. And he has no qualms." Speaking from the perspective of the FoJ campaign, Brian agrees: "I don't like games which elevate the characters to—like, from first level you are a mythical hero and that everything you do is gold and everything should come up roses. I do prefer a little bit of difficulty, sometimes unfair difficulty, in interactions." Back in New York, Eric suggested that this approach requires the development of a trained mode of engaging with the world, one that not all players desire:

> I kinda—role-played so much, I know you shouldn't get too attached to the character … Like, my character Roland, he's fun to play and I like that character, but if he dies, okay, you know? I won't get, like, all freaked out about it, like I might have when I was, like fifteen … So I started up a Labyrinth Lord campaign, right? Now, the problem was that I was running it, like, old school, right? Where people were fucking dying. Like, skeleton comes and stabs you in the heart, you're dead. And everybody's like, AHH, oh my God. [Laughs] I'm like this is how I've been playing—like, this is how I understand D&D, you know? People die and then they, like—characters die and then they—the hardcore ones, they continue to advance. I don't think that was the style everybody wanted to play.

Eric has even rebelled against the narrative invulnerability of his character in campaigns that did not embrace the level of mortality he desired, putting his character in increasingly dangerous situations that he should not survive. In doing so, he rebels not so much against the survival of his character but at the nature of the world in which he finds his character. Reflecting on the nature of the world implied in the rules of Red Box *D&D*, James highlights the riskiness of character immersion when dealing with such a world:

> What kind of world is this where these things are even allowed to exist? It's like, this is a game that's designed to screw you, um, repeatedly. And the minute you forget that, the minute you spent twenty hours playing your guy and you're like, gee I kinda like my guy, I have a crush on this imaginary character, I hope he doesn't encounter any damn killer bees. In fact the idea of encountering killer bees is so upsetting that I'm going to suppress the knowledge that they're out there, that's when you run into the damn phase spiders, they kill you that way.

James's question "what kind of world is this?" represents one of the key questions explored in both the Glantri and FoJ campaigns. The true protagonist of the campaign, in other words, is not any particular character but the world itself. As James says:

> When you begin playing, your character is just a whole bunch of numbers. You have no emotional attachment to this guy at all … Once you've invested hundreds of hours of play into this guy he stops being a bunch of numbers. He's a—a personality, an asset, you know, an aspect of your personality. And what happens is, Dungeons & Dragons remains a game that doesn't give a shit about that. And what it means is that you're not really telling the story of this character. You THINK you are. You've invested hundreds of hours of doing this and developing the narrative of who this guy is and what he wants to do and why he's doing what he does. But fundamentally he is just, you know, doing something insanely dangerous and could die at any moment.

Again, James tends to view this as undesirable, while other players seek it out. Brian, for example agrees with James's diagnosis of *D&D* not caring about his character, but finds in that a reflection of his understanding of the world and the dangers of viewing himself as the protagonist in his own life:

> Personally, [pause] the concept of, like, being the hero in a narrative is one that I've come across in my own life. And it's become apparent to me that if I live my life by the concept that I'm the protagonist of a narrative. That's a horrible way to live my life. Um. Things don't happen for reasons. There's not a lot of control. And I find as the—the default narratives of how people live are shaped by popular media … Like, reality TV shows have shaped the individual narratives in quite a way. So that people, I think, are acting outrageously because they're adopting they're adopting their own personal narrative off of the media narratives of individual lives and how lives should be led. Lives full of artificially inflated drama, of making scenes in public places, of acting inappropriately, simply because that's what shown to them as media representations … How does this—how does me acting in this way, according to a script that says I should react upset and unreasonable because that makes perfect literary sense in the narrative … No. That's not how—there's no rules for that. So I try not to live like that in my life, and I don't necessarily enforce that on my game either … I prefer my game states to be neutral. Like neither for nor against my PC. Clearly the world is not [laughs] neutral. Cuz the world is not necessarily hostile. I think that the world is apathetic to an individual's plight in the world. Now other humans around

> you, or even the animals, might be very empathetic or sympathetic and wish you well or be actively against you. But, you know, the world is a huge conglomeration of [laughs] unspeakable distances. And of things that are well beyond our comprehension. And I really don't think the world gives a shit. [Laughs]

While not all players share Brian's understanding of the cosmos as apathetic, the style of long-term, world-centered play in both Glantri and FoJ tends to bring the imaginary worlds (whatever their stance toward humanity might be) to the foreground of the players' experiences. Even the mortality rate works toward this end, creating a sense of innumerable self-presumed protagonists entering and leaving the world, which remains, slowly growing through this backdrop of characters. As author George R. Stewart (2006) references in the title to his post-apocalyptic novel, in answer to the question "What is man?" "Men go and come, but Earth abides." (Stover 1973, p. 472; Ecclesiastes 1:4)

While Earth may merely abide, Oerth (the planet on which Greyhawk is located) grows over time. It does so through an accumulation of details. Each new character introduced, each event adds to the world the players experience. The NYRB players have documented much of the growth of their world through a wiki, which includes hundreds of pages of information about Glantri. The site even visualizes the growth of the world through animated images documenting the character's increasing knowledge of Chateau d'Ambreville, the "tentpole" megadungeon which holds up the campaign (Fig. 5.1). This world growth contributes to what Wolf, building on the liquid metaphor of conceptual *immersion*, calls "absorption," a two-way process in which the attention is not only immersed in the imaginary world, but "the user also 'absorbs' the imaginary world as well, bringing it into mind, learning or recalling its places, characters, events, and so on, constructing the world in the imagination the same way that that [sic] memory brings forth people, events, and objects when their name is mentioned" (2012, p. 49).

After a certain point, no individual can hold all of these absorbed details in their experience. Wolf describes this as "saturation," "when there are so many secondary world details to keep in mind that one struggles to remember them all while experiencing the world" (2012, p. 49). While Liz's world of Nabonidus IV, discussed in the previous chapter, certainly offered opportunity for absorption, with minimal study I was able to master every known fact about that world (and accidentally invent a few of my

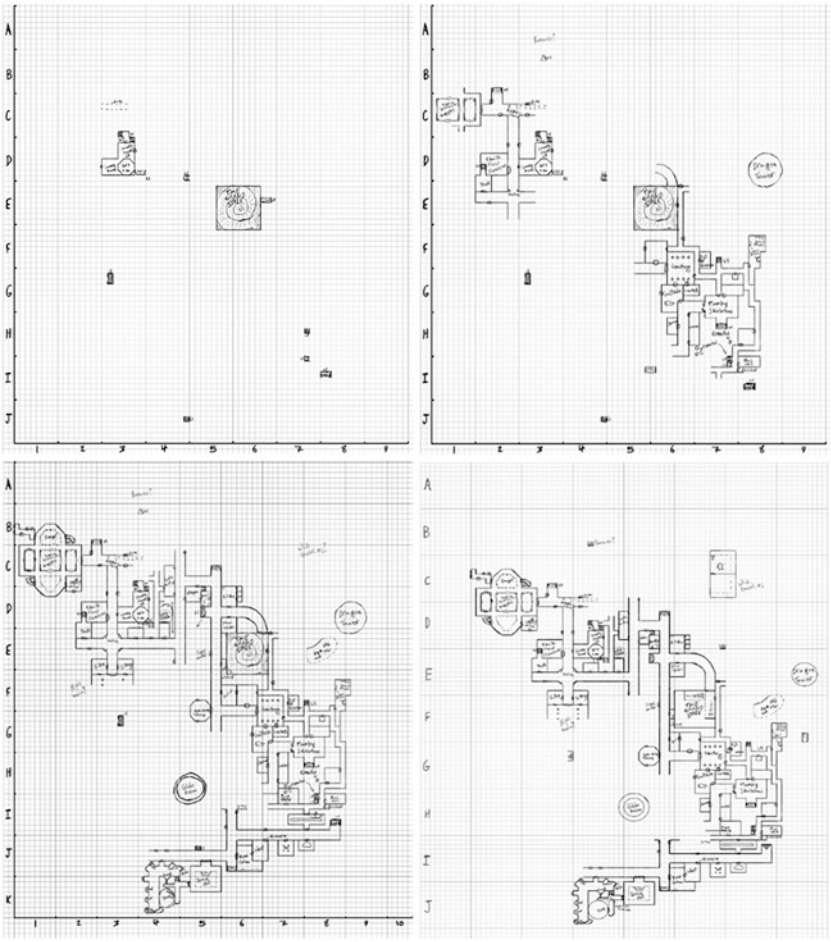

Fig. 5.1 Developing knowledge of the fourth level of Chateau d'Ambreville

own). These long-term campaigns, however, have grown to the point that such mastery is difficult, if not impossible, for an individual player to maintain. Wolf terms this remainder which cannot be held in experience "overflow." With overflow, the imaginary world has grown to the point that it imitates the Primary World, where such inability to hold the totality of the world in one's experience is part of the essence of human being-in-the-

world. "This overflow, beyond point of saturation, is necessary if the world is to be kept alive in the imagination" (Wolf 2012, p. 50).

Managing Leakage

Yet, as we saw in Liz's session, details about the world can easily fade away if not remembered by any of the players. Drawing on Wolf's liquid terminology, we might term this "leakage," overflow not contained in any way and thus lost to experience. With too much leakage, the imaginary world cannot provide the important sense of saturation and overflow, so players seeking that type of experience must develop techniques for preserving the overflow produced over the course of the campaign. The Glantri wiki is one of these techniques, as is the paper calendar that Jon uses to track the passage of time in Greyhawk ("Everybody has a birthday so they age properly and all that kind of stuff," he explained). These techniques are similar to the development of "bibles" for imaginary worlds built through other media such as literature or television, such as the *Star Wars* holocron administered by Leland Chee to maintain continuity of the *Star Wars* universe (Wolf 2012, p. 147).

Techniques of Orality

A second set of worldbuilding techniques to manage leakage follows patterns identified in oral communication by media scholar Walter Ong (1982). Although Ong's designation of "oral cultures" as a label describing a wide variety of human behavior patterns is problematic, this reductionist angle can be avoided if the "psychodynamics of orality" (1982, p. 38) are instead approached as techniques for communicating worlds through primarily oral means. Because much of the creation and cultivation of the imaginary worlds of gaming occurs through speech, and is only later (if ever) recorded in a textual form like the Glantri wiki, these oral techniques prove useful for players needing improvisational access to an expansive body of knowledge about the imaginary world. For example, Ong argues that orality tends toward "aggregative rather than analytic" (1982, p. 38) descriptions of characters and places. Rather than seeking to establish completely unique characters, oral narratives tend toward formulas and epithets such as "brave soldier" or "sturdy oak." The class formulas of *D&D* achieve much of this same purpose, serving as a shorthand for a particular configuration of traits.

For example, when the FoJ players went around the table introducing their characters, most of them led with a statement of their class, perhaps appending one or two notable features. Brian, for example, described his character by saying,

> I'm playing Morton. He's a human illusionist. Uh, playing first edition illusionist so uh, limited spell list. We started off in a small town called Hascort. And instead of trying to be useful Morton actually just summons huge illusions of giant lizards attacking the town and fought them off. Uh, so he could be considered a hero.

By specifying that Morton is a "first edition illusionist," Brian depended on my knowledge of that formula, which largely specifies the sort of actions his character is likely to take in the world. An illusionist often pursues misdirection rather directly confronting obstacles, for example. This connection between formula and action also comes through in the fact that Brian follows up the class designation with a short description of a notable action that Morton has taken, rather than a personality trait. This also fits Ong's description of orality as tending toward human action and "situational, operational frames of reference that are minimally abstract" (1982, p. 49). Rather than explaining that Morton is deceptive and self-aggrandizing, Brian offers a metonymic and memorable action that captures that aspect of the character. While this oral formulaic style may seem to limit originality, it manages leakage, making more of the imaginary world available to experience when players improvisationally interact with the world. It also falls more in line with an understanding of originality as consisting "not in the introduction of new materials, but in fitting the traditional materials effectively into each individual, unique situation and/or audience" (Ong 1982, p. 60).

Division of Imagined Labor

While oral formulas and textual documentation tend to be widespread memory techniques not specific to tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs), the Glantri players also demonstrate another technique more specialized to the cultivation of imaginary worlds through play. Over time the group has developed a division of labor with regard to managing the leakage of details about the imaginary world, with different players taking responsibility for

different sorts of knowledge. When I asked Eric Coumbe, a Glantri player and self-described "stick jockey" who especially enjoys action and combat in his play, what he tends to hold at the front of his play experience, he explained that he focuses on the small details that can enrich the imaginary world:

> So, I guess I'm just like—I'm looking to pay attention to—to some extent I try to pay attention to micro details that Eric is giving out, because I feel like he's that sort of dungeon master, too, and can give out a little detail, and you're like WAIT a minute. Before we continue on in description of all these things, let me ask you about that detail. And then it can potentially, um, it can be a detail or part of the story for the dungeon at large, which I know is important to Misha, or the world at large, which is important to, like, guys like Ben. So while I don't have encyclopedic knowledge of a lot of this other stuff, I feel like I can sort of work the knots out of, um, of the micro details of what Eric is saying. So yeah, that tends to be I guess what I'm paying attention to.

Focusing on small details about the imaginary world, Eric cultivates them through interactions with the dungeon master, at which point they "grow," producing new information about the world. These details can then be connected to broader knowledge about the game world, and different players specialize in making certain types of connections. Misha, the designated mapper for the game, will tend to make spatial connections, while Ben will tend to reference "encyclopedic knowledge" about people and places in the world. An example of this type of detail cultivation and connection came during the session I observed at Cafe 28, when the characters came across the remnants of a battle:

Eric Minton:	And there are dozens of, uh,
?:	Of course there are.
Eric Minton:	of corpses scattered around. They appear to be black, or black with a slight green undertone skinned goblins, shocks of white hair. Uh, some of them are—most of them are like, you know, like three feet tall and spindly. Some of them are more pushing six feet tall. Sort of muscular, broad shoulders but still kind of gangly.

Immediately after this, the players began cultivating the details of the scene, first noting the incongruity between where some recently encountered

characters had described the battle as taking place and where they discovered the bodies:

?: Motherfuckers.
?: They lied to us. They said they were on the fourth level.
?: What is this? The fifth level?
?: This is the fifth level.

By doing this, they multiplied the amount of detail produced through the scene: not only do the players know that this battle occurred, they also gained new information about the characters who gave the party the misinformation, perhaps challenging their trustworthiness. Misha, taking on the specialized role of maintaining spatial information, seeks clarification about the layout of the scene:

Misha:	Can we get away [unclear] Which direction did these goblins come from?
Eric Minton:	Uh, the goblins appear to have, uh, what's your wisdom? Usually six.
Misha:	Eleven!
Eric Minton:	And your intelligence?
Misha:	Twelve! [rolling dice] [pause]
?:	Pretty smart! [unclear]
Eric Minton:	Uh, they appear to have come from the stairway [unclear] from the grand stairs up. [unclear]
?:	Further down?
Eric Minton:	That—you're not sure about that, but it looks—you're on the landing looking into the room. A lot of them look like they were facing away from you. When they went down. So either they came from the stair or they were routed and were all largely stabbed [unclear]. [pause]
?:	So they could've come from the fourth floor.

Misha: Yeah. I mean, there are a lot of night goblins on this level. But there are even more on lower levels. I mean, they live all over on this level. This is actually the level where those [unclear] cities begin. But there are even bigger ones further down.

As the keeper of the maps, Misha was able to place details about the dead goblins into a broader spatial context, making sense of the scene in terms of where he knows the creatures to live and their typical range. This suggests a reconciliation between the otherwise disparate details of the non-player characters (NPCs) describing a battle on the fourth level and the discovery of the corpses on the fifth level: perhaps the battle began above and the goblins fell back to the fifth level, retreating to one of their cities. What they originally encountered as a static detail, the group transformed into a broader sense of a dynamic and interconnected world. Over the course of a long campaign, numerous instances of this type of cultivation accumulate into a saturated experience of Glantri, with the specialized knowledge of each player serving to provide an experience of overflow to others unfamiliar with those details.

We can trace this flow of cultivating labor back toward the source of the world, considering DM Eric Minton as similarly cultivating the accrued details of the world he created. While Eric designed the entire Chateau d'Ambreville, until the players encounter them most of the rooms exist solely as shapes on a map with a sentence or two of description. Eric cannot possibly envision all of the possible connections between the details of over a 1000 rooms, nor does he know in advance how the players will interact with those spaces or even the order in which they will visit them. The rules of the game, to which Eric attempts to hew rather closely, combined with the random outcome of dice rolls specified by the rules, serve as tools he uses in his efforts at cultivation. Combined with the specialization of labor outlined by Eric Coumbe, this suggests an overall flow of labor, with the product being a more fully formed imaginary world (Fig. 5.2). Products of players' labor, such as Misha's maps or Ben's notes, are understood as canonical. Although subject to negotiation with Eric, they generally reflect an established consensus that shapes the development of the game world by managing leakage of some areas more than others.

Following the concept of cultivation, we might consider the world of Glantri as a sort of co-op garden. In creating the world, Eric Minton

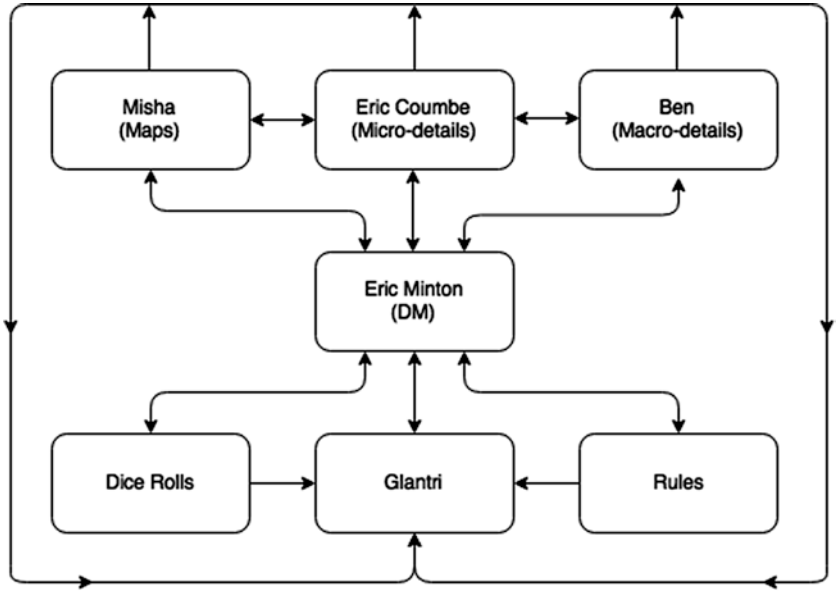

Fig. 5.2 Flow of labor in the Glantri campaign

staked out the territory of the world, tilled its soil, and planted a number of seeds. Different players take on the tending of various aspects of the garden, often encouraging growth in directions different from what Eric might have initially envisioned. Different players have different interests in cultivation: Eric Coumbe, for example, acknowledges the necessity of Misha's mapping labor but does not find it particularly interesting. The uniting factor in their labor is not any particular play agenda represented in the specialized world-cultivating labor, but in a shared stance toward the imaginary world as something which can be cultivated and experienced as having a concrete shape.

It's a Real Thing

This mode of experiencing an imaginary world emphasizes its independence from the individuals who interact with it through the game, as Brian's reference to "spinning gears" suggests. James described one of the central tenets of the OSR as:

> Here's this environment. Here are—here are these things that are going on in the world regardless of what you fucking care about. Um, as—as individuals. This is the world. And the world is gonna react honestly to what you're doing. And regardless of whether or not you pay any attention to it. It's still out there. It's a real thing.

In players' experiences of the game, aspects of the imagined world exist regardless of any individual player's attention, in part because of the phenomena of saturation and overflow. This concreteness also depends on the collaborative experience, because if no one involved in the game pays attention to an aspect of the world it does in fact pass away through leakage. Although to some extent this is true of our experience of the Primary World, because of our embodiment the world can often intrude on our experience regardless of our attention, as someone backing up to take a picture might trip over an unseen log. The log here presents overflow, details about the world not actively held in experience but still concretely present. Because tabletop players are never fully embodied in the imaginary world, it is more susceptible to the leakage of basic aspects of experience. If everyone at the table forgets about the log, it cannot trip anyone. If players do not use miniatures, as is often the case, it becomes notoriously easy to put more people in a space than the space can actually hold, at least until someone (often the dungeon master) draws the group's attention toward those limits. What one person experiences as a direction of attention toward a concrete detail, another experiences as overflow, a concrete aspect of the imaginary world thrust on them without being intentionally called to experience. The gaming group, then, serves as an extended intersubjective embodiment into the other world. Pete described how the creative efforts of other players hold the Glantri campaign together, whether we take "campaign" to mean the imaginary world or the social collection of gamers:

> I think that part of what keeps it together—a big part of it's just Minton, you know, that his—his—this—his—version of Glantri, his megadungeon, the time he puts into it, the thought he put into it, just creates this really immersive world. And that's supported by all these other great players that we have. You know, we have Chris Haggerty, who's [unclear] is this amazing visual artist, did a 3D rendering with a fly around of the chateau. We have Dave and Ben who are creat—really creative writers. [Unclear] We have a wiki that James put up, so it's all linked in this way that it feels really solid. And it just feels like even if you step away from it [unclear] You can come

> back, it feels like—it feels like it's still going even though you're not there, you know? In a way that kind of a d—I mean, I think that's kind of a dream for a campaign, is that persistence and concreteness. For me at least. I think that—that's a big part of it.

The ability to "step away" from the world, come back, and find that things have changed is another important facet of both Glantri and FoJ. Both groups experience notable turnover in player composition relative to other campaigns, particularly shorter ones. Many groups only consist of four to six players who are present at every sessions, and if one or two of those players are unable to come then the game is likely to be postponed. Glantri and FoJ, however, have a pool of players at least twice the number of players present on any given night. Depending on who is able to attend, there might be anywhere from two (on a slow night) to fourteen (at the 200th session). Although there is a regular core contingent that is almost always present, other players come less frequently. Even regulars may be forced to "step away," from the game for a time, as when James's Bar exam preparations put his playing on hiatus. Others, like FoJ member Jason Azze, move away but still return to the game periodically. These missed sessions create further opportunities for the experience of overflowed material: since few players attend every session, there are numerous opportunities to learn new facts about the world that others have retained. For Pete, this provides a sense of "persistence and concreteness" that he describes as "a dream for a campaign."

Responsibly and Accurately

Because Pete and the other Glantri players seek conceptual saturation in a concrete, long-term imagined world, they encourage one another "to play the world responsibly and accurately," as James put it. This connects with Liz's concept of the "otherworldy and judicious" dungeon master who plays as the asteroid. It is also suggestive of the original title for dungeon master, "referee," used in the original 1974 release of *D&D* and inherited from the "free" *kriegsspiel* tradition (Gygax and Arneson 1974, p. 3ff; Peterson 2012, p. 59). The role came to American wargaming through Twin Cities gamer David A. Wesely, who rediscovered it in one of the earliest American wargames, one which predates even Wells's *Little Wars*: *Strategos* (Peterson 2012, pp. 58–59). As creator Charles A.L. Totten put it, in *Strategos*:

> The office of Referee should be regarded, not so much in the light of an adviser, as of an *arbiter*. He should bear in mind the principle that *anything can be attempted*. The *advisability* of an attempt is another thing, and one that it is the object of the War Game to make evident to all concerned by results. (Quoted in Peterson 2012, p. 59)

In order to "play the world responsibly and accurately," the dungeon master must not overrule the players' interactions with the world, but must attempt to accurately represent the outcomes of those actions. Players in both Glantri and FoJ expect and appreciate this from their dungeon masters. Brian describes Jon's style as a DM in these terms:

> I mean, he lets characters do what you wanna do. So he's very permissive of your declaration of intent. He'll simply punish you if your actions merit punishment. And not just by arbitrary, you've done something—if you kill a major plot point—if you—if you decide to eliminate an NPC. Or if you decide to do something truly creative to disrupt the game state, he doesn't take offense to that. Um, and so he won't necessarily punish you if there's no obvious ramifications that, like, merit punishment. But if, you know, you walk in and you start a bar fight, you know, and there's an obvious consequence. So he does enforce consequences, which is nice.

Playing as the world means enforcing the consequences of players' actions, and not doing so is understood as behaving irresponsibly toward the world, even when playing fast and loose might present perceived short-term gains in narrative logic. At times this involves making rulings about mundane details which, if conceptual saturation is to be sustained, must limit the characters' actions in the imaginary world in much the same way they limit our own actions. Jon, for example, had to determine how much air existed within a bag of holding in his campaign. Bags of holding are coveted objects in many *D&D* worlds because they can hold vastly more contents than their exteriors suggest. This provides a way for characters to circumvent some mundane limitations, but also raises new limitations (as do most alterations of what Wolf [2012, p. 32] calls "Primary World defaults"):

Nick: Greg said they were trying to make a town inside one of them? [Laughs]

Jon: Yeah. Yeah, it was [unclear]. I don't do that kind of stuff. You really can't. We had to—I went and researched, like, everybody's opinion on if—how much air is in there, and how long a person can …

Nick: Yeah. Cuz some people say that there's like—there's no air. You can't go in there.
Jon: I—I say there is air in there but it's limited. It's very limited.

Jon's sense of obligation to the imagined world comes through in that, rather than make a snap decision, he researched various opinions about and manifestations of bags of holding, weighing the options and making a ruling based on what fits their campaign. This follows a general approach laid out by Gygax in his *Dungeon Master's Guide*, wherein *D&D* worlds are understood to be "parallel," and at times connected, to more established imaginary worlds, which can provide a guide to dungeon masters: "How much rationalization can actually go into a fantasy game? There is some, at least, as you will see, for it the game is fantasy, there is a basis for much of what is contained herein, even though it be firmly grounded on worlds of make-believe" (Gygax 1979, p. 9).

At times, as with the example of the bag of holding, the process works from world details to rules, with the latter adapted to the former. Other times, as Pete pointed out to me, the process works the other way, with seemingly arbitrary rules shaping details about the world:

> The best rules are ones, you know, that you can kind of subsume into that assumption—into the world. Sort of like, kinda like, it's kind of a weird example, but one that Tavis likes to talk about is that in one of his sessions—in D&D coins are notoriously heavy. You can carry three hundred coins or whatever. Six hundred. I can carry way more coins than that!

Traditional guidelines for worldbuilding can also enforce a level of mundanity that enhances conceptual saturation. As discussed in Chap. 3, two-thirds of all rooms in a traditional dungeon are "empty," in the sense that they contain no monsters or significant encounters. James Maliszewski has stated that in his own campaign, designed around similar principles to both FoJ and Glantri, it is "often the 'empty' rooms that are the most memorable, as it's here that the players, through their characters, interact most immediately with the game world," and also argues that these rooms help to build the "tension and mystery vital to the long-term success of a campaign" (2010). In the Glantri game, this means that the players have sometimes gone weeks without making significant new discoveries in Chateau d'Ambreville. While in a shorter campaign this lull might encompass the entire experience of the world, in a longer game this can help to

further emphasize the points of interest in the world and aid in conceptual saturation by mirroring our experiences in the Primary World, as Eric notes:

> We've had stretches, three, four weeks where you go into the dungeon, you look around, and you don't find shit, you know? … Well, I am an old person, as I mentioned, at forty-one years old, so, uh, I feel I've learned the lesson, like, because if everything was super adventurous and exciting, then nothing would be, you know? … you know, it's a little bit like—[pause] It's like life, Nick! [laughs] And that sometimes you have to go work and sometimes you go to Utah and you snowboard down whatever mountain they've got there.

The Unlucky Thirteen

Perhaps nowhere has the Glantri campaign tested the limits of playing the world responsibly and accurately as in their hundredth session. That session formed a recurring topic of discussion during session 200 as a sort of war story told by seasoned veterans. Titled "The Unlucky Thirteen," the Glantri wiki entry summarizing the session begins by imagining Roland Wolfric, Eric Coumbe's character whose full title is Lord Zanzibar, High Cavalier of the Ouestmarche, Knight-Consort of the House de Marais, Commander of the Company of Crossed Swords, and Sword Prince of Neutrality, reflecting on the adventure while in his cups:

> Evangelista de Sylaire?! Speak to me not of Evangelista de Sylaire!" thundered Roland, already three-deep in cups of wine. He shooed the man away and returned to his brooding. He had seen good men die due to the whims of the sorceress, and was in no mood to bandy words regarding her merit. A conniving, manipulative harlot, he thought. Deserving more of a blade to the heart than the effects of her mother, Phoebe d'Ambreville. He cursed her and silently recalled the details … ("G100: The Unlucky Thirteen" 2011)

Despite Roland's dire mood afterward, the session began with significant fanfare. At the time, Pete worked for the video game company Atari, and secured the use of a conference room at the Atari offices for the evening so that the players would have special surroundings for the notable session. Players who had not attended in some time, like James, reappeared to participate. As James recalled, "We spent the first, probably hour and a half congratulating each other on what wonderful people we were to commit to this, to have such a wonderful community, we all talked about

favorite memories from the game, uh, we had this great thing going on." This festival nature was mirrored in the game world, where a grand feast drew prodigal characters back into the fold for another adventure. Soon, however, the mood would turn sour. The problems stemmed from conflict between the lighthearted nature of the social setting and the seriousness with which the group's established practices treated the world:

> Eric has an NPC who gives us a quest. With very, very specific instructions. [Pause]. Nobody writes those instructions down. [Pause]. I should point out for any readers that—that aren't familiar with Eric's game—he has designed a dungeon with about a thousand rooms. It is thirteen floors deep. Uh, if you don't write down the instructions on where you're supposed to go and why, um, bad things will happen … One of the defining features of Eric as a GM is that—that you can't get away with saying, well of course my character would write this stuff down, right? I don't need to write it down at the table, Eric. Because my character's not a moron and he would write this down as you're telling us. And Eric's attitude about that is well, no, you didn't do it, you know, you should do it. Um, which is perfectly fine, but it's not the call that I would make. And to, uh, to badmouth the players in the gentlest and most loving way possible, they know this! [Laughs] They spent a hundred sessions doing this.

As they descended into the dungeon, deeper than anyone had ever ventured, the party ran up against another hard edge of the imagined world: random encounters. Every other turn, which represents ten minutes of diegetic time, the old-school referee is expected to roll a six-sided die. A result of one indicates that the party has encountered something wandering through the dungeon, with the specifics of which creatures, how many, and their hostility or friendliness also determined by dice rolls. In this case, they encountered a group of phase spiders, which James describes as "a large arachnid the size of a—of a golden retriever that can go—walk in between dimensions, so they can walk through walls. They can teleport out of the way if you try to hit them. If they bite you have, I don't know, something like an eighty percent chance to die right there." As the session summary tells it, "Encountering a web-filled corridor, our heroes were assailed by ghostly phase spiders, one of which sunk its deadly fangs into Martin Le Noir, its poison sending him to an early grave." ("G100: The Unlucky Thirteen" 2011).

In the boardroom, this grizzly outcome depended on a strict adherence to the group's rules about how they interact with the imagined world. By

what James calls "table convention," when the group uses miniatures the physical representation trumps verbal description. Although Martin's player, Pete, described his character as moving away from the spiders, he did not move the figure and was left vulnerable to their deadly bite. Eric Minton takes his responsibility to represent the possibility of character death very seriously, and roughly a year before the spider attack he faced a similar situation with Martin. In that case, the enemy was a giant scorpion that similarly threatened the character with deadly poison:

> In last night's game, while the party was fleeing a horse-sized giant scorpion, stalwart party member Martin "le Black" held the back of the line to give the others time to flee up a stairway. His player asked me if he could get some bonuses to AC for fighting purely defensively, having the high ground, and being better able than the giant scorpion to maneuver through the close confines of the rubble-choked stair. "Sure," I said. But it was late and I was tired, and I didn't actually determine what the modifiers would be. I just rolled the dice.
>
> The attack roll for the giant scorpion's stinger was a 19. Was this a hit? I didn't know. Probably it should have hit—almost certainly, really—but that was meaningless when I was deciding on the modifiers after the fact. If I'd chosen the modifiers beforehand, this would be letting the dice fall where they may. Now, however, it was pure DM fiat either way.
>
> I thought for a moment. If the attack hit and Martin blew his poison save, I'd be killing a PC by fiat. If the attack missed, I'd be going soft on my players, and that's a violation of social contract; the old school DM must be harsh but fair, and this would undermine that crucial harshness. (Minton 2010)

In that instance Eric ruled that the scorpion attacked Martin but failed to land a blow with its stinger, allowing him to avoid the poison. In session 100, however, pulling punches for the phase spider would have threatened the concreteness of the game world and the group's means of interacting with it through the miniatures. Martin succumbed to the poison, and one of his comrades rushed him out of the dungeon "with the faint hope of having the Church of Trianomma revive his friend" ("G100: The Unlucky Thirteen" 2011). Pete's character was indeed later revived, and he discussed the loss with some resignation: "Save or die poison is a motherfucker. And on some level that's one of those things that breaks immersion on some level. Because your character dies … A real slap to the back of the head. Woah! It's like one hit, one attack, and you're dead … A little frustrating.

But you know, it happens." Whereas James viewed this as a problematic encounter and Pete acknowledged that it broke character immersion, Pete also seems to view the outcome as a necessary condition of experiencing an imaginary world with real consequences. For Eric, who was relatively new to the campaign at that point, the death raised immersion: "It was cool in that, again, this was like, a session where there was a lot at stake." It also contributed to the unexpected outcome of the session, which was that Eric and Misha, who was also then a rookie on the team, came to the foreground in helping the party find their way once they had gotten lost.

The problem with getting lost in the Chateau d'Ambreville is that Glantri follows a rule which holds that the characters should leave the dungeon by the end of the session. James described this rule as having been adapted "from other websites that talk about this," such as Maliszewski's *Grognardia*, where he discusses "The Rhythm of the Old School" created by this process. The session with Ernie Gygax back at Gary Con had that rhythm a there-and-back-again journey with increasing tempo and stress as time and resources ran short. One commenter on Maliszewski's post stated that his campaign had "organically" developed that same rhythm, one which he said "feels more 'right' or more 'real,'" suggesting that the rule supports a sense of conceptual immersion for those that prefer it (Maliszewski 2009). The tendency of old-school games toward this in-and-out rhythm derives from the limited resources of the party: once hit points, spells, or light sources begin to run low, the group often prefers to retreat to relative safety and mount another expedition. Nostack also cites other reasons, tied to conceptual immersion, for enforcing the pattern as a rule: "If you've got people who are showing up irregularly, you don't wanna have like a, a storytelling gap or a discontinuity there between this character was here last night, or, you know, five minutes of game time ago, who suddenly disappears, right? It's a hard thing to reconcile."

Knowing this rule, as James said, the party pressed on until late in the evening: "It was like one in the morning at this conference room, and everybody's got work the next day, and just as the characters are trapped in the dungeon with horrible monsters the players are trapped in the conference room with Eric [laughs]." This began to strain both the characters and players to their limits, as Eric Coumbe related to me:

Eric: At some point in session 100 it had gotten to the point, Marten had been killed, more or less. Robert had been killed more or less. It was like, green slime fucking everywhere, you know? And it was just become like a huge shit show. And I think Ben who

was playing Cut Coutelain the Halfling was mapping. And at one point he —essentially just, like, sat down in the middle of the dungeon and was like, fuck this, man. Let's just sit here and DIE. [Laughs]

Nick: Dave had—James said Dave had some, like, breakdown moments, too.

Eric: Yeah. Yeah. It was like, a number of people, like broke down, and were like, fuck this, fucking sucks. And they just—they just sort of like dis—they disassociated with what was going on, right? So that had star—people were dying, people were disassociating—so it was a bad scene, to some extent in and out of game.

While it might seem that a game session that included, as James described it, "a grown man, older than I am, so you know, in his early forties, crying over the situation that they're in," should be judged a failure, the story bears a remarkable similarity to a type of experience regularly sought in other styles of games, particularly the style known as "Jeepform." These games combine aspects of tabletop gaming and live action role-playing, but one of their most distinctive features is that Jeepform players often seek an experience known as "bleed." This refers not to violence but to the "bleeding" of emotions between player and character; in other words, bleed emerges at the deeper levels of character immersion. While these emotions need not be negative, many Jeepform games deal with emotionally difficult content. One NerdNYC member, Natalia, told me that she greatly enjoyed a game in which all of the players took on roles as members of a bereaved parent support group: "It's awesome. Because you get to really live out and experience someone that is totally different from you. But also has distinct similarities." While the Glantri players did not set out with the intention of experiencing the bleeding of despair from their characters to themselves, by holding to the goal of conceptual immersion, of representing the dungeon "responsibly and accurately," they also experienced a deep level of character immersion. As Eric explained, this ostensibly negative experience also created a unique opportunity:

> It was myself and Misha, who had not yet begun, at this point, he hadn't undertaken becoming the full mapper yet. Because I was low level I was, like, paying attention to what was going on … In an old school game if you're low level the best thing to do is pay attention to what the DM is saying … so I was paying attention to how we got down here, right? So myself and Misha, we're like, okay, woah woah woah, everybody. It's getting a little

> bit nuts in here. Let's just try to get out of here. And from memory—it was essentially from memory, Misha and myself, kind of stood up, there's a white board, we stood up, we started mapping out, okay, this is what the room looks like, we're gonna go here, take a left. Okay, now what's there, you know? And we essentially were able to guide the party out of this horrible nightmare. And that was like the first time I'd kinda taken a leadership role in the party so for me that was like the cool experience, like I felt like I had finally, as a member of the group—in and out of game—I'd kinda come into my own a little bit in session 100.

While it would be possible to plan a game session that dealt with the terror of being lost in a subterranean labyrinth, watching your friends die, and finally escaping by sheer force of will, to plan such a story in advance would remove the essential unexpectedness and uncertainty from the experience. Instead, the FoJ and NYRB players have cultivated a world in which such stories can emerge apart from any players' decision to intentionally draw them forth. This element of the unknown depends on cultivating and respecting the concreteness of the imagined world, rather than bending it to meet other goals the players might have.

Imaginative Dwelling

This dictum to treat the world "responsibly and accurately" resembles Heidegger's (1993) conception of dwelling, the human way of being-in-the-world. "The fundamental character of dwelling," he states, is "to remain at peace within … the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its essence" (1993, p. 351). As David Farrell Krell argues, this mode of experience comes to the fore in art, "where we are less disposed to manipulate things or reduce them to our own technical-scientific, quantitative frames of reference; we are encouraged rather to let things be what they are and show their many-sidedness" (1993, p. 344). As an art form, RPGs turn part of that expectation on its head, in that just as the games use rationalization to produce enchantment, so do they draw "quantitative frames of reference" up into the "many-sidedness of the [imagined] thing." Just as the human dwelling in the Primary World does so by leaving it "beforehand to its own essence" (Heidegger 1993, p. 351), so do the players in these games seek to dwell in the imagined world by allowing it to disclose itself over extended periods of time.

Like our dwelling in the Primary World, this imaginative dwelling is active rather than passive. "We attain to dwelling, so it seems, only by means of building," claims Heidegger, and to his examples of building bridges and houses we can add the building of imaginary worlds (1993, p. 347). Understanding the Glantri and FoJ players as worldbuilders who dwell in the imaginary worlds they have constructed helps to explain why the type of campaign they represent is sometimes criticized as lacking complex story. Although many rich stories have emerged from their play, building and dwelling in the imaginary world tends to come first, with the stories emergent from that dwelling. We could say of these players the same thing that movie reviewer Louis Kennedy said of the creators of *The Matrix* franchise, Lana and Andy Wachowski: "We should not fall into the trap of calling them bad storytellers. They aren't storytellers at all. They are worldmakers" (2003).

Extended campaigns like FoJ or Glantri represent a gradual dwelling in the secondary world, worked not by farming or mining but by gaming. Further, the means of their dwelling in those worlds encompasses both modes of building discussed by Heidegger, "building as the raising up of edifices" and "building as cultivating" (1993, p. 349). The initial formulation of the world by the DM, the construction of its dungeons, wilderness, and towns, forms the initial movement of dwelling in the new world. This aspect of dwelling does not depend on long stretches of time, and even shorter-lived campaigns such as Nabonidus IV exhibit this mode of dwelling. Just as in the construction of a building, the construction of a world may take a day or span multiple years, but unlike a building, as Doležel (1998) has noted, a secondary world is by necessity perpetually incomplete. It is in building-as-cultivation that a long campaign demonstrates the unique mode of imaginative dwelling afforded to the players. Heidegger describes this mode of being/dwelling/building as "to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for," a description which matches the language of responsibility and preservation employed by the players in these two campaigns (1993, p. 349). Whether through Eric's encouraging the growth of small details into larger things, Misha's tending of the dungeon maps, or Ben's preservation of the world's lore, the players engage in the work of allowing the imagined world to unfold its essence to them. Through long, habitual interaction with that world they come to dwell there in a manner not found elsewhere in human imagination.

In conceptual absorption of the imagined world, as already quoted, "the user also 'absorbs' the imaginary world" (Wolf 2012, p. 49). While

Wolf primarily speaks of this absorption in a mental sense, over long periods of dwelling this entrance of the world into the self expands beyond simply recalling the details of the imaginary world: it approaches the way that places in the Primary World enter the self. As Trigg says:

> The residue of a familiar place stored in the body hints at another dimension of the body's relation to its environment: place becomes profoundly constitutive of our sense of self. In this respect, the statement, 'We carry places with us' gains a primordial significance greater than that indicated by habit alone. By carrying places with us, we open ourselves to a mode of embodiment that has less to do with habit and more to do with the continuity of one's self … the *very facticity of the world existing through the porous retention of our bodies.* (2012, p. 11)

Through long dwelling in the imagined worlds of their games, the FoJ and Glantri members also come to have those worlds dwell in them, a phenomenon more obvious with imaginary worlds than with the Primary World. Clearly, these worlds dwell nowhere in our world so much as in those people who have regularly dwelt in them.

This view of gaming as the building and dwelling of imaginary worlds requires a revision of our understanding of the essential invention that developed in the early seventies, directing us toward thinking about an RPG as a collection of world-dwelling techniques at least as much as it is a game. As Pete related to me, "I feel like it's less about the way I wanna play games and more about the way my mind needs to structure the world a little bit." This became even clearer in my conversations with Jeffrey Beebe, a New York-based artist connected with NYRB via Tavis. Although these days Jeffrey rarely plays RPGs, his art is deeply influenced by the language of worldbuilding that he absorbed in his youth:

> If I hadn't learned that language and been exposed to the visuals as a kid I wouldn't know how to categorize this stuff. Because the game gave me a reference—like I said, it was like reference material. It was how to build a world. And without being exposed to that way of organizing information, knowing that I couldn't have these drawings, because I wouldn't even know how to organize that space on the paper.

Jeffrey's art draws on the grammar of worldbuilding that he internalized through years of gaming and directs it toward different ends. Through various maps and illustrations he has developed a world he calls Refractoria (Fig. 5.3).

Fig. 5.3 Map of Western Refractoria by Jeffrey Beebe

While all imaginary worlds carry some of the self that created them, with Refractoria Jeffrey has taken this to an extreme rarely seen in gaming, consciously making the world a repository of all of his experiences. Speaking of a map he developed of his experiences of Chicago, he described his goal: "I'm building sort of a framework in which I can put every conceivable memory that I have of that place." The Vast Nonsense, a region depicted in *Map of Western Refractoria*, for example, is ruled by Empress Vanessa I, a mythic version of an old girlfriend. Northwest of The Vast Nonsense, across the waters of The Impossible Narrative, an order of knights perpetually mounts doomed expeditions into an ever-expanding crevasse, The Perpetual Wound.

The world of Refractoria carries Jeffrey's memories even as he carries it with him. He describes his worldbuilding as connected with the concept of the memory palace, an imaginary structure built to serve as a mnemonic device by capitalizing on the way that places can hold parts of our selves.

As Trigg says, "Being attached to a place means allowing memories to be *held* by that place. In turn, being held by a place means being able to return to that place through its role as a reserve of memories" (2012, p. 9). By maintaining the world-dwelling framework of gaming apart from the actual act of role-playing, Jeffrey's work highlights the interpenetrating dwelling that develops between the imaginary world and those who experience it. As Liz put it, "I'll just be the asteroid."

Even as Refractoria heightens the interpenetration of self and world through dwelling, however, it also lacks the robust intersubjectivity that characterizes the experience of imagined worlds through gaming. Jeffrey acknowledges the importance of the shared experience of these worlds, saying that "those worlds only become quote unquote real when—till they're viewed by other people. So. You know, if Tolkien had just made up Middle Earth and no one ever saw it, like, it wouldn't—it wouldn't live. It would live in this one tiny small spot." In gaming, the players are concerned not only with their own experience of the imagined world, but with the experience of their fellow players. As Pete told me, "That's where the focus is, is just on, uh, getting into that scene and getting yourself there. And helping the DM get there, and helping the other players get there." The players in both FoJ and Glantri tended to emphasize the importance of the friendships they have developed through their game more than any other players I spoke with, suggesting a connection between the length of their dwelling in the imagined world and their relationships.

This focus on shared dwelling emphasizes the intersubjective nature of dwelling in much the same way that Trigg describes monuments gathering disparate experiences into focal points of shared experience: "A given location delimits, encloses, and facilitates the possibility of an experience being a shared one … first-person experience of a place becomes constituted by the intersubjective character of that place" (2012, p. 74). The shared nature of experience, in which "my experience is placed alongside those who coexist with me in the same space," is present to experience in all role-playing games (Trigg 2012, p. 74). Dwelling long in the imagined world heightens awareness of this connection even as it intensifies it: "As spatial movements are repeated within a given location, a process of assimilation occurs between place and the persons who collectively perform those movements, such that worldhood becomes the receptacle of a social experience" (Trigg 2012, p. 74). The duration of their dwelling also affords the FoJ and Glantri players more latitude to allow their worlds to provide them with intense experiences of worldhood that can emerge

apart from the actions of any individual. As we saw with session one hundred, these experiences can convey strong, positive senses of shared worldhood even in potentially traumatic instances. These intense experiences heighten not only the sense of the imagined world as concrete, but the intersubjectivity of the world:

> In both trauma and ecstasy, there is a literal standing-outside-of-oneself, a dissolution between self and other … an event occurs whereby the insulation of the self is shattered, so marking the arrival of a memory rooted in the public sphere. Because of this enclosure of the past, the compression of time is reinforced by the shared experience. (Trigg 2012, p. 75)

Here, with the connection between the compression of time and the shared experience, we have come full circle back to the tightening spring I encountered in my session with Ernie at Gary Con, already years in the past by the time I arrived at Cafe 28 for Glantri's 200th session. What we saw there in condensed form, the way that imagination can compress the experience of time, space, and others, we now see in the expanded form of long dwelling. Although the nostalgia of Gary Con also exists in the Glantri and FoJ games, their ongoing nature emphasizes that imaginative dwelling is not primarily about the past but the present. By opening viewscreens into other worlds, as Liz would phrase it, and keeping them open for long spans of time, extended and recurring experiences of imagined worlds help us to live in a present saturated with the experience of the past.

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CHAPTER 6

Journey's End

"Mama, mama, many worlds I've come since I first left home"
—"Brokedown Palace," The Grateful Dead

In coming to the end of a journey it is customary to look back over the road taken and assemble the places passed into a kind of cohesive world. Because the journey of this book has spanned multiple worlds, we could more accurately describe the outcome as a multiverse. Each field site I have visited exists in experience as a realm of connected things, and each realm is connected by threads of shared experiences in the multiverse of imagined worlds generated through tabletop role-playing games.

My task here, then, is much the same as that of a dungeon master, in that I must provide an experience of a world. In attempting to do so, I reflect on the techniques for experiencing worlds that I encountered in my research. In the history of *Dungeons & Dragons* I found that the disruptive innovation of the game was how it used the disenchanting tools of modernity to build and access enchanted worlds. Although this work is bound in at least some of the strictures and formulations of modern scholarship, I have also attempted to embrace the enchanted nature of gaming experiences, to allow for the productive tension of disenchanted enchantment. In the penultimate chapter, I found that gamers who have dwelt in

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their imagined worlds for long periods of time have developed techniques for experiencing enchanted worlds as real, as bigger than themselves. I have dwelt in the worlds described in this book for some time, and can benefit from the techniques of creating and maintaining overflow that I have observed in them. To create a sense of conceptual saturation, I should present this world as one not contained entirely within my presentation of it. Because of this I will violate a general rule for concluding journeys by introducing new people and places into the world created by that journey. I do this to remind myself that the world I have assembled here is necessarily incomplete.

I also reflect on Liz's chromomantic techniques for kidnapping reality with imagined worlds, and find two principles that can guide the way I assemble the worlds of my fieldwork. First, I seek to give space to the things and people of that world to define themselves beforehand, a technique that is also at the heart of dwelling. Second, I find that the way to convey worlds is through color, song, and choice diction. To communicate only the facts of the world without the ambience, in gaming or in scholarship, is to create a world barren and unable to sustain itself or be effectively bound to reality.

Although I assemble this world in a present I must also remember, as in the memorializing play of Gary Con, that the worlds I describe were experienced in a past that, through assembling, I help to perdure. In assembling a past which can only haunt, and never fully occupy, the present, I find a sort of nostalgia for the worlds of my research. This nostalgia has an enchanting quality on the work of worldbuilding, one that is present to my experience even in the rationalizing need to accurately represent the facts as I understand them. This tension is very similar to the tension between enchantment and rationalization that players of tabletop role-playing games utilize in their construction of worlds.

As I stated in the introduction, this work has been an elaboration of worlds rather than the unfolding of a drama. Worlds, as I encountered them in my research, and as I believe gamers tend to experience them, are bundles of potential meaning rather than fixed sets of meaningful propositions. Thus, there is here no final action resolving all of the worlds into a single neat and bounded world, only a last chromomantic glance back at the overflowing particularities of perduring worlds. Whereas I began with fictionalized accounts of likely worlds, I end with these glimpses at further actual worlds.

The Lost Forest of Darién

Be ten. It is 1980 and you are Tavis Allison. You live in Darién, Connecticut, a city that shares a name with the Darién province of Panama, where anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss encountered the Kuna. But you are unaware of this connection. You are aware, however, that your mother just read an article in the local newspaper that featured kids in wizard hats marching across the park lawn. She thinks you might be interested in this new phenomenon called Dungeons & Dragons, and finds some older kids who know how to play. They are only twelve, but they seem infinitely older and more experienced than you, at least until the town youth commission hires a few twenty-year-olds to lead a new gaming program at the local library. They have beards, speak in character voices, and draw art on their character sheets. To you, they are Gygax himself, a link to a tradition that extends backward into a past otherwise inaccessible to you. Your games at the library are a daydreamy sort of thing, imagining strongholds your character would never actually survive to build or the origins of a sword he recovered. The vivid events of play, the ones that will stick with you for the next thirty years, are concrete. Your character found a magic arrow, you thought a lot about what to do with that. And when you killed an orc with the arrow that was the story of your character he found a magic arrow and then he shot an orc and it died.

At the end of your street there is a forest where you often play, the sunbeams piercing the canopy overhead to make chiaroscuro patterns of leafy shadow on your face. One day you come to the forest and find that yellow construction vehicles have moved in, building a new subdivision and moving that forest into the inaccessible past. Around the same time, the daydreamy quality of your games is beginning to fade. You love science fiction, particularly *literary* science fiction, as you often point out to the uninitiated, but the more you pursue that same literary quality in your gaming, the more it recedes from you. By sixteen, you have mostly stopped trying to get back to the forest. New, more rational game systems like GURPS (Generic Universal RolePlaying System) come out, and you read them approvingly, with passing interest, but you play rarely, and only catch the faintest glimpses of worlds adjacent to the one in which your character who never built his stronghold killed an orc with a magic arrow. Years later you will pick up your son from school in New York City and see another stay at home dad wearing a shirt emblazoned with a beholder, and the two of you will begin plotting a course back to realms you had thought closed off.

Candles and Cthulhu

Be a twenty-something graduate student. You are Lisa Padol, attending UCLA across the country from the Bronx where you once sat out a blackout surrounded by candles because your father, a math teacher by training, had just gone through a candlemaking phase. It is homesickness, what the Greeks called nostalgia, which pushes you back into gaming, thinking of you and your father walking out of the Compleat Strategist in Manhattan with a copy of Dungeons & Dragons when you were ten. Although you spent countless hours of childhood making maps for games, you only actually played rarely then, and this Star Trek game in the grad school dorms is the first time you have ever gamed regularly. In some way, visiting that other world helps you with the pain of a lost home. Years later, when you lose your mother, who was an English teacher, you feel compelled to run a game of Call of Cthulhu focused on Hastur, a Lovecraftian entity who often has a strange effect on artists and playwrights.

Screaming Demons

Be twelve. It is 1983 and you are Derek White, who will one day take on the nickname Geek Preacher. You live in Hale, Louisiana, and your small K-12 school closes each spring for Mardi Gras. Taking advantage of the occasion, you and your family drive out to Texas to visit your stepdad's brother. It might be Dallas, but you're not sure because you are twelve. While there, you visit a mall that contains a hobby shop full of model trains and miniature figurines of all sorts. Exploring this store, you come across a shrink wrapped book whose cover catches your eye. In a purple cavern a woman in a flowing red dress and a man in a winged helmet fend off a large wyrm emerging from an underground lake. The woman wields a flaming symbol in one hand and a glowing green light in the other. The man attempts to protect himself with a small wooden buckler as he draws back his spear to thrust at the creature. Between them, a chest lies open, spilling glittering gems on the cave floor like candy. In the distance a stone stair leads to a pillared archway opening into darkness. The sticker on the plastic wrap reads $4.99. You beg your mother for it, but she explains that they really don't have the money. Your stepdad's sister-in-law steps in and offers to buy the book for you. You devour the book cover to cover in the guest room back at the house where you are staying, and when you return to Hale, you find some older kids who already have some of the strange dice that the game seems to require.

Later, after you had earned a technical degree as a phlebotomist but dropped out of your position as a ward clerk at a hospital, you have a religious experience at a revival meeting. The preacher explains the evils of fantasy, of Dungeons & Dragons (D&D), speaking of dark magic and screaming demons. Your burn all of your books in a bonfire and don't look back, eventually going to seminary.

The denomination you end up with, a different one than the preacher who told you to burn your books, sends you up to Alaska to preach at a few small churches while your wife finishes her bachelor's degree back in Jackson, Mississippi. She visits you over winter break, and it becomes clear that the long, cold hours of darkness would be too much for both of you. You finish out your term and prepare to head back south. You spend your last short Alaskan days in Anchorage, and come across a game store called Bosco's. Stepping inside, the memories of playing with Mike, Denny, Richard, and Stacy wash over you. You also remember the preacher talking about screaming demons, though, so you opt for *Traveller*, a science-fiction game with a world bereft of demons. Soon, though, your ideas about imagination begin to change, such that in 2012 when a young anthropologist asks you about them you talk about it as a sort of homecoming:

> Play is a return to the Garden before the Fall. The joy in the world. The joy in the Garden before we entered into rebellion, sin, whatever you wanna call it. Play is an expression of God's goodness and grace that's in the world. And I think, you know, people say our society has too much time to play. I think—I don't think that's the problem. I think our society doesn't know how to have Godly play. You know, not how to overindulge and to know that there's a time to weep, there's a time to mourn, there's a time to work, there's a time to play. And to know how to balance and to do it well. And play is a sign of God's work in the world. Uh. Some Christians use a term that we're co-creators with God. Uh, I have a friend and a professor. He says we're subcreators. I like that term better. You know, because God has created us in God's own image, we subcreate with God. So imagination, creating new worlds, that's part of God working in and through you. So where's God in that, is, well, that creative ability shows that the divine God is working through you and in the world.

Anthropology and Experienced Worlds

I close with Derek's reflections on imagination and subcreation not because they are the final words on the subject but because they speak to the sort of larger worlds to which the experience of imagined worlds in

gaming can connect. To imagine a world is both to create it and to discover it. We come to dwell in the worlds we have imagined even as those worlds come to dwell in us. In the process, we enter into a dynamic of mutual shaping between ourselves, the worlds in which we dwell, and the others who dwell there with us.

We find ourselves in a world already partially assembled, one that extends backward into a perduring past only incompletely accessible to our experience. Within this world we both create new worlds and step into others not created by us. Much has been said of the role of scholars, and particularly ethnographers, as those who tell the stories of others, or perhaps allow space for others to tell their own stories, but I think this gives an incomplete picture of our situation. Stories begin and end with the opening and closing of curtains or book covers, but what persists are the worlds which envelop and sustain them. Stories may be considered fact, fiction, or a blend of the two, but all worlds are simply worlds of experience, however laminated. If the study of experiencing worlds in gaming has something to offer broader efforts to understand humanity it is in this reminder of the primacy of worlds over narratives. In writing an ethnography like this one, stories will inevitably emerge. We should be aware of these narratives, but more than this we should pay careful attention to the worlds we have constructed with our choice diction, the worlds from which the narratives emerge. While the experience of multiple worlds is more explicit in role-playing games than in other areas of human life, gaming points us toward the realization that we are all always taking reality hostage with the worlds of our imagination, using both rationalized structures and enchanted chromomancy to partially share with others various worlds as they present themselves to us.

Appendix

The Joesky Tax

In the world of Old-School Renaissance (OSR) blogging there is something known as the Joesky tax, which reads (in all of its intentionally typo-ridden prose):

> IF YOU MAKE A POST BLOG THAT IS ONLY A ARGUMETN AND WHEN I READ ITIT MAKES A BLAHBLAH BLAH SOUND, YOU HAVE TO GIVE ME SOMETHING FREE AT THE END: NEW COOL RULE, OR A MONSTER(S), OR SOME SPELLS, OR MAGIC ITEMS OR REGULAR ITEMS THAT ARE DIFFERENT, OR EVEN BETTER A MAP—AND IT CAN'T BE A LINK JUST TO SOMEP LACE ELSE IN YOU'RE BLOG, IT HAS TO BE NEW AND COOL.
>
> IF YOU DON'T TO DO THAT YOU AUTIMATICALLY LOSE THE ARGUMENT AND THE OTHER GUY IS DECLARED A WINNER, WHICH MEANS YOU JUST WRITED 5000 WORD SFOR NOTHING!!!!1 (Joeskythedungeonbrawler 2010)

Although this is a book and not a "POST BLOG," I have certainly made my share of "BLAHBLAH BLAH SOUND," and do not consider myself exempt from this rule common to the people I have played and thought with for years. For this reason, I close by paying the Joesky tax with this description of a species of monster known as Fair Ones or, when speaking in whispers, maggotfolk (Table A.1).

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Table A.1 Maggotfolk Statistics Block

Maggotfolk
Frequency: Uncommon
No. appearing: 30–300
Armor class: 5
Move: 15″
Hit dice: 1
% in lair: 90%
Treasure type: E
No. of attacks: 2 (claw, bite)
Damage/attack: 1–8
Special attacks: See description
Special defenses: Nil
Magic resistance: Standard
Intelligence: Average (low)
Alignment: Neutral
Size: Small (2′ tall)
Psionic ability: Nil
Attack/defense modes: Nil

Maggotfolk, which the superstitious refer to as Fair Ones, spontaneously generate from abandoned places which were once imbued with deep significance by those who dwelled in them. In appearance they are generally infantile, pale with large tenebrous eyes set deeply in bulbous heads. They can walk on their short, stubby legs, but generally prefer to crawl, a form of locomotion available to them even on sheer walls and ceilings.

Their hatching is often quite destructive to ruined buildings, as they grow in cysts that develop in the stonework and burst out in a spray of stone or metal that does 1–10 points of damage to anyone unlucky enough to be present (save for half damage). Anyone familiar with the lore surrounding these creatures can thus readily identify a maggotfolk lair by the pockets and debris left behind.

Once hatched, maggotfolk usually take on some semblance of the life that animated the place, repeating butchered bits of song or verse spoken there and making crude, twisted approximations of art in the style of the former inhabitants.

Maggotfolk develop according to a caste system similar to that found in some insects, appearing in two types in equal proportions. Half of maggotfolk are drones that appear in the basic form described here. The other half have webbed fingers which they use to hurl small pods produced from their body and stored in marsupial pouches. To determine pod type, roll

1d6. On a result of 1–4, damage is as normal; on a 5, the pod contains a sticky, viscous substance that acts as a web spell on a single individual; on a 6, the pod contains a caustic liquid that does 1–4 damage for three rounds and leaves disfiguring scars which cannot be healed except through a wish.

Although they feed on the decaying remnants of cultural investment, enchanted and active experience of a place is anathema to their existence. If a place of their haunting becomes a site of active engagement with sentient beings, as through ritual, play, or artistic expression, they will initially be driven into a rage, seeking the source of this disturbance for two to twenty turns and dealing double damage. After this initial rage they will begin to shrivel and become inactive for an additional one to ten turns. If the active cultural engagement continues for a period of two to twenty days, the maggotfolk will either crumble into dust or reawaken as willing and good-natured (although mischievous) homunculi serving those that re-enchanted their lair.

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[1] Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes.

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