

On the Metaplot: A Look at Transmedial Storytelling in Tabletop Role-Playing Games

Abstract: The vast phenomenon of the metaplot in role-playing games dates to the late 1970s and had its golden age in the enormous game lines of the 1990s such as *Vampire: The Masquerade*, as well as the edition shifts of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The metaplot, the ongoing story of the gameworld that is created and released by the game publisher, exists in tension with the player agency that is the core focus of tabletop role-playing games and therefore often unpopular, yet publishers persisted in creating it. Metaplot is intrinsically tied to the market logics of manufacturing role-playing game lines that sustain gaming companies, who must publish books to maintain a cashflow even at the risk of alienating customers. This paper presents a history of the phenomenon, a tentative taxonomy of metaplot elements, and a call for further research.

Keywords: *Dungeons & Dragons*, game production studies, metaplot, role-playing games, storytelling, *Shadowrun*, transmedia

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the medium of tabletop role-playing games, there exists a nearly unique way of storytelling, in some ways transmedial, but largely literary. This is the *metaplot*. The phenomenon originates in the 1980s, had its height in the 1990s and still persists in some game lines today. It is intrinsically entangled with the commercial reality of role-playing game publishing, and it has been hated and loved ever since the first *Dragonlance* novel hit the bestseller lists in 1984.

Curtis D. Carbonell defines metaplot as “the timeline of major events within the universe” of the role-playing game (Carbonell 2019). This is somewhat inaccurate, however, as that definition encompasses also the history of a gameworld. As used in this article, the metaplot is the part of that history that occurs during the gameworld’s publishing life, the continuing story of the world as it is told through sourcebooks, adventure modules, and prose fiction. From an artistic point of view, it is intended to create the illusion of a living world, where events occur and life goes on beyond the contents of a single game group’s campaign. This storytelling method differs from more familiar forms of serial storytelling such as a novel series, an ongoing comic book, television shows or professional wrestling in that those position the consumer as a viewer or reader, while the role-playing game by contrast is about accommodating the consumer’s own creative agency. Role-playing game rulebooks often begin with an explanation of what a role-playing game is, and such an explanation invariably contains a message that can be paraphrased as “you will not be told a story; you will tell your own story” (Wieck et al. 1993; Dowdell et al. 2020, 6). In a role-playing game, the creative agency of the players is central to the medium (Fine 1983, 6). The metaplot, a story handed down from up above by the game’s publisher, is always in danger of contradicting that creative agency.

The existence of metaplot is also intrinsically tied to tabletop role-playing games’ existence as commercial products. Game publishers need to create and sell products in order to remain viable commercial entities and maintain a steady cashflow. However, to actually play a role-playing game, a player typically needs just one rulebook and some people to play with. The author Ben Riggs calls this “the RPG consumption problem”. Once the consumer has purchased the necessary product, they never actually need to buy another product ever

again (Riggs 2022, 100). Perhaps because of this, the tabletop role-playing game as an art form has proven very resistant to large-scale commercial exploitation, as evinced by the struggles of the market leader Wizards of the Coast, who in early 2025 laid off the development team of their virtual tabletop *Sigil* only weeks after launching the software that had cost them an estimated 20 to 30 million U.S. dollars (Carter 2025).

The commercial model of the tabletop role-playing game line, still dominant today, is one or more core rulebooks which supply the ruleset proper for the game, upon which is built an edifice of supplementary rulebooks, adventure modules, and campaign setting sourcebooks (see e.g. Riggs 2022). Popular game lines may run for hundreds of titles. One way to fill out these books has been to describe the passage of time in the gameworld and present new events in adventure modules for the player characters to resolve. Changes between editions have been another popular moment to advance metaplot even in gameworlds that have otherwise avoided it.

2. HISTORY OF THE METAPLOT

The first role-playing game to introduce metaplot was the science-fiction game *Traveller*. Its publisher, Game Designers' Workshop (GDW), published a magazine for the game, *Journal of the Travellers' Aid Society*, which in 1979 started a feature named "Traveller News Service", which told of events unfolding in the game's universe, including kicking off the Fifth Frontier War in 1981, which then affected the *Traveller* game line over the next year (Appelcline 2024, 42–44). According to game historian Shannon Appelcline, however, it was followed by no imitators (Appelcline 2014b, 160–61).

Though Appelcline identifies White Wolf's World of Darkness games in the 1990s as the real breakthrough of metaplots, I am forced to disagree. The 1984 Dragonlance product line for TSR's *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* had a very strong metaplot and it is an early example of such a plot being told transmedially in both adventure modules and novels. The famous Dragonlance adventure series was a twelve-title epic whose story was also told in the novel trilogy *Dragonlance Chronicles* by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman (Appelcline 2014b, 60). The Dragonlance series is identified by Benjamin J. Robertson as a new way of creating adventuring modules. Prior to Dragonlance, adventuring modules for *D&D* and *AD&D* were not created with a coherent overall narrative in mind, being standalone works that a Dungeon Master could string together into a campaign and create their own overarching story. However,

[b]y contrast, the Dragonlance modules had to be played in a specific order and were designed to produce a specific (if still *somewhat* variable) narrative. A group might abandon the narrative at any time, of course, but to continue playing Dragonlance participants need to buy specific updates at regular intervals. The franchise also requires these participants to adapt to a new environment and set of mechanics, mechanics which are now subordinated to the story the modules are trying to tell. For example, while Dragonlance allows players to use their own characters (created with the general *AD&D* rules) in its setting, the modules explicitly encourage players to use the pre-generated characters who would come to populate the novels [...] (Robertson 2017, 135)

Critically, the Dragonlance novels and adventures changed the world irrevocably in major ways, such as by returning priestly magic to the world and ending one of the elven kingdoms. However, the product line started with the adventure series that wrought these changes and inadvertently sidestepped the common problem with metaplots – as they change the world, they risk making older game materials obsolete in various ways, which tends to anger the consumer base. GDW felt this in the late 1980s with their *MegaTraveller* metaplot that broke apart the galactic empire, which was such an extreme change that it alienated many players (Appelcline 2014c, 371).

In the year 1989, TSR released a new edition of *AD&D*. The second edition did not include the character classes of the monk¹ and the assassin, and changed certain other things in the rules. *AD&D*, like most role-playing games of the era, was designed as a ruleset to simulate a world and its physical functions. Such a design necessarily implies certain things about the world of the game, and the gameworld must therefore be congruent with those implications. The disappearance of these character classes², the designers felt, had to be justified in the gameworlds. In the World of Greyhawk, this was handled in the adventure module *Fate of Istus*, which saw all the monks of the world transported to the continent of Kara-Tur (Findley et al. 1989, 119), a kind of fantasy Asia described in another game supplement (Pondsmith et al. 1988). In TSR's flagship campaign setting for the game, *Forgotten Realms*, the changes were told in the *Avatar Trilogy*, three novels with accompanying tie-in adventure modules – *Shadowdale*, *Tantras*, and *Waterdeep*³. The novels clearly take primacy over the game products in this instance, and the adventure modules are widely regarded as railroads, where the players' characters are little more than audience to the novel protagonists' activities (Appelcline 2014d). In these novels, the gods of the *Forgotten Realms* were cast down by the overgod Ao and made mortal. Among other events, the gods of death and strife, Myrkul and Bane, enacted a ritual to kill all the assassins of the world to weaken the god of murder Bhaal, thus explaining why the character class no longer existed in the game's new edition. Carbonell terms this the *godswar mechanism*, "a narrative justification for design changes, and the presentation of a host of new books that must be bought" (Carbonell 2019, 107).

Tangentially, the best-selling *Forgotten Realms* novels at the time were R.A. Salvatore's books about Drizzt Do'Urden, a good-aligned drow elf. Their antagonist was an assassin named Artemis Entreri. Salvatore was told by the publisher that he would have to kill Entreri, as all assassins of the world died. Salvatore famously responded "He's not an assassin. He's a fighter-thief who takes money to kill people" (Tan 2011). This was accepted and the character has since featured in some 18 further books, surviving three further edition changes with their accompanying cataclysms. This illustrates another dimension of creative tensions in metaplot work, the clashing interests of the creators themselves. R.A. Salvatore is a novelist, not a game designer, and his creative agenda is to write an entertaining story, not produce a gameworld. The perceived necessities of the gameworld's development sometimes clash with that agenda,

¹ The "monk" in this case is in the sense of a martial artist as popularised by Hong Kong cinema, not the monastic devotee that *AD&D*'s European pseudo-medieval milieu might be expected to imply. (Peterson 2025, 218–19)

² They were reintroduced to the game at the tail end of the second edition's life in *The Scarlet Brotherhood* sourcebook (Reynolds 1999).

³ The novels were written by the authors Scott Ciencin and Troy Denning and attributed to a collective pseudonym Richard Awlinson. Later reprints credit the authors by their real names. The three adventure modules were written by Ed Greenwood but saw significant edits to bring them in line with the story of the novels, which Greenwood did not have access to due to production schedules. (Appelcline 2014d)

and such contrivances arise from the clashes. It is also notable that the first two novels of Salvatore's trilogy had exceeded 1,5 million sold copies – he was outselling the game itself, which must have been a factor in negotiating such creative impasses (Riggs 2022, 90).

Entering the 1990s, metaplot became *de rigeur* in role-playing games and major game lines all had their own. Most famous for its metaplot was the World of Darkness family of games published then by White Wolf. The family eventually grew to nine different games, all set in the same darker, bleaker version of our real world. The most prominent of the game lines were *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991), *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* (1992), and *Mage: The Ascension* (1993). The game lines ran from 1991 until 2004⁴, concluding with the eight-book Time of Judgment series that ended the story of each of the games with a variety of apocalyptic scenarios. In those thirteen years, they saw an aggressive release schedule from the beginning. It is difficult to arrive at a conclusive, exact number because of the sheer mass of products that came out during the period, but the role-playing game and prose fiction titles released exceed 500. From the beginning, they also told a continuous story of the gameworld, placing the players' characters in the thick of it in adventure modules. The early storyline of *Vampire: The Masquerade* centred on the vampire politics of Chicago and featured such events as a war with werewolves that saw the Prince of the city killed. This happened in *Under a Blood Red Moon* (Brown 1993), a crossover adventure module that presented the events so they could be played in either *Vampire: The Masquerade* or *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*, and was printed with the trade dress of the latter. Though the front cover proclaims it as "The War of Chicago for *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* & *Vampire: The Masquerade*", its visual elements are of *Werewolf*, which had been out for less than a year. It was released simultaneously with the *Vampire* sourcebook *Chicago by Night Second Edition* (Greenberg and Crow 1993), which updated the former *Chicago by Night* (Rein•Hagen et al. 1991) to the postwar era, including the deaths of prominent characters like Prince Lodin and the ensuing power struggle.

Another noteworthy World of Darkness publication was *Vampire's Clan Novel Saga*, first released from 1999 to 2000, a series of 13 novels about a war between two sects of vampires for the control of the East Coast of the United States. Each novel focused on the vampires of a different vampire clan, and their events took place more or less simultaneously, some even describing the same situations from the perspectives of different characters. The series was later re-released in a four-book omnibus edition where the chapters of the books had been rearranged in a strictly chronological order. In the first volume, the prologues end on page 122 (Wieck et al. 2003).

Other peculiar ways of doing metaplot in the 1990s were innovated by Alderac Entertainment Group (AEG) in their games, the samurai fantasy *Legend of the Five Rings* (L5R) and the swashbuckling game *7th Sea*. The latter initially presented a fantasy world based on Renaissance Europe, and the focus of the game was on swashbuckling adventure, sailing the high seas, and duelling (Wick and Wilson 1999). However, it was then revealed that the magic used by the world's sorcerers was tearing holes in reality and threatening to unleash cosmic

⁴ They were initially replaced with "the new World of Darkness", which was a reimagining of the franchise and did not use metaplot. The old World of Darkness games made a comeback in 2011 when *Vampire: The Masquerade 20th Anniversary Edition* (V20) was crowdfunded. The new World of Darkness was rebranded as Chronicles of Darkness in 2015 when Paradox Interactive, having just purchased White Wolf from the Icelandic computer game company CCP, announced they were going to bring back the old World of Darkness (Carbonell 2019, 132). Though V20 was quite light on metaplot, it concluded with *Beckett's Jihad Diary*, a 559-page book describing the metaplot from 2004 up to 2015 (Alexander et al. 2017).

horrors in a very Lovecraftian vein (Wilson 2001, 18)⁵. This was seen as a severe breach in the tone of the game and was unpopular with the player base. In this instance, the metaplot development revealed that a major element of the game was actually in an entirely different genre from what it had been sold as. AEG sometimes did engage in such tricks, perhaps most famously in the L5R book *The Merchant's Guide to Rokugan* (Vaux 1999), whose paratexts, cover, and introduction present it as a deliberately boring text on the economics of the gameworld's feudal fantasy Japan, until three pages into the introduction the author drops the façade and announces the book's actual topic, a secret society intent on toppling the empire.

In *Legend of the Five Rings*, power over the metaplot of the game lines was handed over to players, but not players of the role-playing game. The events of the Clan War (1995-1997) were determined by the outcomes of official tournaments of the *Legend of the Five Rings Collectible Card Game*, culminating in the finals, the Second Day of Thunder. Game designer Matthew Colville described it as "The Greatest Story in Gaming" and emphasized its emergent and participatory storytelling. The tournament players could steer the gameworld's storyline by their victories and defeats as well as their actions in the finals. There were surprise defections. A player might concede a game to manipulate another player of their favoured clan into a better position in the tournament bracket. The outcome of the final game was so surprising that the lead narrator John Wick, who had prepared sealed envelopes for the story of each clan's victory and burned them unopened as each clan was eliminated, burned even the ones he had left and narrated the outcome of the Day of Thunder off the cuff (Colville 2017). On *Salon.com*, the journalist Robert Rossney characterized it as "a new type of oral storytelling" (Rossney 1999). A fictionalized version of the story of the card game tournament itself was used as the basis of the movie *The Gamers III: Hands of Fate* (Vancil 2013). However, these sweeping changes into the world, some of which were quite strange absent the context where they arose, were then introduced to the role-playing game, whose players possibly had no knowledge of where they were coming from, and many felt alienated by them. However, the testimonials of Colville and Rossney speak of significant investment into the game, a fandom. Some role-playing games have managed to encourage the formation of this kind of investment, most of them being characterized by strong metaplot.

Entering the 2000s, strong metaplots became less common. When Wizards of the Coast released the third edition of *D&D*⁶ in 2000, *Forgotten Realms* was updated to the new ruleset in a far less overt manner, though changes did occur, such as the return of Shade, a flying city that had been in exile in the Plane of Shadow for a thousand years, to become a new political power (Greenwood et al. 2001, 280), or the villainous Red Wizards' turn into mercantile outreach to project soft power and act as a cover for their espionage activities (*ibid*, 278). This type of metaplot writing did not invalidate previously published supplements quite so extensively. While certainly older descriptions of cities in the world did not contain Red Wizard enclaves, choosing whether to insert one or not is simple for a Dungeon Master. Locations that were destroyed, such as the town of Tilverton (*ibid*, 113), were ones about which little had been previously published.

⁵ Mere two years between the two books feels slight, but fast and aggressive production schedules were typical of the role-playing game industry from the early 1990s up to the early 2010s. The first edition of *7th Sea* is of comparatively modest size at only 28 titles, but they were all released during the three-year period of 1999-2001. *7th Sea* received a new edition named *Swashbuckling Adventures* in 2002 and a crowdfunded second edition in 2016 from John Wick Presents that bankrupted the company and led to a buyout by Chaosium to fulfil the crowdfunding campaign (Bunge 2018; O'Brien 2019).

⁶ Continuing from *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Second Edition*. The edition numbering of *D&D* is a recondite art, and the numbering used is the convention and has little to do with the actual number of discrete editions of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Before *D&D*'s fourth edition came out, the final Forgotten Realms book published in the third-edition era was *The Grand History of the Realms*, a book originally compiled as an online document by the fan Brian R. James (James and Greenwood 2007). It compiled the full timeline of the Forgotten Realms from the countless⁷ game supplements, novels, video games, and comic books that been set in the world, both the in-setting history as well as the metaplot that had advanced the timeline by only fifteen years since the first version of the campaign setting was released in 1987. According to Carbonell, it "is important because it represents how a shared, imaginary universe becomes realized through the combination of analog/digital tools made available to the public" (Carbonell 2019, 104).

When in 2008, the fourth edition of the game came out, the timeline of Forgotten Realms was advanced a full century. The designers also introduced the device of the Spellplague, a worldwide magical cataclysm (Cordell et al. 2008, 40). Even the old world maps were no longer useable with the redrawn coastlines and sunken nations. Appelcline characterizes the fourth-edition Forgotten Realms sourcebooks as "some of Wizards' worst-received supplements ever" and lays the fault for this specifically on its incompatibility, bordering on hostile, with the older versions of the setting (Appelcline 2014c, 190). When the fifth edition of *D&D* was released in 2014, the timeline was advanced yet further but the sweeping changes of the Spellplague were undone in what was called the Sundering and described in an eponymous series of novels by different authors, including R.A. Salvatore. As per Carbonell, it was "needed to return FR to its pre-Spellplague state. Such complexities are often beyond the interest of many players, but those who choose to unravel them face a historiography and an archive-building challenge of great magnitude" (Carbonell 2019, 107).

In the third-edition era, Wizards of the Coast did run another experiment in player-driven metaplot, the Living Greyhawk organized play campaign. In the campaign, managed by the marketing arm Role Playing Games Association (RPGA), the gameworld of Greyhawk was divided up between the player communities of different locations in the real world to develop and publish adventures for. The campaign ran from 2000 to 2008, the length of the third edition's publication, and produced in excess of 2,000 titles of adventure modules that are these days largely unavailable (Särkijärvi 2024). Giving such a free hand with their intellectual property to groups of unpaid and unvetted fan writers with little supervision would be probably unthinkable today.

A final example of a metaplot executed in the 2010s and 2020s shall be Paizo Publishing's *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game*. Paizo was founded as a magazine publisher and in 2008 when circumstances⁸ forced them to pivot into role-playing game publishing, they leveraged that expertise and started a series of monthly adventure modules⁹, initially for *D&D*'s third edition and starting in 2009 for their own *Pathfinder RPG*. Every six modules formed a complete campaign that would take the party of player characters from level one to level twenty, where the base game's character levels were capped. These were branded Adventure Paths, and one could buy a subscription. In the metaplot of *Pathfinder*'s world, Golarion, the time advanced at a 1:1 pace with the real world. Books published in 2009 were set in the year 4709 (Baker et al. 2007, 203) and so forth. Unusually for the time, when most game publishers were toning down their publishing schedules, *Pathfinder* saw multiple releases each month. However, their novel line, *Pathfinder Tales*, did not tell stories that made great changes to the world. Those

⁷ Carbonell says "over one hundred" (Carbonell 2019, 103), but the number is at least double that.

⁸ See (Appelcline 2014a, 221) for details.

⁹ At the time of writing, volume #216 has just shipped to subscribers.

happened exclusively in the Adventure Paths, and were thus the players' to make. Throughout the first edition of *Pathfinder*, 2008-2019, there were virtually no major changes to the setting that did not come from the Adventure Paths. Those changes were rarely referenced and when they were, they were in ways that enabled rather than constricted the players' options. Instead of destroying cities, the Rise of the Runelords Adventure Path opened up a newly discovered ruined city far in the high mountains (Hitchcock et al. 2011, 55). Only in the game's second edition in 2019 were all of the changes compiled into a new version of the primary campaign setting book (DePass et al. 2019). More recently, however, Paizo Publishing has also worked with classical metaplot in the godswar vein, where the god of war died and wrought changes upon the world (Case et al. 2024). Even that event was also presented in an adventure module for the players to experience (Hoskins 2024).

In 2025, Paizo Publishing is one of the last lions of metaplot writing, and neither the current editions of *D&D* nor the World of Darkness games have it. Other current game lines that still have metaplot include *Shadowrun*, *BattleTech*, and *Legend of the Five Rings*, but the sweeping epics of yesteryear are over and the trend has long been away from telling stories through sourcebooks. The reasons can be speculated. One likely factor is the change of the publishing landscape itself. As described by William J. White, the turn of the millennium saw a series of new developments in the field. These include such myriad things as the simplification of online payment systems, which in turn facilitated PDF storefronts. Digital printing technologies made smaller print runs viable and the advent of consumer-friendly layout software significantly lowered the threshold of publishing a role-playing game product (White 2020, 225). In the heyday of the metaplot, the 1990s, the commercial model for a tabletop role-playing game line was "the supplement treadmill": one or more core rulebooks which supply the ruleset proper for the game, upon which is built an edifice of supplementary rulebooks, adventure modules, and campaign setting sourcebooks (see e.g. Riggs 2022). Related to this is also the appearance of games that are described as "anti-canon", seen as more accessible to players, without the perceived requirement of reading a great deal of worldbuilding or to keep up to date with new advancements (see e.g. Rejec 2019)

3. FRAMEWORK AND TERMINOLOGY

Based on the above, we can discern broad trends in how metaplot has been executed and work towards a framework to discuss it. This conceptualisation approaches the metaplot through its relationship to the gameworld and the players – taken on its own, it is literature and can be studied as such. The most obvious element is how *intrusive* it is. This is about how much the progressive metaplot invalidates previous game supplements and the sheer scale of its effects in the gameworld. The Spellplague and Forgotten Realms's transition to the fourth edition of *D&D* is a prime example of a highly intrusive metaplot event – practically nothing of the older materials was compatible with the setting's new version. Likewise, the Clan War of *L5R* was very intrusive, in that the Emperor was murdered, his dynasty ended, one of the Great Clans was outlawed, and the naga, snake people, introduced to the setting. The opposite to this is *subtle* metaplot, which advances the timeline but keeps changes small and maintains backwards compatibility. An example of this would be the transition of Forgotten Realms to *D&D's* third edition.

Closely related to this is how much a metaplot event is *removing* from the gameworld as opposed to *adding* to it. *WG06 Fate of Istus* removed all of the monks from the World of Greyhawk, taking away this character option from the players. In the fantasy space opera game *Starfinder*, the planet Aucturn was revealed to be an egg of a god, which hatched (Jarzabski 2024), removing the planet as a location in the gameworld. Conversely, the Clan War added the naga into *L5R* as a character option, and in the fifth edition of *Vampire: The Masquerade*, vampires of Clan Lasombra were introduced to the Camarilla sect as a player option (Anderson et al. 2018). Often adding something is involved in removing something else – the fourth-edition *Forgotten Realms* added the new continent of Abeir, but it replaced the older continent of Maztica (Cordell et al. 2008, 200).

How the metaplot is told matters a great deal for how it is received. If it is told through adventure modules, something that the players can experience at their game table, it may be better-received than if it is handed down from up above. It is then either *participatory* or *imposed* – though instances like the Avatar Trilogy have the novels imposing a certain canonical outcome to the story, regardless of what transpires in the game table when playing the associated adventures. The same is true of the Dragonlance series of novels and modules, though the Avatar Trilogy is not fondly remembered while the Dragonlance series are classics¹⁰. Until *War of the Immortals*, the metaplot of *Pathfinder* exclusively advanced through the Adventure Paths, which generally enjoy a measure of appreciation in the community – certainly they have remained financially viable as a monthly product since 2007.

A final, minor variable is whether the metaplot is *publisher-driven* or, in a rare few instances, *player-driven*. Such instances are the tournaments of Clan War, the fan-produced Living Greyhawk campaign, as well as the early role-playing game *Torg*, where players could respond to feedback forms in published adventure modules and thus affect the direction of the metaplot. Likewise, the organized play campaigns Pathfinder Society and Starfinder Society ask game masters to report the results of certain scenarios at the tables they run, which then determines their canonical outcome.

4. DISCUSSION

There is little to no existing literature on metaplot to draw from. Academic role-playing game studies have overlooked the topic and even game design guides by and from practitioners do not address it. Titles such as *The Grand History of the Realms* are rare and tend to be compilations of diegetic events in the gameworld aimed at the general consumer instead of documentation of how the metaplot was told. This article is a tentative opening to looking at how it works, how and why it has been done, and how it could be done better.

The phenomenon is an interesting one because it is nearly unique¹¹ to tabletop role-playing games, and exists at a point of tension between the creative agency of player groups

¹⁰ The RPGGeek website's listing has the Avatar adventures rated 5.4 and 4.6, while the most recent Dragonlance reprints, *Dragons of Autumn*, *Dragons of Winter*, and *Dragons of Spring* all have scores of over 7. The scale runs from 1 to 10.

¹¹ The *Legend of the Five Rings* card game being an obvious example outside of role-playing games. Certainly, fictional universes like that of the miniatures wargame *Warhammer 40,000* advance their timelines, but without the role-playing component, its impact on the playing of the game itself – apart from the introduction of new armies and units – is debatable. Likewise, MMOs such as *World of Warcraft* and *Matrix Online* have advanced their storylines in various ways, but there the players have little option to reject the changes in their own play without spinning up a private server.

and the economic realities of the game publishers. A study of metaplot as a topic should take into account not only its form as transmedia storytelling but also the manner of its production¹². It is also a necessary topic of study. It was a dominant form of role-playing game storytelling throughout the 1990s into the early 2000s, and it is unique to the medium of the role-playing game¹³. It was also a major element of several games regarded as classics, *Vampire: The Masquerade* perhaps the foremost among them.

It therefore feels apparent that metaplot can be a driver of player investment in the product and important to building a fandom for the gameworld. A devout fandom that feels they share ownership of a cultural product is not, of course, always desirable, but the role-playing game industry is financially precarious, and establishing a set of best practices for building a metaplot without inviting fan backlash would be in the interests of the industry itself as well as academia.

It must be admitted that metaplot is not an easy topic of research. While the lack of existing research to scaffold one's work on can feel even liberating, the material fact remains that metaplot is also storytelling at a large scale and even the comparatively modest first edition of *7th Sea* comprises 28 published titles, or in excess of 3,400 pages¹⁴. A full reckoning of *Vampire: The Masquerade* publications in the years 1991 through 2003 would involve nearly 200 game books, prose fiction titles, and graphic novels. Any study of the topic is by necessity work-intensive for the sheer amount of reading involved. While access to materials has become simpler in the era of PDF storefronts¹⁵, it too may be a significant financial consideration. While its vastness makes research difficult, it also demands it.

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¹² For more on game production studies, see Sotamaa and Švelch 2021.

¹³ This article has ignored larp, but campaign larps such as those run under the Camarilla organization for World of Darkness had something like metaplot. Harviainen et al. 2024 (102) briefly mentions the term in conjunction with campaign larps in the United Kingdom.

¹⁴ A single PDF file containing the entirety of the first edition was distributed to backers of the *7th Sea Second Edition* Kickstarter campaign. It is 3,479 pages long.

¹⁵ Even the older editions of most major games whose copyright and distribution rights status is clear and belong to a single legal entity are available as PDFs. Works based on various media licenses such as Marvel comics or the old *Middle-earth Role Playing*, as a rule, are not, but they mainly do not engage in metaplot storytelling. The complications of dealing with licensors are another aspect of role-playing game production studies.

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