Creativity Rules

How rules impact player creativity in three tabletop

Popular abstract - This article sheds light on how different rules systems for tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) impact players' sense of creativity. It looks at three very different games played by six role-playing ensembles, and uses interviews and group discussions to make the players reflect on how they are influenced by the rules used during play. While the sometimes insular nature of TRPG gaming became evident, it was also clear that there are several different phenomena that occur in a TRPG that can be labeled as "creative". Aiming to provide a tool for discussion on TRPGs, six different types of creativity is outlined in the article, as well as a number of different examples of the role that the rules play in influencing these.

General Terms: Design, Human Factors, Theory.
Keywords: Tabletop role-playing, rules systems, creativity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The tabletop role-playing game (TRPG) as we know it appeared in the world of gaming sometime in the seventies, initially as an off-shoot of war games in a fantasy setting, where each player would command only a single character instead of a unit of troops (Fine, 1983, Mackay, 2001). While inexorably linked to gaming in a more board-game sense for the first few years, it soon became apparent that TRPGs held much wider potential in its capacity to serve as a modern day vessel for storytelling. The TRPG brought rules that regulated the activity, and a more systematic focus on co-creation and participation. There is currently a plethora of TRPG systems and settings available, both commercially (Schick, 1991 list well over a hundred, and there has been many more since) and under a creative commons license (e.g. Boyle and Cross, 2009).

One of the problems of TRPGs is that the genre suffers when it comes to expressing what makes a game good, just like games in general (Lundgren, Bergström and Björk, 2009). Opinions differ greatly, and many role-players have deep-seated prejudices towards the way other role-players play, or the systems that they use; added to this is the often insular nature of the TRPG community (a sentiment echoed by Hendricks, 2006).

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Even if members come and go, the player groups are often rather solid, and players seem to seldom discuss their play in depth with others, something which is possibly linked to the earlier stigma associated with TRPGs (Bowman, 2010). Even if the internet created forums for debate, far from every role-player takes part in the debate, and it seems there is a lack of a common language of expression. Likely, this hampers the development of TRPGs and the creation of theories on the activity – Greg Costikyan (1994) lamented this very fact as applied to the wider field of games in his *I Have No Words & I Must Design*.

Comparing with live-action role play (LARP), where larger player groups (often in the hundreds, compared to the 5-6 participants in a TRPG group) contributes to a less insular community, one finds that the debate, both scholarly and otherwise is a lot more open and accessible. As an example, the yearly Nordic conference "Knutepunkt" has published books on LARP theory and practice since Gade, Thorup and Sander (2003) and draws an international crowd. There is nothing similar in the TRPG community – despite several conventions no comparable culture of meta-discussion has developed. *The Interactive Fantasy* (Rilstone, 1994) journal was an early attempt at developing a discourse on role-playing, but only lasted four issues.

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Since TRPG players often state that a sense of creativity is central to their experience (Fine, 1983, Bowman, 2010) and that some type of rules system is inherent in all TRPGs (Montola, 2009), looking at how rules impact the players' sense of creativity could be a fruitful starting point for looking at why some perceive a specific system as good, and some do not.

The purpose of this article is to examine how three different rules systems, chosen for breadth, impact the perceived creativity of the players. "Perceived" since no formal or quantitative measure of creativity will be used, (such as Carson, Peterson and Higgins, 2005) because no such measure exists for TRPGs, and translated existing measures would probably lend themselves poorly to their evaluation.

Although there are plenty of other formalized systems available for the co-creation of stories, such as *Once Upon a Time* (Lambert, Rilstone and Wallis, 1995) or *Universalis* (Holmes and Mazza, 2002), TRPGs were chosen because player groups tend to play the same game extensively, and with some solidity when it comes to the people they play with, making systematic study easier.

With all the talk of games and systems, it is easy to view this as a "game-centered" article (Björk introduced the delineation of game studies into the study of games, gamers and gaming in a 2008 article), but this would be a mistake. At heart, it is primarily focused on the players of TRPGs ("players" is used rather than "gamers" in this article, since a TRPG is not strictly a traditional game and the term "gamer" more frequently conjures up images of someone who plays digital games) and their creativity, here expressed through the respondents of the study.

2. BACKGROUND

In a summary of creativity research, Michael Mumford (2003) claims that there is general agreement that creativity involves the production of "novel, useful products", but applied to TRPGs, this definition is inherently problematic. TRPG players do not produce products, but the creative aspects of role-playing are hard to deny. You can also debate the nature of "usefulness"; the fruit of a role-player's creative endeavor is not, as with a writer or composer, a book or a song, but rather something altogether ephemeral, existing only as it is being made, and afterwards mainly in the minds of the participants, save for notes and/or props. In this, it is more similar to a performance of improvisational jazz.

This study will not delve into the debate on the nature of creativity at length (see e.g. Kaufmann and Sternberg, 2010), but rather establish that for the purposes of this work, it is the player's own experience of creativity that is in focus.

Fine (1983) who wrote about the then-budding hobby using anthropological methods in the 1970s was first out, but besides him tabletop role-playing was previously a distressingly under-researched subject. Since then, researchers Mackay (2001) (role-playing as performing art), Cover (2010) (how narrative is created in TRPGs), Bowman (2010) (benefits of role-playing) and Tresca (2011) (how role-playing games have evolved over the years) have looked at various aspects of TRPGs. Tychsen et al (2007) has made a fruitful comparison between the tabletop and digital varieties of role-playing – finding that although the subject matter is similar, there are fundamental differences, the presence of actual role-playing being one.

When it comes to the rules of role-playing games, Montola (2009) navigates the difficult waters of the role-playing process and outlines three key

components: an imaginary game world, a power structure and personified characters. He also points out that the rules of TRPGs are significantly different from those of e.g. board games as described in e.g Salen & Zimmermans *Rules of Play* (2004).

LeBlanc (2006) introduced the mechanics-dynamics-aesthetics model, which shows how the rules of a game (the mechanics) influence the experience of a game (the aesthetics) through the behavior of the game that emerges from the rules (the dynamics). Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek (2004) also introduced eight types of aesthetics in order to create a more "directed vocabulary" for describing the players' experiences of a game.

Using LeBlancs model, Lundgren, Bergström and Björk (2009) presented the idea of "aesthetical gameplay ideals"; specific concentrations of gameplay design patterns (Björk and Holopainen, 2005) showing how one could describe the aesthetics of a game through its mechanics and dynamics. Although limiting themselves to board- and computer games, these ideas should also be applicable to TRPGs, albeit with a slightly different methodology.

In an early attempt to do something similar for tabletop role-playing, Edwards (2001) put forth the "GNS-model" which has since gained some traction in parts of the TRPG community. It presents three different "creative agendas" – the "gamist" style, concerned with competition; "narrativist" style, concerned with the creation of a good story; and "simulationist" style, concerned with the accurate simulation of a diegesis. The GNS-model has been the subject of much debate since its initial inception and is part of a larger corpus of role-playing theory called "Forge" theory (a useful summary of which can be found in Boss, 2008).

3. METHOD

Rather than studying the game artifact solely as in Lundgren, Bergström and Björk (2009), it was felt that a similar study of TRPGs also demanded user data. TRPGs are much more concerned with players' creativity and have (almost) limitless possibilities compared to board- and computer games. However, in order to focus the discussion and provide a similar frame of reference, three specific game systems were chosen for analysis.

The three systems chosen were *Dungeons & Dragons*, both in its 3.5 (Cook, Tweet and Williams, 2003) and Pathfinder (Bulmahn, 2009) incarnations, *World of Darkness* later edition (Bridges, Chillot, Cliffe and Lee, 2004), and *Legends of Anglerre* (Newton and Birch, 2010). Additionally, the participants were encouraged to comment and compare with other systems if applicable.

Six player groups were picked, with every group having at least extensive experience with one game system and moderate familiarity with another, but often considerably more. All groups were also at least presented with the third game, if they had no previous experience with it. Every game had two groups for which that game was their main experience. Note however that "extensive experience" is not necessarily the same for all three systems; as some have been around longer, players are naturally more experienced with them. The player groups were far from homogenous, with different members having markedly diverse levels of experience with TRPGs, from a couple of years to more than twenty-five years, with the median around 10-15 years. Several reported that they had two "blocks" of TRPG experience, one from when they were younger, and one from when they "rediscovered" the hobby later in life. They all played in other TRPG groups than these from time to time, and were familiar with several other systems. The respondents were of mixed ages, from early twenties to late thirties, and while there was an overrepresentation of males, the gender composition was probably at least comparable the hobby at large. The groups did not stay completely fixed throughout, and three players appeared in more than one group. All in all, about twenty-five people contributed data to the study in this stage.

Several different data collection methods were utilized; interviews with select participants (interviewing all participants would not have been feasible given time, resource and access constraints), participatory observation and observation by the researcher - TRPG researchers Fine (1983), Mackay (2001), Cover (2010), Bowman (2010) and Tresca (2011) all use similar methods, but Fine is the earliest and speaks most about methodology. The most prolific data source was however group discussions, both within the selected groups, and at two occasions between groups when members from several groups gathered.

The interviews and some of the group discussions were more formal, structured affairs compared to the other data collection, but still loose enough to encourage reflection and free association on the subject, very much in the vein of Thomsson (2002). This also meant that the respondents were presented with the work in progress, what others had said before them and invited to take part in the analysis.

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For the interviews and formal group discussions, participant consent was secured beforehand, but for most of the other data collection consent was only secured *post-hoc*. What might have been a serious breach of researcher etiquette in a more sensitive field was considered unproblematic given the subject matter. No participant had any problems with this, and no-one refused participation. No recordings were made, but extensive notes were taken. The respondents were asked specifically if the anonymization standard on their quotes could be relaxed somewhat, so as to be able to include group-specific rulings, sayings, etc. and everyone agreed.

When the study was almost done, the analysis and findings was presented to another, separate group of TRPG players with at least considerable experience to provide greater external validity. They had the opportunity to ask for clarifications, point out errors/findings that did not concur with their understanding. This because the six groups showed remarkable diversity – further emphasizing the point made in the introduction; while this provided the study with rich data, it also raised questions on the reliability of the study, despite the fact that the participants often were in agreement.

The study has two main limitations; the geographically limited sample (Nordic participants only) and the possibility of confounding variables.

While there is no systematic study published on the differences between role-players from different countries, the players themselves maintain that there are many differences, mainly when it comes to the role of the rules. This is however a one-sided assessment since no foreign players has been asked, and in any case it is unlikely that they would have developed opinions on Nordic players. Given the amounts of prejudice generally displayed by role-players (Fine (1989) also reports on this, some twenty-five years earlier) it is probably safe to say that these views are fraught with bias. Nevertheless, this does not mean that concerns over significant geographical differences can be discarded outright. If we turn to the sibling LARP community, there is at least one published work that purport to highlight the differences of "Nordic-style" LARP, entitled simply Nordic LARP (Stenros and Montola, 2010). Further research in the same vein on other samples will hopefully shed light on whether the differences are significant, or if the findings in this study are generalizable to the larger TRPG community. A randomized international sample of TRPG players and e.g. a questionnaire study would also suffice, but is hardly feasible due to resource and access constraints, not to mention the loss of depth/detail that a questionnaire would entail.

The greatest risk of confounding in the study comes from the fact that TRPG games comes with more than rules. There is also setting (sometimes published separately from the rules, see e.g. *GURPS* (Jackson, 1996)) - the diegetic world in which the game takes place, as well as presentation, illustrations, layout etc. of the game. Either of these has the potential to significantly influence player creativity, confounding the relation between the rules system and player creativity. Throughout the interviews and groups discussions the participants were asked to focus on the role of the rules and not the setting of the games, and this was kept in mind during the study.

In addition to the limitations mentioned above, there is also the constant risk of bias introduced by dissimilar respondents, when it comes to e.g. eloquence. Some respondents are naturally much more interested in the topic than others, and some reported a marked disinterest in the rules system altogether. Although this is a risk one runs with almost all interview studies (see e.g. Kvale, 1997) it is mentioned here because the effect might have been somewhat more present.

The results of the study are presented below, first a description of the three systems and player commentaries on them, then a section on the different role of rules, and on different kinds of creativity. The games are described with a short

paragraph on setting and type of game, the traits of a character and other notable rules features. All quotes are translated from the native Swedish, edited for brevity and readability, and anonymised.

4. THE GAMES

The three systems were chosen on the basis of breadth – they represent somewhat radically different approaches to tabletop role-playing – their status as "established" TRPG systems and researcher access to player groups. While some of the more "niche" rules systems (e.g. Czege, 2003) probably could have provided even more breadth, it is in the naturally the case with more obscure games that fewer people play them, thus making it difficult to locate a satisfying sample.

4.1 Dungeons & Dragons 3.5 / Pathfinder

Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) remains a classic tabletop role playing game years after its initial launch in 1974 (Gygax and Arneson, 1974). In many ways it is the "grand old lady" of TRPGs, and is currently in its fourth edition (Collins et al, 2008). In this study it is the earlier 3.5 edition (Cook, Tweet and Williams, 2003) and the later development of Pathfinder (Bulmahn, 2009) that is the object of study, since these are the versions the respondents had familiarity with. For the purposes of this article, the two are considered as the same system. Of the three systems, this is probably the most rules-heavy.

The settings were Eberron (Baker, Slavicsek and Wyatt, 2004) and the Pathfinder setting (Jacobs, 2011); these are more or less classical fantasy settings in which the players portray bold adventurers seeking treasure and experience. Gameplay generally revolves around slaying monsters, overcoming adversaries and fulfilling quests, revolving heavily around armed conflict. As characters progress, they earn experience which grants them additional capabilities.

The D&D character has several components – race, class, attributes, skills, feats, gear, spells if applicable, and sometimes other special abilities; but most important is "level", a general measure of the characters advancement derived from amassed experience. There is also a host of other statistics such as armor class, saves and movement speed derived from the above components. Race (e.g. human, dwarf, elf) gives modifications to attributes and sometimes other abilities (such as low-light vision); class (fighter, ranger, monk, etc.) describes roughly what your character does in the group, but this is not set in stone.

> *"Generally, the fighter fights in close combat, the 'caster [someone who has access to and can cast spells] stays back and provides support, the rouge sneaks and so on, but part of the fun is to challenge these things and play with the roles."*

Most traits are chosen by the player for his or her character, with the exception of attributes which are sometimes rolled for randomly.

> *"In all honesty, despite those that claim otherwise, this game is geared towards combat. Sure not *only* combat, but I have never been in a game that hasn't had plenty of it. That's not necessarily bad, though, it's just that it's more like an action movie than a drama. The game is complicated for a reason; you're supposed to be able to explore the mechanics of the game when you play."*

> *"For me, this game is completely unfathomable; the [D&D] rules are the very anathema of creativity and role-playing. There is so much to keep track of, so much flipping through a heap of rules books and you are constantly penalized if you don't know the rules, so you're not encouraged to experiment at all."*

As is evident from the sentiments above, the respondents were mixed on the merits of the D&D rules. Some pointed at the creativity inherent in using the rules, others felt that the many rules stifled and dampened their creative expression. It was also evident from the respondents that a system such as this required all participants to know the rules to a much greater degree than in other systems, where only the GM (Game Master / Moderator) might have a firm grasp of the system.

4.2 World of Darkness (new edition, diceless)

The "world of darkness" (WoD) came into being in 1998 with the launch of the first edition of *Vampire the Masquerade* (Achilli et al, 1998). Since then several different games have been published that have compatible rules and are set in the same world, allowing characters from the different games to be present in the same group. In 2004 the game was rebooted and a core rulebook for the "new world of darkness" (nWoD) was introduced (Bridges et al, 2004). The system generally uses dice, but can also be played diceless, as it was in this case. The rules are designed to be fast and

comparatively easy to learn, but it is by no means rules-light.

The WoD setting is a sort of "shadow-version" of contemporary earth, where supernatural beings such as vampires and werewolves prowl the night. The genre is called "gothic-punk" and attempts to deal with more mature themes. The players can portray any number of supernatural creatures, or normal humans, and gameplay usually explores themes of personal horror – the sense that you are losing what makes you human and degenerating into the unknown.

The nWoD consolidated the rules, even if the rules of the earlier games were already pretty similar. Characters have attributes, abilities, merits, (sometimes) supernatural abilities and a morality trait.

In this case, the players used the same system but dispensed with the rolling of dice, instead allowing the game master (in WoD called the "storyteller") to judge based on the characters score and the interest of the story. The players could spend willpower points to increase their score. In one of the groups the players also had "drama points", inspired by games such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer RPG* (Brannan et al, 2002), with which they could influence the story and resurrect their characters. Similar systems nowadays exist in numerous TRPGs, such as "perversity points" in *Paranoia* (Varney, 2004) and fate points in *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* (Pramas, 1986) or *Dark Heresy* (Barnes, Flack and Mason, 2008).

> *"We want things to go as fast as possible and wouldn't let a bad dice roll get in the way of a good story. The 'dots' [WoD stats are often called dots because of how they are depicted in the rulebook] simply illustrate what your character is good at and is used in a purely descriptive sense."*
>
> *"I like dice. They provide uncertainty, dispel some of the arbitrariness that would otherwise occur, and allows for a much more dynamic story to 'grow' from the interactions between the players; the random results also forces you to be creative in new and unexpected ways."*

The respondents were again of different minds on the use of dice; while some abhorred it and some felt it "almost necessary", some occupied a more moderate middle ground.

4.3 Legends of Anglerre

Legends of Anglerre (LoA) (Newton and Birch, 2010) is the fantasy version of the popular *Starblazer Adventures* (Birch, Donachie, Newman and Nicol, 2008) role-playing game, and uses the FATE (Donoghue and Hicks, 2003) system. It is meant to be rules-light, streamlined, and to encourage a narrative style of play.

The rules can be used with a number of settings (two examples are included in the product); one of the groups had created their own generic fantasy world before play, the other created theirs "on the fly" during play, changing the setting every couple of games.

A LoA character is defined by his or her skills, stunts and aspects. Aspects are short sentences that describe the character and that can be brought into play through the use of "fate points", that are gained if the aspect is negative (in a given situation) for one's character, and spent if it is positive.

> *"Let's say my character has the aspect 'light sleeper'. If I need to roll in order to wake up when someone sneaks into my room, I can spend a point and get a bonus, but if there is lots of noise during the night, perhaps I don't get much sleep at all and wake fatigued; then I would get a point instead."*

Fate points also serve the same function as the drama points mentioned earlier, allowing the players to affect the story directly through their expenditure.

> *"If I come up with something that my character could do something really cool with if it was in the story, then the GM might allow me to spend a point, and it is there. Or maybe I forgot to state something important earlier, then maybe I can spend a point and I didn't."*

LoA is a game with few rules, and those that are all work more or less in the same way.

4.4 On house rules and group adaptations

None of the groups ran their game exactly as the rules were written, instead substituting unwanted rules with their own interpretations, removing superfluous rules (seldom explicitly, more often they would just not use them) and making additions, often taken from other systems, such as the drama point example above. While this might seem to make it more difficult to evaluate a given rules system it is not necessarily so. These are often minor alterations and adaptations, fully

comparable to the house rules and other agreements that occur when playing other types of games, such as board games (Bergström, 2010). Adapting the rules can also be seen as a creative pursuit, see below.

5. THE ROLE OF RULES

Presented here are a number of different roles that the rules play for the creative process during the game. They emerged during the interviews and later solidified during the discussions.

5.1 The rules as "narration first" or "rules first"

An important difference between the rules systems was the distinction between "rules first" and "narration first" systems. In a narration first system (WoD) the player would narrate the actions of their character first, and the rules interpretation would come afterwards, in a rules first system (D&D, LoA) the mechanics precede the narration.

> *"Oh, this one is a little bit complicated – with rules first it's like no matter what I do, the rules stay the same, so I have enormous freedom. All magical ranged attacks in LoA are the same, so I can describe it in whatever way I like; freezing blasts, Darth Vader style choking, or whatever. With narration first I have to be more careful, but on the other hand, what I say matters more, 'cause if I do something smart, for example, that will be reflected in how the rules resolve the action."*

> *"These are two completely different narration styles, and I can't honestly say that I prefer one over the other; one is good if you want a colorful story, the other if you want to be more problem-solving creative, so to speak."*

"With narration first I have to be more careful, but on the other hand, what I say matters more, 'cause if I do something smart, for example, that will be reflected in how the rules resolve the action."

5.2 The rules as arbitrator

Tabletop role-playing is a collaborative, co-creation effort, but as in all groups that do something together, different opinions sometimes clash. Two players can have a different view of what makes an interesting story, or what would be possible for a character, for example. While the GM usually fulfills the arbitrator role, the rules also carry this capacity, and are often viewed as more impartial. Often used in player vs. player conflicts. In this way, the rules can function as an arbitrator of player creativity, helping to ensure equality between the players. However, the rules often fail in this regard according to the respondents.

> *"Of course it happens that two people are of a different mind on what should happen, and the GM might not be able to resolve it. Then we might go 'let's ask the dice, shall we?' and in effect, the rules decide."*

White (2009) has a good example of this: "*[13-23] shows the GM reframing his diegetic attempt game-mechanically rather than narratively…*" (p. 179), where the GM uses the rules to arbitrate.

5.3 The rules as creative coolant

While a very open system might engender free and open narration, this can sometimes become too boundless, and in this case the rules system can act as a "coolant" that prevents the narrative from becoming too fantastic. The three systems in the study were cited as placed more or less on a scale, with D&D as most coolant, nWoD in between, and LoA least. The respondents seem to indicate that there is a difference between creative quantity and creative quality, but that the relation between the two is far from straightforward. Note that a story can be fantastic, but still internally consistent, which differs this role from the one below.

> *"When we play a more open, free form game where the rules basically don't restrict you at all, the narration often becomes very fantastic and far-fetched. This is fun now and then, but seldom produces the more tight, believable stories. The rules 'bound the sandbox' so to speak, and makes sure the sand doesn't go everywhere".*

5.4 The rules as consistency-provider

Diegetic consistency is an issue in both TRPGs and other narratives, such as books and movies, but where someone might review the script of a movie and spot inaccuracies, TRPGs lack the presence of a script. Rules can often provide some consistency, a stable, quantifiable point in the diegesis that change in more or less pre-set ways, that the players can come back to and make sure that consistency is maintained; or to quote one respondent, "*at least isn't completely out the window*".

"Sometimes people smirk at the notion of realism in obviously fantastic settings, but what they don't release is that it isn't about realism, it is about internal consistency and that that the world makes sense 'in that world' so to speak."

5.5 The rules as inspiration

Many rules-set, include several different options for creating your character, pre-selected skills and other abilities. The systems in this study are no different, and are quite rich with examples and possibilities. Along with the game's setting, these can also provide inspiration, both for characters and for stories, which the players might not have thought about otherwise.

"It's sometimes hard to say where the setting ends and the rules begin, in some cases they are inextricably linked. They can provide great inspiration towards what the game is really about, so to speak, and gives a sort of 'easy access' to the setting."

5.6 The rules as support

While all players are equal on paper (there are no handicapping rules in TRPGs) the players often differ in levels of experience with the game (both rules and setting) and creative ability. The rules can serve as support for inexperienced players and show what you can do and not, what the chances of success for a particular action might be, and as was mentioned by the respondent above, allow access to the setting.

"Say what you want about D&D, but it is a gem for beginners if they play with someone who really knows the game. Your options are all laid out for you, but there is still depth as you level up. Combat is simple, and the rules regulate everything, so there is no need to feel like you don't 'get it'. Sure, a good player gets more done, but it's not the same as if you have a more abstract system"

"For someone who isn't as into the geek stuff as us, the rules help level the playing field, so to speak, and I know this might seem like a paradox, but it really isn't"

According to the respondents, it is very different to not know the rules, and knowing them but not being good at using them, the former leading to much more trouble as players "freeze up" when they become uncertain.

5.7 The rules as communication

The rules system, particularly the numbers on different traits, serves an important communicative purpose during the game. While verbal descriptions usually suffice, putting numbers on abstract concepts can ease communication and make sure that there is a greater similarity of understanding in the group. By using the rules when communicating, skilled role-players can distribute creativity in the group, without sacrificing consistency.

"I'll give you an example - if my character receives damage, for example, I want to know more exactly how damaged, but this can be hard to describe exactly in words. If the game master can put a number to it instead, I can interpret the numbers and play from there."

5.8 The rules as randomness

Only two of the systems in the study had randomness (the WoD system has randomness as written, but this was removed by the player group) and while undesired results can disrupt the activity as a whole, everyone agrees that it also can serve as a potent source of new creative angles. Whether it is a failed roll when overcoming an obstacle, or a roll on a random encounter table, the dice (dice provides the randomness in almost all TRPGs) have the potential to surprise the entire group, including the GM.

"Randomness makes the story more organic, more uncertain. You never know exactly what will happen and often the unexpected occurs, forcing you to think in new ways. Without randomness you are safer, and you can be more long-term, so to speak. Both ways have their merits."

5.9 The rules as diegetic control (distribution) mechanism

Diegetic control[1] and the distribution thereof can be a sensitive thing when playing TRPGs, and it has a direct and obvious effect on player creativity. It refers to who has the power to decide what is true or not in the game diegesis, that is, the alternative world that is created by the narrative (compare "alternative possible world" in Cover, 2010). The GM usually has "ultimate authority" but this picture is overly simplistic. Tradition, specific

[1] "Diegetic control" is who has the power or authority to enter things into the diegesis, i.e. "to make things true in the story".

agreements for the player group and the system being played all contribute to an often complex pattern of who gets to enter things into the narrative. Worthy of an article all on its own, details will not be provided here beyond the facet of the rules. Both the WoD and the LoA games had a specific game currency to allow players to enter specifics into the diegesis beyond their characters.

> *"It usually isn't stated right out, but sometimes it is, but all systems also carry their own more or less implicit understanding of the power of the players vis a vis the game master. In D&D, while 'the GM is god', s/he is also assumed to stick to the rules of the game and not change anything on the fly, on the other hand, because of the 'gaminess' of the rules, the players are also bound very strictly. In WoD, whatever the GM says goes, all the time. In LoA authority explicitly rests with the table, i.e. the group, and not solely the GM."* [respondent refers to the specific games among the groups in this study, not those systems in general]

6. FLAVORS OF CREATIVITY

As is evident from the respondents and earlier research, tabletop role-playing games elicit several different "brands" of creativity, which is affected greatly by the role rules play in a specific game. Six of the more prominent are outlined below, with the most important roles rules play (italicized) for each.

Rules as support and *rules as diegetic control mechanism* is not linked to any specific type of creativity, instead having a more broad effect on the creative process.

6.1 Narrative (story) creativity

Narrative creativity refers to the ability or potential to create a good story, usually going outside your specific character (if you are not the GM) and looking at the story as a whole. Introducing new elements and re-visiting older elements (a hallmark of good narrative, according to Johnstone (1979)), developing the ongoing story and coming up with new arcs are all part of narrative creativity.

> *"Depending on the rules, you are either required to influence the story with only your character, or there might also be other venues afforded by the rules, such as with fate- and drama points. You can also make off-game suggestions, for example, but this is received differently in different groups."*

Rules as creative coolant and *rules as consistency-provider* are most important for narrative creativity; both making sure that the story does not become too farfetched and retains internal consistency.

6.2 Acting creativity

Acting creativity is about being creative in the portrayal of your character (or characters, in the case of the GM), what many players consider the "core" of role-playing. Initially it was not separated from narrative creativity, but this is apparently a point of contention among players. Some think that a player should only concern him- or herself with this type of creativity, others think that narrative creativity is much more important.

> *"I normally don't concern myself with the overall story that much, I like to immerse myself in the character completely, and really try to *be* that person. And since he or she doesn't look at his or her life as a story, neither do I – but of course I try to retain some sense not to ruin things completely."*

For acting creativity rules as communication is important, since it frees up the player to act on system inputs, as is *rules as randomness* which provides new angles to act upon.

6.3 Gaming creativity

More directly related to the rules system, this is the type of creativity exhibited when utilizing the rules towards some specific outcome. For many players this is "optimizing" their character, choosing the traits and abilities that will allow the character to succeed as much as possible, but also choosing the correct action rules-wise at any given moment. Heavily dependent on the rules-system used, which must be well-written and interesting if players are to bother.

> *"Comparing builds [a specific combination of character traits and abilities], scouring the rules for powerful combinations or ability synergies, finding how elements work together for maximum effect – this is the heart of D&D for me. But with other systems, this just isn't as possible"*

The *rules as arbitrator* is central for gaming creativity, as it provides a sense of fairness and levels the playing field, emphasizing the "game" aspect of the TRPG. *Rules as randomness* is also important, since randomness affects everyone alike, and is something that can be manipulated through usage of the rules.

6.4 Problem-solving creativity

One of the focus points of Bowman's (2010) book, most TRPG scenarios include plenty of problem-solving. The problems come in a wide variety; tactical, social, political, strategic and more. This has to be balanced with acting creativity, lest the believability of a player's portrayal of his or her character suffers. While gaming creativity also covers some problem-solving, that is always under the auspices of the rules system and its mechanics, while this refers to more open-ended problem solving, such as coming up with a good plan or compromise between two conflicting factions.

> *"Almost none of the problem-solving we do have anything to do with the rules, the boundaries come from the setting, the situation and or characters."*

> *"Problem-solving can be difficult, because you want to be smart and come up with good solutions, but at the same time you mustn't overplay [e.g. playing smarter or more skilled than the character is rules-wise] your character too much. But it can be very difficult playing dumber than you are, so we are usually pretty lenient with that."*

Problem-solving creativity is among the things affected by *rules first* vs. *narration first* – in a rules first environment it can be difficult for good problem-solving strategies to gain traction, since the rules remain the same despite clever strategy. *Rules as consistency provider* is also important, since problem-solving can be difficult (or too easy) in a world with little consistency.

6.5 Game-world creativity

This is the creativity used to create the setting and elements within, such as your characters backstory, the geography or inhabitants of a region, organizations in the game world, and so on. This is generally uninfluenced by the system used, and heavily dependent on the division of diegetic control in the group and its traditions. It is closer to the craft of a writer, but not wholly, as care must be taken to adapt the world to the role-playing format.

> *"When we play LoA, we usually create the world together, relieving the burden on the game master and giving everyone the opportunity to be creative in constructing the setting. The GM acts as facilitator, but everyone introduces elements and develops each other's elements, provide suggestions, and so on"*

> *"Since our WoD game is so dependent on the sense of mystery, the players participate very little in the world creation, instead uncovering the secrets of the GM piece by piece. But of course we have some influence, saying what elements we like, and so"*

> *"The Pathfinder setting is pretty much written already, but you always get to make the background of your character and how it fits into that world"*

Game-world creativity is largely influenced by *rules first* vs. *narration first* – rules first frees up the player to describe things very freely in the game world, since the descriptions do not affect the underlying rules much. *Rules as inspiration* is also important, the rules feeding information on the game world to the players.

6.6 System creativity

A form of meta-creativity, this is the creativity required to adapt the rules system to the specific group and its needs and wants. In many cases this is perceived as necessary to fix flaws and/or bugs in the rules system, often by removing parts deemed "unbalanced", but whole new elements can also be introduced, such as in the WoD game.

> *"Very few games can be played RAW [Rules As Written]; there is always something that doesn't suit our style of play, or is just plain broken. Often it is easy to fix, but sometimes you have to get really creative or rewrite sections altogether. And of course, sometimes we add entirely new rules structures, often adapted from other games"*

System creativity is not particularly influenced by any of the roles, and this is hardly surprising given that system creativity is concerned with being creative with the rules themselves. Often players will try to bolster one or more of the roles above, often striving towards or just removing obstacles for their preferred type(s) of creativity.

7. DISCUSSION

The notion that TRPG groups usually do not engage in discussions with one another on the nature of their activity was readily supported by the respondents. Only a handful admitted to ever having talked beyond the superficial with another role-playing group, and many claimed that even within the group there was a significant lack of discussion on e.g. what the different players wanted out of the activity.

> *"I don't think I've ever talked to another role-playing group on issues beyond specific rules, personal characters or the like - and certainly never as a group. Problem is that even if I/we did, I'm not sure what we'd be talking about."*

During the group discussions many seemed to experience their first real, in-depth discussion on what they got out of role-playing games, but the prejudices held against other role-players also came to the fore.

> *"What they are doing is not even role-playing in my book, it's just dice rolling and normal gaming, not unlike a computer role-playing game. Why anyone would waste time with it is beyond me."*

While the existence of multiple forms of creativity in TRPGs is by no means a significant find on its own, it is important to understand its relation to the rules system used and that different systems cater to different individuals, because they prefer different forms of creativity.

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The respondents also confirmed the lack of language when discussing TRPGs, and often retorted to the use of examples of other systems during the discussions, leading to some difficulty since all were not familiar with the examples.

Looking back at the GNS-model (Edwards, 2001), the gamist, narrativist and simulationist styles map quite well towards the gaming creativity, narrative creativity and acting creativity. The latter is probably the worst fit, since acting creativity does not necessarily imply a simulationist style. It is also important to mention that the respondents did not see the "competition" in the gamist style, and instead focused on the use of rules. This is probably because the GNS model has been presented somewhat differently than originally incepted in Swedish RPG circles. The inherent differences between the styles was also evident through the respondents in this study, showing that it can be hard to reconcile different playing styles and that it is difficult to find rules that cater to all kinds of creativity.

Of the eight types of fun mentioned by Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek (2004), it is only the first, *games as sense-pleasure* which is not readily applicable to TRPGs – although it is not impossible that there is some ensemble out there that derive sense-pleasure through e.g. beautiful language, none of the respondents mentioned this. Out of the remaining seven, *game as make-believe*, *game as drama* and *game as obstacle course* can be associated with the creative aspects of the TRPG. Game as make-believe is closest to narrative creativity and game-world creativity, game as drama to narrative and acting creativity, and game as obstacle course to gaming and problem-solving creativity.

The respondents pointed out that although creativity in its many facets probably was the main reason they played TRPGs, creativity is not the only thing you get out of a TRPG. There is also the thrill of uncertainty, often aided by the rules' fortune aspect, the joy of camaraderie (a design ideal covered in Bergström, Lundgren and Björk, 2010) and the delight in exploring other worlds, maybe testing things that you would not do otherwise (Bowmann, 2010) – all of which corresponds rather well towards the remaining types of fun mentioned by Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek (2004). Thus, it could be unwise to tailor a game exclusively towards the facilitation of creativity at the expense of other areas.

One could argue that since players adapt the systems so much, and tend to chose systems that fit their style of play, a more relativist position – saying that the actual game artifact matters so little in relation to the group that uses it that a study of this kind becomes moot - but this would be unnecessarily shortsighted; the artifact does matter, at least according to the respondents. They all agree that significant adaptation takes place, but at the same time not everything has been written, and there just are not systems for all tastes out there.

At the same time, one must also be careful not to underestimate the impact on creativity from other sources than the rules system; as was mentioned in the methods chapter. However, the respondents mentioned that many of them never saw anything of the artifact except the rules as they were explained to them, perhaps a character sheet, which further complicates the matter.

7.1 The importance of diegetic control

Initially, the role rules played as distribution of diegetic control was not emphasized by the respondents, the reason probably being that diegetic control can be a sensitive subject, and that different groups have quite entrenched traditions on what the distribution should be, to the point that some did not even recognize the presence of alternative paradigms at first. However, as the discussion deepened, it became clear that it was how the rules tackled the distribution of diegetic control that seemed to have the most effect on player creativity. Also observe that "diegetic control" is equivalent of the power structures mentioned as a key component of the role-playing process in Montola (2009). Therefore it is interesting to go back to the games covered in the study, and look at how they influence what types of creativity becomes important through how their rules approach diegetic control:

In a game with strict diegetic control, such as D&D, where not only the roles of player and game master is rigidly defined but the rules also regulate the diegesis to a large extent, the players naturally turn to gaming creativity at the expense of narrative creativity. But with a very clearly defined rules-set there is also a tendency towards less problem-solving, as it can be difficult to undertake actions not covered by the rules. The importance of rules gave rise to system creativity, but mostly in a "fix" capacity, and not the introduction of new elements. This might not be the case for an audience less willing to play (or less familiar with) alternative systems, such as those that use the D&D rules for a greater diversity of games (Cover, 2010, Bowman 2010). This would make them adapt the system instead of choosing another, which in turn also fosters system creativity.

In the nWoD groups, diegetic control was significantly relaxed in comparison, with both the players being allowed (slightly) more leeway and the rules occupying more of a descriptive and advisory position. Accordingly, gaming creativity was largely absent and acting creativity more emphasized. Through drama points and the option to narrate entire sequences without explicit involvement of the GM, narrative creativity was possible to a great extent. System creativity was absent during the game as the rules remained fixed, but the game groups had both adapted the system beforehand to suit their needs and wishes.

The LoA groups were somewhere in the middle rules-density wise, with clearly defined but loose rules. There was also a clear "rules first" focus which de-emphasized problem-solving and instead encouraged narrative creativity. The simplicity of the rules removed gaming creativity, but the aspect- and fate-point system further boosted narrative creativity. Because the players were relatively unfamiliar with the system – FATE has not been around as long as the other systems – interpreting and adapting the rules required some system creativity. LoA was also more or less unique in its facilitation of game-world creativity, because of an emphasis on player created worlds and elements.

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8. CONCLUSION

This article has studied what role three TRPG rules systems have in facilitating player creativity through interviews and observation of six player groups. It has outlined nine different roles that rules can play in fostering player creativity, and how these influence six different types of creativity associated with tabletop role-playing. The most important probably being the distribution of diegetic control, which seems to have a far reaching effect on the creative expression.

This work is aimed at scholars interested in TRPGs and those looking to design TRPG systems, as well as TRPG players, or anyone else interested in the rather unique mesh of game-like rules and play-like creativity in TRPGs. The study provides greater insight into how the two fit together, help in the design of TRPG systems if looking to tailor them towards creativity, and offer more information on the creative expression of players of TRPGs. It also outlines a language of expression for some parts of the TRPG activity, which through the respondent-close methodology is hopefully as useful as possible to those that might need it.

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