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8. Online Freeform Role-Playing Games

Jessica Hammer

Imagine being in a chat room, watching as two of your friends play out a conversation between Snape and Spider-Man about how they take their coffee. In another window, you are browsing Snape's character journal to see what's been happening to him recently. In a third, you have a half-written post to the game's forum about how one of your characters, Starbuck, gets into a fistfight. This imaginary game is an example of what participants call *online freeform role-playing*.

Online freeform role-playing games have significant similarities with other types of Role-playing games (RPGs). For example, online freeform players adopt the roles of characters in a shared fictional setting (RPedia: The Roleplay Resource 2012b). Participants play their characters together, collaborating to find out what

will happen next (wanted wanted 2013). Finally, players can affect the state of the game world through the behavior of their characters (Montola 2008). These features distinguish online freeform role-playing games from related activities such as collaborative writing and fan fiction[1].

At the same time, online freeform role-playing games are distinct from other types of role-playing, including freeform live-action role-playing games (larps) and multi-player online role-playing games (MORPGs). Unlike other digital RPGs, which use custom software, online freeform games primarily take place on platforms that are not intended for role-playing. As of this writing, a partial list would include journaling sites such as Livejournal and Dreamwidth; online forums; social networks such as Twitter, Google Plus, and Facebook; Tumblr; dedicated mobile apps such as Geekling; email; wikis; IRC; and chat. (RPedia: The Roleplay Resource 2012). Online freeform players have adopted platforms even when role-playing is neither supported nor welcomed. For example, so much role-playing was happening on Nintendo's Mii system that Nintendo redesigned it to reduce role-playing activity (Buckley 2015).

Online freeform games do not limit themselves to a single platform. Rather, these games draw on different types of software to serve game goals. In *Cryptic Conjuring*, for example, players post their characters' actions on a web-based forum (Cryptic Conjuring 2015). However, players also use chat rooms to sketch out scenes in real-time that they later write up and post. A Shoutbox – live, web-based chat embedded on the game's home page – allows players to leave quick messages for one another or have brief conversations, while new players are recruited through the All Things Roleplay tumblr (All Things Roleplay 2015). Each medium has a separate purpose, but they are linked together both formally, through hyperlinking and references, and culturally, by players' shared understanding of what technologies to use for which parts of play.

Online freeform is also the only form of role-playing which is primarily *asynchronous*. While some games use synchronous systems such as chat for specific purposes, the majority of play takes place using asynchronous systems such as forums, where players do not have to be online at the same time (RPedia: The Roleplay Resource 2012). For example, if one player posted on a game forum at midnight, another player could comment on their post at noon. Because players do not have to coordinate schedules, online freeform games enable a wide range of participation patterns. For example, a player could make many posts in a short

period of time, and then go for a long time without making any posts at all. This is a sharp contrast to tabletop and live-action role-playing games, where players agree to gather at a specific place for a specific length of time.

Finally, online freeform role-players are predominantly women and predominantly young (Fiesler 2013). For example, a survey of one large game found that 83% of players were female and 75% were between the ages of 16 and 25 (Strickland 2011). This pattern may be because of the form's roots in fanfiction and online journaling; while some online freeform games develop original settings or require original characters, many games remain deeply engaged with popular books, movies, or television shows (Hampton 2015).

Online freeform role-playing is an emergent form that is primarily asynchronous and text-based, it takes place using a variety of distributed online journaling and discussion tools where players take on the role of characters in a shared fictional setting and collaboratively affect the state of the game world through the behavior of their characters.

Callout 8.1: Online freeform role-playing

To best capture the nature of online freeform, this chapter uses existing research on online freeform where available, coupled with direct investigation of canonical games and interviews with online freeform players. First, we will explore the stakeholders of online freeform games. Second, we will look at common patterns of technology use. Finally, we will examine two challenges created by technology and how online freeform addresses them.

[Box 8.1 near here]

One brief note about what this chapter does *not* cover: technologies that are used as an adjunct to other forms of role-playing. Consider, for example, Facebook profiles for larp characters, wikis that track the history of tabletop games, or forums that coordinate the activity of MORPG guilds. While these adjuncts to play can be asynchronous, use multiple platforms, and take place on platforms not intended for role-playing, they are beyond the scope of this chapter because they are not the central play activity. Nonetheless, we believe that insights from this chapter are applicable to understanding how they function.

Stakeholders

Before exploring how online freeform is played, it is important to understand the different possible roles for participants. As we will see below, each role has important specialized functions within the game. These roles include players, who portray characters; moderators, who manage the logistical and social tasks of play; administrators, who control the technological means of participation; and readers, who follow along with the game without participating. These roles are similar to those found in MUDs, or multi-user dungeons, though with some aspects that are specific to online freeform play **(see chapter 7)**.

Players participate in the game by portraying characters. Players often maintain a stable of multiple characters that they can select from, depending on what type of play they are in the mood for, or on which other players they would like to interact with. In most games, they are considered to have ownership over those characters, and those characters' actions are the primary way that the player can affect the game world. In most types of online freeform play, players primarily portray their characters through writing. For example, in forum-based play, players write posts that describe what their character is thinking, feeling, and doing; in chat-based games, the players do the same in written chat messages; in play by-email (PBeM) games, the players use emails. However, there is an important secondary role for image-based communication in online freeform.

Players may share character portraits, respond to posts with reaction gifs, or use images to convey the tone of a scene (I, Roleplayer 2015).

Moderators handle the logistical and social tasks of managing play. Sample moderator[2] duties might include developing storylines for particular players, resolving conflicts between players, enforcing the rules, or managing the application process for the game (Footprint 2006).

Administrators control the technological means of participation. For example, the owner of an email list used for PBeM play can change the settings of the list, or unilaterally remove individual players from the game. Administrators often delegate some power to moderators, such as the ability to eject a misbehaving player from a chat room. However, administrators' own power is almost always limited by the constraints of the software the group is using.

Readers follow along with the game by reading what participants have written, without necessarily participating themselves. Online freeform participants have a complex relationship with readers. On one hand, they are aware that others are

reading their work, and often value the ability to entertain readers both inside and outside the game. On the other hand, players are often aware that their work skirts the boundaries of legality, at least when it comes to writing in pre-existing settings or using characters from other media, and hence do not seek to attract the attention of outsiders. In practice, this conflict is resolved by the sheer difficulty of learning how to read an online freeform game without deep expertise in the community of practice; while readers do not necessarily play in the game they are reading, it is exceptionally difficult to learn how to read without ever having played.

Finally, we note that online freeform games are highly scalable, ranging from intimate two-player games at the low end, to thousands of players at the high end; for example, *Hogwarts New Zealand* has over 9,000 player accounts (Hogwarts New Zealand 2015). The balance among players, moderators, administrators, and readers changes depends on the size of the game. For example, large games often give moderators highly differentiated roles: one large game set in a interdimensional bar included a “bar mod” who was responsible for maintaining the continuity of the fictional space, such as tracking whether the bar had chairs or benches (Milliways Mods 2015).

Technology and Characteristics of Play

Online freeform players select technologies to serve their social and narrative purposes in play. Taylor frames these types of choices as an *assemblage of play*, a complex relationship between software, game design, and player choices that produces a play experience (Taylor 2009). Online freeform communities vary in the tools they select, as well as the goals they seek to achieve with them. This variation is particularly evident in moments of conflict, such as the 2009-2012 exodus of Livejournal online freeform role-players to competitor Dreamwidth and microblogging site Tumblr. In their discussions about whether to move, players articulated specific software design decisions Livejournal made that changed their play experience. Some groups, such as *Fandom High*, remained on Livejournal despite its limitations, while other groups, such as *Milliways Bar*, switched platforms in search of an easier way to play (Fanlore 2015).

Even though online freeform players assemble and deploy a range of technologies, and even though there is variation within each of those technologies, it is still possible to glean some insights about common behavior. Rather than attempting to describe all online freeform games – whose practices, as mentioned earlier, vary significantly – we extract three relevant themes.

Parallel Play

Online freeform allows *multiple activities to proceed in parallel*, including scenes involving some of the same characters and/or players. This is a sharp contrast to tabletop and live-action role-playing, where a given player can only be involved in one scene at a time. It also contrasts with the "persistent world" model of CRPGs and MORPGs, in which all players affect a shared digital environment; in online freeform, players explode the space of play into many parallel streams, then reassemble them mentally into a shared understanding of the world.

Online freeform games are, as noted above, assembled across many different platforms. While some games use synchronous elements, the majority of online freeform play is asynchronous, and much of it is slow. Scenes often take multiple play sessions, spread across days or weeks, to complete. It is therefore common for many scenes to be active at the same time. Players can decide on each visit whether they want to contribute to one of the current open scenes, whether they want to initiate something new, or both.

In online freeform, parallel role-play refers to the fact that a player may control characters in multiple scenes all at the same time.

Callout 8.2: Parallel role-play

Many online freeform games allow players more than one character. As with alternate characters (alts) in MORPGs, players can switch between different characters. However, unlike alts, players may be engaged with multiple characters simultaneously. For example, a player might have multiple windows open, each of which involves a scene with a different character. Even when players are limited to one character, they may be participating in multiple scenes involving that character at the same time, or in both scenes and discussions about future scenes. If they have a moderator or administrator role, they may also simultaneously be participating in discussions about game rules, reviewing applications to join the game, or adjusting the software to better support play.

Documentation

The default for digitally created materials is that they leave some type of trace. Typed text – the primary medium of online freeform – can be saved, copied, pasted, and edited **(**Clark and Brennan 1991**)**. Most ways of communicating online through text automatically capture it; for example, sending an email to a Google Group saves a copy both in the sender's account and in the group's

archives. Images, as well, are almost always captured in the process of sharing them, such as by posting a gif on Tumblr.

Online freeform games, therefore, generate an enormous amount of associated data. Unlike tabletop and live-action games, no special effort is needed to capture and interpret the data, or to translate from the analog to the digital. Unlike most computer role-playing games (CRPGs) and MORPGs, the data can be extracted, modified, or repurposed without special tools or skills. However, the very abundance of this data generates problems for participants, as we will see later in this chapter.

Access Control

Every type of software currently used for online freeform play allows some type of access control. For example, a PbeM game using Google Groups can control whether or not its archives are publicly viewable. Group administrators can grant or revoke posting access for individual players, and they can also decide which members are able to perform technical tasks such as releasing posts from moderation. These decisions about access are enforced in code. While not every game chooses the same mix of access levels, the idea of controlling viewership,

participation, and moderation through code is a critical feature of this genre of role-playing games.

Despite how granular access control can be in theory, in practice it is far less so. Online freeform players write scenes that may be read by a range of overlapping audiences: active scene partners; players who aren't involved in the scene, but are observing at the time of writing; players browsing the game archives at a later date; moderators and administrators who need to make game rulings; or dedicated spectators who follow the game as a hobby. As boyd found with teenagers using social media, participants are aware of the multiple audiences for their role-play performances and adjust how they write accordingly (boyd 2014). For example, online freeform players often deliberately write in ways that are inaccessible to a general audience, so that strangers do not try to police the setting or the stories told in the game.

[Box 8.2 near here]

Challenges of Online Freeform Play

So far, this chapter has described a set of features that, broadly speaking, characterize online freeform play. These features have advantages for

participants, such as the ability to contribute on one's own schedule and the power to control access to different parts of the game. However, they also affect the way that common role-playing challenges, such as agreeing on a shared narrative, are manifested and addressed in this genre of play.

Narrative Collisions

In a narrative collision, two contradictory things have happened in the game at the same time. In tabletop and live-action games, this might mean that players have different mental models of what has happened in the game, which may not be discovered until there is an overt conflict between them (Montola 2008). When it is discovered, players can confer to bring their models back into synch. When players interact with digital game worlds, as in CRPGs and MORPGs, the game software prevents these types of contradictions and serves as the canonical baseline for reality. In online freeform, however, there is no shared persistent world, nor any computer code-based way to evaluate whether an action has caused a contradiction. On the other hand, players may generate a large amount of material distributed over multiple platforms based on a misconception; simply conferring with other players may not be enough to restore the narrative integrity of the game world.

A narrative collision is when two contradictory things have happened in a game at the same time.

Callout 8.3: Narrative collision

Online freeform play has additional vulnerabilities. First, some types of online freeform play allow simultaneous editing. For example, on a web forum, multiple participants can reply to the same thread at the same time. Second, many games allow characters to be present in multiple scenes running simultaneously; events in one scene might make the other impossible, or at least impossible as written. Third, attempts to resolve narrative conflicts can take a long time. While this process is happening, other players may not be aware of it (or even that there was a conflict in the first place), and continue to build on the disputed material. Finally, online freeform players may simply be more likely to *catch* continuity errors and narrative collisions, because the past of the game is so well-documented.

[Box 8.3 near here]

While online games use a range of techniques to address this problem, we present some representative examples.

In *preplay*, players collaborate privately about how they want a given scene to play out, then later run it. Disagreements are ironed out before the scene is made visible to the larger group. Preplay may take place in the same medium as the rest of the game (e.g. using direct messages in a forum-based game), but players may also switch to a different format. For example, players often switch to a synchronous format such as IRC or chat when doing preplay so they can come to agreement faster.

Alternately, a scene that is already publicly visible can be *put on hold*. For example, a forum thread title might be changed to indicate that no new contributions are allowed until the conflict has been resolved.

Preplay is a process by which players collaboratively establish how they want a scene to proceed before playing that scene.

Callout 8.4: Preplay

Other solutions use *setting* to address this problem, such as by choosing a setting where time, space, or even reality itself is in question. For example, *The Nexus* took place in an interdimensional nexus, allowing for some flexibility in narrative logic (Dear Multiverse 2015). These choices allow major narrative collisions to exist within the game's canon. Did a character do two contradictory things? Then they time traveled, or they had a doppelganger, or they simply did them both.

Even in games with more traditional settings, minor discontinuities are often treated *pragmatically*. For example, if a character enjoys a glass of milk in one scene, and talks about hating milk in another scene, that conflict may not be important enough to resolve. Players use their own judgment in determining what facts need to be reconciled, and which can be elided in the narrative – and many players consider the ability to use their own judgment to be a feature, not a bug.

The Waiting Game

Online freeform games are, like all role-playing games, collaborative. Players must wait for responses from other participants before moving ahead with the game. However, asynchronous play means that participants cannot know when their collaborators will next contribute to the game. Any given exchange can take

an indefinite amount of time, as the other participant might respond immediately, but might also take hours, days, weeks, or months, or never respond at all.

As with narrative conflict, online freeform games have developed a range of methods for addressing this problem.

Temporary synchronicity means that players move temporarily to a synchronous form such as chat, IRC, or instant messenger. This solution can also be adapted to asynchronous forms, as when players agree to monitor the same forum thread for a given period of time so they can respond to each other as soon as possible.

Turn-taking lets players know what their participation responsibilities are, and creating expectations for how often each player should be engaged with the game. It is a common solution in scenes with as few as 3-5 characters, and is sometimes combined with a backchannel used to request an “out of turn” response. A less formal version of turn-taking prohibits players from contributing twice in a row. Turn-taking helps with the waiting problem because it reduces the odds of players each waiting for the other to contribute. It also allows the group to skip the turn of

a player who is unresponsive, and quickly identify who should pick up the narrative baton. *Activity checks* also address the problem of unresponsive players by requiring evidence of regular participation. For example, some games require players to participate in a certain number of scenes – one per month is a common amount – in order to remain in the game[3] (Canterlot 2014).

Godmodding is the practice of controlling someone else's character when role-playing. It most commonly happens when a player determines how another character reacts to something their character did.

Callout 8.5: Godmodding

In many games, players are asked to use *greedy writing* techniques, which means to go as far as possible with a scene until they must stop for input[4]. As explained earlier, almost all online freeform games agree that a player may not write another player's character, but players can and do write up to the moment when the other character must respond. Players also sometimes give each other permission to write scenes in which their characters behave in pre-defined ways, such as through *preplay*, so that the number of back-and-forth exchanges are reduced.

Greedy writing refers to the practice of writing as much as possible in a scene stopping only when it becomes necessary for another player to offer their input.

Callout 8.6: Greedy writing

Finally, many games *reduce interdependence* by focusing on low-key scenes about relationships or character development. While character development might inform how a player writes the character in a different scene, it can be more easily written around than external events such as the outcome of a climactic battle. If one scene is delayed by a participant's schedule, then related scenes can still progress.

Sensemaking

Because online text and images produce a record through being shared, most online freeform games naturally accumulate a set of game-related artifacts simply by being played. In order to participate in the game, players must be able to identify relevant data and identify a situation that allows them to take action; they must also be able to incorporate existing narrative elements and the social expectations of play into their behavior. This process is known as sensemaking (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld 2005) **(see Chapter 22)**.

One approach taken by online freeform games is to create *centralized archives*. An archive might take the form of a Tumblr masterpost, a Google Group's archives, a Dreamwidth community, or a web forum. Even games that do not have a central archive allow for distributed archiving of game materials, such as individual players keeping chat logs from IRC play. Participants with access to the archive can not only follow the game as it progresses, but also see the game's past.

Most types of software used by freeform games allow *linking* between participant contributions. For example, online forums order posts based on when they were made, and identifies in which thread the posts were made. These implicit linkages help players understand who is responding to whom, and in what context. Players can also explicitly choose to post links in one thread that point players to another thread on the forum, or to an entirely different website.

Metadata makes game materials searchable, and also creates conceptual links between different parts of the game. For example, in *Milliways Bar*, participants

can use tags attached to posts as navigational aids. By searching tags, players can identify all scenes a particular character has been involved in, or follow specific plots (Milliways Mods 2015). Games like *Milliways* use player-generated metadata, and many games require the players to generate metadata along with their posts; however, many games also automatically generate metadata that players can use for navigation. For example, most journal and forum sites have home pages for each account that show all posts made by that participant.

Players can *spotlight* information that is particularly important for the game. For example, role-playing Twitter accounts can pin a tweet to the head of their stream, which can be used either for quick characterization or to point readers toward a longer format for a description of the game. In other games, players simply state the information, such as beginning a new forum thread with “As of this scene, Spiderman has had his arm cut off.” In both cases, groups develop agreements about what technical strategies are socially appropriate. For example, posting in a forum thread makes that thread more prominent to other players, but some games forbid bumping, or acting on your own thread for the sole purpose of forcing it to re-appear at the top (WoWWiki 2005).

Finally, sensemaking processes are also used to determine what is *not* considered a part of the official game record, through a process of *canon management*. Many things written by players do not "count," such as backchanneling in chat, OOC conversations, or entire scenes that are for some reason not accepted by the group. For example, "crack" scenes are ones that players enjoy participating in, but that do not influence the history of the character or the future of the game (RPedia: The Roleplay Resource 2015). Canon management may happen by platform – for example, "no material produced in chat is canonical until it has been written up and posted on the forums" – or through active moderation, such as requiring journals to be linked from a Tumblr masterpost before they become official. They may also be identified in metadata. Either way, exclusion is as important as inclusion when it comes to making meaning out of the enormous amounts of content online freeform role-players generate.

Canon management refers to the rules and processes by which the players and moderators determine which game materials should be considered canonical, or officially part of the game's story and world, and ones should not .

Callout 8.7: Canon management

Online Freeform Play in Gaming Culture

As this chapter has demonstrated, online freeform play is a complex and vital form of role-playing, with its own rules, social norms, and cultural expectations. Before we close, we consider two further challenges of online freeform play, and why they mean online freeform may have much to offer other forms of RPGs.

First, online freeform is an exceptionally hard form to understand. The canonical texts of play are not game books or computer programs, which even at their worst are *teaching* texts that explain how to participate in the game. Instead, the canonical texts are the play record itself, an inward-referencing mass of artifacts generated for and by people who already know what is going on. Similarly, it is hard to learn by observing a game, as one might in tabletop or larp. One cannot show up at a particular time or place to observe a game, as the game is always happening. One cannot even assume that any given player is having a characteristic experience of a particular game, as a single game can support both the player who makes a couple of posts a week and the one who makes hundreds of posts a day.

Second, there is very little money in online freeform. Players sometimes pay for software (e.g. paying for no-ad forum software), and they sometimes pay for

services (e.g. paying other players to create character portraits), but there is no direct market equivalent to the markets for role-playing game books or software. There is also no premium market for elaborate multi-day events or branded merchandise. These games therefore are rarely publicized except within the community[5]. No one benefits by converting new players, except the people who actually play with them.

Taken together, these challenges mean games can evolve quickly and independently, while the risks of innovation are low. It is unsurprising, then that online freeform culture is flourishing on every level. Participants are turning new forms of software into mediums for play; there are flourishing communities on Twitter, Tumblr, and G+, many of which integrate with email, forums, and/or chat. Older games continue to grow, creating a playerbase with deep expertise and a set of canonical games whose "children" influence the growth of the medium; *Phoenix Nexus*, for example, has been running for over twenty years (Phoenix Nexus 2015).

The expertise of online freeformers influences role-playing culture beyond online freeform games themselves. Digital adjuncts to other forms of role-playing, such

as Facebook pages for larp characters, often adopt online freeform techniques and conventions. Conceptual models from online freeform have also penetrated the tabletop and live-action design communities, in frameworks such as *Play With Intent* (Care Boss and Holter, 2012). Because of the rapid pace of technical change, online freeform is likely to remain a source of both technical and design innovation. To date such innovation has been brought out to the larger role-playing community by online freeform experts such as Emily Care Boss, as there has been a dearth of scholarly attention to this community. If we choose to change this pattern in the future, there is much more that the larger role-playing community can learn.

Summary

Online freeform role-playing is an emergent form that is primarily asynchronous and text-based, it takes place using a variety of distributed online journaling and discussion tools where players take on the role of characters in a shared fictional setting and collaboratively affect the state of the game world through the behavior of their characters. Online freeform games have evolved to include several distinct roles. Players participate by portraying characters, moderators handle the logistical and social tasks of managing play, administrators control the technological means of participation, and readers follow along by reading what players have written without necessarily participating themselves. Online

freeform games are often distributed across a variety of online tools and sites, making them harder to follow and understand. Playing them also generates large amounts of game materials requiring participants to organize and archive them. As an emergent form, online freeform is hard to understand and also commercially limited. However, the form is also rapidly evolving with innovations that are beginning to appear in the other forms of role-playing.

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Box insert 8.1: De Profundis

De Profundis, written as a series of letters from designer Michael Oracz, asks players to immerse themselves in a Lovecraftian horror story (2010). Players engage with the game by writing each other letters, either by mail or online. As in online freeform games, players are asked to address problems narratively and socially rather than through explicit formal mechanics. For example, players are guided to be "subtle and believable" when weaving supernatural elements into the game's world. There are three particularly interesting things about this game. First, it is historically interesting because it is a game book, first published in 2001, with rules for online freeform; most online freeform games have distributed systems of authorship and little notion of a "game designer." Second, it is a rare example of an asynchronous tabletop role-playing game. Finally, it is interesting because it shows the continuum between forms of technology. While this chapter emphasizes online play, *De Profundis* allows players to use the same ruleset to play either by email or with physical letters.

Box insert 8.2: Setting Choices

Online freeform games are often known for their use of mainstream media properties, to the point where some scholars have proposed the creation of the category FRPG, or fan-based RPG (Fiesler 2013). For example, in a sample of

nearly 4,000 game advertisements on All Things Roleplay, 28% were tagged as Harry Potter games and an additional 19% as Supernatural games. These two media properties alone represent nearly half the total games advertised. Fiesler suggests that different fan properties may be more or less popular on different media – for example, Marvel games seem heavily represented on Tumblr – but fan-based games are common across online freeform as a whole.

It is important to note, however, that many online freeform games do *not* use fan settings in a conventional sense. Perhaps most obviously, some games develop original settings, such as the science fiction game *Phoenix Nexus* (Phoenix Nexus 2015). Others are "multiverse" games, in which players may portray characters from any fictional setting they choose (Fandom High 2015). Finally, some online freeform games use existing role-playing game settings and simply adapt them to online freeform; examples include *In Nomine*, *Dragon Age*, various World of Darkness games, and *Assassin's Creed.*

Fan-based games face some issues that other online freeform games do not. For example, players who portray famous characters face expectations from other players about how that character "should" be played. Players may want to play the same character, creating the need to manage a 'cast list' of permitted characters and to identify which characters have already been taken. (Multiverse games often address this issue by permitting an infinite number of, say, Bruce Waynes.) Similarly, some characters may *need* to be present in the setting,

leading to the need to recruit replacement players if an important character becomes inactive or their player drops out.

Box insert 8.3: The Golden Rule

The golden rule of online freeform, drawn from improvisational theater, is "yes, and" (Johnstone 1987). Players are expected to agree with what has gone before and build on it. The golden rule provides a framework for players to resolve existing narrative conflicts, and to play in ways that avoid generating new ones.

There are two versions of this approach: consent and ICA-ICC. Consent-based games mean that players may "call consent" to gain veto power on actions that affect their character. For example, if Black Widow shoots at Hawkeye, Hawkeye's player may veto the action, since being shot would affect the character. On the other hand, ICA-ICC games rule that in-character actions lead to in-character consequences. Players cannot call a veto on something happening to their character, but they can insist that appropriate consequences be enforced, usually by an in-game authority. For example, Hawkeye's player could insist that SHIELD censure Black Widow for inappropriate use of firearms. These terms are commonly enough understood in the community that games can identify which

one they incorporate, players can use them to describe their preferences, and participants can filter for appropriate co-players and games.

It is important to note that in both cases, players are forbidden from writing one another's characters. Black Widow could shoot at Hawkeye, but could not declare that Hawkeye got shot. Writing another player's character is referred to as "godmodding," and is deeply frowned upon in the community (Forum Roleplay 2015). It is considered especially egregious when players use godmodding to arrange for their characters to succeed in a conflict. Other types of consent-violating behavior include ignoring fictional limitations to win a conflict, using out-of-character knowledge when players have agreed otherwise, and creating characters out of line with the rest of the game (RPedia: The Roleplaying Resource 2015).

Key Terms

Canon management, Godmodding, Greedy writing, Parallel play, Preplay, Online freeform role-playing

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[1] A minority of role-playing games do not treat characters as central. For example, the tabletop game *Microscope* focuses on creating the history of a civilization, rather than on playing characters who affect a world (Robbins 2011). Similarly, some online freeform games, broadly construed, do not emphasize character-based world-affecting play. *Lexicon*, for example, uses collaborative

wiki-writing to develop the history of a person, place, or thing (Twisted Confessions 2012). However, the vast majority of online freeform games are character-centric, as are the vast majority of role-playing games more broadly.

[2] Some games use the term "administrator" for both administrators and moderators. Nonetheless, the distinction between logistical/social and technical roles is a useful one.

[3] Activity checks also address the issue of "character squatting," when a player claims a character but is rarely active as that character. While not a problem for original characters, players who squat on popular characters from existing media franchises, such as Harry Potter or the Avengers, block other players from participating in the game.

[4] This term is taken from computational theory, in which greedy algorithms make decisions that optimize for the state of the problem that is directly in front of them.

[5] This effect is even more striking because many players do not *want* their games publicized outside the community due to intellectual property concerns (Fiesler 2013).