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27 Power and Control in Role-Playing Games

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When we play a role-playing game, we are doing several things at once. First, we are constructing a fictional reality, in which we agree that our words or actions represent meaningful changes to a game world (Searle 1995, Montola 2008). Second, we are playing a game, in which we adopt an attitude of playfulness in following game rules (Suits 1978). Finally, we are participating in a socio-technical system of play, which includes everything from the code that runs a computer role-playing game (CRPG) to the publishing structures that determine which games are released in the first place. Power structures in role-playing games, therefore, must address the fiction, the game, and the socio-cultural context.

Power structures are particularly visible in multi-player¹ role-playing games, because power becomes something that has to be negotiated among game participants. Under what circumstances are contributions to the game world considered valid? How much impact can a given participant have on what happens in the world? When participants disagree, who gets their way? How are decisions enforced? What values are used to judge successful participation? What social, cultural, and material factors affect what participants even try to do in the first place? These are serious—and, depending on players' commitment to the game, often emotionally demanding—questions. On the other hand, these questions must be answered in a way that supports playfulness and allows players to engage with the experience as a game.

Games go to some effort to demonstrate that power relations in the game are specific, constrained, and different from those in ordinary life (Huizinga 1955). Power relations in the game are carefully regulated by game rules and game materials, in part to ensure that these relations are not carried over outside the game world. However, this attempt can never be entirely successful, because game rules exist within the social world of the game group, within role-playing

culture, and within larger social and technical systems at the same time (Goffman 1974, Fine 1983).

In this chapter, we first examine prior work on role-playing games and power, and contextualize it within existing work on power relations. Next, we discuss how the different frames of a role-playing game (RPG) allow the reshaping of power. We then look at the concrete ways in which RPGs distribute power, both to *intervene* in the game and to *enforce* one's will. Finally, we conclude with an examination of how power shapes the way games are designed, produced, and distributed.

Prior Work

To understand more clearly how power functions in role-playing games, we begin by examining a range of existing scholarly work on the topic. We then consider how it might relate to larger sociological theories of power.

Montola (2008) proposes that two fundamental features of multi-player role-playing games are first, that “[t]he power to define the game world is allocated to

participants of the game,” and second, that “participants recognize the existence of this power hierarchy.” He divides the methods of exerting power in games into three categories. First, there is diegetic power, the power that game characters have to influence the game world. A character who persuades an enemy to surrender is an example of diegetic power, since their actions are taken within the game’s fiction. Second, there is endogenous power, power allocated to the player by an aspect of the game such as game rules or a game-defined social role. An example of this is rolling a die to cast a spell. Finally, there is exogenous power, the power that players have to control the game outside of the game context. Asking a new player to join the game is an example of exogenous power.

Hammer (2007) provides an empirical study of how role-players negotiate power in practice in tabletop, larp, and computer-based role-playing games. She investigates two concepts: agency, or how participants negotiate input into the game, and authority, or how participants resolve disputes. She then breaks down the types of agency and authority available to game participants, such as the difference between “character agency” (what a character is capable of doing in the game world) and “participant agency” (whether the character’s actions have the impact the player had hoped). Hammer also identifies a number of strategies used by role-players to negotiate agency and authority during play, such as reasoning

forward from player actions to determine how they might later impact the game world and playing toward that impact.

Hellstrom (2013) considers the role of “symbolic capital,” or agreed-upon symbols of authority, as ways of shaping power relations in games. By defining what is valued and should be emulated, symbolic capital shapes not just what participants are *able* to do, but what they *aspire* to do. Hellstrom compares two different larp communities to identify what each community values, and through what symbols and concepts community values are enforced. He finds that there are differences between the communities in *what* is valued, and that those differences imply different power relations between larp organizers and players. Edmonton larps emphasize adherence to quantitative rules, and expects that rulebooks are used by larp staff to control player misbehavior. Stockholm larps focus on drama, which results in a more egalitarian relationship between players and larp staff, since everyone can contribute dramatically; however, costuming and props are highly valued by the community, which serves to exclude players with less time, money, or interest. Within the game, Stockholm players have a more equal relationship with game staff, but Edmonton larps are more egalitarian when it comes to access. These are quite different power structures, but in both

cases the *mechanism* for determining what is valued, namely the development and deployment of symbolic capital, remains the same.

Rossi (2008) examines how the technical and social tools available to guilds in multi-player online role-playing games (MORPGs) interact to give guild leaders and members power in conflicts. For example, Rossi defines the power controlled by individuals (who decide how to allocate their time and expertise in completing high-level raids) and by guild leaders (who control entry to the guild, and can also unilaterally remove participants). Guild leaders must balance their unilateral power to control guild membership against their need for enough high-quality members to run a successful guild. On the other hand, guild members can always take their valuable skills elsewhere, but cannot negotiate too hard with leaders or risk being banned.

These studies collectively demonstrate that power in RPGs can be construed quite differently depending on one's scholarly approach. Is power the right to define the game world? The ability to get one's way in the face of opposition? The capacity to determine what is valued or valuable in the game community? Is it located in game rules? Player behavior? Social relationships? Material or technical capabilities? Somewhere else entirely?

These differences are not just present in the literature on power in role-playing games; they are present in the underlying literature on power. For example, an ongoing debate in the power literature² is about whether power is primarily *agentic* (rooted in individual decisions) or *systemic* (rooted in the systems within individuals operate). In the realm of RPGs, we might understand this as a debate over whether power operates in *the decisions players make*, or in *the systems of game rules that constrain decisions*.

Another debate in the power literature asks whether power means the ability to accomplish one's goals, or the ability to impose one's will on others. Role-playing games often conflate these two types of power, such as by requiring players to defeat monsters controlled by a referee to receive in-game rewards, but they do not have to be so conflated. The difference between these types of power is perhaps best summed up by Follett (1942), who articulated a distinction between *power-to* and *power-over*. *Power-to* is the ability to advance one's own goals through direct action, while *power-over* is the ability to overcome opposition. She also defined a third type of power, coercive power or *power-with*. This type of power refers to new abilities and capacities discovered by those who voluntarily

work together. For example, *power-to* might reflect a player's ability to personally influence the game world, *power-over* might reflect their ability to control or negate the creative contributions of others, and *power-with* might describe shared creative elements of gameplay.

This chapter attempts to reconcile these approaches to power by pointing out how each is relevant to a different aspect of role-playing games. We will also consider how these understandings can be applied across a range of role-playing forms—tabletop, larp, single-player CPRGs, MORPGs, and online freeform play.

Frames, Contexts, and Power

Power is typically tied to a particular social and material context. For example, a teacher typically has a great deal of power inside their classroom, but much less power in ordinary situations such as going to the grocery store. Even when games are not involved, it is normal for power relations to shift as contexts do.

We can understand these power changes as shifts between *frames*. According to Goffman, a frame is a shared understanding of a situation, which both helps construct the situation and allows people to interpret it (1974). The same behavior

can mean different things in the context of different frames. For example, knocking someone down might be interpreted as hostile in the frame of everyday life, but as good behavior in the frame of a game of rugby.

Most role-playing games involve three frames at once: “the social frame inhabited by the *person*, the game frame inhabited by the *player*, and the gaming-world frame inhabited by the *character*” (Mackay 2001). Each of these frames has its own codes and rules of power. In the frame of the game-world, players may gain power *diegetically*, or within the context of the fiction. For example, one player might take the role of a queen, while another might take the role of her lady-in-waiting. In the frame of the game, players gain power through skillfully manipulating rules. Finally, in the social frame, players gain power through social skill, access to valued resources, or other types of community status.

Many games use rituals or workshops as frame-shifting activities, to help signal that the context is changing and rapidly prepare the player for the game’s power dynamics. For example, part of the workshop for the game *Service*, in which characters are enlisted into the military, has players practice marching as a unit

(Kessock 2014). Costuming, makeup, or even filling out a character sheet can also serve this purpose.

In theory, the player who has the most social clout in the group, the player who is best at manipulating the game rules, and the player who plays the highest-status character could be three different people. However, in practice, these categories often bleed into one another (Copier 2009). For example, skillful use of game rules might result in a player's character becoming queen, while players who want favors from the in-game queen might treat her player differently in the social frame.

One reason this may happen is because frame shifts are not limited to the beginning and end of role-playing sessions, when rituals and workshops can be deployed. Within a game session, players regularly switch between frames (Fine 1983). Additionally, Deterding demonstrates that the three frames Mackay identifies are not unitary experiences, but actually contain many possible framings (Deterding 2013). For example, players can frame gameplay as a leisurely social activity or as a competitive one. These issues, however, only serve to point out

how impressive it is that role-playing games are able to restructure power relations at all.

So what do players actually do with these shiny new power relations? We'll begin with, as Follett might put it, the power-to define the game world.

Changing the Game World

Role-playing games proceed by allowing players to iteratively make changes to a shared fictional world (Montola 2008). These changes may be spoken, as in a tabletop role-playing game; acted out, as in a larp; written, as in online freeform play; or executed in code, as in a computer-based RPG. However, not all participants have equal power to make changes to the game world, and not all attempted changes “count.” When we think about power in games, we must consider who has the power to make changes to the game world and under what circumstances (Hammer 2007).

Inputs and Interfaces

Different types of role-playing games imply different ways that changes to the game world can be expressed. Role-players may affect the state of the fictional

world through many different interfaces, including spoken language, written words, physical behavior, and/or interactions with software.

In most CRPGs and MORPGs³, participants interact with a digital interface that controls the in-game actions they can take, and that defines how those actions affect the game world. The player might want to take an action that is not in that limited set, but they cannot. For example, when *Skyrim* was originally released players could fight dragons, but not ride them. When the *Dragonborn* expansion was released in 2012, it included dragon-riding, which allowed for new types of interactions and new effects of player actions on the game world (The Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages 2015).

In other types of role-playing games, most changes to the game world are made through statements. These statements may be spoken, as in tabletop; written, as in online freeform and MORPG chat play; or acted out, as in larp. As a group, players agree that certain kinds of statements have the ability to affect the game world. This agreement can be understood as a *constitutive rule* of role-playing (Searle 1995, Montola 2012). Constitutive rules are rules that make an activity possible by defining how objects should be treated in that context (Searle 1995).

For example, a constitutive rule of chess is “This piece of wood counts as a white king in the game of chess” (Montola 2012). In the case of role-playing games, a constitutive rule might be, “When a participant communicates that something happens in the game world, and the right conditions are met, then all players update their model of the game world accordingly.”

As suggested in the formulation of this rule, the conditions under which a participant can change the game world are important. For games with digital interfaces, those conditions are often implicit in the interface design and the back-end code. However, in statement-based games, players can say, write, or do⁴ whatever they like. The statements they make may exist in a role-playing context, but they only have meaning *for the game* under certain circumstances. The rest of this section will consider examples of these circumstances.

Actions by Characters

In most role-playing games, at least some participants take action through the lens of a character (Montola 2008). Those characters might have different amounts of *diegetic* power (power considered purely within the fiction of the game). A queen typically has more power, in a fantasy setting, than a farmgirl; an admiral would

outrank an adjutant, and a superhero surpasses a shopkeeper. Characters may also have very different levels of absolute power. Some might have the abilities of ordinary humans, such as the would-be lovers of *Breaking the Ice* (Boss 2005), while others might be near-divine, such as the Nobilis who can stop time, turn memories into wine, or shoot down the sun (Moran 2011). When a player wants their character to take action in the game world, the diegetic power of the character helps game participants understand whether that action could succeed.

[box 27.1 near here]

Characters' diegetic power, however, does not always translate directly into their ability to affect the game world. Characters' abilities are often codified into character sheets, which may contain vital statistics or other descriptors representing the character's abilities. A queen's character sheet might not give her many abilities, despite her high fictional rank, while the farmgirl could have exceptional statistics that give her player far more power to change the world of the game.

Additionally, role-playing games typically require that the character follow rules of plausibility in taking action in the game world, such as being present at the scene of their proposed action (Ryan 1980). Statements such as “I am ten miles away but everyone can still hear me” must typically be explained, e.g. by magic or telepathy. As we will see next, these explanations must also be logically consistent with the narrative reality of the game.

*Steering is what a player does when they intentionally influence and make decisions for their character for reasons that are outside of the game. For example, a character may leave a scene in a larp because the player needs to go to the restroom. In the context of a game master, it is used to refer to the way players might be subtly influenced to make certain decisions or perform certain actions (see also *Railroading*, this chapter).*

Callout 27.1 Steering

Narrative Expectations

Proposed actions must fit with the players’ broad sense of the fictional environment of the game. For example, while there may be no specific rule forbidding a player from describing how they pull out a laser pistol in a fantasy

game, it is unlikely to be acceptable⁵. Narrative expectations can also include requiring statements to be consistent with the prior state of the game world as established through play, such as not abruptly writing characters out of a scene.

Many games define the default state of the game world thoroughly, so that players can reference game materials to determine what actions make sense; for example, the *Ars Magica 5th Edition* line includes over thirty books as of this writing (Atlas Games 2015). Games can also use pre-scripted elements. In such a case, statements may be checked for validity based on whether they are consistent with the specific scenario being used. Stark's *The Curse* features two couples confronting breast cancer (2013). While cancers do sometimes go into spontaneous remission, a player making that claim about the game world would undermine the basic premise of the scenario, and their choice would be unlikely to be accepted.

Game Mechanics

Some statements are valid if and only if certain rule conditions are met. For example, many combat-based statements require players to follow a complex sequence of rules before anyone involved knows how the statement affected the

game world. In *Shadowrun*, a player who states they are making an attack must spend an action, apply situational modifiers, and make an opposed die roll to determine whether their attack hits the enemy; an additional two steps are necessary to determine whether the enemy was injured (2013). The validity of the statement is determined retroactively by the outcome of the game mechanics.

House rules: In RPGs, rules created by local player groups that deviate from those officially published by the game creators. House rules can include changes to existing rules as well as entirely new ones. Their use and creation is largely uncontroversial since RPG publications have a long tradition of encouraging players to adapt the game to better suit their needs. Popular and widespread house rules are often later incorporated into the official rules.

Callout 27.2: House rules

Groups develop their own interpretations of which of these constraints must be followed to create a valid statement, and under what circumstances. This can take the form of removing rules from the game; for example, deliberately ignoring the *Dungeons & Dragons* rules about Encumbrance allows participants to make valid

statements in which their characters carry implausible amounts of gold (Wizards RPG Team 2014)⁶. It can also mean creating their own rulings for situations not covered by the rules. House rules are also possible in digitally-mediated games; instead of the group agreeing to follow a different set of rules, players use mods (external pieces of software that change the game) to change what actions are possible and under what circumstances.

Group intervention is not the only way that game mechanics can change during a particular game. For example, game mechanics may vary over time, such as in the larp *Hamlet*. Characters could not be damaged in the first act of the game; they could suffer serious wounds in the second; violence in the third act would lead to “an untimely and spectacular death” (Koljonen 2004). Different game mechanics may also apply in different game spaces (either physical or virtual, such as zone-wide effects in MORPGs) or, as we will see next, to different participants.

Game Role

Some methods of changing the game world are only available to players with certain in-game roles. For example, *Ars Magica* (2004) has a rotating gamemaster role; each participant may get a turn to serve as gamemaster. While they are the

gamemaster, they can propose changes to the state of the game world or the behavior of non-player characters. The same statements, made by the same person while taking the role of a player, would likely be unacceptable. The person in the player role has the right to make authoritative statements about their own character, but generally not about other players' characters, including those played by the gamemaster.

While the gamemaster-player division is a common pattern in multiplayer role-playing games, other role assignments are possible. For example, the online freeform game *Milliways* has a "bar mod," a player who is in charge of statements about the physical layout of the bar where the game is set (Milliways Bar 2015), while many of the larger Vampire larps put different Storytellers in charge of different clans. These formal roles define the kinds of changes that participants can propose. However, informal roles can also influence the power participants have to affect the game world.

Social Status

Social status within a group can affect whether a proposed action is considered a valid way of changing the game world. This can manifest through differences in

opportunities to participate; for example, high-status group members are interrupted more than low-status members, and women are more likely to be interrupted in either case by men (e.g. Smith-Lovin and Brody 1989). This can also manifest as constraints being more or less rigidly applied to different members of the group. While few groups are willing to admit they do this, many players anecdotally report that statements made by higher-status members are more likely to change the game world.

These examples demonstrate how complicated it can be to decide *whose input to the game is legitimate*, and *under what circumstances*. This list of constraints may seem overwhelming, and indeed learning to make valid statements is a particular challenge for new role-players. However, participants in a particular game are generally able to learn which constraints matter for them and which do not. CRPGs and MORPGs carefully teach players about what power they have to change the game world through tutorials and early quests, and embody most game mechanics in code. While tabletop, larp, and online freeform do not have the option of digital tutorials, they use a variety of techniques to help players learn what power they have to affect the world, including game texts, online teaching aids, introductory scenarios, and players teaching one another. In practice, players are able to use their power to affect the game world reliably. Game sessions

captured by researchers show that experienced players can usually contribute in ways that are within the scope of the power they have been assigned (e.g. Fine 1983, Mackay 2001).

It is important to note that even when a valid statement has been made, its power can be negated by other occurrences in the game world. Hammer (2007) describes this as “participant agency”—the degree to which a player’s actions will actually achieve the player’s goals. For example, gamemasters who “railroad” their players give their players the ability to make statements that change the game world, but negate the effect of those statements when it is incongruent with what the gamemaster would like to happen. This negation might happen at the level of the fiction, by twisting the game world to make the statement pragmatically irrelevant; at the level of the game, by using their role as gamemaster to overrule the statements; or at the level of the social group, by using their social power to influence what kinds of statements get made in the first place.

Railroading is when a game or game referee takes noticeable measures to steer player action in such a way that the players feel curtailed in their freedom. For example, player characters might run into arbitrarily broken bridges and

blocked roads that prevent them from proceeding in any direction that isn't the "correct" one. Railroading is generally viewed negatively.

Callout 27.3: Railroading

Sometimes, though, game participants propose to change the game world in ways that violate one or more of the rules about how they ought to participate. In that case, a number of things can happen. The statement may be ignored; it has no effect on the game world. Sometimes the group agrees to let the exception pass, or to negotiate a version of the statement that the group can accept⁷. Sometimes participants explicitly argue about whether the statement can or should be accepted, and sometimes group members cannot agree on what the right course of action is.

Note that these responses to invalid statements are, generally speaking, about what the *group* does. That is because most forms of role-playing are group activities, in which all players must agree on a shared reality⁸. The nature of the activity pushes participants toward requiring agreement on what has happened, what is happening, and what should happen—but participants' opinions about

these things may differ. What, then, happens when participants disagree, whether deliberately or because of a misunderstanding? When disagreements between stakeholders must be resolved, we enter the realm of *power-over*, the ability to get one's way in the face of opposition. We therefore next examine how disagreements are resolved and resolutions enforced.

Getting Your Way When Others Disagree

Even when all participants are making statements that have the power to change the game world, participants in a game can often disagree. For example, participants might disagree about how a given statement should change the game world, or what rules ought to constrain the statement, or whether the statement was valid in the first place. Participants can also disagree about a wide variety of other things, from whether *Monty Python* jokes are allowed at the table to how in-game resources should be shared. So what happens when participants disagree? Who has the power to win conflicts?

Note that some conflicts are built into RPGs. As Suits might put it, role-playing game rules offer “unnecessary obstacles” that allow playfulness to emerge (1978). Statements like “I hit the orc with my axe” are meant to be contested, using the

game's ruleset, to determine whether the statement takes effect in the game world. As long as all participants agree on what ruleset should be used and how it should be applied, the suspense as to what will happen in game does not create a conflict between players. Rather, the process of discovering the effect of the statement, through the application of rules, is precisely the shared goal of play.

Instead of looking at conflicts that are purposefully designed, this section emphasizes conflicts that emerge from the reality of any collaborative endeavor. For example, these might be conflicts about what *has* happened. As Montola describes, different participants can have different understandings of the game world, and may only discover at a later date that these understandings conflict (2008). They might also be conflicts about what *should be allowed* to happen. For example, social norms in the MORPG *City of Heroes* forbade certain combat tricks such as teleporting enemies into dangerous situations, even though they were both technically possible and permitted by the rules of the game (Myers 2008). Finally, there might be conflicts about *what methods should be used for decision-making*, such as when players disagree about interpretations of the rules. Like disagreements about *Monty Python* jokes, not all participants in these conflicts can get what they want. Power is at play in deciding who gets their way and who must go along with it.

To understand the methods by which disagreements in games are resolved, we can turn to Montola's work categorizing rules in games (Montola 2012). He identifies six types of rules: internal rules, social rules, formal rules, external regulations, materially embodied rules, and "brute circumstance" or the limits of physical reality. We can understand these six types of rules as reducing to three methods of getting one's way: *referential authority*, or turning to game rules; *social authority*, or using social power within the game context; and *external authority*, which includes social, legal, material, and technical authorities beyond the scope of the game itself.

Referential Authority

Referential authority means voluntarily referring to game rules or other game materials as a way of resolving in-group conflicts⁹. Referential authority is helpful because all participants agree to be bound by the same game rules and narrative conventions. By having one big-picture buy-in, methods of resolving later conflicts do not always need to be negotiated individually.

In some situations, referential authority is simple and effective. For example, consider a group playing through the pre-written scenario *Desert of Desolation* (Hickman 1987). If two players disagree on the topography of the desert, the group can refer to the included map to determine the correct answer.

In other cases, referential authority may require judgment calls. For example, a *Harry Potter*-based online freeform game may require players to write in a way that is true to the character they are portraying. However, even with all the *Harry Potter* books available for reference, players may disagree about what, say, Professor Snape would do in a particular situation. Further, judgment calls are themselves open to question, and groups may voluntarily choose to ignore even the clearest-cut decisions made by the game designer.

This is both the strength and the weakness of referential authority: it is only as good as participants' willingness to use it to resolve group conflicts. Because game rules are malleable, there is an incredible flowering of diversity among groups in how they actually use them. Groups develop house rules that modify original rulesets; create "rulings not rules" for situations where they feel the rules

do not apply; generate original setting materials and homebrew scenarios; and write mods for digital games. In short, it is common for groups to generate their own game materials, and to give those materials the same power as the original game rules when it comes to deciding whose vision of the game gets enforced. Individuals can use the same malleability to opt out of referencing the rules when they encounter an outcome they don't like.

“Rulings, not rules” refers to the idea that published rules should be considered suggestions or ideas that can be used or not depending on the group’s desires. It also represents a style of game refereeing, one that prioritizes flexibility, improvisation, and creativity over getting bogged down in details. The idea is that a game referee is empowered when they can craft rulings on the spot rather than being hampered by rules that get in the way of running a game the way they’d like to.

Callout 27.4: Rulings, not rules

Game participants can also pretend they are following the rules, but in actuality cheat. While there is debate about what counts as cheating in games (Consalvo

2009), some forms of cheating in role-playing games include misreporting die rolls, secretly changing character statistics or other abilities, or reading a scenario when the group has agreed to be surprised by it. Cheaters rely on other participants to follow the rules, and encourage others to believe that they themselves are following the rules. In other words, they rely on referential authority to enforce a system in which they have a secret advantage.

The case of cheating illuminates another limit of referential authority: referential authority has only as much power as the least-invested member of the group chooses to give it. We therefore must also consider forms of authority that have greater power to compel bad actors to conform to group norms.

Social Authority

It is not an accident that referential authority only works if the *group* agrees to use the rules and other game materials as a final source of authority. *Social authority*, therefore, refers to types of power that are negotiated between members of a group¹⁰.

One common type of social authority is *group consensus*, in which all members of the group agree to something. Consensus can take the form of explicit agreements, such as choosing a setting for the game, or implicit norms, such as gaining a “feel” for what types of storylines are appropriate. Extensive research shows that individuals work to conform to the expectations of groups that they value (e.g. Goffman 1959); while consensus seems a fragile way to enforce authority, groups that succeed in forming a strong sense of identity have great power over individuals (Carron and Brawley 2000). When group members disagree, the ones who most effectively conform to group norms can use the threat of loss of cohesion in the group to compel others to do as they wish.

Note that this implies that referential authority—in which everyone agrees to use game rules or other game materials to resolve conflicts—can only be achieved by the use of social authority. This is an unsurprising finding, because in most cases games are a voluntary activity; participants must agree to play before in-game rules become binding (Suits 1978).

Another common type of social authority is the use of *social status* to win conflicts. Social status may be allocated by game rules, or in other words by the

referential authority accepted by the group. For example, in many games the gamemaster is the final arbiter of conflicts between group members, even ones in which they do not have a personal stake. However, social status can also result from out-of-game group relationships. For example, a player who has many close relationships with other group members may be able to enforce their will on others, particularly others who have fewer relationships backing them up.

A third type of authority is *resource control*. When some members of the group control a critical resource for play, they can limit or withhold access to it unless others agree to their conditions. Conversely, they can give access to those who please them. Resources for role-playing games can include in-game resources; for example, the person playing a queen might give grants of in-game land to her favorite courtiers. Resources can also mean out-of-game resources, such as access to the space where the game is played.

Resisting social forms of authority is, unsurprisingly, primarily social. For example, a participant who uses access to play space to resolve conflicts becomes less persuasive when another participant provides an alternative space.

Rules Lawyer: A colloquial description of a player who prioritizes enforcing a game's official rules over shared enjoyment. It generally has a negative connotation, either due to its use by a player to "get their own way" or because it leads to the disruption of play sessions that get bogged down in the need to check and verify rules.

Callout 27.5: Rules Lawyer

One important form of resistance to social authority is the threat of spoiling. The player who is least invested in the group's cohesion and success can hold the group hostage, so to speak, as long as that player does not overstep sufficiently to be expelled. They threaten the ritual space of the game and the cohesion of the group, by refusing to buy into it. This behavior can manifest in apparently minor choices, such as wearing a t-shirt to a costumed larp¹¹. Rules-lawyering, or attempting to exploit game rules in a way that violates the social compact of play, can also be a form of spoiling. Rather than rejecting the authority of the group entirely, rules-lawyering attempts to reject social authority and replace it with referential authority—when, of course, it most benefits the rules-lawyer.

Griefers are individuals that for whatever reason, engage in annoying other players and ruining the game experience as much as possible. They perform serial harassment for their own entertainment, and are not at all interested in authentic

engagement in play. Often they will attempt disruption in any way possible, which may include cheating.

A last-resort form of resistance to social authority is for the group to split or dissolve. For example, members of online freeform games commonly create “child” games, inspired by a previous game they were in, when they want to change the setting or rules of the game in a way the rest of the group does not want.

External Authority

Some methods of imposing control are not chosen by group members, but rather enforced by an external authority. As per Montola’s analysis, these methods may include external regulation by a legal or social authority, methods inherent in the physical or digital artifacts of play, and ones that are enforced by the “brute circumstance” of the physical world (Montola 2012).

Legal constraints mean that stakeholders may be able to invoke the law to resolve conflicts about the game. For example, most CPRGs and MORPGs require

players to sign a Terms of Service agreement. These terms of service are legally binding, and players who violate them can be punished in or out of game.

In computer-based RPGs (CRPGs, MORPGs, online freeform, and digitally enhanced tabletop or larp play), *technical enforcement* is also a factor. We saw earlier in this chapter that when RPGs become digital, players can only affect the game in ways that the code allows; however, code can also be used to enforce the authority of game participants. For example, *World of Warcraft* gives special powers to raid leaders, players who coordinate groups to defeat particularly difficult enemies; raid participants can disagree about how the battle's rewards should be divided, but only the raid leader has the technical capacity to choose a method for dividing looted items (Nardi 2009). Online freeform games often give special powers to moderators, such as the ability to kick players out of chat rooms associated with the game.

Finally, *physical* methods of control involve using time, place, or the laws of physics to get one's way, such as by physically expelling a participant from a real-world location where a game is being played.

While it is difficult to ignore the laws of physics, both legal and technical authority can still be resisted. For example, some online freeform players use existing media properties in ways that skirt the law and work to avoid coming to the notice of anyone who might use legal authority against them (see chapter 8), while CRPG players have been known to illegally download games and MORPG players might play on a pirate server. While there are stakeholders who might disagree with their actions – for example, the rights-holders for the characters being played, or the publishers of the games being illegally downloaded—the pragmatic costs of pursuing individual offenders means most of these cases fly under the radar.

Resistance to technical authority is a more interesting case. For example, in games that allow user-generated content, developers measure TTP, or “time to penis” (Urban Dictionary 2015); at least some players will very quickly push the boundaries of what they think the game’s authority figures will tolerate, even if it involves elaborately constructing flying penises from primitive geometric objects. This resistance can be used to dramatic effect, such as when would-be presidential candidate Mark Warner gave an in-game interview in *Second Life*; in protest the entire area was assaulted by digital flying penises, and the attack ended up

overloading the server (Game Politics 2006). Along similar lines, games that allow modding often end up with mods that undermine the developers' intent. For example fans of the *Dragon Age* series have created mods that permit heterosexual romances with gay or lesbian characters (Nexus Mods 2015).

Koster's "A Declaration of the Rights of Avatars," a set of principles determining how avatars ought to be treated in multiplayer digital virtual games such as MUDs and MORPGs, illuminates additional areas in which power in digital RPGs can be technically contested (2005). For example, Koster raises the question of data ownership. He argues that players should never lose data without a compelling reason; however, one could also imagine players keeping their own data backups as a way of resisting technical control.

Overlapping Authorities

While we have separated referential, social, and external authority for purposes of analysis, in practice they are often entwined. *World of Warcraft* guilds, for example, have technical methods for enforcing group agreements, such as removing someone from the guild or removing their access to shared resources. However, there are also social agreements, as players can decide whether they are a role-playing guild, a raiding guild, a casual guild, or a guild of some other type.

Finally, players can reference shared rulesets to settle disputes, such as rule-based algorithms that players voluntarily adhere to in distributing loot (Nardi 2009).

When groups have different types of authority available to them, they often serve different functions in practice, and cannot always be substituted for one another. Perhaps the best example of this comes from *Habitat*, an early online role-playing game (Morningstar and Farmer 2005). The game's "wizards" (technical authorities) accidentally gave a player a super-powerful weapon, and then had to decide how to retrieve it. The wizards had ultimate technical power within *Habitat*. They could have simply removed the gun from the player's inventory, or destroyed it. However, the wizards realized that resorting to a technical fix would destroy that player's engagement with the game. Instead, they negotiated with the player in question even though they did not have to. Eventually, the player agreed to hand over the gun as part of a dramatic in-game scenario and invited the larger community to watch. By using a socially negotiated agreement that fit with the game's narrative rather than technological force, the wizards were able to not just sustain, but actually enhance, the narrative of the game.

Shaping the Discourse

We have discussed how individual players can have power over the game world, and how disputes between players are resolved and resolutions enforced.

However, there is a third type of power at play in role-playing games: the power to define what is valued and set the terms of debate. This power is what Bourdieu describes as “symbolic power”—the ability to define what sort of world is ideal or even legitimate, and to impose that vision on other people (1989). This power can be seen in how categories are created and used as markers of value, such as attempts to divide the space of role-playing games into “real role-playing games” and “not real role-playing games,” or to demonstrate that one’s own gaming style is the best (Gillen 2010, Bowman 2013). While different groups may draw that line in different places, any place that it is drawn is an attempt to enforce group values as aspirational for all role-players, and a claim that someone has the right to draw it is a play for symbolic power.

In other words, role-players must grapple with a third form of power: the power to shape the possibility space in which people define their desires, aspirations, and goals¹². This type of power can be construed as the power to establish different game frames with different governing norms and different goals of play (Deterding 2013). Different groups can establish different behaviors as valued and valuable. In one group, sharp characterization might be the ideal, while in another

respect goes to those who master the intricacies of the rule system. By referencing larger genres or communities of play, such as the freeform tabletop traditions of Fastaval (ALEA 2017), groups can reference the values and norms of existing game frames rather than training players from scratch.

The conditions under which role-playing games are produced and distributed also shape the options available to players. For example, expensive games filter out players who are unwilling or unable to spend money on the game, no matter how much they would like to play (Hellstrom 2013). Any power relations that are negotiated within the game have already been shaped by the game's barriers to entry.

To understand how these broader conditions shape power relations in games, we will look deeply at one example: the tension between communalism and commercialism in role-playing game creation, distribution, and play.

[box 27.2 near here]

Communalism, as a form of power, relies on the shared dedication of members of various RPG communities to create public goods—whether these goods are freely distributed games and game materials, time volunteered to help organize games at a local meetup or major game convention, or hosting and moderating an internet discussion forum dedicated to RPGs—as well as to supporting fellow players and fellow amateur designers. Under a communal approach, games are valued based on their ability to attract the attention of community members, and particularly the dedicated attention required to run games, host discussions, or create supplementary materials for the game. Power, therefore, lies in the ability to attract the *time* and *labor* of others.

Communalism does not allocate power equally to all participants, regardless of the quality of the game at hand. For example, not all people are seen as equally deserving of the time and labor of other role-players. While different groups are marginalized in different role-playing communities, designers from marginalized groups typically struggle with acquiring community capital, and all the more so when multiple marginalized identities apply (see Chapter 26).

Commercialism as a form of power comes down to money. This includes the money raised by selling RPGs and/or related products and services and also the social prestige of earning money through role-playing games. Under a commercial approach, the value of a role-playing activity is defined by whether one can get paid, and the value of a game by whether it will sell. Money is power, and power is money. This in turn leads to the rise of “playbor,” work treated and framed as play despite poor work conditions and low wages, such as gold farmers who trade MORPG currency for real-world money (Nardi and Kow 2010) (see Chapter 16 for a discussion of fan labor).

The power structures of communalism and commercialism—engagement and money—are not mutually exclusive. For example, tabletop RPGs have many elements that the players are expected to come up with on their own: characters, setting details, adventure concepts, opposition, new rules for how to deal with new situations, and so on. Sharing these between different groups of players makes things easier for everyone, meaning collaboration and communalism often happens not just within a single table but within a broader community of practitioners. If the elements that the players come up with are welcomed—not only at their own table but taken up by other groups—these elements can acquire status equal to or even above that of elements included in published game

products. This, in turn, creates opportunities for commercialization, since players can choose to commercially publish these new elements or a new game.

Consequently, the divide between the designers and writers of TRPGs, on the one hand, and the players and consumers of their products, on the other, has always been indistinct.

The situation in digital RPGs has at times been similar. Many early computer adventure games and early RPGs, including foundational games such as *Colossal Cave Adventure* (1976-1977), were originally created through the free collaboration of a number of designers and then later commercialized, sometimes in ways that cut out the original creators (Adams 2015). More recently, particularly following the rise of the Internet, an extensive number of high-powered creation tools—both commercial tools and free programs—allow players and amateur designers to create their own CRPGs. For example, Danny Ledonne's controversial but critically acclaimed *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* was created using the commercial program RPGMaker (Columbine Game 2015), while Edward Castronova's experimental Shakespeare MMO *Arden* was built in the engine used for the commercial game *Neverwinter Nights* (IU Research and Creative Activity Magazine 2006). Currently, the Unity engine is

freely available and popular among both professional and amateur game designers.

In both of these cases, advances in digital technologies have made it increasingly easy for players and amateur creators to gain power—receiving the time and labor of others under the system of communalism, or being paid for their work under commercialism. For example, the Internet makes it easier for independent RPG creators to find support, particularly from one another, and allows for the free distribution of games as part of a mutually supportive community. It also allows them to market and sell their game products directly to customers, often by using digital distribution methods and crowdfunding to lower the amount of financial risk involved (Linver 2011, Maiberg 2015) (see Chapter 16).

At the same time, both communalism and commercialism have established power structures—game designers who have gained status in the community, or who are paid well and regularly to do their work. While many individuals from both these groups want to help players and amateur creators succeed, there are also counter-efforts to enforce the separation between professional and amateur creators and their games, similar to many of the methods used to resist or subsume the rise of

indie comics, indie film, and so on. These include, in particular, multiple attempts to define what a “real” RPG or game is, redrawing or reasserting boundaries to exclude many of the games made by new creators; co-opting new creators into more traditional business models where intellectual property remains in the hands of larger corporations; and small-scale game publishers adopting the practices of much larger companies to seem legitimate.

Other power struggles around communalism and commercialism produce specific topics of debate within the role-playing game community. When should you distribute a game for free? When is it acceptable to charge money for a game, and how much? What is required to call yourself a game designer? Should success be measured by sales? Should people be paid for playtesting? How do we keep the entry-level low for new and more diverse creators? How do we prevent the market from being swamped by low-quality games that make it harder for consumers to find the good stuff? Why are some poorly designed games so popular and successful? Within individual role-playing communities, participants come up with sets of answers that reflect both the pragmatic value they place on communalism and commercialism, and also the community’s norms and values.

Summary

We have seen multiple ways in which power is at stake in RPGs. Within the game, not all statements have illocutionary power, the power to change the shared fiction of the game world; participants must navigate a complex set of conditions in order to make effective statements about the game, and even then their statements may not achieve the goals they have for themselves. Among stakeholders, power means the ability to get one's way in the face of opposition, and to enforce such an outcome even when others do not want to obey. This type of power can be rooted in shared agreements to obey the game rules, in social status and access to resources, or in external constraints such as code. Finally, game culture and the value frameworks it creates shape power relations, particularly in the kinds of activities that are used to gain status and the standards against which people and games are judged.

In practice, these types of power are not completely independent of one another. As Bourdieu might put it, there are certain associations between, say, how power is allocated to players during play and what community values that game's players and designers aspire to (1989). For example, tabletop games that involve taking turns with narrative control are most often found in the self-identified "story-game" community. The goal of this chapter, however, has been to provide tools analyze the overlapping power structures in role-playing games, and to

understand the multiple levels in which power is at play. That being said, role-playing communities are nothing if not idiosyncratic, and there is still much to be learned from individual communities and games about the wide variety of strategies for distributing power and control.

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Box insert 27.1: Power Dynamics within RPG Fiction

RPGs often unintentionally replicate or creatively explore power dynamics from the real world. For example, in the fantasy adventuring premise of *Dungeons &*

Dragons— since been popularized across different RPG genres—characters “grind” their way through a series of lesser jobs toward the promise of greater wealth, power, and fame (Wizards RPG Team 2014). This is the promise of a modern capitalist society. The key to success lies in gaining more experience that can be codified into a series of one-line traits written on a character sheet, not unlike a resume or CV. Most of these valuable experiences involve killing or harming animals, sentient beings Othered as nonhuman, and people viewed as incurably wicked. At the end of this process, characters hope to have earned enough power and wealth to save the world. Many digital RPGs replicate and model these dynamics.

The power dynamics of *Vampire: The Masquerade* are perhaps more self-aware and jaded, positing that the world is secretly ruled by an illuminati of ancient vampires standing in for the Powers That Be (Rein-Hagen 1991). These elders could easily be overpowered by the hordes of their young who have only recently come into their own, and so they manipulate these youth into jealously fighting among themselves over mere scraps cast down from the adults’ table, allowing the elders to remain largely unchallenged. Even in the rare event that a younger vampire succeeds in literally “eating the rich” and taking the power of an elder, their struggle to the top of this unfair system socializes them such that they now

take their rightful place at the top of the pyramid scheme and continue perpetuating the status quo.

TRPGs also reify certain real-world power dynamics through specific play procedures. For example, many games with horrific elements include descriptions of mental illnesses paraphrased from outdated editions of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), telling players to randomly assign them to characters who experience trauma. While one might hope this practice was a satirical commentary on the state of contemporary psychiatry, in reality it mostly serves to promote popular misunderstandings of mental illness (Dymphna 2012).

A number of independent TRPGs were intentionally designed to call out problematic power dynamics or educate players on real-world issues of power by explicitly modeling unfair processes and situations. For example, Burke's *Dog Eat Dog* demonstrates the power dynamics of colonialism by having the actions of a group of "native" characters be repeatedly judged against a steadily increasing number of restrictive rules generated over the course of play. In the end, each native character has to essentially choose between assimilating into the

new society imposed by the “occupation” or rebelling and being killed (Burke 2012). Similarly, Lewon’s *Kagematsu* attempts to model certain gender dynamics, asking one female player to portray a male ronin passing through a troubled Japanese village, while the other players portray local women trying to convince this stranger—using what few means and resources they have—to stay and help solve their problems (Lewon 2008).

Box insert 27.2: Games and Resistance to Power

Role-playing games can serve as a site of resistance to power relations in the real world, by giving players direct experience of unjust power dynamics and the opportunity to experiment with different ways of responding. For example, Burke’s *Dog Eat Dog* illustrates the power dynamics of colonialism while asking players to personally participate in an unjust system (2012). The larp *Kapo* takes place in a prison camp, where the rules of the game forbid an upheaval of the brutal power dynamics between prisoners and authorities. Instead, players must explore methods of survival within such a power dynamic. The larp is explicitly designed to respond to issues of terrorism and illegal detention, and critiques the power structures of the modern state (Raasted 2012).

Key Terms

House rules, Railroading, Rules lawyer, “Rulings, not Rules”, Steering

¹ This typically includes tabletop, larp, and online freeform, as well as multi-player interactions within MORPGs. However, CRPGs and solo MORPG play will also be considered in this chapter.

² For example, Weber (1978) locates power in the individual, while Foucault (1977) primarily attributes power to the systems within which individuals operate.

³ Exceptions include MUDs and MOOs, where players interact through freeform text as well as text commands (see chapter 7). Additionally, many MORPGs have text-based role-playing elements, though they do not directly affect the virtual world of the game.

⁴ Within, of course, the constraints of physical reality.

⁵ Should the player persist, the group must decide how to respond. See the next section of this chapter for details.

⁶ Agreeing as a group to ignore the Encumbrance rules is distinct from one player unilaterally choosing not to follow those rules, which would be better understood as cheating. See the next section of this chapter for further discussion of rule enforcement.

⁷ This varies based on the perceived importance of the violation. For example, a player declaring what another player’s character does is generally treated more

seriously than a player establishing minor setting details, even if both are technically disallowed.

⁸ Agreement looks different across different role-playing forms. For example, single-player CRPGs do not require agreement between multiple players, but players must still negotiate with the designers' vision of the game; MORPGs and multi-site larps may only require local agreements between players; online freeform role-playing games often support multiple parallel realities, but for each one, players must still agree.

⁹ Referring to rules that are embedded in code is typically not voluntary on the part of the player, and is examined later in this chapter.

¹⁰ As noted earlier, most types of role-playing games are multi-player. However, even players of single-player CRPG may encounter social authority if they participate in online communities or discuss their play practices with others.

¹¹ There are, of course, many reasons why a player might end up wearing a t-shirt to a costumed larp; however, one of them might be to signal that they are willing to break the game rather than allow others to win conflicts.

¹² A careful reader will have noticed that the previous section of this chapter references only five of Montola's six types of rules. Internal rules, or rules that players set and enforce privately for themselves, were omitted. This chapter argues that internal rules do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, players internalize the

values and norms of their play communities, which in turn shape what internal rules they perceive as worth following. This type of “soft power” is often difficult to see, but it can also be exceptionally powerful in shaping player behavior.