

Nathaniel Barmore

## Folkspeech Among Roleplaying Gamers

I am an avid player of roleplaying games (RPGs), and thus a definite member of the particular subculture they engender. For this paper, I sought to use this subculture as the jumping-off point for an investigation of the folkspeech of a particular group, in this case one little-studied and close to my heart. At first, I set out to interview some friends who are also roleplayers,<sup>1</sup> using terms that I expected to be widespread. As it turned out, the few terms I had started with weren't as common as I had thought, nor were my friends quite the fonts of experience I had hoped—or at least their memories weren't as easily triggered as I had expected. However, I was able to get a short list of items common to the three of us, or which demonstrated close variations. I then took this list, and posted a message on two UseNet discussion groups, rec.games.frp.misc, and rec.games.frp.advocacy, both of which are dedicated to non-game-specific discussions of roleplaying games. This produced results far better than I had anticipated. Not only was I able to use many more informants than if I were limited by the scheduling concerns of face-to-face interviews, but I was fortunate to get responses from all around the globe, which demonstrate much better than a local sample would the multiply existent nature of many of these items. The other problem I ran into early on was one of communication: I originally asked for examples of “jargon,” and had to revise my request when a potential informant pointed out to me that jargon connotes (if it doesn't denote) formalized terms and expressions, usually well-defined and quite static, and generally stemming from authority, i.e., almost exactly the antithesis of what I actually wanted. The best term I could come up with for conveying my

meaning turned out to be “lingo,” since I didn't feel that “folkspeech” had the

<sup>1</sup> two of my roommates, Peter Keller, and Tom Stanis, were the only friends I could corner and who would admit to having the time for this

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right connotations for the average non-folklorist to elicit the responses I wanted.

Through these methods, I collected several hundred items of folkspeech, and from these was able to find those with the greatest proliferation, weeding the list down to the multiple examples of 18 distinct items. These 18 items together demonstrate what I think are the 4 basic categories of roleplayer folkspeech—jargon-derived folkspeech, folkspeech referring to frame interaction, folkspeech about RPGs, and pop-culture references—and are also some of the most common folkspeech terms. For analysis, I was blessed with a great deal of incidental exegesis in informants' responses, as well as generally thorough examples of context and meaning. Combined with my own experiences as a member of the subculture, I was able to provide what I believe is a quite accurate analysis of meaning and *raison d'être* for this body of folkspeech. My only concern is that it may be tainted by my forced position of esoteric observer; I can't very well remove my experiences of being a roleplayer in order to get a true exoteric viewpoint. As an attempt to counter this, I had several non-roleplayers read through a draft of this paper, and they helped immensely to identify assumptions I was making, and explanations I was leaving out. Also, I was able to use Gary Alan Fine's viewpoint<sup>2</sup> as a semi-exoteric viewpoint, since he was not a roleplayer before writing his ethnography, and, in my opinion, retained an outsider's viewpoint despite his participation in

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<sup>2</sup> Fine, Gary Alan. *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1983. Despite (or perhaps because of) what I would consider an exoteric viewpoint, Fine does a fair job of describing the roleplaying subculture of the late '70s and early '80s. The only fault I can find with the book is that the sorts of roleplayers he meets, and thus the sorts of roleplaying he encounters, seem skewed towards a particular play style, much more akin to wargaming. From what I know of that period (which predates my own roleplaying—the early parts may predate my literacy, for that matter), it was a much more common playstyle than today, so it may merely date the work. But it may also be that, like today, roleplayers of radically divergent play styles interact only rarely, so that once you've met one style of roleplayer, it is not likely you will meet others. It is also possible that that playstyle is today more common than I know, and I simply haven't met many roleplayers of that stripe.

roleplaying games for his research.

But before I can really explain the folkspeech I collected, or justify its place as folklore, I need to explain what exactly a Roleplaying Game is.

## **What is a Roleplaying Game?**

To answer that question, I'll start with a brief description of a typical roleplaying game:

*"A group of people sits around a table, with formalized descriptions of imaginary characters on pieces of paper in front of them. There are normally dice on the table, and sometimes even models representing the imaginary characters. Everyone starts talking at once, usually loudly; rolling dice and ignoring results, and scribbling notes on their 'character sheets.' If an outsider were able to discern what was going on in this hubbub, he would find that it boiled down to a protracted question and answer session between the 'players' and 'referee.' It would not be too much of an imagination to say that the entire roleplaying hobby is a series of subtle and complex elaborations of the formula:*

*"Referee: 'What do you do now?'*

*"Player: 'I do such-and-such.'" <sup>3</sup>*

But this hardly answers the question. A roleplaying game is, in essence, the construction of a story (using the term loosely) by a group of people imagining the happenings in a world, restricted only by the consensual reality of that world, and assisted to some degree by formalized rules of play. An RPG is a strangely difficult concept to explain, though I have found it an exceptionally easy concept to demonstrate. On the one hand, everybody already knows, because they've spent their lives doing it—pretending. But on the other hand, it is a strange, new concept—rules, jargon, worlds of another's invention. To further complicate matters, there is much disagreement between roleplayers on just which characteristics are fundamental, and which define sub-genres. The

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew Rilstone "Role-Playing Games" *Inter\*action* #1. Rilstone is a long-time writer in the RPG field, including editing several fanzines and magazines and contributing to even more, and was the editor and half the driving force behind *Inter\*action/Interactive Fantasy* (the magazine underwent a name change after issue 1).

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best description I've seen for encompassing all RPGs, and still separating them from storytelling and acting and other forms of entertainment that most roleplayers would intuitively define outside of roleplaying is a "participative, collaborative, extemporary, storytelling amusement." <sup>4</sup> Continuing with Brett Evill's definition of an RPG:

*"The facts that everyone participates (no-one is just audience), that the storytelling is collaborative (not directed by one person), and that it is extemporary (the story emerges during play, it is not determined in advance) make RPG storytelling different from writing books or plays. The fact that it is a storytelling game, not a storyhearing game, makes it different [from] reading a book or watching a movie."* <sup>5</sup>

Evill makes fairly clear how an RPG is unlike reading, but also brings up the parallel with storytelling. There are certainly elements of acting and game in an RPG, too. So how does it differ from these?

First of all, an RPG is not a game by most definitions. "A game is a form of art in which participants, termed players, make *decisions* in order to manage *resources* through *game tokens* in the pursuit of a *goal*."<sup>6</sup> An RPG almost fits this definition, but it lacks an inbuilt goal. Like SimCity (itself not strictly a game),<sup>7</sup> there is no inherent goal to an RPG. Many provide settings where certain goals are likely to be adopted by the players, but they are not the only goals, nor are they necessary goals.

An RPG is not quite acting, though it shares a lot of characteristics. In particular, improv theater and some of the nearly rules-less RPGs come very

<sup>4</sup> Brett Evill "Storytelling vs. Storyhearing" private email correspondence on 6/18/96.

<sup>5</sup> Brett Evill "Storytelling vs. Storyhearing" private email correspondence on 6/18/96.

<sup>6</sup> Greg Costikyan "I Have No Words and I Must Design" *Interactive Fantasy* #2. Emphases his. Costikyan is a long-time RPG writer, having designed or contributed to the design of several very influential RPGs, including *Ghostbusters* (based on the movie of the same name), *Toon: the Cartoon Roleplaying Game*, and the *Star Wars Roleplaying Game*, and written many articles on RPGs and the RPG industry.

<sup>7</sup> Greg Costikyan "I Have No Words and I Must Design" *Interactive Fantasy* #2.

SimCity is a popular commercial computer simulation, wherein the player attempts to build, maintain, and expand a city.

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close to each other. But theater has performers and audience, and while that distinction is occasionally bent, it is essentially never broken. RPGs have no audience, in the sense that there is no intended place for someone who is passively observing without participating. Or, you can consider all the participants to be simultaneously audience members, appreciating each other's performances.

An RPG is not storytelling, though it is very close. Again, some of the more unusual RPGs are not much different from a group storytelling session. But always, the primary goal of storytelling is to tell a worthwhile story. In an RPG, other things often take precedence over the storyline, such as enjoyment of the participants, advancing individual characters, or obeying the rules. And even at the extreme, the players in an RPG have more input than the audience of a storyteller. Yet if you go to the other extreme, where the boundary between referee and player has been completely eliminated and the roles blurred, everyone has more authority than any collaborative storyteller, since there is essentially no time when they do not have input.

So, considering what they are not, what are they? There are certain commonalities to essentially all RPGs. Every RPG involves characters, and the majority of them match one character to one player. These characters are much like those of a play or novel in conception, but the game-like elements come in during their construction. In order to maintain a sense of balance or "fairness,"<sup>8</sup> there are rules for quantifying the characters in terms of the game reality. Most RPGs allow the players to allocate a pool (or several pools) of

points towards several categories of traits, including "attributes," which

<sup>8</sup> Strictly speaking, most RPGs don't involve direct competition between the players, so this fairness is an unnecessary construct, unlike in a competitive game. Some newer games are toying with eliminating this initial guaranteed equality.

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measure raw ability, like strength or intelligence; skills; personality traits, such as “brave,” or “patient;” and whatever special powers the game reality affords, such as spell casting or psychic abilities or Aston Martins with hidden machine guns and an ejector seat. There is actually quite a bit of variety in the details of these systems, but all have in common the same goal: to quantify the player’s conception of the character, thus eliminating the biggest problem of childhood roleplaying–“I shot you!” “No you didn’t!”

Every RPG has mechanics of some sort for resolving what happens in the game reality. The variety in the details, however, is huge. Some strive to be an extremely realistic simulation of reality or a particular genre (Kung Fu films or comic-book superheroes). Others emphasize speed or simplicity of play. Most at least make a stab at both of these goals, to varying degrees. Most use dice for a random element, to simulate all the many little things that influence an outcome in real life, but aren’t quantified by the game. A few instead use playing cards or tarot cards, at least one game uses poker chits and another marbles, and a very few have no such random element. The specific details of how the mechanics work vary widely within this basic parameter, involving various ways of rating traits and rolling dice of anywhere from 4 to 100 sides and/or drawing and playing cards, or marbles, or perhaps something else.

As mentioned above, there is generally a referee, usually referred to as the “Gamemaster.”<sup>9</sup> This person is responsible for everything that the individual players aren’t. This includes creating and describing the settings, roleplaying other characters encountered (NPCs<sup>10</sup>), adjudicating the rules, maintaining the

<sup>9</sup> “Dungeon Master” in *Dungeons & Dragons*®. Other synonyms include Referee, Storyteller, Storyguide, Game Operations Director (GOD), Keeper, Sholari Guide, Host, Marshall. Some of these are intended to reflect the genre, others are just an attempt to be unique.

<sup>10</sup> NPC: Non-Player Character. All of the characters run by the GM, as opposed to the PCs–Player Characters–who are run by the rest of the players.

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plot, and so on. The gamemaster is analogous to the narrator and editor of a novel, where the players are playing the main characters. However, some RPGs play with this dichotomy, changing the balance of responsibility between gamemaster and player. Two common changes are to shift more of the burden away from the gamemaster, or to blur the distinction between the two. In the former case, the rules are constructed in such a way that they center around the players, letting them do all the die-rolling and most of the adjudication of results. The latter involves sharing world-creation and narration amongst all of the participants, either through taking turns as the gamemaster, or through divvying up the responsibilities in some fashion.

One other interesting commonality shows up looking at RPGs. They nearly all take place in a fantasy world, and they all revolve around the characters being exceptional individuals. A very few published RPGs make it possible to play nominally average individuals, but none make them the focus of the setting. At least the background or situation of the characters is unusual.<sup>11</sup> And the closest any of the settings get to the real world are some modern military games, which at least attempt to be an accurate simulation of elite military squadrons, such as the Green Berets and Rangers. Assuming the genre simulation *is* accurate, such a setting is still essentially a wish-fulfillment fantasy world for the players. Most RPG settings are much more overtly fantastic, such as Middle Earth (from *The Lord of the Rings*) or Victorian England with faeries and trolls, or the *Star Wars* universe.

Beyond these four general commonalities, not much can be said of roleplaying games as a whole. They run the gamut from extremely serious through

<sup>11</sup> For example, the RPG *Call of Cthulhu* is known for featuring arguably average individuals, but these characters' lives within the game revolve around confronting the horrifying truths of H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos.

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satirical to silly. Genres include action-adventure, spy, space opera, swords & sorcery, modern fantasy, historical fantasy, historical, horror, comic book superhero, cartoon, Anime, and nearly anything else you can think of. Some games have extremely detailed settings, while some have none.<sup>12</sup> Some have very concrete rules, while others are little more than guidelines.

## **Roleplaying Games as Oral Tradition**

It seems to me no coincidence that the roleplaying game was “invented” in the early ‘70s, at a time when the folk revival was going strong, and had been for quite some time.<sup>13</sup> Roleplaying games are, in many ways, storytelling. And storytelling is something that has been all but lost to our society as a formalized activity. Some even claim that RPGs evolved directly out of group storytelling and the like.<sup>14</sup> Whether or not this is the case, I would claim that RPGs are the spiritual, if not literal, descendants of the oral tradition.

In many ways, the idea of formal storytelling has been transformed, and some of the elements lost, by modern society. The most common forms of “storytelling” today are TV and film, with one storyteller able to spread the same story to thousands or even millions of listeners. But in the process, some of the crucial components that differentiate the oral tradition from modern literature have been lost. No longer is the storyteller faced with her audience, able to adjust the story to cater to their every whim. No longer is the story passed along, retold in ever-changing versions by an endless chain of people.

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<sup>12</sup> These latter are generally sold as “universal” systems, for use with any setting. They generally have numerous setting/genre supplements available.

<sup>13</sup> Cantwell, Robert. *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1996.

<sup>14</sup> Gaudiosi, John. quoted in “The Games People Play” *The Washington Post* 9/23/97 Page B05

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Instead, we have carefully-crafted stories where all of adjusting happens before most people ever see them, and where one version of the story is authoritative and “correct.” Except for an elite few, those behind and in front of the camera, the power to shape the stories of our society has been lost.<sup>15</sup>

Roleplaying games reverse that trend. Where traditional storytelling involves a storyteller crafting a story, tweaking it in response to audience responses, RPGs directly involve the “audience,” giving them direct control over the central characters of the story. Where traditional storytelling is usually just a process of varying and recombining already-known stories, RPGs involve the crafting of new stories. And where traditional storytelling always produces the result the storyteller intends, RPGs create stories that are unknown to even the participants until they have been told. RPGs provide a creative outlet much like formalized storytelling, only moreso. In nearly every way, RPGs meet the goals of storytelling, and surpass them.

### **Roleplayer Lingo as Folkspeech**

While the place of roleplaying games as oral tradition is arguable, roleplayers definitely make up an identifiable and definable subculture. While it borders

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<sup>15</sup> Folkerts, Jean, Stephen Lacy, Lucinda Davenport. *The Media in Your Life: An Introduction to Mass Communication*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon. 1998. pp173-174 describe films through personal retrospectives as providing the entertainment and escapism that storytelling do, only moreso; pp183-190 discuss the history of movies as social commentary, and their interaction with the marketplace of ideas, and noticeably absent is any discussion of direct response from audiences, except for counting profits; p198 talks about Godzilla, an excellent example of how this limited feedback actually does produce changes, as Godzilla has gone from a destructive monster to a national defender over the last 40-some years; pp235-236,271 briefly touch on the idea of TV and film replacing indigenous folk culture; pp259-260 summarizes the TV ratings system, which is the primary feedback storytellers get in the medium of TV.

also,  
Jack Zipes. *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale*. The University Press of Kentucky. 1994. Chapter 3, in particular, discusses the “Disneyfication” of folklore.

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on the tautological, one of the most interesting ways to see this is to look at the lingo of roleplayers. Roleplayers are a diverse lot, playing a diverse selection of games. Almost no roleplayers have seen, much less played, all of the RPGs available, or even a sizable portion of them. Most have played no more than half-a-dozen, usually including AD&D.<sup>16</sup> And yet, they do have an identifiable lore. Despite the many different games and experiences playing them, certain commonalities arise, and this is reflected in the lingo. Certain terms have come to have common currency among roleplayers, and are understood by nearly any moderately-experienced roleplayer,<sup>17</sup> whatever her background. I claim that this lingo qualifies as folkspeech, and that therefore roleplayers qualify as a folk culture.

Folkspeech is, of course, a particular genre of folklore. The speech part is easy to prove: every one of these terms is spoken as communication between roleplayers. But is it folklore? Well, folklore is one of those notoriously hard-to-define concepts. The best definition I have seen is the test proposed by Dundes of “multiple existence in variation.” Applying each of those parts in turn to the lingo of roleplayers, we see that there are clearly multiple existences of most, if not all, of these terms<sup>18</sup> and that variation is a hallmark of these multiple existences. Moreover, these multiple existences come from informants scattered all over the globe, not all of whom are native English speakers, which strongly implies at least a limited commonality of experience that can most easily be explained by the fact that all of the informants are roleplayers, since what little I know of them indicates that they span a large spectrum of age,

<sup>16</sup> *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*®, a newer game published by TSR and based on extensions to the original *D&D*, with which it has many similarities.

<sup>17</sup> English-speaking, at least

<sup>18</sup> I specifically chose examples with multiple existences for this paper, but some of the lingo I collected was arguably unique, and probably doesn't qualify as folkspeech—at least not for roleplayers as a whole; quite a few of the terms were unique to a particular small group of roleplayers.

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race, gender, education, political and religious beliefs, and other (non-roleplaying) interests. Another concern not included in the Dundes test above is authorship. Many contend that true folklore is authorless, which would obviously disqualify a reasonable portion of the roleplayer lingo I collected. I counter that the original source of folklore need not be authorless, but only the use as folklore need be. A classic example of this is the “fakelore” of Paul Bunyan. The story of Paul Bunyan started out as an ad campaign, and was the subject of several Walt Disney cartoons.<sup>19</sup> However, I think it is clearly reasonable to say that the stories of Paul Bunyan can now be considered true folklore, as they have entered oral circulation, and many people, myself included, learn and transmit them without having any awareness of their primary origin, or of other mass-media representations. Likewise, while two entire categories, as I have constructed them, of roleplayer lingo have as their ultimate source authored materials, their use as lingo is divorced from this authorship, and is thus legitimate folklore. In the case of game-derived jargon, it is also quite possible that the jargon was itself originally only a codification of pre-existing folkspeech. Considering all of these factors, I believe it is a perfectly reasonable claim that the lingo of roleplayers is folkspeech.

A fair amount of this is game-specific jargon, introduced by the published materials, but even this crosses game boundaries, being used in contexts that make no literal sense, and/or by players who have never played the game it originated in. *I disbelieve* and *no Saving Throw*<sup>20</sup> are widespread examples of this, both originating in unusual mechanics in *Dungeons & Dragons*® (D&D;

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<sup>19</sup> Battle, Kemp P., compiler. Chapter 13: “Paul Bunyan and His World.” *Great American Folklore: Legends, Tales, Ballads, and Superstitions From All Across America*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc. 1986. pp601-602 gives the true story of Paul Bunyan’s origins, and puts forth the notion that his stories are, nonetheless, folklore.

<sup>20</sup> Saving Throws are statistics of the characters against which a die roll is often made to determine how well the character resists some sort of attack or difficulty.

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the first commercial RPG). *“I disbelieve: Harkens back to AD&D, when the illusionist class could create imaginary dangers that wouldn't actually kill PCs, but merely put them in a bad way. It was great, because GMs could present the illusion of real danger. The only way to resist was to utter, ‘I disbelieve.’ In non-AD&D games, uttered when something utterly impossible occurs.”*<sup>21</sup> *“This also shows up in games as ‘Can I roll to disbelieve?’ after something horrendous happens. GM: ‘The last shot toasted your drive. the Zhodani battlecruiser is calling for your surrender.’ Player (weakly) ‘Can I roll to disbelieve?’”*<sup>22</sup> References to **sanity checks** or **SAN checks** are nearly as common, and stem from a mechanic in the game *Call of Cthulhu*. In *Call of Cthulhu*, the characters are normal individuals who somehow stumble on to the extradimensional horrors of H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos, which tends to result in literary versions of insanity. **SAN**<sup>23</sup> checks are used to determine how much the characters are unbalanced by the horrors. Now, however, it has entered common parlance and is *“Used in reference to any mind boggling event, or particularly twisted chain of logic; i.e. ‘That burned SAN, but I followed it!’ [It is] Most often used out of game.”*<sup>24</sup>

Also in this category are terms that are found, usually in very similar form, in nearly every RPG. Almost every RPG has “experience points,” and most use that term or a very close variant. In an RPG, experience points are a game-like reward mechanism. The details of how they are earned vary from game to game, and GM to GM, but they all are essentially a reward for accomplishments and/or good characterization by the player, and can be used to improve the character. Of course, that is a simple mechanical similarity. What is interesting is that the concept has drifted into real-world interactions. It is not uncommon to hear roleplayers refer to *XP* or *eeps*<sup>25</sup> in relation to something in their real lives. Perhaps the most common of these references is

<sup>21</sup> Lee Garvin, personal interview via UseNet.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas E. Berry, personal interview via UseNet.

<sup>23</sup> SAN is the standard game abbreviation for the Sanity statistic in *Call of Cthulhu*.

<sup>24</sup> Jeff MacDonald, personal interview via UseNet.

<sup>25</sup> shorthand for eXperience Points and EP (Experience Points), respectively

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a gamer variation of “that which does not kill me makes me stronger”.<sup>26</sup> *at least I still get the XP.* It’s an “*expression of resignation used in RL [Real Life] to indicate that whilst an event has not gone according to plan, useful experience has been gained.*”<sup>27</sup> The implication is that, while something hasn’t turned out well, the person still has the experience gained, which in an RPG would be quantified as actual experience points, which could then be used to tangibly improve the character (such as improving her score in a skill).

The next broad category of roleplayer folkspeech relates to the interaction of the three frames that roleplaying takes place in. In any RPG experience, the participants have the interesting task of simultaneously interacting on three levels, each of which ostensibly operates unawares of the others.<sup>28</sup> On the first level, the participants are of course simply people, most likely friends, who interact as such. The second level is that of players, where they participants are playing a game, complete with rules and goals. The third level is that of characters, for the participants in an RPG are, in a very real sense, identified with the characters they play. Unlike in most games, the character is more than a mere token, and is an extension of the participant. Each of these levels has information that the others lack, and is governed by a distinct set of rules. Two people who have essentially no relationship as people (having just met at a game) can nonetheless have a cooperative relationship as players, and simultaneously a rival relationship as characters. In terms of knowledge, both the character and the player know things that the other doesn’t. The character knows things about the world of the game that the player doesn’t (such as her childhood chores or what an orc smells like), while the player knows things

<sup>26</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, noted German philosopher.

<sup>27</sup> Dr. Jim Davies. personal interview, via UseNet.

<sup>28</sup> Fine, Gary Alan. *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1983. p 186 has a brief summary of this concept, while pp181-204 deal with it in depth.

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about the mechanics of the game that the character doesn't (such as another character's statistics or the likelihood of a prayer for divine intervention succeeding). Some of this information can't be meaningfully passed between levels (the smell of an orc), some of it can (the GM and/or player can determine what a character's childhood was like), and some of it shouldn't be (the fact that two people are upset with one another ideally shouldn't affect the relationship between their two characters).

However, in practice much information passes between the levels that shouldn't, some of it deliberately, some of it accidentally. The two most common examples of this are players and/or characters acting in response to information only the person should have, and characters acting in response to information only the player should have. An example of the former is when one character is upset or in love with another character because the person playing the first character is upset or in love with the person playing the other character. It is also not unheard-of for a player to attempt to have her character act on information known only to the person (such as having a Medieval character create gunpowder).

In response to this, much folkspeech has developed. The first class of it deals with those areas where undesirable cross-over is inevitable. For example, however much the participants might wish otherwise, the character is inextricably linked to the player and person. While it may be possible to firewall information between the three levels, there is nothing that can be done about physical presence; if the person is absent from a game, so, in a very real sense, is the character. Different groups deal with this in different ways, but most agree that the ideal is for the character to be absent when the player is,

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for example by “staying home” or going on a short trip solo. However, this isn’t always possible without breaking the continuity of the game world. (If a group of characters is sailing far out to sea, one of them can’t very well be there one day, gone the next, and back the third, without some means of transport.)

Failing this, most groups have a standing technique for accounting for the sudden apathy of the character. These techniques often stem from a particular instance, but then become the metaphor or actuality for further occurrences.

*“My groups take on this - 'locked in the sanitary facilities'. One of the players was poring over the deck plans of the starship they were on, and was incredibly ticked by the fact that the WCs were labeled 'Sanitary Facilities' - I'm not sure why. In any case, he ended up the session locked in them, and he wasn't around for the next two games, so we assumed he was still locked in the SanFac. From then on, whenever someone was missing for a session, the first thing their character would do is say, 'I'm gonna go to the bathroom' (or something similar) and then wander off, and somehow get locked or stuck there.”<sup>29</sup> Often, this literal occurrence evolves into a willful conceit, and then eventually a metaphor with no literal meaning. So an initially realistic explanation (the character who is busy studying in a library for a few days), becomes the standard explanation, whether or not it makes sense (thus referring to any absentee player’s character as being “in the library,” even in a genre or location where libraries don’t exist). Some of these can be quite fanciful:<sup>30</sup> “[We] Also use ‘the grey haze’ to denote the whereabouts of PC's whose players were AWOL.”<sup>31</sup>*

A related case of cross-over is the fact that, unlike the real world (though like most literature), the PCs are the main characters around whom most, if not all,

of the activity is defined. Thus, the PCs have an importance in their world that

<sup>29</sup> jeff@io.com, personal interview via UseNet.

<sup>30</sup> I once knew a group where characters of absent players were suddenly encased in an indestructible pink shell of energy, which conveniently floated along with the group. In another, characters of missing players suddenly suffered an acute flare-up of an incapacitating venereal disease—regardless of whether or not the character’s personality would make it likely or even possible for the character to have contracted such a disease.

<sup>31</sup> red\_army\_blues@hotmail.com, personal interview via UseNet.

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is disproportionate to the actual power and influence of the characters they supposedly are. For some groups and/or genres this is actually desirable—in epic fantasy and modern action films, the main characters are the center of the universe. For others, it becomes a sort of in-joke, poking fun at the fact that the PCs get deferential treatment: “We call that ‘having PCness,’ or ‘having PC painted/tattooed on your forehead/shining brow.’”<sup>32</sup> And for some, it interferes with their suspension of disbelief, and is something to be avoided: “Here, it’s your ‘PC Badge.’ Flash it to get the other player characters to work with you, or to let NPCs know that you’re looking for some plot.”<sup>33</sup> This difference in play style can be seen in the different terms people have for this situation. *PC Aura* and *Blue Glow* are relatively benign terms, while *Having PC Tattooed on His Shining Brow* points up a blatant quality. A reference to a *PC Badge* is not only blatant, but shows that the PCs somehow have more authority than they ought, and likens being a PC to being an authority figure.

Similar terms deal with the flip side of this phenomenon: the fact that NPCs are often disproportionately unimportant. NPCs often end up undefined except as necessary for the particular interaction with a PC, and thus may lack fundamental attributes like a name. Instead, they get referred to by generic moniker, such as *Bob* and *extra*. A particularly self-referential example of this is “*Ensign Enpic* - [an] NPC who needed a quick name when the GM wasn’t ready for it; comes from pronouncing NPC as a word.”<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, an entire class of terms has arisen for labeling “disposable” NPCs. These fall into two categories: opponents and allies. Disposable allies are most often referred to as *red shirts* or *cannon fodder*, though there are many other terms, generally more group-specific, in

<sup>32</sup> R. Boleyn, personal interview, via UseNet.

<sup>33</sup> Ryan J Franklin, personal interview, via UseNet.

<sup>34</sup> Scott Delahunt, personal interview, via UseNet.

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use. “[Cannon fodder] Always referred to masses of such [disposable allies],”<sup>35</sup> while red shirts are singular. Easily-disposed-of enemies are generally referred to as *mooks*<sup>36</sup> or *orcs*<sup>37</sup> (whether or not they are orcs, or orcs even exist in the milieu), but there are again many different terms.

Another class of terms that stems from this knowledge cross-over deals with style of play issues. A *Monty Haul* game is “essentially, an unbalanced game...It of course refers to ‘Let’s Make a Deal,’ a TV game show hosted by Monty Hall. It is specifically a reference to ‘I’ll take whatever’s behind door number three, Monty!’ – a convention of the television program where people were awarded prizes by choosing the door behind which the prize was located. The reference is to dungeon crawl games, basically (A)D&D and the like, implying that in a ‘monty haul’ campaign players can gain treasure simply by going about dungeons and opening doors (glossing over combat, roleplaying, [and going directly] to treasure and especially magic items).”<sup>38</sup> But without the knowledge brought to the situation at the level of the player, who knows how difficult things really are, the situation would not exist. From the character’s perspective, she has no way of knowing that the game is “rigged” as opposed to her merely being skilled or lucky. In an almost exactly inverse situation, the stereotypical *dungeon crawl* game–“An adventure set in a dungeon, cave or other traditional dank underground setting...[or] any adventure that has the features of old-style dungeon adventures–monsters that stay one location until encountered, traps with no logical purpose, etc.”<sup>39</sup>–while potentially great fun for the player, would seem nonsensical from a pure character perspective: in a world that existed only on its own merits, rather than as a construct for a game, the *dungeons* where such games take place simply wouldn’t make sense

<sup>35</sup> Lance Berg, personal interview via UseNet.

<sup>36</sup> *Feng Shui* is a new RPG that aims to simulate the genre of Hong Kong action films, and a requisite trait is the hero defeating literal hordes of lesser badguys. Thus the mechanics make this an explicit possibility, assigning characters into two categories: “mooks” and “named characters,” (the PCs and major villains) and applying different rules to the two.

<sup>37</sup> Probably derived in part from *The Lord of the Rings*, in which the heroes routinely vanquish unreasonably huge hordes of evil monsters, of which orcs are the most memorable.

<sup>38</sup> Gord Sellar, personal interview, via UseNet.

<sup>39</sup> R. Boleyn, personal interview via UseNet.

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and wouldn't exist. "In a dungeon crawl, there's this huge warren of caves filled with monsters, most of them in sealed rooms. What do they eat? When one PC party goes through it, another will probably follow and fight the same foes. Where did they come from?"<sup>40</sup>

Another common case of knowledge cross-over in a similar vein is not only accepted but willfully employed. Oftentimes, the issue of compatibility between the characters is glossed over, and they are just assumed to work together, more or less, for the sake of the players. Along this line, rather than trying to justify why the characters are together, it is not uncommon to just assume they are. This is often indicated by some variation on "you met in the bar," a reference to the clichéd origin for so many fantasy groups. A clear example of this in practice can be found near the beginning of *Star Wars*, where the group comes together in the cantina on Tatooine, but when the expression is used in an RPG, it is as often as not not literal, but just a metaphor.

A third class of RPG folkspeech is that which has arisen to discuss RPGs and roleplaying. In much the same way that literary criticism has developed, invented, and refined a set of terms for talking about literature, roleplayers have developed a set of terms for talking about roleplaying. One set of these deals with play style issues, mostly in a pejorative manner. So *munchkins* are those who engage in *minmaxing*, and are often most interested in *hack & slash* games.<sup>41</sup> A related set of terms has become more of a running joke than anything else—there are a whole series of jokes about the "4 types" of roleplayers: Real Men, Real Roleplayers, Munchkins, and Real Loonies. Real Men are the roleplayers who embody the action-adventure hero ideal. Real

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<sup>40</sup> Frank J. Perricone, personal interview via UseNet.

<sup>41</sup> hack & slash games are games that focus on, or exclusively contain, combat and other violence. minmaxing is the practice of creating a character with the goal of maximizing her power in the game world, without regard for believability.

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Roleplayers are most interested in living a vicarious life through roleplaying. Munchkins just want to win. And supposedly nobody really knows what Real Loonies want out of roleplaying. Despite the semi-seriousness with which jokes and anecdotes about this split are presented, I've yet to meet anyone who takes the classification at all seriously.

Finally, the most diverse class of roleplayer folkspeech consists of pop-culture references. Strictly speaking, movies have authors, and shouldn't really be considered part of the oral tradition, or of folklore. However, I believe that these references *do* qualify as folkspeech. Using the "multiple existence in variation" test, a given reference often becomes "corrupted" and is heard in slight variation from different tellers. Moreover, I argue that the body of movie references used by roleplayers, as a whole, conforms to this test. While the wording of a given quote rarely shows much variation, it may be used in multiple contexts, with radically divergent meanings. Likewise, several different quotes may all come to have roughly the same meaning, and thus be functional variations on one another, despite the differing origins. Finally, as Dundes points out, the fact that something is transmitted by, or even originates in, a fixed technological medium does not inherently disqualify it from the realm of folklore.<sup>42</sup> These quotes are retransmitted orally, and reinterpreted by the roleplaying folk culture to give them relevance, despite the fact that their original source (movies, mostly) assure a very broad initial distribution.

Due to their origins in pop culture, these are generally the least obtuse items of folkspeech found among roleplayers. Most of the references would be equally

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<sup>42</sup> Dundes, Alan. "Who Are the Folk?" *Interpreting Folklore*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. 1980.

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well understood by a non-gamer, and consist of lines from popular movies and other sources used in contexts similar to their original context. However, some are more distinctive, and there is one subset, in particular, that seems to be extremely specialized to roleplayers: *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*<sup>43</sup> references. In addition to a similarity of subject matter with a great many RPGs (a disproportionate number of which are pseudo-Medieval or swords & sorcery), I suspect this comes from a similarity of tone. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, is, among other things, a deconstruction of not only the Arthurian mythos and the ideals of chivalry, but of the heroic quest in general. And, in a way, the bastardization of an epic that most RPG games turn out as is very similar. Therefore, I find it no coincidence that so many of the quotes and scenes from the movie are appropriated by roleplayers—both are drawing on the same heroic fantasy tradition, and have many of the same elements.

In response to a particularly asinine suggestion, someone might quip *build a bridge out of her*, in reference to the scene where the villagers and Sir Percival are trying to determine if a woman is a witch through utterly silly tests founded on spurious “logic.” Another very common reference is to *Tim*, or Tim the Enchanter, who is one of several character in the movie that have no place except to convey necessary plot information. “*We always used it to refer to any old sage in a remote location that gave us the next clue on a quest, especially when his appearance felt sudden and contrived, like the GM just put him there as a way to get us back on track.*”<sup>44</sup> Again, this is a parody of a figure from folktales: the wise enigmatic figure in the wilderness that helps the hero, so applying the name of the parody to the bastardization in an RPG is extremely appropriate; they have more in common than most roleplayers would probably like to admit.

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<sup>43</sup> Columbia Pictures, 1974.

<sup>44</sup> Steve Mading, personal interview, via UseNet.

## Section II: Folkspeech Items

The following specific items of roleplayer folkspeech include all of those cited in the paper body or footnotes, as well as further examples. In each case, the actual item is listed, followed by my interpretations and then others' explanations and interpretations. If several terms are synonymous or near-synonymous they are grouped together, and I explain any differences in meaning. The folkspeech items themselves are bulleted to separate them, and in italics. Quotes are italicized in a smaller typeface and blockquoted. All direct quotes are unedited except for formatting (linebreaks and the like), and most were directly copied from the original written response. Since the vast majority of these were relayed to me in written form, I saw no point in trying to use Tedlock's methods in presenting them.

I gathered all of the quotes, both terms and contexts, from a personal interview with two of my roommates, followed by responses to a survey posted to the UseNet newsgroups `rec.games.frp.misc` and `rec.games.frp.advocacy`, and subsequent discussions in those forums and via private email. To the best of my ability, all informants are identified with a real name and a location, but in some cases I was forced to settle for as little as an email address. I chose not to print email addresses unless I had no other identifier. Luckily, a full email address is unique. Unluckily, it is not static, and may prove little use in even the near future. I chose to include location (to the degree that it was provided by the informants) to help illustrate the degree to which these folkspeech items are widespread among a subculture that is only loosely connected.

- *I disbelieve*
- *Can I roll to disbelieve?*

Response to something particularly terrible/improbable. It stems from the

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game mechanic in D&D for making a die roll to recognize a magical illusion as false. Since you had to have a reason for believing something was an illusion before you'd try this, anything out of the ordinary might trigger such a response.

*I disbelieve: Harkens back to AD&D, when the illusionist class could create imaginary dangers that wouldn't actually kill PCs, but merely put them in a bad way. It was great, because GMs could present the illusion of real danger. The only way to resist was to utter, "I disbelieve." In non-AD&D games, uttered when something utterly impossible occurs.*

--Lee Garvin

*This also shows up in games as "Can I roll to disbelieve?" after something horrendous happens.*

*GM: "The last shot toasted your drive. the Zhodani battlecruiser is calling for your surrender."*

*Player (weakly) "Can I roll to disbelieve?"*

--Douglas E. Berry

- *save vs. Death or die*
- *save vs. Death*
- *no saving throw*
- *Want to play this out, or just roll up new characters immediately?*

All of these indicate that an outcome is unavoidable. The first two are specific

to a fatal situation, while the last can be used in just about any context. They

are all variations on the concept of the "Saving Throw," a mechanic found in

D&D. Saving Throws are statistics of the characters against which a die roll is

often made to determine how well the character resists some sort of attack or

difficulty. So to "save vs. Death or die" means to roll against the Characters

"Death" Saving Throw, and the consequence of failing the roll is death. This is

implicit in the second example, while the third doesn't specify the

consequences, but makes it clear that they are unavoidable. The last is a

reference to the fact that an RPG is never really over, if the players don't want it

to be. The players can always create ("roll up"<sup>45</sup>) new characters and continue

the same or a different story line.

*"I disbelieve" is used in real life around here, as are "Save vs [whatever]", "ring of [whatever]", and "burn XP to get another roll."*

--Carrie Schutrick, Carnegie-Mellon University

<sup>45</sup> a reference to random statistic generation with dice in some RPGs, including the original few.

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"Want to play this out, or just roll up new characters immediately?"

--Lance Berg

'No saving throw' - inevitable and unwelcome.

--Dr. Jim Davies

- Redshirt
- Rufus & Dufus
- grog
- Mr. Standard & Mr. Bearer
- Mr. Spear & Mr. Carrier
- Test Hobbits
- Thuds
- spear carriers
- Fred and Charley
- Polish mine-detector
- Irish mine-detector
- Alex, Brian, Chuck, Dave...Zack
- Able and Baker

These are all variations on indicators for disposable, faceless NPCs. There is no point in naming them because they have no (or almost no) personality, but are just statistics, the equivalent of extras in an action movie. Moreover, they are not expected to last very long, generally being the first to be killed when the game gets violent. By far the most common of these, "redshirt" comes from the original Star Trek, in which almost every episode the main characters and a security officer or two that we had never seen before would go into some dangerous situation. Inevitably, the (often nameless) security officer(s) would be killed, while the main characters were left untouched. The security branch uniforms consisted of black pants and a red shirt, as opposed to the green and gold and blue shirts of the main characters, and thus the term.

*Any series of NPCs named alphabetically, eg Alex, Brian, Chuck, Dave...Zack. - Cannon fodder.*

*Redshirts.*

--Dr. Jim Davies

*"Send in Able and Baker.": send in nameless trooper (or whatever) #1 and #2 (from the M\*A\*S\*H television show, which always had references to 'Nurse Able' and 'Nurse Baker')*

--Zoran Bekric

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Dunno about you guys, but the term I've ALWAYS heard used was "Redshirts", from the poor original series Star Trek security guards. One red shirt, one dead shirt.

--seawasp@wizvax.net

Redshirt, obviously from Star Trek, for nameless henchmen or NPCs. Similarly, Rufus and Dufus.

--Stephen B. Mann, Albany, NY

We call 'em Test Hobbits. Not sure if the room is trapped? Throw in a Hobbit, and see if it explodes. Works like a charm. In Traveller, we called 'em Thuds. It started out as Thugs, but Thud is more accurate, as that's the sound they made as they got their one chance at return fire.

--Terry Austin

Redshirt: An expendable NPC (usually). Also used to describe being point-man "I'm not going to be a/the Red Shirt."

--R. Boleyn, Palmerston North, New Zealand

Mr. Standard / Mr. Bearer; Mr. Spear / Mr. Carrier; <several similar patterns ad nauseum> Similar in concept to Star Trek's "red shirts" (which I believe someone already mentioned), these are the two quintessential disposable henchmen. My first time encountering this concept was, in fact, in a Star Trek game where Mr. Standard and Mr. Bearer were two redshirt security ensigns. The use has spread, however, to other games.

--Michael T. Richter

Red Shirt: already mentioned in another post, but I thought I'd mention that it is also used as a verb, meaning - to assign a person duties that will almost certainly get them killed. usage: "I can't believe you Red-Shirted me!"

--Lee Garvin

- **Bob**
- **extra**
- **peon**
- **Ensign Enpic**

Generic NPC so unimportant that figuring a name for him is not worth it.

Closely related terms to Redshirt, et al, above. However, Bobs aren't necessarily slated for quick death.

I have run across this as well. Sometimes, when encountering a Bob, someone will say, "Oh, it's you,... Bob." from the Toyota commercials of a few years ago.

--Lee Garvin

Extra: From Aftermath! and Bushido in which they were NPCs of little or no importance with 1 Hit Point each. We use it for any NPC who obviously has only a walk-on part.

--R. Boleyn, Palmerston North, New Zealand

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*Ensign Enpic* - NPC who needed a quick name when the GM wasn't ready for it; comes from pronouncing NPC as a word.

--Scott Delahunt

- **Fighter #1**

Closely related to Bob, et al, a Fighter #1 is an equally faceless PC.

*a generic pre-rolled character that you get when you play tournaments. "fighter #1," "thief #2," "mage #3," and there are no names, it's just like a sheet of stats, and that's it. no personalization. occasionally used as a derisive term like "DM#1" [to indicate that the DM has no personality/just rolls the dice]*

--Peter Keller, University of Wisconsin

- *mooks*
- *burgers*
- *crunchies*
- *Orcs*
- *Kobolds*
- *gobbo*

Weak faceless enemies, unrealistically easy to kill, often found in large groups.

*Feng Shui* is a new RPG<sup>46</sup> that aims to simulate the genre of Hong Kong action films, and a requisite trait is the hero defeating literal hordes of lesser badguys. Thus the mechanics make this an explicit possibility, assigning characters into two categories: "mooks" and "named characters," and applying different rules to the two. Since this is the first RPG to do so explicitly, and thus have a special term for it, the term has rapidly gained popular currency, even among people who've never even heard of the game. In D&D, orcs are a common opponent, and relatively weak, while goblins (whence "gobbo") and kobolds are progressively weaker. Thus these specific creature types became catch-alls for any weak massed opponent that was effortless to slay. Similar "faceless minions of Evil" are found in much fantasy fiction, and to some degree in its oral literature antecedents. The most well-known examples of this would probably be *The Lord of the Rings*, in which the heroes routinely vanquish unreasonably huge hordes of evil monsters, of which orcs are the most

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<sup>46</sup> first published less than 2 years ago

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memorable, and *Chanson de Roland*, in which Roland defeats huge numbers of unnamed warriors identified only as “pagans.”

*Usually "orcs" in my early gaming career (regardless of genre) later replaced by "Goblins" and "kobolds" when more detail about orcs changed them from easy kills into another fully developed race. It took some time for this alternate terminology to seep through, though, given that few of the people involved actually played D&D, where the archetypical terminology was rooted, by the time the sea change overtook the orcs.*

--Lance Berg

*Orcs - cannon fodder monsters of any genera, usually unrealistically easy to kill.*

*Kobolds - as orcs, but trivially easy to annihilate.*

--Dr. Jim Davies

*Gobbo: From 'Goblin', any monster of little power or frightfulness, especially if it's humanoid and tends to attack in large numbers.*

--R. Boleyn, Palmerston North, New Zealand

- *Cannon Fodder*
- *catapult fodder*
- *wizard fodder*

Closely related to mooks, et al. Cannon fodder is of course a conventional world, which retains the same meaning in the game: people who are sent in just to be killed, so as to keep the enemy busy. Catapult fodder and wizard fodder are just fantasy-appropriate variations.

*Always referred to masses of such, used to draw fire, or hold a line briefly against overwhelming opposition. As GM, I have several times used "\_canon\_ fodder" to refer to non clerical followers of a religion used in similar means by the church, or contradictorily any group going up against high level clerics (doomed to failure, it would seem, even if not being sent to die on purpose) including the party itself. Since the word sounds just like cannon, and is less well know, the pun usually goes over everyone's head, but at least it amuses me...*

--Lance Berg

- *dungeon*
- *dungeon crawl*
- *The big truck comes up to the door*

A maze or structure designed to provide a challenge to the PCs, who explore it for some reason. It is typically full of monsters and treasure, rarely with any sensible explanation. A dungeon crawl is an adventure in such a place. A feature of early RPGs, the dungeon crawl is now much less common. The terms have now expanded to include any place/adventure that shares many of

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the features: monsters that stay in one location until encountered, traps with no logical purpose, magical treasure that isn't utilized by the creature guarding it, no ecologically sensible explanation for what all the monsters do when there aren't adventurers trying to kill them, etc.

*a bunch of friends get together and say, 'Hey, I want to run a dungeon crawl tomorrow,' and all you do is start out with a fighter #1 and a mage #2...and throw them into this wild dungeon out of some Dungeon Magazine.*

*--Peter Keller, University of Wisconsin*

*Dungeon Crawl: An adventure set in a dungeon, cave or other traditional dank underground setting. Also any adventure that has the features of old-style dungeon adventures - monsters that stay one location until encountered, traps with no logical purpose, etc. Can be used as a verb "We're going dungeon crawling".*

*--R. Boleyn, Palmerston North, New Zealand*

*"The big truck comes up to the door": in a dungeon crawl, there's this huge warren of caves filled with monsters, most of them in sealed rooms. What do they eat? When one PC party goes through it, another will probably follow and fight the same foes. Where did they come from? The obvious answer: the Dungeon Catering and Supply Company, which drove up after each group of PCs left the dungeon with a huge truck, backed up to the entrance, and unloaded a fresh batch of monsters, plus food. As the PCs walk into the sunset on the way out of a dungeon crawl, they invariably pass the truck heading for the dungeon entrance, look over their shoulders, and see the big truck come up to the door.*

*--Frank J. Perricone*

- *Monty Haul*
- *gilded hole*
- *circus game*
- *Grimtooth game*
- *Monty Hell*

A Monty Haul game is unreasonably easy or overly rewarding. The term comes from Monty Hall, the host of the old game show "Let's Make a Deal," because the contestants' winnings depended on luck and Monty's mood, rather than any skill on their part. Grimtooth game and Monty Hell are responses to just such a gaming style, the latter making a deliberate pun in the process.

*Nobody mentioned "Monty Haul Campaign" . . . I first encountered this term in Dragon Magazine,<sup>47</sup> so that's why it's such a widespread term . . . essentially, an unbalanced game (this term tends to fault the GM rather than players, though implies players' complicity). It of course refers to Let's Make a Deal, a tv game show hosted by Monty Haul. It is specifically a*

<sup>47</sup> Dragon Magazine is one of the oldest magazines dedicated to RPGs. It has been published by TSR, the company that publishes D&D, since the mid '70s.

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reference to "I'll take whatever's behind door number three Monty!" - a convention of the television program where people were awarded prizes by choosing the door behind which the prize was located. The reference is to dungeon crawl games, basically (A)D&D and the like, implying that in a "monty haul" campaign players can gain treasure simply by going about dungeons and opening doors (glossing over combat, roleplaying, to treasure and especially magic items). It is also often spoken of (fondly, like the way one speaks of old crushes and the like) as a stage which all GM's pass through in their development as a GM.

--Gord Sellar, Saskatoon

"Circus games" are like Monty Haul ones, but even worse, such as D&D characters repairing and operating the spaceship from Expedition to the Barrier Peaks.<sup>48</sup>

--David Crowe

Regarding "Monty Haul" campaigns and "gilded holes": for some reason, I am under the impression that the connotation of the former is that it is something that other lesser players do, while the latter is something that one played in in one's own misguided youth. I note that I first saw these terms about twenty years ago in essays written by the late Glenn Blacow in the gaming fanzine *The Wild Hunt*.

--Warren Dew

A friend of mine used to run what he called "Monty Hell" campaigns. You got lots of stuff... \*if\*, and only if, you manage to survive the [sic] get the stuff.

--Mark Kinney

[a grimtooth game is] a game either that uses one of the Grimtooth's Traps books,<sup>49</sup> or just one that is unreasonably deadly.

--Peter Keller, University of Wisconsin

- *you meet the party in the bar*
- *you met in a bar*
- *you arrive at the capital*

A reference to the clichéd introduction found in so many poor fantasy games (and movies and books). Now, it is not so often used literally, but as a shorthand for saying "we're not concerned with how it happened; you're all together now so we can get started right away." A slightly more sophisticated example of this convention can be seen in *Star Wars*.

We call this "you arrive at the capital." after a particularly difficult to start game.

--Terry Austin

<sup>48</sup> *Expedition to the Barrier Peaks* was a published scenario for D&D that involved the pseudo-medieval characters finding a crashed space ship and exploring it.

<sup>49</sup> *Grimtooth's Traps* is a supplemental book published for GMs to use that focuses on the adversarial relationship between GM and players in a dungeon crawl game by providing a host of particularly ingenious, and particularly deadly, puzzles, traps, and obstacles for the GM to incorporate into a dungeon. It has since spawned a host of sequels, containing more of the same, and titled *Grimtooth's Traps Too*, *Grimtooth's Traps For*, and so on.

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- *hack and slash*
- *Hack 'n' slay*

A derisive term for a game that is all combat, and/or for players that are only concerned about combat. Looked down upon by most gamers, because it is seen to go against the spirit of RPGs: 'why play a roleplaying game if you're not going to pay any attention to the role? That's what wargames, computer games, and other tactical games are for.'

- *munchkin*
- *power gamer*
- *minimaxing/minimaxer*
- *Min-Maxing/minmaxer*
- *raping the rules/raping the system/rules raping/rules raper*
- *point-shaver*
- *mathematician*
- *rules lawyer*
- *dice bouncing*
- *roll-playing*

These are all terms that relate closely to hack & slash. Like it, they are used derisively to refer to people who aren't playing RPGs the "right" way. In this case, the "sin" is following the letter of the rules over their spirit. The various terms differ both in degree of offense and degree of judgmentalism. Minmaxing is seen as perhaps acceptable, depending on group and context, and is the least judgmental term, sometimes being applied in a positive manner. Point-shaver and mathematician are more self-designations, and thus intended to be positive, emphasizing the skill with which the player utilizes the mechanics of a game. Power gamers and munchkins are seen as more misguided, while rules lawyers and rules rapists are seen as maliciously misinterpreting the spirit of the rules in favor of the the letter. Dice bouncing and roll-playing are synonyms, referring to the tendency to rely on mechanical interpretations instead of narrative ones. The latter is most often seen in writing, as the visual pun tends to be lost in spoken communication.

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*Maybe it's nitpicking, but I think "munchkin" is more attitude than action. Minmaxing, etc is a \*symptom\* of munchkinism, not the definition of it.*

*And I think the term probably originated with older gamers referring to younger, less "enlightened" (a relative term) gamers... because they're short (like Baum's<sup>50</sup> munchkins) and annoying (like Baum's munchkins).*

*There's probably the core of the definition... a munchkin is a childishly annoying powergamer, etc.*

*--Carl D. Cravens*

*Regarding the term 'munchkin'...*

*Also enthusiastic and noisy, and perhaps not characterized very deeply.*

*The meaning may have shifted, though. In my day, a 'munchkin' would be expected to try to exploit the rules, but not to have the capability to actually do it effectively.*

*--Warren Dew*

### **• It's all xp**

A reference to experience points, a concept found in nearly all RPGs.

Experience Points (XPs, EPs, exp, "eeps") are the primary game-like reward in an RPG. They are given out by the GM as a reward for accomplishing goals and/or roleplaying well, and can be spent to improve the character.

*expression of resignation used in RL to indicate that whilst an event has not gone according to plan, useful experience has been gained.*

*--Dr. Jim Davies*

- *grey mists*
- *Reality Ends, 50ft*
- *Construction Area-Keep Out!*
- *Ancient Ruins Under Construction*
- *Here There Be Dragons*

One of the problems with creating a fantasy world and then giving a group of players free reign within it is that no fantasy world can ever be complete. And, inevitably, it is precisely the incomplete areas, where the GM hasn't had a chance to fill in the details (or sometimes even the broad strokes) that the players get interested in. As a result, groups tend to come up with some sort of short hand that minimizes the intrusion of reality into the game world, while letting the players know that they should politely come up with something else to do. Here There Be Dragons is, of course, a slightly less jarring euphemism,

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<sup>50</sup> L. Frank Baum, author of *The Wizard of Oz* and sequels.

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drawing on old maps which used phrases and illustrations to that affect to fill in spaces the cartographer was ignorant of.

*"Grey mists" - the parts "off the map" that the GM hasn't designed yet but into which the players inevitably blunder.*

*--Giles Williams*

*"Reality Ends 50ft." and "Construction Area-Keep Out!" Signs found on the edge of the campaign map and in dungeons to indicate we were about to wander off the GM's map.*

*--Douglas E. Berry*

*"Ancient Ruins Under Construction" (generally encountered on a large billboard in the party's path. Used to indicate that the party is reaching the edge of the area mapped by the GM and that they should advanced no further. Actually occurred many years ago in game; these days is used metaphorically: GM: 'You can't go there.' Player: 'Ah, it's Ancient Ruins Under Construction.' GM: 'Yeah...')*

*--Zoran Bekric*

*"Here there be dragons" used to mean this, often misunderstood by players; sometimes literal and meant to be misinterpreted.*

*--Lance Berg*

- *PC Glow*
- *having 'PC' stamped on his forehead*
- *player aura*
- *PC Badge*
- *having PCness*
- *having PC painted/tattooed on your forehead/shining brow*
- *blue glow*

In most RPGs, the players are explicitly the center of the game, and so their characters tend to be more or less the center of the fantasy universe. However, this isn't always seen as desirable, as many gamers prefer the "realism" of their characters being no more important to the world than their status and/or power would indicate. Therefore, a whole slew of terms have arisen, all of which essentially point out that a character is being treated specially in the game world, for no reason except that she is a PC.

*"player aura" - The quality that allows characters to know that another character should be trusted. Used as "It's okay; he has player aura," or "He says nothing; his player aura is dim today" (when the player is absent).*

*--johnmc@opennt.com*

*Here, it's your "PC Badge." Flash it to get the other player characters to work with you, or to let*

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*NPCs know that you're looking for some plot.*  
--Ryan J Franklin, University of Arizona

*We used two expressions: "Tear the N off" and "Velcro the N on" referring to a legendary "NPC T-shirt"*  
--Lance Berg

*We call that "having PCness", or "having PC painted/tattooed on your forehead/shining brow".*  
--R. Boleyn, Palmerston North, New Zealand

*We call this 'blue glow'. And when a character's player is absent we say that the character 'keeps bumping into things', or that its 'blue glow has gone out'. I think that our term 'blue glow' refers to the magical quality of PC-ness, and might have roots going back to the blue glow of magic swords. It might also have something to do with the blue-glowing ghosts of Jedi masters in the 'Star Wars' films.*  
--Brett Evill, Australia

*AH! This is the one I've been trying to remember. We call this effect the 'PC Glow', or alternatively having 'PC' stamped on his forehead. Refers to the indisputable fact that players have their characters typically trust other PCs... Often exploited by unscrupulous GMs and their conniving accomplices in crime using a 'doppleganger'.*  
--George Heintzleman, MIT

- Quantum PC
- Schrödinger PC
- locked in the sanitary facilities
- the grey haze
- PC with PMS

One of the most fascinating intrusions of the real world into the fantasy world is the issue of missing players. Since a typical game spans many sessions and breaks in play time often don't neatly coincide with breaks in the characters' activities, it is almost inevitable that sooner or later a player will be absent when there is no believable way for the character to be absent. It is common practice that one doesn't play another's character, at least as a general rule, so the player-less character will do little or nothing for the duration. As a result, the group (usually the GM, actually), has to come up with a reason why that character is suddenly less alive than before. These range from the reality-defying (Lothar is suddenly encased in an indestructible pink shell of energy, which floats along behind the group, wherever you go.) through the tongue-in-

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cheek, to the merely coincidental.

*We have Quantum, or Shrodinger's<sup>51</sup> PCs, for players who are absent - they're assumed to have been with the group, just in an indeterminate state for the course of the session.*

--Neil Barnes, University of Bristol, England

*My groups take on this - 'locked in the sanitary facilities'. One of the players was poring over the deck plans of the starship they were on, and was incredibly ticked by the fact that the WCs were labeled 'Sanitary Facilities' - I'm not sure why. In any case, he ended up the session locked in them, and he wasn't around for the next two games, so we assumed he was still locked in the SanFac. From then on, whenever someone was missing for a session, the first thing their character would do is say, 'I'm gonna go to the bathroom' (or something similar) and then wander off, and somehow get locked or stuck there.*

--jeffj@io.com

*Also use "the grey haze" to denote the whereabouts of PC's whose players were AWOL.*

--Red <red\_army\_blues@hotmail.com>

*You mean PC with PMS : Player missing syndrome.*

-- Peter P. Toth

- **Burning SAN**
- **Blowing SAN**
- **SAN check**

From Call of Cthulhu, where this is an actual mechanic, invoked in response to horrifying events. Now used not only in other games, but also in real life. Most often refers to horrifying events, but sometimes is sarcastically applied to inane or illogical events.

*from Call of Cthulhu: Burning (or Blowing) SAN.<sup>52</sup> Used in reference to any mind boggling event, or particularly twisted chain of logic; ie "That burned SAN, but I followed it!" Most often used out of game.*

--Jeff MacDonald

*SAN check; Not just a term used in our cthulhu games, something that has spread throughout all the RPGers i know where i live. USed whenever we see something scary. We even use it for non game purposes.*

--marsthrel@aol.com, Yorkshire, UK

- **Robin the not-so-brave**

<sup>51</sup> Physicist Erwin Schrödinger proposed the idea that not only observation, but reality itself, was observer-dependent, so a quantity is not only unknown, but indeterminate, until observed. This idea is one of the core tenets of quantum physics, and thus the 'quantum' reference.

<sup>52</sup> SAN is the standard game abbreviation for Sanity, a statistic in the *Call of Cthulhu* game. *Call of Cthulhu* is a game built around the universe of cosmic horrors from the fiction of H. P. Lovecraft, and Sanity is used to model the way that characters in his fiction were driven insane by these horrors.

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- *Run Away!*
- *Look! It's the old man from scene 32!*
- *Tim*
- *vorpal bunny*
- *turn [something] into a newt*
- *And there was much rejoicing. Yeaah!*
- *Build a bridge out of her?*
- *shrubbery quest*
- *'Castle Arrrrg' note*

All of these, and many more, are references to the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Moreso than any other film or book, perhaps, this film is common currency among gamers. I have yet to meet or even hear of a gamer who hadn't seen the film—usually several times. While there are many pop-cultural references found in the gaming community, this one is near-unique in its universality—only *Star Wars* even comes close. This probably stems from the similarity of both subject and treatment. RPGs started out in the pseudo-Medieval fantasy vein, and even today swords & sorcery fantasy is probably the most popular genre. Moreover, most gamers recognize the inherent disconnection of gaming from reality, and readily poke fun at themselves. Very few games are as self-referential or silly as *Monty Python* is on a regular basis, but almost every gamer has recognized the tendency on occasion, and most have had at least an evening's worth of such gaming in a nominally serious setting. And the synergy works both ways. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is at its heart a parody of the entire heroic quest tradition, which is of course the basis for much of roleplaying, especially in the high fantasy genre. Therefore, the very traits that the movie is poking fun at in stories are as or even more common in roleplaying games: the knight errant who undertakes a quest or task because someone tells him to, heedless of the source or alternatives; the assumption of monarchy; the “hero” who responds to most situations with violence first and foremost; and so on.

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Interestingly, only two of the quotes commonly reported by gamers (the newt quote and the reference to the “vorpal bunny”) show up in those highlighted by the Internet Movie Database,<sup>53</sup> which implies that the gamers are not just parroting the most popular quotes, but those that are most relevant to gaming.

*Any Monty Python & the Holy Grail Reference: While not an individual term, I thought it deserved mention. Any line from the movie is a valid piece of roleplaying jargon, given that everyone will know what you mean when you mention it. Some specific ones I have heard: Vorpal Bunny: Any critter that looks harmless and cute that turns out to be fearsome and terrifying in action. Build a bridge out of her: (or any similar reference to a line from the witch trial scene) Any sort of utterly silly test to find out information, or intensely complicated utterly illogical line of reasoning. shrubbery quest: Any silly quest to get something that makes no sense at all other than the fact that someone asked for it in exchange for a favor. Very prevalent in computer adventures. A 'castle arrrg' note: Any message that was presumably recorded by the author just as the author was killed.*

--Steve Mading, University of Wisconsin

*Robin-the-not-so-Brave: A tough fighter whose player keeps trying to avoid going into danger.*

--R. Boleyn, Palmerston North, New Zealand

*"Run Away!": alternative call for retreat, usually after a particularly bad fiasco.*

--Michael T. Richter

*Tim: any wizard character who's sole function is to lob fireballs or cause explosions. Also used to refer to various cards in CCGs. Derived from "Monty Python and the Holy Grail."*

--Lee Garvin

*"Tim" : Tim the Enchanter. Mentioned earlier by someone else as a mage who uses lots of fireballs, but we always used it to refer to any old sage in a remote location that gave us the next clue on a quest, especially when his appearance felt sudden and contrived, like the GM just put him there as a way to get us back on track.*

--Steve Mading, University of Wisconsin

*"Look! It's the old man from Scene 32!" (or 24, or whatever). Again, a character who appears bearing a clue, for no apparent reason.*

--Tom Scudder, University of Michigan

*to turn [something] into a newt: a spell which appears to work but wears off too quickly. "Quick, charm him!" "OK, but I'm almost out of power, it might just turn him into a newt for a round or so."*

--Carrie Schutrick, Carnegie Mellon University

*And of course, we can't forget "And there was much rejoicing, yeeaaah", said after a particularly annoying character has just died.*

--Steve Mading, University of Wisconsin

<sup>53</sup> a submission-driven online movie database, <<http://www.imdb.com/>>

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- *Little Old Man*

A little old man is related to the Monty Python “Old man from Scene X” and “Tim”, above, but independently arisen. This serves to emphasize the fact that *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is not by any means uniquely a source, but also parallels RPGs as an outgrowth of traditional heroic quest fiction and epics.

*Little old man - an NPC whose only job is to give out rumours.  
--Dr. Jim Davies*

- *Railroad*
- *Railroading*
- *Tunnel-of-fun*
- *Okay, you've all been poisoned (and you'll die in 3 days if you don't get the antidote).*
- *GM's Hammer*

One of the few things that most roleplayers can agree on is that railroading is a bad thing. Railroading is the practice of forcing the players to follow a single, predetermined plot, most frequently because the GM isn't prepared to deal with the consequences of anything else. Since most roleplayers, whatever their motives for gaming, value the ability to control their character, something that so blatantly limits how they can play their character is seen as a frustration at best, and blasphemy at worst. There are a whole host of terms that go along with this, and GM's Hammer is a good example of them. Normally, the GM is expected to provide plot hooks, which the players then have the freedom to act on or not.<sup>54</sup> A GM's Hammer, however, is a plot hook that is provided over and over again, until the players take it thus hammering them into that position—a frequent tool of railroading.

*'Railroading': as GM, forcing the PCs to follow a course of action you have chosen.  
--Brett Evill*

*'Tunnel-of-fun': an adventure with heavy railroading, in which the alternatives to the GM's*

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<sup>54</sup> As part of the play contract, it is considered good form to generally cooperate; the GM attempts to provide reasonable hooks that the characters really would be interested in, and the players in return may stretch absolute simulation a bit to accept the plot hooks.

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*chosen course of action are cut off by clumsy plot devices.*

--Brett Evill

*"The Railroad": A game in which the players have no control over the route, and only get to look at the scenery as they are hustled through the predetermined story (often by forcible and stupid plot devices). Players are often exposed to great danger only to be rescued at the last second, sometimes by a Rubber Dinosaur. Glove Puppets also live on the Railroad.*

*Usages: "We've been Railroaded". "This is a Railroad". "It's a bit Railway".*

--Kevin Lowe, Brisbane, Australia

*From one particular recent session where the GM used a really obvious railroad device (Hey, Bob, are you out there listening?), we now have the jargon "Okay, you've all been poisoned (and you'll die in 3 days if you don't get the antidote)." as a metaphor for 'railroading'.*

--Steve Mading, University of Wisconsin

*GM's Hammer: Any plot hook repeatedly offered by the GM, giving an image of preference for a particular choice. Also any deus ex machina used that points in a particular direction.*

--Mark Kinney