Role-Playing Games, Fandom and Participatory Culture:

A New Paradigm of Cultural Production

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Abstract

The epitome of human cultural production up until the closing years of the 20th century was the book. Indeed, as a piece of technology the book has become so natural to us that we barely notice that it is technology. Yet we now stand on the verge of a new age in which the entire paradigm on which our literary culture is based is challenged by technological and social developments. This paper explores both practical and theoretical aspects of these challenges, arguing that they can be better understood by looking for precedents: forerunners that developed during the 20th century in the behavior of "fans." Finally, role-playing games are introduced as an example of the participatory culture which drives much of the new paradigm.

Introduction

A young woman is using her smartphone. She is looking at the screen, while occasionally operating it by touch. What is she doing?

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, this is not an easy question to answer. A mere ten years ago, if someone was observed using a mobile phone, a reasonable guess would have been that they were communicating with someone by voice or by text. Now, however, the chance of making a correct guess has dropped dramatically. Is she playing a game? Updating her Facebook page? Reading a *manga?* Or just browsing the web?

Mobile phones have become one of several means by which people commonly access the World Wide Web, and the nature of that access has changed. The Web that Tim Berners-Lee invented was a way of obtaining information conveniently. Web 2.0, as it is now called, links people in far more complex and productive ways. For an idea of how these developments may affect cultural production, it is first useful to examine how cultural production has been shaped by the circumstances of the past.

The Gutenberg Parenthesis

McLuhan (1962) argues that the development of printing technology radically altered human consciousness, by changing the ratio of the senses. He suggests that alphabetic written language privileged the visual sense over others—especially the auditory sense which is dominant in pre-literate cultures—in such a way as to enable a variety of abstract mental operations. There are many problems with McLuhan's analysis, not least his questionable assertions about the nature of Asian civilization, but his claim that the printed word shaped Western civilization for several centuries seems unarguable.

First and foremost, printing technology established the *book* as the most highly privileged source of human knowledge. Greek philosophers had been wary of the written word. One of their main objections to it, however, became one of its most emphatic characteristics during the centuries following the spread of printing: its (alleged)

completedness.

The book was already central to three of the dominant religions of Europe and the Middle East: Christianity, Judaism and Islam. As the heated debates over which writings merited inclusion in the Christian Bible demonstrate, "completedness" and "authorization" were no abstract concepts, but sources of acrimonious dispute and even violence; after Christianity was recognized by the Roman Emperor in the 4th century, heretics were subject to a sentence of death.

Without a *codex* (the piece of technology that we now recognise as a book: namely, a collection of pages bound on one side into a single volume), the rules for inclusion in a book were essentially separate from the book itself. "Books" largely consisted of scrolls, parchments, fragments; the codex made it possible to directly embed the "completedness" of the book in the book itself. Until printing technology made access to books possible for all levels of society, books were employed as sources of authority by the elite, and used to shape an orally-transmitted regime. Thus the priest would read from the Bible to a congregation which was mostly illiterate. Everyday discourse for ordinary people consisted of oral transmission. Books were the tools of the elite, and so inevitably they became tools of authority. To bolster this authority, they had to be distinguished from oral transmission.

> A book is essentially not a talked thing, but a written thing; and written, not with the view of mere communications, but of permanence. The book of talk is printed only because its author cannot speak to thousands of people at once; if he could, he would—the volume is mere amplification of his voice … But a book is written, not to multiply the voice merely, not to carry it merely, but to perpetuate it. (Ruskin, 1985)

The book, therefore, combined completedness, authority and permanence. It helped the spread of religious doctrines because it could not easily be argued with (this was an objection of the Greek philosophers to written thought). The only effective way to argue against a book was to produce another book: a process requiring considerable time, effort and capital.

Just as it aided the spread of religion, the book made its contribution to science. The book made it possible for scientific theories to be "settled," that is, to be accepted for a period of time before being overturned. This provided science—which is, essentially, a process of constant change and updating of knowledge—with the stability required to apply its discoveries on a practical level.

Derrida (1982) asserts that in the binary opposition of speech and writing, speech has been privileged, and he responds to this by arguing for the primacy of writing. In so doing, he also challenges McLuhan's claims about the importance of phonetic writing, by asserting that writing is not, primarily, phonetic. He further develops previous theory on the inherent incompleteness of language into the idea of supplementarity. An example of this idea can be taken from the above assertion about language: we assume that Western writing is phonetic, and that the non-phonetic marks employed—such as punctuation—are mere supplements. Derrida argues that the "supplements" are actually key to the functioning of the language, as well as operating on its "margins."

Supplementarity explodes the myth of the "completedness" of the book. For hundreds of years, literate civilization took it for granted that a story had a beginning and an end. It offered knowledge, discourse, in reassuringly packaged "chunks." The book was a metaphor for human life: its beginning was birth, and its ending—its last page—death.

In the closing years of the "Gutenberg Parenthesis," however, this system of thought has been challenged by theorists. McLuhan saw it as being overturned by the advent of television, which would see another change in the ratio of the senses, devaluing the visual. In this, however,

it seems he was wrong, overestimating the length of the period of time for which television would be the dominant medium. Influential literary theorist Bakhtin denied that any work could be "monumental," which is to say, independent of previous work (Bakhtin & Volosinov, 1986). His work explored the ways in which writing is intertextual—though that term was coined in response to Bakhtin's work by Kristeva (1980)—which is to say a composite entity, constructed from pre-existing forms. Kristeva herself, with the other French intellectuals associated with the journal *Tel Quel,* subjected the whole notion of communication to critique:

> Communication and meaning…present knowledge and intellectual work as a product, a commodifiable and exchangeable object of value. Most people, it would be fair to say, believe that knowledge, if it exists, can be clearly communicated, and because of this it can be bought and sold in books, in educational courses and so on. The belief in the clear communication of ideas plugs intellectual work into a capitalist market system in which things are only of value if they can be bought and sold. In such a system, we might say, ideas are only valuable if they are consumable. (Allen, 2011)

Post-structuralist thinkers resisted conventional "totalizing" systems of thought. Roland Barthes reversed conventional understandings of the terms "work" and "text" in a manner akin to Derrida's differentiation of speech and writing.

> A work is a finished object, something computable, which can occupy a physical space (take its place, for example, on the shelves of a library); the text is a methodological field. One cannot, therefore, count up texts, at least not in any regular way; all one can say is that in such-and such a work, there is, or there isn't, some text. 'The work is held in the hand, the text in language.' (Barthes, 1981)

The "work," in Barthes's reading, is the physical expression, while the "text" is the play of signifiers, the passage of meaning as the reader interacts with the intertext. With its pretense of completedness, authority and permanence, with its status as commodity, the book epitomizes the totalizing process of the "work."

After the Book

McLuhan's belief that television would reshape our relationship with culture was not entirely mistaken, however. The spread of television made clear something which had previously been primarily observable in movie theaters and, earlier, theaters: the death of the author. Barthes (1977), coined this expression to criticize the concept of the author as a historical expression masquerading as a "natural" phenomenon. Television, succeeding movies, demonstrated in a different way—on a practical level—the weakness of the author as a concept. An author can on the one hand be defined as the writer of a text, on the other as the "creator" or "originator" of a work. Film theory tied itself in knots trying to identify an *auteur* for a film, even though film-making is an enterprise involving the contributions of dozens of people. It settled on the director, emphasizing that a writer is not necessarily an author; the latter has connotations of responsibility and power, and in film, a director has more power than a writer. With television, the distributions of responsibility and power are so complex that the notion of an author as either a writer or an originator disintegrate under the strain.

This can be demonstrated with an example that also relates to the new paradigm of cultural production. Who is the author of the longest-running science fiction television series in the world, *Doctor Who?* Is it Sydney Newman, who came up with ideas that led to the program? Is it Verity Lambert, the producer who oversaw the creation of the program in 1963? Is it Antony Coburn, who wrote the first four episodes, or Waris Hussein, who directed them (or any of

the writers or directors of the dozens of later stories)? Wikipedia lists the creators of the series as Newman, C. E. Webber and Donald Wilson (Doctor Who) on the basis of these three producing the first "format document," even though Webber wrote nothing for the series, and Wilson's main contribution was attempting to block the adoption of a story by Terry Nation, "The Daleks" which went on to define the program in significant ways. It becomes necessary to interrogate the whole concept of "origination" of a work. Sydney Newman is credited with providing the initial inspiration, but how much of the subsequent 49-year history of the program derives directly from his vision? *Doctor Who* was originally conceived as an entertaining form of historical education for children; once the Daleks appeared in its sixth broadcast episode, however, it was clear that entertainment, and science fiction, would overshadow education.

Doctor Who contributes to this discussion in other ways. I have already suggested completedness, authority, and permanence as perceived characteristics of the book. *Doctor Who* shows how television exposes the contradictions in these concepts.

Firstly, *Doctor Who* is never complete, and can never be complete. In 1989 the program was taken off the air because of poor viewing figures. It continued, however, in other forms: books (ironically), sound recordings, comics, animations. In 1996 it returned in the form of a co-produced television movie set in America. The movie was insufficiently successful in the United States, and so *Doctor Who* lapsed once again. It was revived as a BBC television show in 2005, and since then has continued as one of the BBC's most successful programs (Hills, 2010). Since it has survived cancellation on more than one occasion, *Doctor Who* is now effectively impervious to destruction. Even if it were to be cancelled, the *expectation* of its revival would remain, along with versions in media other than TV, and therefore *Doctor Who* would continue. And thus it can never be complete: completeness implies an ending.

Secondly, as noted above, *Doctor Who* destroys the notion of authoriality. It has had many writers since 1963, and has been produced and written in so many different—and contradictory—ways that the notion of a single authorial vision is impossible.

Finally, *Doctor Who* even lacks the permanence Ruskin associated with a book. Numerous episodes from the 1960s have been lost, thanks to a BBC policy of recycling the use of recording media. All that remain of these episodes are fragments, sound recordings, derived books and, of course, the memories of those who saw them when they were broadcast. Of course, this reminds us that the alleged permanence of a book depends on its material fortunes: many works have been lost to us over the course of history (celebrated examples include Shakespeare's *The History of Cardenio* and *Love's Labours Won)*. Yet their traces remain: just as traces of oral culture remains. In the end, books are not so much more permanent than other forms of cultural transmission.

Most significantly, the above details show us that the successor to the book is not, as McLuhan envisages, the television; rather it is a complex of text delivery that we might describe as "transmedia." This term stands for the variety of means now at our disposal for distributing cultural production, including broadcasting, webcasting, publishing and others. Crucially, transmedia does not replace the book, it incorporates it (Stein & Busse, 2012). Transmedia has another characteristic which represents a significant break with the age of the book: it permits participation.

Participatory Culture

Jenkins *et al* (2005) describe participatory culture in contrast to consumer culture. In consumer culture, an audience of consumers receives cultural content. Traditionally, this reception was regarded as a passive process, but recent theory initiated by Hall (1980) and

developed by such theorists as Fiske (1991), Morley (1992), and Ang (1996), has made it clear that audiences—whether of television or books—are far from being such monolithic, passive entities. Nevertheless, there is a clear divide between the producers of cultural content, including the person or entity identified as the author, and the consumers of that content.

Participatory culture blurs the division between the producer and the consumer. The most obvious examples of this are to be found in the world introduced at the beginning of this paper: the world of Web 2.0 content. Blogs, YouTube, Flickr, Wikipedia etc. involve the sharing and manipulation of content. Wikipedia is a case in point, a dynamic example of Derrida's notion of supplementarity. A printed encyclopedia makes a pretense at completeness, yet it is a pretense that fools no one: every printed encyclopedia is obsolete the moment it is published, as changing events or knowledge modify the accuracy of its content. Wikipedia, on the other hand, is in a continual process of change, made possible through its openness to participation.

Interestingly, Wikipedia is frequently derided for its inaccuracies. For example, Keally (2008) denounces it at length, extrapolating from its weaknesses in his specialist area of Japanese archaeology. Critics of Wikipedia cite lack of authority as their area of concern. Here we return to the earlier point about the book as an enabler of knowledge production through its "settling" of knowledge. By effectively providing a pause in, or obstacle to, the dissemination of constantly changing knowledge, the book made it possible to establish expert knowledge. Whether Wikipedia's crowd-sourced, self-correcting nature can ever exceed such expert knowledge in usefulness remains a controversial topic.

In the field of culture-production that is the focus of this paper, however, expert knowledge is of little significance. We cannot criticize a fan-produced video on YouTube, for example, in comparison to a novel by Thomas Hardy, with reference to the latter's deployment of expert knowledge. A more productive comparison once again deploys the concept of authority. Traditional schools of criticism—particularly literary criticism—are concerned with establishing a "canon": a corpus of critically acclaimed works that can be taken, in some way, as the representatives of the culture that produced them. Modern participatory culture undermines this in several ways.

Firstly, it reduces the obstacles to cultural production. During the Gutenberg Parenthesis, having a book published required access to considerable capital. A potential author would need either to possess such capital himself, or persuade a publisher that the book merited publication. Nowadays, however, it is possible for anyone with Web access to publish. In my own case, for example, since my agent was unable to persuade a print publisher to release my novel (on the admittedly abstruse topic of historical Chinese detective Judge Bao), I was able to publish it myself (Mason, Absent Heads, 2012). Such forms of publication do reduce the likelihood of significant financial return, but as the runaway success of *50 Shades of Grey* demonstrates, they by no means preclude it (Bosman, 2012).

Secondly, participatory culture attacks the "authority" of both author and critics. When culture lay in a book, an artifact treated with veneration, the author was distanced from the audience, and from this distance arose a hierarchical distinction. The work of critics, too, was distanced from the ordinary reader. Though they may have been able to influence the acceptance or otherwise of a work as part of the canon, critics were nevertheless insulated from the reading public; they dwelt in their ivory towers and looked down on the masses. Now, however, reviews on Amazon are more important than the opinions of most literary critics. Moreover, authors who participate in web discussions have often been shocked at how their voice is treated as one among many. Every reader is, potentially, a critic, and Barthes's hypothesis that the author is dead has been given ample

empirical support.

Thirdly, participatory culture encourages a view of cultural production based not on “origination” but on “transformation.” Returning again to Bakhtin, Kristeva and Derrida, all linguistic expression is supplementary, in that it depends on pre-existing language. At the same time, however, all linguistic expression is different in that the situation—most crucially the time—is different. The same principle applies to cultural production. The myth of the book as a singular, unique, complete creation encouraged the idea of the author as an almost demiurgic originator: “Let there be words!” he said, and there were words. Yet all novels, for example, are recombinations of existing forms. They are supplementary in the sense that a reader cannot hope to comprehend any novel without prior knowledge: all novels employ familiar forms, in both style and plot. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that they are “novel” recombinations.

Participatory culture is most threatening to established consumer culture—represented by, though by no means limited to, literary culture—in its claim to better reflect society. By involving a larger proportion of the population in cultural production, it offers a more “democratic” representation, clearly contrasting with the elitism associated with traditional producer culture. Historically, popular forms have been deprecated compared to those elite forms referred to as “the Arts”—notwithstanding the arguments of the likes of F.R. Leavis, who contrasted an authentic “folk” culture with the industrialized popular culture which had largely replaced it (Leavis & Thompson, 1933).

Participatory culture rides on the intellectual developments of post-modernism in attacking such binary oppositions, critiquing them in terms of their assertion of ideology. In a sense, participatory culture represents the triumph of what Bakhtin describes as the carnivalesque: “A boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed to the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture” (Bakhtin M. , 1965). It is also reminiscent of the potential effects of mechanical reproduction on the art world described by Berger (1972): “Because works of art are reproducible, they can, theoretically, be used by anybody.” Berger goes on to describe how in practice, the edifice of the art world functions to ascribe an almost sacred quality to originals. Yet people do use art in their own ways: putting posters or reproductions on walls in their own personal combinations.

Another aspect of the threat of participatory culture arises from gender bias. Much cultural production operates according to very clear gender biases. Serious literature, as well as various other categories such as television production, is overwhelmingly dominated by men. But participatory culture is based on self-selection, and therefore does not have the institutional biases that support discrimination. This is not to say that current participatory culture is inherently balanced or even truly representative. Ironically, participatory culture reflects the society that produces it—including the various forms of discrimination, such as sexism and racism which influence the generation of socially-expressed identities—and thus perpetuates them to an extent. Nevertheless the evidence so far is that the effect is attenuated: Lenhardt and Madden (2005) report on media creation using the Internet (in other words, use of Web 2.0) by Americans and find that, especially among young people, representation of women and ethnic minorities far exceeds that within traditional culture production.

Early Participants: Fans

Mass participation in transformative cultural production by means of the Internet is a recent phenomenon. If we want to understand this behavior it may be productive to look for precedents. The Internet has enabled people all over the world who are interested in something to get in touch with others and share their interest.

Prior to the arrival of the World Wide Web, this sort of behavior existed, but required far more time and dedication. Those with such time and dedication were often referred to as fans.

Jenkins (1992) describes how the term fans, while originally applied to those who were particularly attached to professional baseball, was then applied in the world of entertainment—specifically the theater, though later in other fields. Jenkins is careful to specify that his study focuses on one type of fans, generally known as media fans. This focus made it possible to explore the topic in some detail, but it had the unfortunate side-effect that many of the scholars who were inspired to write about fan studies in the wake of Jenkins's work appeared to take the term "fan" to mean media fans and media fans alone.

A terminological confusion of this sort is unfortunate not only because of the various forms of fans—of sport, music, games for example—but especially when the history of media fandom is taken into account. Although, as Jenkins makes clear, fans of entertainment can be traced back to the late nineteenth century, the concept of media fandom came about in the 1960s, as a result of the appeal of the *Star Trek* TV show. Fans of the show derived the practice of "fandom" from the dominant model of fan social organization at the time, namely science fiction fandom. Science fiction fandom originated in the 1920s, when addresses printed in the letters columns of Hugo Gernsback's SF magazines made it possible for fans to contact each other. The result was a flowering of activity distinctive to fans, most notably the production of fan magazines (fanzines) and meeting at conventions.

Media fandom was by no means the only expression of fan activity to derive from SF fandom. Comics fandom also grew in the 1960s, drawing on SF fandom for its model of activity (Pustz, 1999). Perhaps more significantly to the present study, the hobby of playing the board game *Diplomacy* by post also drew on SF practice, as confirmed by sources within both areas (Hansen; Sharp, 1978). The postal *Diplomacy* hobby, like the role-playing game (RPG) hobby which will be covered in more detail later, was not devoted to a fan object, some text or group of texts to which fans are particularly attached. Instead it was based on a game. The application of the SF model of fan activity demonstrated that it is the activity itself that defines the fan, rather than the object. In other words, the extent to which fandom, especially that deriving from the SF model, is a form of participatory, rather than consumer, culture is made clear.

Fan activity historically involved the production of fanzines and meeting other fans. Thorne and Bruner (2006), in research examining fans from the perspective of marketing, categorize fan activity in four ways:

1. Internal involvement. This corresponds to the individual deriving pleasure directly from a source. It may be an SF fan reading a book, a *Star Trek* fan watching an episode, or a *Diplomacy* player playing a game (though in the latter case, inevitably, category 4 is also evoked).
2. External involvement. This category refers to a fan expressing interest in a source in an indirect way. It may range from writing fan fiction based on a TV show to researching related information. For example, a fan of the *Sharpe* novels and TV series who investigates the history of the Napoleonic wars is displaying external involvement.
3. Acquisition of related objects. In a world dominated by concepts of ownership, it is inevitable that fans express themselves by acquiring objects associated with their interests. In some areas, this behaviour constitutes a very large part of fan activity: a majority of comics fans are collectors, for example. In other cases it may or may not be present. For example, though many RPG fans collect games, miniature figurines and even dice, others do not.
4. Sharing involvement with others. For some areas of fandom, involvement with others is an

inherent part of the activity. It is very difficult to be a tabletop RPG fan, for example, without playing the games with other people. On the other hand, it is possible to read SF books or listen to CDs in secret.

In order to be a fan it is not necessary to be active in all of these categories. Thorne and Bruner's insight is that these are dimensions along which fan activity manifests, and that being a fan is not an 'all or nothing' proposition, but a position on a spectrum. Those who self-identify as fans will, in most cases, be significantly active in at least two, more usually three or four, of these categories. Thus, music fans will not only listen to CDs, but may sing *karaoke,* collect other paraphernalia related to their favorite groups or singers, and attend concerts. The combination of these activities, and the level of affect involved, identifies them as music fans.

Prior to the advent of the World Wide Web, these activities—especially the latter three—required more effort than at present. The research or creativity involved in external involvement, for example, was more difficult; the acquisition of related objects often necessitated physically visiting shops or conventions, or tortuous negotiation by post, while sharing with others demanded organizing a local group, visiting conventions, or going to the trouble of producing or subscribing to fanzines. For at least a century, however, there have been a number of subcultures whose members were prepared to make this effort.

The World Wide Web has made mass participation in these activities drastically easier. As a result, we have seen in the last decade what many have described as the "mainstreaming" of fandom: see, for example, Coppa (2006) and Hanks (2012). Activities that were typically the preserve of fans have even started to have a significant effect on the world stage. An example of this is the "cute cat video" phenomenon. Zuckerman (2011) draws attention to the influence of social media on the Arab Spring movement and other human rights-related activism around the globe. One interesting mechanism he notes is that activists use popular social media to organize; the response of a regime is to limit access to social media, but this limiting of access has the effect of radicalizing more moderate users of social media whose main interests are recreational. Videos or pictures of cute cats posted by general users are a typical example of these interests, and these constitute a form of mass participatory culture.

It is thus no exaggeration to claim that we are presently experiencing a shift in the paradigm of the dominant form of cultural production, away from that of the sole-creator, originating author ushered in by the rise of printing technology from the 15th century onwards, and towards a more shared, participatory model with the idea of transformation supplanting that of origination. If we are to understand some of the mechanisms of this new paradigm, we can do so by examining its precursors. The activities of fans have, for many decades, expressed this same participatory, transformative dynamic. The next section raises one example of fan activity that particularly demonstrates how participatory cultural production might operate.

Role-playing Games

The activity of wargaming has an extremely long history. Abstract military conflicts such as chess go back centuries. More detailed military simulations emerged with the development of *kriegspiel* in 19th century Prussia. Such activities were in turn adapted for recreational use, most notably by the author H.G. Wells (1931). These recreational wargames did not differ significantly from other games. Participants attempted to defeat their opponent(s), deploying their resources in accordance with the rules.

It was only during the 1960s that experiments with such games led to the first role-playing games (Mason, 2012). It is significant that this happened at the same time as science-fiction fandom was spawning a variety of offshoots, ranging from

comics fandom, to media fandom and, perhaps most significantly, the postal *Diplomacy* hobby.

The first published RPG was *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974, and the hobby that emerged from it quickly acquired the distinctive trappings of science fiction-derived fandom, with fanzines and conventions. It should be noted that these were not essential parts of the hobby of role-playing, and in the same way that many people read SF novels without having anything to do with SF fandom, the majority of role-playing gamers were happy to enjoy their activity without the need for more extensive involvement.

Nevertheless, RPGs demonstrated that science fiction-derived fandom did not require an original object—whether a book, TV show or piece of music. As with *Diplomacy,* the fandom was organized around a game. With role-playing, even more than with *Diplomacy,* the game was also a form of participatory cultural production. To explain why this is, a brief explanation of how RPGs are conducted is necessary. Because RPGs have been through many permutations since their conception, the following is necessarily exemplary rather than definitive.

In its most basic form, a role-playing game is played by a small group of people. One of the participants acts as a referee, while the others each play the role of a character. The characters are analogous to the main characters of a television series; they are the focus of the events of the game. Role-playing is a relatively unstructured activity, which leads to frequent misunderstandings by those who assume it to be like a boardgame, with regular, ordered turn-taking in accordance with the rules. In practice, the game is conducted in the form of utterances by participants. The referee, who has multiple jobs to perform within the game, may describe the scene confronting the player characters. The referee may also announce some event which demands or implies a response from the players. For example: 'You are travelling up to the 10th floor offices of the Taketomo Corporation when suddenly the elevator reverses direction and plunges downwards…' Players may then intervene, to utter spontaneously created dialogue for their characters, or to describe the actions taken by their characters. The referee responds to these actions, and the cycle continues. The referee or players may call on the game rules to help make decisions about the results of actions; the rules do not, however, determine how the game is conducted. In the course of the game, the referee and players rapidly switch between different "frames" (Fine, 1983), which is to say, different orientations to the fictional experience—for example, a player may speak as if acting out her character; she may describe her character's actions as if giving stage directions; she might comment on what is happening as "herself"; she might talk in terms of rules mechanics. Many who have not experienced an RPG have difficulty understanding how this frame-switching operates, or imagining that it could be done in any coherent way; in practice, learning to switch frames is one of the most basic, and rapidly acquired, skills of role-playing.

In the process of conducting the game, a form of story is created. Yet it is a mistake to confuse this story with those of traditional author-created novels, TV shows and films. The story is not crafted, edited and honed for subsequent consumption by an audience. The story is experienced by its participants as it happens; moreover, since each participant experiences the story while contributing to it as one of the involved player characters, the story is different for each participant. It is possible to record or merely remember a role-playing game and subsequently produce a version of the story produced: such "write-ups" have been a common fan activity. Yet they are generally unsatisfactory as narrative fiction. It is evident that the appeal of role-playing games lies not so much in a deliberate sense of literary craft, as in the immediacy and spontaneity of the experience; in participation. In this respect, role-playing games clearly demonstrate characteristics

associated with modern Web-based interactive entertainments. It is no coincidence that many such entertainments are directly derived from the tabletop RPG tradition originating with *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Internet-based MMORPGs ("massively multiplayer online role-playing games") such as *World of Warcraft* not only employ the same notion of participants role-playing a character within a fictional universe, they generally adopt the same stylistic conventions regarding the background of the fictional universe itself—most frequently fantasy. Underwood (2009) describes the intertextual way that gamers appropriate ideas from existing sources as "genre farming." Although it is most evident in gaming, it is not hard to see the same process at work in popular fiction. To take but one example, although on his blog fantasy author George R. R. Martin vigorously defends his intellectual property, and his own status as an original creator (Martin), his work productively "farms" the established fantasy genre, most notably the work of J.R.R. Tolkien, presenting an extensive pseudo-medieval world with supernatural creatures and magic. In some cases, names are farmed directly from the sources: Martin employs dragons and wights, for example, and many other fantasists take their elves, orcs and trolls straight from Tolkien. In other cases, ideas are farmed and names changed. Martin's "Others," for example, are compared by the author himself (Others) to the *sidhe* (the Celtic inhabitants of the fae otherworld). Notably, when Martin's work was televised, the name was changed to "White Walkers."

Conclusion

Anderson (1983) argues that manuscript books were an essential part of the Catholic Church's dominance over Europe—through control over information and its dissemination—and that this dominance was threatened and ultimately fractured by printing technology. The way in which knowledge was controlled simply didn't work for the new technology. Instead, a new paradigm of cultural production developed; part of this involved the concepts of copyright and the author as a creator of an original work. This paradigm has pertained up until the present.

During the rise of printing the Catholic Church continued its attempts to control knowledge in the same ways it always had. Similarly, we are now regularly treated to the spectacle of owners of intellectual property, unable to recognize and adapt to the ways in which new technology has changed cultural production, attempting to hold back the waves.

There are changes on the way for a variety of media, not least the traditional form of the novel. Our conventional notion of the nature of a "work" no longer appears so useful, while Barthes's description of the plurality and interconnectedness of a "text" seems to have come to fruition. While it is difficult to predict what will happen, and whether the corporate forces which now control human knowledge will have any more success than the Catholic Church before them, we can at least recognize some of the directions in which we are currently moving. As well as the move towards transmedia, the change which seems likely to have the greatest impact on our culture of art and literature is that towards increased participation. And if we want to understand more clearly the forms such participatory culture takes, we can productively explore its precursors: the activities of fans.

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