A Case Study of the Influence of Fandom: How Role-players Helped Develop Computer Games in Britain

Paul Mason

Abstract

Fandom is widely regarded as a form of excessive consumption, an essentially reactive activity. Work in the field of fan studies has drawn attention to its creative aspects, but these are still often deemed to be expanding on or embellishing the work of creative professionals. The present study explores the ambiguity of the boundary between fan creators and professional creators in order to illustrate how fans were instrumental in the creation of a new form of expression. It charts aspects of the history of computer games development in the UK, and shows how that development was driven by the interplay between fans and professionals in related fields.

Introduction

In a basement room at a school in Britain in the early 1970s sits a strange machine. At first glance it seems to be a large typewriter, but closer inspection reveals it to be a teleprinter. It is connected to the mainframe computer of the city treasurer's department. A schoolboy is operating the teleprinter, periodically typing in short commands, and then watching intently as the results of those commands are printed out: a grid formed of dots occasionally replaced by other symbols, with some terse accompanying text and data. The boy is playing *Blake's 7*, attempting to steer the spaceship Liberator and successfully defeat pursuing Federation craft. The teachers at the school are aware of student use of the computer terminal and its teleprinter, but allow it, perhaps because they are unaware that it is being used to play a game, or even because the whole concept of games using computers is so new that it has not yet been recognized as a bad thing.

The above represents a slice of lived experience of computer games. It happens to be my own first experience, because directly reporting what we know makes a convenient starting point for any investigation of fan history. Although the above account may well be atypical in its specifics, it nevertheless reveals some characteristics typical of such reports. One is that they are often personal, somewhat private recollections. They incorporate emotions, attitudes – even passions.

Another is that, being recollections, they are unreliable. Although my memory tells me that the game I played was *Blake's 7*, I can find no reference to a game of that name, and yet the well-known *Star Trek* game of the early 1970s (Wilson, 1991) matches it exactly. Whether I misremembered the game, or whether the nameless programmer who implemented it on that mainframe made the change – I do not know. In fact, I cannot even be sure that the mainframe to which the teleprinter was connected was in the city treasurer's department. These uncertainties of fact might seem to render the recollection useless. As a simple historic source, of course, it is highly unreliable. But as a marker of attachment, it could be more. I could also recollect my first encounters with tennis game Pong, with *Space Invaders*, and how shortly after playing this *Blake's 7*/*Star Trek* game I started programming in BASIC, beginning with a simple driving game played out in real-time graphic form on the text-only screen. These recollections are part of a history: part of the personal experience of computer gaming which is one of exposure to incredibly rapid development.

All these games were culturally devalued, and as the first and last examples show, often operated "underground" – outside the commercial economy. This makes the reconstruction of their history more difficult. Even if my memory were perfect, it would still only provide a fragment. Putting it together with other fragments helps, but still offers a warped and incomplete picture. For a better idea, we would need not only people who played these games, but those who were more closely involved. In this particular case, that would mean the creators and distributors of the games. Since the games were emphatically not commercial, these creators and distributors can reasonably be described as fans.

Certain forms of fan studies define "fan" in consumption-based terms that do not necessarily help us here. But according to the understanding of the word in SF and related fandoms, early computer games were fan activity. They were not fan activity entirely in the sense of fans of *Star Trek* (or *Blake's 7*) expressing their fandom through fan work, but in a more nuanced sense in which the creators of the games were also fans of the genre of computer games, even as they were in the process of creating that genre.

Since my interest in fan studies extends beyond the dominant media paradigm, rather than examining fandom as an instance of intense consumption of a media object, I have tried to consider fans in terms of the behaviour that defines them as fans. Mere consumption does not mark someone as a fan. I was not yet a fan of computer games when I sat at that teleprinter. Fans do more. I have identified on a preliminary basis a set of categories of behaviour that are associated with fans. They can be considered an expansion of the idea of dividing fandom into affirmational (or receptive) and transformational (or creative) expressions (obsession_inc, 2009). Taken in isolation they are not indicators that someone is a fan, but considered together they

show the dimensions of fanhood[1]. These categories are spectating, collecting, knowing, criticizing, enacting, transforming and socializing (Mason, Towards a topography of fandom(s), 2013). Describing fan activity in this way draws attention to the range of fan behaviours, and especially those which relate to knowledge and analysis. Recent scholars have observed an extraordinary explosion of this fan activity on the Internet. Indeed, much of fan scholarship itself is driven by fan involvement. Yet this is not just a recent phenomenon. SF fandom has been active in criticism, as well as other forms of organization of knowledge – including the compilation of histories (see http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com for a remarkable example of SF scholarship) – for decades. And since SF fandom has greatly influenced other fandoms, such as comics and games, those behaviours have been seen as natural elements of the development of those fandoms.

Back in the early 1970s, unfortunately, there was as yet little self-recognition among the creators of computer games that they were fans. Or at least, that they were computer games fans – they may indeed have self-identified as fans of other areas such as SF. We therefore don't have a great resource of fan material to explore, at least not until computer and video games had blossomed into a large, highly successful field of commerce. What we do have, however, often comes from those associated fandoms with which computer gamers were involved. Here I would like to explore one such connection. It is rather a specific area, but it sheds some light on the development of one area of computer gaming history in one region. We will see how the creation and development of computer role-playing games involved a highly active fandom – a fandom or fandoms that cheerfully straddled categories.

Origins

The origins of some forms of computer games are obvious from inspection. 1958's *Tennis for Two* (Anderson, 1983) is clearly an attempt to simulate tennis. Chess games don't require any imagination to discern their source. Other games, on the other hand, can be more opaque. While the *Star Trek* game mentioned earlier might superficially appear to be an attempt to simulate the *Star Trek* TV series, a moment's thought reveals that it is not. Although it involves elements from the TV show – the Starship *Enterprise*, Klingons, Romulans and so on – it does not construct a plot that bears any resemblance to the TV episodes, a point made all the more evident by my confusion with *Blake's 7*. It is conducted in turns, which immediately brings to mind board games; and it involves the player having limited knowledge of the environment, which perhaps –

---

1   Some writers confusingly use the word "fandom" to denote "the state of being a fan". Since that term has established prior usage as "the community of fans" I will instead stick with "fanhood".

at a stretch – could suggest the game *Battleship*. Nevertheless there is a sense that the game was an original. While it may have drawn on board games, it used the capabilities of a computer in a way that is extremely difficult for board games to achieve. Perhaps the closest analogue would be *kriegspiel* games (see below).

Computer role-playing games, on the other hand, are different. Most clearly derive from *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*), of which more anon. Not all are based on *D&D*, however. *Colossal Cave Adventure* is, if anything, a cousin of *Star Trek* in that it exploits the computer's facility for exploration. But *Colossal Cave* itself imported elements associated with *D&D*, and this became standard procedure as computer role-playing games proliferated and became popular. Indeed, a remarkable feature of computer role-playing games is the extent to which they incorporated *D&D* terminology and concepts, even where this was unnecessary. Character classes, alignment, hit points, levels: there was no particular reason why these should ever have been used in computer games.

The history of *D&D* is relatively straightforward. This is because it was a commercial product, first published in 1974 (Mona, 2010). However the tendency to use *D&D* as a shorthand form for the entire category (like Band-Aids in the US, or Hoovers in the UK) obscures the fact that the history of *D&D* is not the same as the history of role-playing games. There are many competing claims as to who came up with the idea of role-playing. The *D&D* orthodoxy is that Tactical Studies Rules, a war game company, published a set of medieval war game rules called *Chainmail*, which included an appendix allowing battles based on fantasy literature. War gamer Dave Arneson used these in his games, originating the idea of many players each controlling a single character. Arneson approached Gary Gygax of TSR with his idea, and the result was *D&D*, which, coincidentally, was not referred to as a role-playing game, but as a "fantastic medieval wargame. (Mona, 2010; Mason, 2012)

A parallel history recognizes M A R Barker, who created a detailed fantasy world called Tékumel in his youth, fighting miniatures battles but then subsequently developing characters and stories based in the setting, along with other SF fans. When he became aware of the as-yet-unpublished *D&D* he quickly adapted its rules to his existing game. TSR published the resulting *Empire of the Petal Throne* just a few months after *D&D*, and Dave Arneson was an enthusiastic supporter (Fine, 1983).

Still others claimed to have come up with the idea of role-playing. For example, *in The Lion & Lamb Chronicles*, an international fan publication published in Norway in the early 1980s, David Palter claimed that his 'Talking Game' of the late 1960s was a prototype role-playing game. It seems quite likely that similar claims have been made in other obscure locations. The claims rest on what the essential attributes are considered to be. Palter's game, for example, lacked the

element of rules, and was therefore not substantially different from the well-documented youthful toy soldier-based fantasies of the Brontë sisters (See for example Leyland, 1997). For all that it outgrew its origins, early role-playing was emphatically an offshoot of war gaming.

The key feature of the early years of role-playing games is that they were fan-led. The games were not sourced in the R&D departments of large companies. They were created by fans. Arneson and Barker were unequivocally fans. Gygax was an enthusiastic war gamer himself. *D&D*'s earliest competitors were the result of gamers who found the original game incomplete (to be fair, virtually everybody found it incomplete – and many found it incomprehensible). *Chivalry & Sorcery*, for example, was originally conceived as a supplement or expansion to *D&D*, and only became a published game after its authors were rejected by TSR. *RuneQuest* had a similar pedigree to *Empire of the Petal Throne* in that it married a pre-existing fantasy world, which had been used for war games as well as fiction, with role-playing rules.

This characteristic is not surprising. As already noted, role-playing games were originally seen as a novel variant of war gaming. While war gaming can be traced as far back as games such as chess, its modern form owes its origins first to the *kriegspiel* games of the Prussian military in the 19th century, and subsequently to H G Wells' *Little Wars* (Wells, 1913). The latter is another clear example of fan creation. The twentieth-century history of war gaming is that of a fan economy. While the packaged nature of the related war board games associated with companies such as Avalon Hill and SPI meant they could be commercialized very early on, war games with toy soldiers were not successfully turned into wholly commercial enterprises until the *Warhammer* boom of the 1990s.

After a slow start, *D&D*'s popularity steadily expanded throughout the late 1970s, spread to a large extent by word of mouth, especially within existing fan communities. The principal transmission was within the war gaming hobby, but it also reached connected hobbies such as that of the board game *Diplomacy*, which had a large network of fanzines based around playing the game by mail (these fanzines were influenced by, and in some cases part of, SF fandom). Both directly, and via the *Diplomacy* connection, SF fandom also took note of *D&D*. Because of this means of transmission, role-playing fanzines sprang up extremely quickly. Two influential examples in the US were the amateur press associations (APA) *Alarums & Excursions* and *The Wild Hunt*, both started in 1975. An amateur press association is a publication where a number of contributors send their 'zines' to a central mailer, whose responsibility is to collate the zines into a single publication and distribute it. In some cases APAs are only read by contributors, but both *The Wild Hunt* and *Alarums & Excursions* drastically expanded their readership. *Alarums & Excursions* is still being published every month, and over the years many contributors have gone on to make their mark in the fields of both tabletop and computer role-playing games.

Early role-playing publishing was rather amorphous, however. As noted earlier, war games companies were essentially hobby enterprises. To promote their products they therefore produced "newsletters", which closely resembled fanzines. Examples include *The Strategic Review*, published by *D&D* publishers TSR, and *Owl & Weasel*, from UK games importer Games Workshop, both started in 1975. Both of these newsletters subsequently developed into professional magazines: *The Dragon* and *White Dwarf* respectively. Over the next few years, a wide spectrum of publications emerged, including fanzines that were arguably more "professional" than some of the professional magazines, and commercial magazines with extremely low standards of editorial and design. Naturally, writers for these often became involved with both fan and professional publications, though it should be noted that there were some people who deliberately limited themselves to one type.

The Flood

The 1980s saw a remarkable proliferation in the number of RPG fanzines published, especially in the UK. One attempted record of such fanzines from the Usenet newsgroup uk.games.roleplay lists approximately 280 fanzines published in the UK (Misiaszek, 2004). As one present at the time I can confirm the large number of fanzines published. I can also testify to the very high degree of interactivity between them. Reviews of other fanzines were a common fixture of these publications, along with the practice of "trading," by which editors would agree to send their zines to each other with no exchange of money. Editors and readers often met up with each other at university, in pubs, as well as at games conventions. These latter events blurred professional and fan activity: many were organized by companies (Games Fair by TSR(UK), Games Day and Dragonmeet by Games Workshop) while others were organized by fans more in the style of science fiction conventions or war games meets (for example Stabcon and Koancon). While the Games Workshop conventions were more like commercial showcases, Games Fair was residential, drawing elements from the fan SF conventions. This, in turn, influenced fan conventions. The many fanzine editors and writers at Warwick University in the early 1980s decided to organize a fan-run games convention influenced by Games Fair as well as the SF conventions they had attended. The resulting Koancon ran for three years. As an interesting example of the ways in which fan ideas transmit by osmosis, some of the organizers of Koancon went on to organize the UK's Seventh National Bisexual Conference, dubbing it 'Bicon' in the style of the conventions they were familiar with, and changing the style of event to more closely resemble a fan convention (Dekker, 2006).

This level of interaction may be one explanation for why so many fanzines were published in the UK in comparison to the US. It was possible for UK fanzine editors to meet up locally on a

regular basis (at monthly pub meets for example) and these local groups interacted with each other in many ways: for example as university students returning to the family home attended local groups.

With such a hive of activity, and such a large number of fanzines being published, generalizations about their contents are unwise; even more so are speculations about the motives, attitudes and ideas of the publishers and readers. This means that this paper requires a disclaimer: I was myself involved in publishing a fanzine, and my own opinions from the time may taint my recollections of such matters. On the other hand, as noted earlier, fans are intensely involved in the activity, and therefore can offer a wealth of information, so long as the researcher can develop a methodology for coping with and accommodating their opinions and agendas.

I have no way of knowing what proportion of fanzine editors and readers shared my views on the distinction between amateur and professional producers. On the other hand, I can say with certainty that there was intense discussion about the topic, and a wide range of views was expressed. For some fanzine editors, publishing a fanzine was seen as a stepping stone to professional involvement in publishing, whether in role-playing or other fields. For others, such an idea was anathema. Anathema or not, a number of fanzine editors and writers became involved in writing for the professional publications, and working for games publishers. For example, two of the editors of the well-regarded fanzine *DragonLords* went on to work for Games Workshop, Ian Marsh as editor of *White Dwarf*, and Marc Gascoigne as editor of *Warlock* and subsequently the company's range of tie-in novels. The traffic was two-way. When TSR(UK) started *Imagine* magazine as a competitor to *White Dwarf*, editor Paul Cockburn went out of his way to engage with the fans and solicit their involvement. Dave Morris, a writer for *White Dwarf* who had never been involved with fandom, was introduced to it by the influx of fanzine editors to its editorial staff, and subsequently started to write for fanzines, even editing one of his own, an *Empire of the Petal Throne* fanzine called *The Eye of All-Seeing Wonder*.

As already noted, a crucial aspect to UK role-playing games fandom in the 80s was its interaction with other fandoms. Both SF fandom and the postal *Diplomacy* hobby acted as "older siblings" to role-playing. The analogy is apposite, as the average age of role-players was rather lower than that of *Diplomacy* players and SF fans. Postal *Diplomacy*, in particular, had to cope with a large influx of younger fans for whom the distinction between RPGs and postal games was of relatively little importance. Many RPG fanzines started to run postal games including *Diplomacy*, and this led to occasional friction.

While UK *Diplomacy* zines were predominantly edited by men in their 30s or older, RPG zine editors were predominantly teenagers and students (though the gender balance was similar, there was perhaps a slightly higher ratio of women in RPG fandom). While the *Diplomacy* hobby, like

SF fandom, was generally aware of its history, and prone to publishing retrospectives and memoirs, the youth of the RPG hobby generated obstacles. RPG fandom was itself a recent phenomenon, with little history to speak of. The awareness of history mainly manifested in those who had been reading zines for a few years, and who did not like to see the same ideas being periodically recycled. The suggestion was made to create a resource for new entrants which would bring them up to speed and enable them to devote their efforts to creating new ideas. In the age of the Web, this has become a trivially easy undertaking, but when fanzines were ephemeral paper publications, it was difficult.

The obstacles were both internal and external. External obstacles related to the difficulty of publishing, printing and distributing something in relatively permanent form. The present author rather optimistically submitted a proposal to Penguin books in the early 1980s, but was rejected on the grounds that the company already had *What is Dungeons & Dragons*? (Butterfield, Parker, & Honigmann, 1982). This book had a poor reputation in fandom. It was written by schoolboys at one of the UK's elite public schools, which immediately alienated many fans from less privileged backgrounds. It was also regarded as a simplistic and uncritical introduction to the most superficial aspects of role-playing. However, realistically speaking this book (along with Ian Livingstone's similarly simplistic *Dicing With Dragons*) were all that could be expected of mainstream publishing, for whom role-playing was no more than a poorly-understood youth fad.

Without a professional publisher, publishing a book of fan history presented many problems. One was resources. Fanzine editors were, as already noted, often students. While students might have access to cheap printing facilities, they rarely had access to the sort of finances necessary to fund publication of a book, nor to distribution channels. Here RPG fans were acutely aware of the advantage the "older" fandoms of *Diplomacy* and SF had over them.

In addition to the external obstacles, there were difficulties within fandom with the idea of attempting to preserve any kind of record of fan history. RPG fandom was riven with factions and antagonisms. Some of these were based on preferred game: whether *D&D*, *RuneQuest*, *Traveller* or some other game – including self-created or "homebrew" games. Others were based on philosophy towards gaming. From outside the hobby it would seem incomprehensible that there could be disagreements over matters as arcane as whether game rules should simulate "real" reality or "fictional" reality, and the like. In practice, such arguments became quite heated: Twitter thirty years early, as it were. Inevitably, therefore, any attempt to record the ideas of fandom would fall foul of some of these ideological fault lines. Even the principle of keeping a record was itself subject to heavy criticism. I was one of the very few fanzine editors to submit my fanzine to the UK's Copyright Receipt libraries, and obtained an ISSN for it. For this I was ridiculed as pretentious and pseudo-intellectual. The same charges were levelled at those who

tried to preserve some of the ideas of fandom.

This position can be backed up with powerful arguments (in addition to the likelihood that I was indeed pretentious and pseudo-intellectual). Fandom is a social expression of an identity within a subculture. Although this point is more clearly observable in the "tribes" of music – the punks, mods, rude boys and so on – it could also be seen, and still can be seen, in games fandom. For some, the appeal of games fandom was its spontaneity, its lack of regulation, its freedom from the constraints of everyday society. Much of the appeal of games themselves, after all, derives from escapism. Some fans were resistant to the idea of subjecting role-playing fandom to the regulatory forces they felt around them in everyday life. Indeed, the same impulse was felt by myself and others who wanted to record fan history; the difference was how we characterized the regulatory forces. This difference brings us back to the fan attitude towards professional, commercial production. For while the opponents of fan history felt regulated by the discourses of the academy, its proponents in their turn were against commercial imperatives. Notably, the former produced fanzines aligned to specific commercial games such as *D&D* while the latter were more likely to advocate homebrew systems and self-created fantasy worlds. In a glorious irony, this led to a relatively high proportion of the latter going on to work for games companies – both tabletop and computer.

Before following this thread, though, we should take a diversion into another mass phenomenon of the period that energized the hobby and created a new set of fans, as well as providing commercial outlet for the creative impulses of existing writers.

The Gamebook Connection

Games Workshop, founded by Ian Livingstone and Steve Jackson, was at the heart of the role-playing games hobby in the UK. Even when TSR set up its own UK operation, Games Workshop continued to be dominant. But role-playing games were, relatively speaking, a niche market. In their first 15 years they did not manage to expand their demographic very far beyond their war gaming roots. Livingstone and Jackson, eager to exploit the concepts more widely, hooked up with Puffin Books, the children's imprint of Penguin which was itself curious about the new youth fad. The result was the Fighting Fantasy (FF) gamebook series.

Jackson & Livingstone wrote the first few FF books themselves, but to keep the line going, they asked other authors to contribute. The first of these was Steve Jackson: an American board and role-playing game designer whose invitation perhaps derived in part from his sharing the name of one of the FF authors. The next pair of authors were Jamie Thomson and Mark Smith. Thomson was editing *White Dwarf* for Games Workshop (Livingstone and Jackson's company) at the time, while Smith was an old friend who also played in the same weekly gaming group.

This group, which mainly played *Empire of the Petal Throne*, included Dave Morris and Oliver Johnson, who regularly contributed to *White Dwarf*. The two went on to write gamebook series themselves (Morris didn't contribute to the Fighting Fantasy series until number 43, which he co-authored with Thomson), as did Thomson and Smith. Other contributors to the FF series included Peter Darvill-Evans, the former manager of Games Workshop Publications, who went on to edit Virgin Books' *Doctor Who* range of novels in the 1990s, as well as Marc Gascoigne, the former fanzine editor and Games Workshop employee. There was a clear trend of offering books to Games Workshop employees: editor of *Warlock* (the Games Workshop-published *Fighting Fantasy* magazine) Steve Williams was invited to pitch for a book. He opted to collaborate with his assistant on the magazine, myself. Other employees of Games Workshop persuaded other publishers to create new gamebook series.

The Fighting Fantasy books offer the closest connection between tabletop role-playing games and the design of video games in the UK. The books were adapted into computer games at an early stage, mainly on the ZX Spectrum platform, which was popular in the UK at the time. The first book was adapted into an arcade-style game by designers who repurposed an existing game. Subsequent books were text adventures. The last of the "first run" of Fighting Fantasy gamebooks was the abortive attempt at *Deathtrap Dungeon* by Ian Livingstone's company Eidos, including Jamie Thomson as one of the designers. A second wave of games started a decade later. Designers of these games were younger, and therefore not from the original batch of role-playing fans. On the other hand many were fans, not only of early computer games, but of Fighting Fantasy books. Tin Man's Neil Rennison (whose company produced three of the later games) described himself to me in personal correspondence as "a bit of a fan first and foremost".

Both of the founders of the Fighting Fantasy series moved into computer games, although their respective routes are interesting. Steve Jackson had the idea of applying telephone technology to the gamebook concept and came up with Fantasy Interactive Scenarios by Telephone (FIST), which were essentially audio short-form Fighting Fantasy books conducted over the telephone. This was a curious detour to take. Then again at the time computers were not all that common, while everyone had a telephone. FIST had a brief period of popularity, before the problem of parents facing high phone bills caused by children's playing of the game brought it down. This brief period meant that unlike Fighting Fantasy, it never acquired a series of secondary authors, although Ian Livingstone did subcontract me – a former fanzine editor, Games Workshop employee and gamebook writer – to design a FIST game based on duelling wizards.

While Livingstone went on to massive mainstream success at Eidos with *Tomb Raider*, Jackson worked with Peter Molyneux at Lionhead studios, to produce more thoughtful games such as *Black & White*.

Fans Moving on to Computers

The fan tendency towards factionalism should not disguise the breadth of fan interest during the period described above. While it is true that some fans passionately argued extremely narrow positions (such as the idea that "true" role-playing could only take place in games which dispensed with game rules), it is also true that fanzine content ranged very widely. Under the influence of SF and *Diplomacy* zines, it became normal for fanzine editors to include material about books, music, politics, food & drink and, of course, activity more closely related to role-playing such as board games and computer games. These latter had been intertwined with role-playing from the very beginning, and the rather nebulous nature of role-playing game activity meant that many members of the general public understood *Dungeons & Dragons* to be either a board game or a computer game of some sort – that is, if they had not been seduced by the image of "live action" role-playing that tended to be of most interest to the media (and which informed both the Tom Hanks movie *Mazes and Monsters*, and the later Spanish movie *El Corazon del Guerrero*).

Role-playing games tended to be sold in shops that also sold board games, and some companies did produce hybrids: board games with role-playing elements. It was also natural for games companies to attempt to branch out into related computer games markets. Games Workshop, for example, was actively trying to develop computer games from the beginning of the 80s. *Tower of Despair* was a typical product of the times. It was written by Jamie Thomson and Steve Williams, both of whom were keen computer gamers, and both of whom also went on to write Fighting Fantasy gamebooks. In the case of Thomson, before achieving success as a children's author with the Dirk Lloyd books, he developed a number of strategy games, some during his stint at Domark, and its successor Eidos. Other Games Workshop employees and writers went on to work on computer games, most notably Ian Livingstone, but curiously the company itself had relatively little success with them until the later *Warhammer* games of the 1990s.

Livingstone had been involved with the games company Domark since 1984. After he and Jackson withdrew from Games Workshop, and after a brief period of tax exile and semi-retirement, this became a more serious concern of his. During his semi-retirement Livingstone had returned to the board games which were his main interest as a gamer. At the time, gamers in the UK were just starting to appreciate some of the board games being produced in other countries, especially Germany. German board games have gone on to high street success in the UK as in Japan, but at the time it was a niche market akin to the early days of *D&D. Games International* was a high street magazine which championed these games, while also providing

coverage of established US games, as well as role-playing games and some computer game content. As with so many magazines of this type, although commercially distributed it was more like a glorified fanzine. It had only one employee (its editor) with even its production editor being employed on a freelance, part-time basis. It was one of the very first newsstand magazines in the UK to be produced using DTP technology rather than traditional typesetting, but this was due to economic necessity – and the fanzine-acquired skills of its production editor – rather than through a desire for trailblazing. Its writers were generally fan writers, and were paid poorly and late. Through social contacts *Games International's* editor, Brian Walker, persuaded Ian Livingstone to get involved with the magazine. As Livingstone devoted more attention towards computer games, *Games International* devoted more of its space to them. The same pool of fan writers turned out to be as interested in computer games as they were in board games, and it was easy to expand the pool through fan contacts. Moreover, the existing computer games magazines published by large corporations were seen as promotional vehicles for computer games publishers, more interested in fancy graphics (both of the games themselves and the magazines) than critical analysis of the games.

　Games International was renamed *Strategy Plus*, and reversed its emphasis to become a computer games magazine with some coverage of board games. Despite its ramshackle background, it outlived a number of other professional magazines of the period. The only advantage the magazine had over its competitors was access to a fan network. All magazines have difficulty with content, but *Games International/Strategy Plus* had the advantage of a pool of writers who were highly experienced at writing about games and who, perhaps crucially, would do so without being paid full professional rates. I was the production editor until 1991, when former *White Dwarf* editor Ian Marsh took over.

　Ian Livingstone became increasingly more involved with computer games production at Domark. The Fighting Fantasy series had shown him that there was a pool of board and role-playing games writers and artists which could be called on to provide design expertise. One of these was Richard Halliwell, who was involved in the initial stages of the design of the *Deathtrap Dungeon* game mentioned earlier. From his beginnings designing what were effectively fan-made war games rules such as *Reaper* (1978), Halliwell had gone on to produce numerous board games for Games Workshop, and been instrumental in the genesis of *Warhammer*, which later became the company's cash cow. Other alumni of the role-playing and gamebook worlds were Dave Morris and Jamie Thomson, who stayed with the company through its transformation into Eidos, designing a game called *Warrior Kings*. Work on an early, aborted version of this game had been done by Carl Sargent, another prolific RPG author who had credits with TSR, Games Workshop and Fighting Fantasy.

Also drafted in to the Eidos empire – this time through company buy-out – was Jim Bambra, who had written for TSR, then Games Workshop, before becoming head of design at MicroProse. *Games International/Strategy Plus* editor Brian Walker also found a berth here after his magazine was bought up by a US publisher. Another Livingstone appointment was artist Martin McKenna, who had made an impact earlier illustrating the role-playing game fanzine *Die Rubezahl*. By this stage, in the 1990s, the computer games market had already outstripped the other games markets considered here; games companies were highly corporatized compared to the ramshackle enterprises of war gaming and early role-playing games. Nevertheless they were still eager to employ fans and other writers with established track records in related fields of gaming. Jamie Thomson, for example, as well as working for Eidos, spent some time writing for Lionhead.

Dave Morris, who worked in all these fields, as well as being the author of the UK's best-selling books of 1990 (*the Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles* tie-in novels) argues that role-playing game writers were particularly suited to computer games design. While board games design turns on clever game mechanics, these are unimportant in computer games. Rather, RPGs and computer games share a design requirement of simulation.

Other fanzine writers such as *Aslan's* Andrew Rilstone, and *Sound & Fury's* James Wallis moved into computer games design for a while. The latter – who had taken over publishing the *Warhammer* tabletop role-playing game for a while – demonstrates the curious linkages going on here, as he also wrote gamebooks based on *Sonic the Hedgehog*.

By the time this was happening, the golden age of fanzines in the UK was over. Even before the Web rendered much paper fanzine activity pointless, the wind had gone out of its sails.

Mining Fan History

It is possible to obtain quite a nuanced appreciation of the dynamics of fan activity and creation, and its influence on the mainstream, from fan sources such as fanzines. The two main difficulties with this are interpretation and availability. By their very nature, fanzines are highly partisan forums, presenting passionately argued positions which are often at odds with the mainstream as well as with the positions held by other writers. This means they must be read dialectically, and ideally multiple zines from the same period should be contrasted. The pronouncements of fanzine editors should not be trusted or taken as representative. Indeed, in many instances fanzine positions usefully delineate the mainstream by their opposition to it.

Pre-Web fanzines are ephemeral objects, and with little perceived resale value they have generally not been preserved. This can make them difficult for researchers to obtain. A hidden danger is that the fanzines which *are* available may give a warped perspective. As mentioned above, many fanzine editors were dismissive of the notion of preserving fan thought, and this

attitude often correlated with other value judgements about gaming and fandom. Those who did take steps to hand down their fanzines are unlikely to be representative. For example, a researcher might be able to use the UK Copyright Receipt Office to obtain a copy of my own fanzine from the mid-1980s, and deduce from it that role-playing fandom at the time was pretentious and pseudo-intellectual, dominated by a "narrative" approach of story-oriented original, subcreated worlds. In this, however, they would be wrong. The majority of fanzines were still concerned with supplying additional rules, monsters and scenarios for existing published games. The near-universal features of fanzines were rather those aspects associated with fandom as a subculture: reviews of other fanzines and meets, general chat and reviews. The latter two include material on computer games. Because this was often a step aside from the arguments being conducted about tabletop role-playing, it can provide a useful window into the reception of the games of the day. Moreover, it can afford a glimpse of a dynamic, argumentative world of fandom eerily reminiscent in some ways of today's online community, but in other ways tantalisingly different.

References

Anderson, J. (1983, Spring). Who really invented the video game? *Creative Computing Video & Arcade Games*, 1(1), p. 8.

Butterfield, J., Parker, P., & Honigmann, D. (1982). *What is Dungeons & Dragons*? Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Dekker, K. (2006, November 5). *Talk:BiCon* (UK). Retrieved from Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:BiCon_(UK)

Fine, G. A. (1983). *Shared Fantasy: Role-playing Games as Social Worlds.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Leyland, F. A. (1997). *The Brontë Family with Special Reference to Patrick Branwell Brontë* (Vol. 1). London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press.

Mason, P. (2012). A history of RPGs: Made by fans; played by fans. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 11.

Mason, P. (2013). Towards a topography of fandom(s). *Journal of the Institute for Cultural Studies, Aichi Gakuin University*(28), 53–69.

Misiaszek, B. C. (2004, August 3). *Vintage UK RPG Zines.* Retrieved from Narkive Newsgroup Archive: http://uk.games.roleplay.narkive.com/Nvs5udj4/vintage-uk-rpg-zines-update-august-3rd-2004

Mona, E. (2010). From the Basement to the Basic Set: The Early Years of Dungeons & Dragons. In P. Harrigan, & N. Wardrip-Fruin (Eds.), *SecondPerson: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media* (p. 25). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

obsession_inc. (2009, June 1). *Affirmational vs Transformational Fandom*. Retrieved from Obsession_inc web log: http://obsession-inc.dreamwidth.org/82589.html

Wells, H. G. (1913). *Little Wars*. London: Frank Palmer.

Wilson, J. L. (1991, November). The History of Computer Games. *Computer Gaming World*(88), pp. 16–26.