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# <Original Research>At the Head of the Table: The TRPG GM as Dramatistic Agent

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CITATION:

White, William J. ...[et al]. <Original Research>At the Head of the Table: The TRPG GM as Dramatistic Agent. RPG学研究 2022, 3: 46-58

ISSUE DATE:

2022-09-30

URL:

[https://doi.org/10.14989/jarps\\_3\\_46](https://doi.org/10.14989/jarps_3_46)

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# At the Head of the Table

## The TRPG GM as Dramatistic Agent

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### Abstract

This paper uses Kenneth Burke's dramatistic approach to examine the way that the tabletop RPG Game Master (GM) is depicted in a number of different TRPG fan discourse sites distributed over time. The result of the analysis is a "rhetoric of the GM" comprising a fourfold typology of understandings of the referee role, labeled as "Fan," "Challenger," "Grown-Up," and "Demiurge," based on contingencies of dialogic versus monologic and adversarial versus non-adversarial orientations to the player-GM relationship.

Keywords: Game Master (GM), Kenneth Burke, Rhetoric

### 要約

本稿では、ケネス・バークの劇作論的アプローチを用いて、時系列に分布する様々な TRPG ファンの言説サイトにおいて、卓上 RPG のゲームマスター (GM) がどのように描かれているかを検証した。その結果、プレイヤー・GM 関係における対話的対単一的、敵対的対非敵対的な方向性に基づき、「ファン」「チャレンジャー」「成長した者」「デミウルジ」の 4 つのタイプに分類されるレフリー役の理解から「レトリック・オブ・ザ・GM (ゲームマスターの修辞学)」を作成することに成功した。

キーワード: ゲームマスター (GM), ケネス・バーク, 修辞学

### 1. Introduction

Tabletop role-playing game (TRPG) texts employ various bespoke or generic terms such as Dungeon Master (DM), Storyteller, master of ceremonies (MC), narrator, or referee, to name only a few (White 2020b, 257n1) to refer to what has most generally come to be called a game master (GM). The presence of this special player role is a common feature of the definitions, descriptions, and explanations offered by designers, fans, and scholars of the form alike. The GM is the figure who "determines the game world, manages and communicates it to the players, and enacts all the NPCs" (Zagal and Deterding 2018, 31). The fifth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) describes the DM as its "lead storyteller and referee" who "creates adventures for the characters" played by the other players. Those player-characters (PCs) "navigate its hazards and decide which paths to explore" while the DM "determines the results of the adventurers' actions and narrates what they experience" (Mearls and Crawford, n.d., 5).

The variety of appellations for the GM role implies one of the central questions of TRPG play; that is, "what exactly is the GM-analog doing that

makes a given game work in practice?" This question is harder to answer than it may seem at first blush, perhaps because of the implicit promise of TRPGs that a player can at least try to do *anything*. Cover compares the structure of a D&D game to that of a "pick-a-path" (2010, 23-27) story tree structure, but notices that in a TRPG neither the number of decision points nor the direction they lead are pre-determined, such that players are "given the opportunity not only to make decisions but also to build their own pathways" (ibid, 31). She discusses the way her D&D DM planned for alternative "endings" in case of different PC actions (ibid), and "made up a great deal of the [campaign] world and story on the fly, in response to what the players decided to pursue" (ibid, 49).

Cover then describes watching a convention game where a group "got sidetracked, partook in a dinner break, and generally took their time working through the adventure" such that the DM was obligated to "speed through both the exploration of space and the storyline" (Cover 2010, 83). She also relates part of her own experience as a novice DM, including fudging dice rolls to present more of a challenge to players, whom she discovered could



easily subvert her intentions (ibid, 112). One of the problems she reports is having difficulties translating the D&D “module” (i.e., a published adventure) she was running, with its encounter structure and lists of non-player character (NPC) skills, abilities, and recommended combat tactics, into something resembling “an interesting story” (ibid, 137). So being a Dungeon Master presents itself as a rather challenging interactional practice requiring no small degree of group communication skill and leadership ability.

How to be a GM is of clear interest within fan discourse, and is often expressed in the desire for or the provision of “solid GM advice” (e.g., Vecchione, Ciechanowski, and Arcadian 2015; Colville 2016) for navigating the practical and conceptual challenges the task throws up. One such difficulty seems to lie in how to calibrate the relationship between players and the GM. Colville (2016) offers what seems to be a typical perspective. When some new players, unfamiliar with the conventions of role-playing games, asked him after a game as their DM if he had fun, he told them, “If you had fun, I had fun.” As the GM, he suggests, he is the host, and the players are guests at his table whose comfort as well as well as entertainment are his responsibility. So Cover’s (2010) surprise and dismay at the willfulness of players resisting a D&D DM’s plot seems somewhat at odds with Colville’s coolly solicitous regard for his players’ fun. But in our experience, both are fairly common motifs within contemporary TRPG discourse.

The perspectives that game scholars from Fine (1983) onward have employed to make sense of TRPGs have tended to focus on the collective social and communicative achievement of play without much specific attention to the role of the GM (Williams et al. 2018), even when considering the distribution of power and authority at the table (Hammer et al. 2018). In this, the scholarship perhaps seems to anticipate or reflect the fruitful experimentation with GMless and GMful (i.e., rotating or distributed GM authority) game designs that has been taking place in some design spaces (Biswas 2021) for quite some time (Boss 2006). The recent rise in popularity of streamed TRPG “Actual Play” has further complicated the picture by focusing analytic attention on the role that audiences play as part of the collective enactment of the game, further diverting attention from specific attention to the GM role, which is glossed as “intertwining narrative elements in the path forged by players” (Franklin 2021, 75) or as being “both rules-master and NPC” (Marsden and Mason 2021, 175).

Some more attention to the way that role-players understand the role of the GM in their own terms would thus be a valuable augmentation of the analog game studies literature, extending prior

accounts of TRPG discourse. Hendricks, for example, notes that “players and GMs use different strategies with respect to incorporative discourse” – that is, their contributions to the fictional space of the game – “because each type of gamer takes on different roles during the course of the game” (Hendricks 2006, 44). The mode of rhetorical analysis presented in this essay opens this explanation up for interrogation, such that one can ask if the relationship between game role as cause (or referent) and *discourse strategy* as effect (or sign) is as tightly coupled as Hendricks implies, for example. These sorts of questions have implications for design and play as well, in the sense that expanding one’s sense of the possible meanings or contexts of application of a given idea opens up new game design spaces.

To that end, we explore part of the fan discourse that elaborates the nature of the TRPG GM, using rhetorician Kenneth Burke’s dramatic pentad as an analytical tool to examine four different texts as *moments of articulation* of the idea of the GM. We’ll use that exploration to develop a *rhetoric of the GM* that will serve as a provisional specification of what role-playing fans are talking about when they talk about the GM.

## 2. The History of the Game Master

While a fully realized historical account is beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth touching upon some key developments in the idea of the GM as a precursor to the archaeological examination of particular moments of discourse that follows. This tracing will then serve as a context for the examination of specific moments of articulation of that idea that we undertake. In essence, the following account amounts to a “rational reconstruction” (Lakatos 1978, 103) of the development of an idea. That is, it is an intellectual history rather than an empirical one fully integrated with its contexts of production.

## 3. Roots in Wargaming

The role of the “game master” has its origins in the professional wargames created by nineteenth century European military officers in response to Napoleon’s battlefield victories. The game of *Kriegsspiel* was devised six years after Napoleon’s triumph in the 1806 battle of Jena-Auerstedt and employed highly detailed military maps and sand tables upon which wooden pieces represented soldiers. In this new type of military training, two physically separated commanders would issue orders to a third party called a referee, who would use dice to simulate the randomness of training, equipment, and the strains of war (Engberg-Pedersen 2015; LaLone 2019; Toups et al. 2019).

The Prussian game inspired translations and imitators, including a two-volume American version that was called *Strategos: A Series of American Games of War, Based Upon Military Principles and Designed for the Assistance Both of Beginners and Advanced Students in Prosecuting the Whole Study of Tactics, Grand Tactics, Strategy, Military History, and the Various Operations of War* (Totten 1880). In a footnote, Totten observes that “the skillful exercise of the important office of Referee requires not only a special aptitude, but it is indispensable that he, of all others, should be thoroughly familiar with the principles and methods of the Game.” The referee, Totten continues, should be regarded as an arbiter, who “should bear in the mind the principle that anything can be attempted” (ibid, 105).

*Strategos* was a direct influence on David Wesely, who created a simplified version of the game called *Strategos N* in 1968 after stumbling upon it in a Twin Cities library (Graves and Morgan 2019). Wesely assigned the referee the responsibility “to settle all disagreements between the players concerning the rules and the conduct of the game” (Wesely 1968, 1). This stipulation was necessary in the games that Wesely devised to make use of his rules, where each player took on the role of a single officer or persona in a small Napoleonic-era community named Braunstein (Graves and Morgan 2019).

Dave Arneson’s experience with Braunstein prompted him to create his own scenarios using different rules after Wesely left to go to college (Graves and Morgan 2019). His experiments would then contribute to the version of the game published by TSR in the mid-1970s as *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974). But “the idea that a miniature wargame might require a ‘judge’ or referee” was fairly common in the hobby” (Peterson 2012, 63) and the tradition of postal *Diplomacy* games (Callhamer 1959) familiar to many early fans of D&D also required a neutral “gamesmaster” to collect, resolve, and transmit the outcomes of military orders as well as player broadcasts and communiqués to all participants. This sort of arbitration seems to have been regarded as a rather thankless task, taken on in order for other players to be able to enjoy themselves – for the game to happen at all.

But the true neutrality of the wargame referee that Totten (1880) and Wesely (1968) saw as a key element was in practice difficult to sustain. The pleasure, or satisfaction, for the referee in these pre-D&D games seems to have been related to the imaginative possibilities of scenario design within the limits of an adversarial contest between opposing players: “For one match I built a chest of jewels as the object to be obtained to win,” Gygax (1972) reported in *Wargamer’s Newsletter #127* about a particular game of *Chainmail*, D&D’s predecessor. “However, I did not mention to either team that I had

added a pair of ‘basilisk eyes’ ... which immediately turned the first ogre to open it to stone” (Gygax 1972, 18–19). Players of a certain generation may recognize in this a point of origin or at least departure for D&D’s penchant for “crooked” magic items (Martelle 1996), later given free rein in the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Master’s Guide* (DMG, Gygax 1979). This moment also points to the contradictions inherent in the notion of the referee as an impartial arbiter: as the person who sets up the fundamental choices offered to players, and who decides when particular game mechanics are employed, the referee “dominates the whole proceedings,” at least from one perspective (Peterson 2020, 193).

Some of the earliest accounts of play, such as those in Lee Gold’s amateur press association *Alarums & Excursions* (A&E, since 1975), seem content to regard the Dungeon Master’s role as merely functionary, certainly requiring the possession of rules knowledge (to permit the portability of characters from one dungeon master’s dungeon to another) but otherwise being fundamentally procedural in nature, as is suggested by Mason’s description of the content of early A&E as focused chiefly on rules expansion, expression, and interpretation (Mason 2004, 3). However, by the time he wrote his pioneering ethnography of tabletop role-playing game (TRPG) players, sociologist Gary Alan Fine was able to describe the TRPG “referee” as being “in theory omnipotent”; a demiurge who, in creating the game-world within which players must survive, “maintains ultimate interpretive authority” over it. “*In theory*,” Fine says (emphasis added), the GM “is in control” (Fine 1983, 72–3). In practice, however, Fine goes on, the situation is more complex: the game is a “joint construction” (80) of the players and the GM.

The early player discourse, however, included some thought about the nature of the GM. As Mason (2004) observes, the correspondence between the wargame referee and the Dungeon Master of D&D was inexact: “Because the players tended towards co-operation rather than competition, the role-playing referee had to provide opposition” while at the same time fulfilling the more impartial duties of arbitration. The extremes of the too-difficult “Killer Dungeon” and the overly generous “Monty Haul” game amounted to a Scylla and Charybdis for the unwary referee (ibid, 4). During the 1980s, however, fan theorizing seemed to turn toward the categorization of player types rather than more in-depth treatment of the varieties of GMing practice (Mason 2004; Torner 2018).

#### 4. From Dungeon Master to Storyteller

The arrival of White Wolf’s *Vampire: The Masquerade* in 1991 as the first in their “World of Darkness” line marks a clear point of departure from

the wargames-inflected model (Rein·Hagen 1991). This new approach involved highlighting the narrative quality of games, though the fan desire for games with diegetic coherence arguably was recognized by TRPG publishers as early as 1978 with the publication of the dungeon module *Steading of the Hill Giant Chief* (Gygax 1978) by TSR (Mason 2004). Thus, *Vampire* calls its GM a Storyteller, responsible for “ensuring that other players have a good time by telling (them) a good story, creating it and guiding it, deciding if characters succeed or fail, suffer or prosper, live or die” (White 2020b, 15). The asymmetry of the storyteller/player relationship was softened in later editions of *Vampire*, but the World of Darkness Storyteller retained at least a procedural responsibility for guiding in-game events to a satisfying conclusion (Hindmarch 2007).

Even before this time, however, the difficulties involved with regarding RPGs simultaneously both as games and as narratives produced “an ongoing culture clash between those who viewed story as perhaps important but tangential to understanding the nature of games, and those who viewed it as essential” (Costikyan 2006, 5). The persistence of this tension reflects the “direct, immediate conflict between the demands of story and the demands of a game” (ibid, 6). Procedurally, “traditional” TRPGs may “often exhort players to roleplay and tell stories,” but they “don’t generally provide a structure to shape [those stories]” (ibid, 10), such that player-produced TRPG “expedition reports” relating an account of one or more sessions of play “almost invariably make dull reading for those who are not involved in the campaign” (ibid, 9).

## 5. The Art of the GM

The arrival of internet-enabled communications fostered interaction between people with different perspectives on play. New voices, disconnected from the newsletter-based “art worlds” (Becker 2008) of the earliest D&D communities, led to entirely new syntheses of ideas. This would have consequences for the conventional wisdom about role-playing games (see, e.g., White 2020b, for a discussion of the Usenet group [rec.games.frp.advocacy](http://rec.games.frp.advocacy)).

By the end of the 1990s, the notion that a good GM was the only real consideration in making a good game was fairly widespread (Edwards 2000). To the extent that “being a good GM” was understood as anything other than numinous, it seems to have had to do with the GM’s ability to respond to players’ individual preferences and desires in a transactional way (White 2020b, 127). As Laws stated, “there is only one way to role-play: The way that achieves the best balance between the various desires of your particular group” (Laws 2001, 3).

This culminated in a literal “Rule Zero” in the third edition of D&D (Cook, Tweet, and Williams 2000, 4), that said that players should check with the Dungeon Master about the rules in force in any given campaign, formalizing the principle previously espoused in the AD&D *DMG*, directing that the GM should “never hold to the letter written, nor allow some barracks room lawyer to force quotations from the rule books upon you, if it goes against the obvious intent of the game.” The Dungeon Master is beholden only to the text of the game, being told, “As you hew the line with respect to conformity to major systems and uniformity of play in general, also be certain the game is mastered by you and not by your players” (Gygax 1979, 230).

In the “indie scene” surrounding the Forge, an online discussion site for design, publication, and play of tabletop RPGs (White 2020b) that emerged during the first decade of the 2000s, this relationship is inverted. Following the principle that “System Does Matter” (Edwards 2000), they saw game mastering as a practice that could be done in different ways depending upon the “social contract” within a game group, although some of those ways were less likely than others to sustainably produce functional play (Young 2005a; Young 2005b). If the desire of the group was to have a coherent story emerge from play, the GM perhaps ironically had to take an approach that put the focus on the characters (Edwards 2003a; Edwards 2003b). Because the experience of gameplay was shaped by the design of the game, the particular degree of asymmetry in the GM/PC relationship was a game design choice that had to do with the apportionment of different sorts of authority at the table; this apportionment could be calibrated in the service of different design goals. One of these goals, characterized as “Narrativism” or “Story Now” (White 2020b, 154–155), focused on employing techniques that would allow narrative structures or effects to emerge via play rather than being imposed upon play.

The Open Game License issued by Wizards of the Coast to enable third-party publishers to produce third-party material for D&D (Appelcline 2014a, viii) would facilitate an “Old School Revival” (OSR). This gaming scene was prompted by dissatisfaction with how some of the design choices in later editions of D&D dampened the possibilities for imaginative expression in that game (Mizer 2019, 42–43). It would embrace a principle of “rulings, not rules” (Finch 2008) that was similar to the Forge-era precept that “System Does Matter” in the way it conceives the relationship between GM and system. However, it highlights the GM’s role in allowing player contributions to enter into the fiction. This retrieval of “the imaginative flexibility of relying on a DM’s improvisational judgments in unexpected circumstances” (Mizer 2019, 44) also emphasized the informational asymmetry in some TRPGs between

player and GM. For example, one OSR-adjacent designer proceeded by treating the rules themselves—or at least those related to the parameters of encounter design—as a kind of hidden information to be kept from players (White 2020b, 199), retrieving older visions of the centrality of the GM. Still more recently, the popularity of “actual play” streamers like *Critical Role* (Jones 2021) has highlighted the performative activity of play as a focal point of thinking about TRPGs to the point that it arguably threatens to obscure the impact of game design on the play experience (White 2019).

The way that different TRPG communities of practice talk about the “art and science” (Gygax 1979, 2) of GMing may thus be useful in understanding how TRPGs work and how people engage with them. One way of exploring that is to compare different moments of articulation of as rhetorical acts; that is, events where individuals in addressing a community of practice (Wenger 1999) share their understanding of the world and invite that audience to participate in it. The next part of the paper briefly elaborates the rhetorical analytic schema to be employed in examining those moments of articulation.

## 6. Principles and Ratios in the Dramatistic Pentad

Kenneth Burke was a twentieth century rhetorical theorist who offered a perspective on speech-acts that amounted to a theory of the human subject—an approach to thinking about speech as symbolic action that focuses on the way that speakers constitute themselves as actors in a social setting engaged in the enactment of their own and the world’s constitution (Wess 2010, 139). His perspective offered a way of thinking about “how humankind’s language-use implicates larger social relations,” and “how language can reframe, reconstruct, and otherwise revise our very conception of reality” (Rountree and Rountree 2015, 350). Commonly employed in the field of speech communication, Burke’s (1969) rhetorical theory of *dramatism* has recently been applied to TRPG discourses (White 2020a), as seems appropriate for a medium that is centered heavily on conversational interaction. In this theory, Burke regards such interactions as efforts at offering points

of identification with and for others, such that persuasion is more accurately described as the acceptance of an invitation to share the world-view or perspective of the other. To that end, rhetors (speakers) via their utterances offer narratives that they hope will be taken up by their audience. Those narratives can be understood as comprising (1) a *scene* or setting in time and space within which someone acts; (2) the *actor* in the setting whose activity is central to the dramatic narrative; (3) the *act* or action intended, initiated, and/or completed by the agent; and (4) some *agency*, or the instruments or tools that the agent employs in action; all in the service of some (5) *purpose*, which is the motivation that lies under the agent’s act.

These five “principles” are the constituent elements of the speaker’s narrative, but in any given utterance they are given different weight by the speaker. By paying attention to the relative salience of each principle as well as the implicit and explicit connections the speaker draws between any given pair of principles, the listener gains a sense of the speaker’s understanding of how the interaction of principles shapes what will happen, is happening, or has happened. Burke refers to the whole apparatus as a “pentad,” and calls an interaction or relationship between any given pair of principles its “ratio.”

Table 1 shows the principles and their ratios, regarding them as directional ties between nodes of a graph, such that a link originating from one will have a different character than its reciprocal. Thus, for example, the act-agent ratio, in which an act *characterizes* an agent, is here distinct from the reciprocal agent-act ratio, in which the agent *authors* the act. In the table, reading across from the first principle to the relevant characterization then down to the second principle indicates that nature of the ratio between the two principles.

Burke tends to conflate these relations in his discussion, but the additional degree of granularity helps make sense of Burke’s claim that each principle is associated with a corresponding philosophical orientation, such that a narrative prioritizing the agent is philosophically idealist; one prioritizing the act, philosophically realist; agency, pragmatist; scene, materialist; and purpose, mystical. In practice, as well,

**Table 1: The Principles of the Pentad and Its Ratios.**

First Principle	Relationship of First to Second Principle				
<b>Agent</b>	WHO	Authors	Employs	Inhabits	Intends
<b>Act</b>	Characterizes	WHAT	Is facilitated by	Colors	Is a sign of
<b>Agency</b>	Empowers	Effectuates	HOW	Comprises	Is suited for
<b>Scene</b>	Contains	Contextualizes	Provides	WHERE	Is suited to
<b>Purpose</b>	Motivates	Informs	Inheres within	Befits	WHY
Second Principle	<b>Agent</b>	<b>Act</b>	<b>Agency</b>	<b>Scene</b>	<b>Purpose</b>

the distinction seems to matter a great deal. For example, the *agent-act* ratio in which people who are born gay then engage in homosexual activity – the position of the gay activists in the 1970s described by one Burkean analyst – is a different kind of explanation than the reciprocal *act-agent* ratio offered by their opponents, in which choosing to engage in homosexual behavior made people gay by definition (Brummett 1979).

As the foregoing suggests, certain ratios will be more prominent than others in any given text, as they are invoked to explain the events described by the rhetorical act. “The ratios may often be interpreted as principles of selectivity rather than as thoroughly causal relationships,” Burke (1969, 18) says, as for example when the times are more suited for daring than for caution – a scene-agency ratio. Each ratio asserts a different understanding of the causal connection between the principles it invokes, or at least a different sense of their motivating salience to the circumstances in question.

Some critics regard Burke’s scheme as part of a larger trend of employing rhetoric as a “hermeneutic metadiscourse” (Gaonkar 1997, 25; see also Fleming 2003, 93) rather than a framework for generating productive discourse, but to Craig, the value of each of the intellectual traditions shaping the field of communication, including rhetoric, lies within the metadiscursive framework it offers for making sense of practical problems of communication (Craig 1999, 128–132). In the case of rhetoric, a metadiscursive vocabulary theorizing ideas that include art, method, logic, emotion, and strategy (ibid, 133) seems particularly relevant to game play and game design. For our purposes, the value of the pentad is the possibility of rendering different discourse communities commensurable, or at least legible, in the sense of highlighting the differing connotations associated with particular words in different interpretive frameworks (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 134–135).

## 7. The GM as Dramatistic Agent

In what follows, we apply Burke’s pentad to four specific moments of articulation of the idea of the GM, moving backward in time not to trace a causal link or evolutionary path but simply to suggest the shape of the discourse space archaeologically, so to speak, having already moved forward through the history of the GM in the previous section. This is consistent with Foucault’s dictum that an archaeological approach should not seek to relate discourses “on a gentle slope to what precedes them, surrounds them, or follows them” but instead to produce a “differential analysis of modes of discourse” (Foucault 1972, 139).

The four moments we examine include a one-page “best practices” guide recently published on itch.io ((Deshaies-Gelinas 2022), an online forum thread from the mid-2000s (Marcus 2004), and two magazine articles, the first an attempt to catalog the TRPG lexicon from the mid-1990s (Masters 1994), the second an advice column for new players from the late 1970s (Krank 1979). Each has a somewhat different sense of who it addresses, but in general each text can be treated as a rhetorically dramatistic act that invites its reader to share its understanding of what a GM is or should be. The co-authors read each text in question and constructed the tables representing the pentadic analysis of each one as a joint enterprise.

Our selection of these moments from across a wide chronological swath of anglophone TRPG discourse amounts to a kind of theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 45) that, while not fully saturated, does index the historical periodization we have already outlined: the wargaming roots and early world-building focus, the turn toward narrative, and the search for alternatives to “traditional” play. The most recently produced document (Deshaies-Gelinas 2022), which we examine first, gives access to a post-Forge, post-OSR contemporary TRPG scene that is hard to capture because of its fragmentation into myriad isolated online social media spaces. Additionally, we have chosen historical moments of articulation that appeared in venues described as thoughtful or serious places for engaging in TRPG discussion. The effect is to bring the rational reconstruction outlined above into contact with its empirical history at those moments of articulation.

Even though we are deliberately drawing examples from different time periods, we are in no way suggesting that they trace some pattern of *evolution* or *development*; this is neither an historical account nor a teleological one. By the same token, we don’t think that these utterances are in dialogue with each other in the sense that their proponents may be regarded as interlocutors; to date, it seems as if fan discourses within TRPG spaces employ propositions whose status as commonplaces or conventional wisdom, versus heterodoxy, varies across different communities of play, without much awareness of earlier conversations in a similar vein, such that similar patterns of debate recur over and over again, in the manner suggested by White (White 2020b, 222). Instead, we think that these moments offer an initial point of entry into a larger field of discourse.

## 8. The Twitter Game Master (2022): A Fan of the Players

The authors recently encountered a short guide to best practices for TRPG GMs and players on itch.io, the “littlest next big thing in gaming” (Maiberg 2015), summarizing a Twitter conversation among TRPG

designers (Deshaies-Gelinas 2022). This one-page document divided its advice into two columns, and offered brief elaboration on four practices in each column, one for GMs and the other for players. The GM principles included (1) Be a fan of the players; (2) Don't plan, play; (3) When in doubt, ask questions; and (4) This is a game, not a simulation. A dramatic reading of this advice is summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2: Dramatistic Summary of Deshaies-Gelinas (2022).**

Principle	Expression
Agent	The GM as a fan of the players
Act	Plays to find out what happens, listens to players
Agency	Players' ideas [vs. hyperrealism, planning]
Scene	A game (vs. a simulation)
Purpose	To have fun; to help facilitate or find an interesting story

In this brief text, the GM is positioned as the point of elaboration of individual contributions. The scene-purpose ratio introduces a point of ambiguity, in that while “a game” is clearly suited to having fun, the relationship between game and story is undeveloped. More prominent is the act-agency ratio, in that “playing to find out” (rather than planning or otherwise driving the action) is facilitated by paying attention to what players offer. This advice seems to offer a rather striking contrast to the model of play that Cover describes, wherein DMs might introduce a challenge they expect PCs to fail, “because their failure will be key to building the story he or she wants to tell” (Cover 2010, 48), and often find themselves chagrined at the way players find a way around obstacles when “they have tried so hard to steer them in a certain direction” (ibid).

## 9. The Sorcerer Game Master at the Forge (2004): A Thrower of Bangs

“The Forge was a place to talk about role-playing games,” says White, “for those interested in designing, publishing, and playing games that were not in fact D&D, but that did something else, or did the same thing in a different way” (White 2020b, 33). Arguably, one of the most significant contributions of the conversations at the Forge – at least as understood by its habitués – was the idea of “Narrativism” as a style of play focused on producing thematic or “premise-addressing” play, rather than simulating a particular fictional world or engaging in a competitive experience. This sort of “Story Now” (Edwards 2003a; Edwards 2003b) play was seen as being a product of designed-in game features and play practices that facilitated it, and discussion of how to do this successfully was a regular part of the conversations at the Forge. Many of those conversations revolved around Edwards’ game

*Sorcerer* (Edwards 2001), which offered a toolbox of Narrativist-facilitating techniques.

One example of such a conversation is Marcus (2004), who was trying to understand how to implement advice he’d already received on how to run his *Sorcerer* game. In particular, he wanted to know how to prepare “Bangs” – in-game events intended to drive play. “I assume that Bangs are, at least to some extent, pre-prepared by the GM,” he began. However, he went on, “If that assumption is correct, how can this be unless the GM has some sort of a branching plotline structure in mind beforehand, which is apparently a no-no?” The responses came from a variety of posters, summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3: Dramatistic Summary of Marcus (2004).**

Principle	Expression
Agent	The GM
Act	Drives PCs toward conflict or fateful (characterizing) choices
Agency	Bangs (in-game situations), Relationship Map (NPCs and their interactions)
Scene	The game of <i>Sorcerer</i> and by extension similar "narrativist" games
Purpose	In the service of a "Story Now" Creative Agenda (addressing premise)

According to those responses, bangs are “situations that explode and demand a decision from the player, and which reveal the nature of the character no matter what he decides to do about it” (Trevis Martin; reply #3 in Marcus 2004). It is fun, Martin went on, to “throw the characters a hot potato (bang) and see what they do with it, without any concern yourself about how YOU would want them to handle it.” Another poster explained, “you have to step back and realize that the relationship map is just a snapshot of plot. The backstory is the plot up to the point of the beginning of play. The Relationship Map is the relationship between key characters as they exist at that moment subsequent to all of the previous backstory history” (Valamir; reply #10 in Marcus 2004).

The Narrativist GM envisioned at the Forge is thus seemingly characterized by an agency-act ratio whose thrust is that employing the techniques that facilitate Narrativism will result in conflict-rich play that pushes players to “address premise” (i.e., make choices for the character that can be interpreted as thematic or otherwise principled statements by the player) in the same fashion as other sorts of fiction, albeit via different means. It may be that this or something like it is what Deshaies-Gelinas (2022) intends by the phrase “interesting story.”

## 10. The Interactive Fantasy Game Master (1994): The Grown-Up at the Table

*Interactive Fantasy* (originally Inter\*Action) was a magazine published in the mid-1990s whose



founders James Wallis and Andrew Rilstone were interested in taking TRPGs seriously as a medium. Its four issues featured articles among whose authors were “TRPG luminaries”; overall, the magazine “received some good attention because of its thoughtful and analytical coverage of role-playing” (Appelcline 2014d, 220). One article (Masters 1994) offered a lexicon of the developing vocabulary of role-playing. The entry for “GM” in that piece reads as follows:

GM: Abbreviation for ‘Games Master’ (sometimes, perhaps pretentiously, ‘Game Moderator’)—the individual acting as referee and scene-setter in a game. Many games have used their own names for this function, starting with *Dungeons & Dragons*’s ‘DM’ (q.v.), and including *Call of Cthulhu*’s ‘Keeper (of the Arcane Lore)’, *Toon*’s ‘Animator’ and *Ars Magica*’s ‘Storyguide’; early variations were more or less serious attempts to avoid the genre-specific implications of ‘DM’ before ‘GM’ became widespread, while later efforts attempted to emphasize various aspects of the games. Traveller, rather puritanically, prefers ‘Referee’. However, ‘GM’ has become commonplace and is certainly useful, simply because of its flexibility (and despite the slight hint of sexism—‘Games Mistresses’ are rarely discussed) (Masters 1994, 63).

Other entries develop the idea of the GM. For example, the cross-reference to *Dungeon Master* observes that the term “has now fallen into some disrepute, perceived as implying that a game is restricted to Dungeon-Bashing” (Masters 1994, 62). Masters then goes on to relate a somewhat obscure joke at the expense of D&D. “The same letters were also used,” he remarks, “by the first edition of Traveller as an abbreviation for ‘Dice Modifier’, a fairly self-explanatory rules mechanism. Steve Gilham has pointed out that the latter expansion described the prime function of many DMs in the former sense” (ibid); the quip is an allusion to the invidious comparison of roll-playing with role-playing, a distinction that is widely regarded as “sheer hypocrisy” (RPG Museum 2020).

Other entries in the piece contrast a cooperative play style (meaning, chiefly, willingness to go along with the GM’s style and planning) with an adversarial “GM-as-Enemy” style, such that “differences in expectations between players and GM in this area has probably led to more problems in games than almost anything else” (Masters 1994, 64). Additionally, an entry for “mode” distinguishes between “parent,” “child,” and “adult” approaches to interaction at the table, with GMs operating chiefly in adult mode, which is “practical and pragmatic, and

accepts responsibility for necessary tasks,” since child mode would be disruptive and parent mode condescending. The balancing of all of these expectations and interactions seems to be the way to achieve the sense of wonder that arguably “all games should aim for, and too few achieve” (ibid, 71).

Table 4 summarizes the dramatic interpretation of these observations. The TRPG appears as a field of tensions in Masters’ article. The GM, in striving to offer hard but fair challenges to the players when playing as adversary, must resist the temptation to be provoked into “unrestrained hostility” (Masters 1994, 64) that will quickly lead to the characters’ destruction or otherwise hinder campaign development. Simultaneously, in pursuing a cooperative style of play, the GM must avoid demanding the excess of conformity that will rob the game of suspense, action, and excitement. Additionally, a GM seeking to flesh out the campaign world may “attempt to enforce their predetermined concepts of plot and character development on players” and in doing so at the last extreme be unmasked as a “failed novelist” (ibid, 63).

**Table 4: Dramatic Summary of Masters (1994).**

Principle	Expression
<b>Agent</b>	Games master (or perhaps game moderator). The editors of <i>Interactive Fiction</i> prefer the term “referee.”
<b>Act</b>	Scene setting and refereeing as well as “campaign development,” possibly including the creation of “narrative structures”; somewhat disparagingly when applied to the D&D DM, “die modifying”; depending on style, may also include presenting “genuine but not insuperable challenges” or
<b>Agency</b>	Play style, from cooperative to adversarial (“GM-as-enemy”); in particular “adult mode behavior”; NPCs including patrons
<b>Scene</b>	The campaign, a “linked series of game ‘incidents,’” within a particular game-world; may be open-ended or of fixed duration.
<b>Purpose</b>	To pursue a sense of wonder, perhaps via the creation of a “strong, rich narrative thread” in the campaign.

## 11. The Different Worlds Game Master (1979): Demiurge of a Sub-Creation

The earliest fan discourse took place chiefly in newsletters and amateur press association fanzines like *Alarums & Excursions* (Mason 2004) as well as in-house organs like *Different Worlds* magazine, which was produced by Tadashi Ehara for Chaosium, the publisher of *RuneQuest*, an early alternative to D&D (Freeman 1979). D&D’s publisher TSR was known for its litigious zeal in defense of its intellectual property (Appelcline 2014b, 102), and so Peterson describes *Different Worlds* as a “Bay Area

gaming magazine” whose title echoes the sentiment of the writer of a Chaosium game supplement called *All the Worlds' Monsters* that “one world we will not have in the book, by the way, will be TSR’s” (Peterson 2012, 590). Mason (2004) describes it as “professional forum for more thoughtful material” beginning in 1979 (4), and Appelcline says that it remained “a top independent role-playing magazine” (Appelcline 2014c, 344) throughout the 1980s, even after Ehara left Chaosium and took *Different Worlds* with him, continuing to produce issues until 1987.

One article in the first issue of *Different Worlds* introduces role-playing to the novice player from the perspective of an experienced player who regularly encountered curious newcomers at his store (Krank 1979). In painting a picture of role-playing, Krank assigns one person the title referee and explains that they serve several purposes for the game, including creating the world in which all of the action in the game will take place. The players, he says, must cooperate with each other in order to defeat the referee’s monsters. Krank seems to be describing his own deepening engagement with the game both as a creative pastime bordering on obsession and as a sink for time and money. “All your free time will disappear,” he says, “and you will become very, very poor.” What’s more, he goes on, “Your games will last through one night and on into the next when you drop from exhaustion, only to awake and begin again.” He jokes that referees always have a “distinctly ‘undead’ look” about them. Nonetheless, he insists, “It’s great!” (Krank 1979, 5). This emphasis on the time commitment of the GM contrasts sharply with Deshaies-Gelinas’s (2022) claim that “you don’t need to spend hours planning all the details.” The distinction lies in the act of GMing: for Deshaies-Gelinas, the GM plays (to have fun); for Krank, the GM prepares (but doesn’t play, not really).

Table 5 pulls together Krank’s description of the activity of being a referee. Of the four moments of articulation this paper examines, his most strongly highlights the asymmetry of the GM/PC roles. Running “all those monsters” is “the closest you will get to actually playing in your world,” he observes (Krank 1979, 3), for example. He also notes that while players will make suggestions, the ultimate decision-making authority rests with the referee.

This description of role-playing seems to center upon an agency-purpose ratio. The devotion of all of those resources, including money (“My father never could understand how you could spend so much money on just one game,” Krank 1979, 4) and time (to the point of obsession), is undertaken in order to be able to “capture the mystery and adventure of a fantasy world,” an end that apparently requires an encompassing library of different rules systems and setting descriptions that perhaps contribute to one’s own synoptic creation. The model here appears to be

M.A.R. Barker, whose fantasy world of Tékumel is described in the game *Empire of the Petal Throne* (Barker 1975), a D&D variant set in a world “evocative of Bronze Age migrations and Iron Age empires” (White et al. 2018, 74); Fine (Fine 1983, 124–136) describes how Barker drew upon his academic training as a linguist in the elaboration of his fantasy world and notes a similarity to J.R.R. Tolkien in terms of the relationship between Barker’s disciplinary expertise and his worldbuilding.

**Table 5: Dramatistic Summary of Krank (1979).**

Principle	Expression
<b>Agent</b>	The referee
<b>Act</b>	Prepares and presents "a situation complete with conflict and reward" to players who "try to combine their talents and gain that reward" and then "runs all those monsters" and "answers the multitude of questions that players will ask."
<b>Agency</b>	The "world in which all of the action in the game will take place," perhaps borrowed from fiction or invented out of whole cloth, containing "monsters or bad guys" and "riddles, traps, or mazes" and other ways "to subtly eliminate the players" as well as treasures and other gains; rules systems; "little 25mm lead miniatures"; "all of your free time"
<b>Scene</b>	Role-playing
<b>Purpose</b>	To "capture the mystery and adventure of a fantasy world" as well as motivate players to engage in the struggle to survive in that world.

## 12. GM Styles

In attempting to discern patterns within these accounts, we may be able characterize the first two we examined (Deshaies-Gelinas 2022; Marcus 2004) as dialogic in their orientation to players; the latter two (Masters 1994; Krank 1979) can be characterized as monologic. Both Masters and Krank regard players as audiences for the work of the referee, while the view presented in the later two texts see the player role as more active or responsive. On the other hand, there is also a difference in the extent to which the GM/PC relationship is regarded as adversarial. Both Deshaies-Gelinas and Masters offer a non-adversarial perspective; the former describes the GM as properly a fan of the players while the latter seems to regard “cooperation” as a key element of play. Conversely, both Marcus (2004) and Krank (Krank 1979) emphasize the adversarial challenge the GM is expected to provide.

The result is a fourfold set of contingencies: dialogic non-adversary (Deshaies-Gelinas 2022), dialogic adversary (Marcus 2004), monologic non-adversary (Masters 1994), and monologic adversary (Krank 1979). We may perhaps label these as “Fan,” “Challenger,” “Grown-Up,” and “Demijurge”

respectively. This mirroring of the typologies of play styles offered in the “para-academic” theorizing of TRPG players and designers (Torner 2018) may offer a useful shorthand in conceptualizing not only the differences among GMs, but in describing the difference between GMs and players.

### 13. Conclusion

This exploration traces some of the contours of a larger discourse within the fan community of tabletop role-playing games about the GM – a pivotal role the understanding of which is a crucial component for successful play and design. We can see a range of models for the GM role, from that of appreciative audience through various shades of adversary on the one hand to some sort of narrative psychopomp on the other. We believe that awareness of this “rhetoric of the GM” can be helpful to game designers and GMs in their practice, particularly in explaining play preferences and procedures. Some game design communities thrive precisely in enabling participants to challenge the received wisdom of what TRPGs are, how they work, and what one does when playing (White 2020b, 253–254).

Additionally, this exploration provides a series of labels, approaches, and categories for future researchers of TRPGs to consider as they engage with a given community of play, which can be understood as an interpretive community situated within a particular historical space. Understanding how such communities may embed seemingly familiar language with unanticipated connotations allows the analytic hermeneutic to be sharpened, and the resulting analytic account to be clearer. In other words, it can assist in making sense of various discussions occurring within and between fan communities of practice, aiding an observer in identifying otherwise hard-to-discern points of difference, or what Foucault calls “points of diffraction” – incompatible equivalents that form “link points of systematization,” the raw material of which “larger discursive groups” such as theories, conceptions, and schemes are built (Foucault 1972, 65–66).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it offers a rational reconstruction of the idea of the GM as an object of discourse that can serve as a point of departure for a supplementary “external history” that connects that discourse to its socio-psychological production (Lakatos 1978, 102), tracing the links from contemporary ways of speaking to older lines of thought. For example, the “best practices” recently discussed on Twitter (Deshaies-Gelinas 2022) suppress the idea that there is tension between the TRPG as game and as narrative; we can ask to what extent that suppression reflects a settlement or a solution. That is, is there simply tacit agreement to ignore the anomaly, or has the problem actually been

solved, and if so how? Certainly, Costikyan (2006) is willing to regard the way that indie role-playing and freeform games have used game-forms to constrain narrative possibilities as one answer, but the revival of GM-centered styles of play suggests that differences in practice and practical understandings may exist. Similarly, we have seen a striking shift in the conception of the act of GMing from being located in preparation and divorced from play to being located in moments of play itself. We can ask how that shift occurred, if it did, and how it manifests in textual practice and gameplay. Tracing this shift out from its moments of articulation in discourse to the non-discursive circulations (Jenkins et al. 2009) and reifications (Wenger 1999) in which TRPG discourse is embedded will enable a clearer account of different “play worlds,” by which we mean the socio-cultural scenes in which TRPG activity takes place.

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