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ROLEPLAYING GAME GENRES

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by

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Tutkielmassa määritellään ja kuvaillaan 25 roolipelien lajityyppiä. Kyseiset lajityypit määritellään niin, että niissä on mahdollisimman vähän päällekkäisyyksiä keskenään ja että niitä voidaan lähes vapaasti yhdistellä. Lajityyppejä yhdistelemällä voidaan helposti kuvailla erilaisia roolipelejä, mutta yksittäisten pelien erikoisuuksien kuvaamiseen tutkielman lähestymistapa ei sovellu.

Lajityyppien määrittelyn pohjana käytettiin elokuvien ja kirjallisuuden lajityyppiteorioita, joista valittiin soveltaen tutkielman tarkoituksiin sopivimmat osat. Lajityypit määriteltiin niiden olennaisimpien piirteiden tai ominaisuuksien perusteella.

Tarkastelluista lajityypeistä kuvailtiin muun muassa roolipelien maailmaan ja yleisimpään tapahtumaympäristöön liittyvät asiat, pelien yleisimmät aihepiirit, yksityiskohdat, hahmotyypit, tunnelma ja se vaikutus pelaajan tunteisiin, johon lajityypin peleissä useimmiten pyritään. Esimerkiksi fantasiatyypin peleissä taikuus on todellista ja agenttityypin peleissä pelihahmot ovat yleensä agentteja. Jotkut lajityypit määriteltiin myös niiden suosiman pelityylin, aihepiirin tai tunnelman avulla.

Lähteinä lajityyppien määrittelyssä käytettiin roolipelikirjoja ja Internet-lähteitä. Roolipelikirjat ovat enimmäkseen pelien perussääntökirjoja ja Internet-lähteet pelien valmistajien kotisivuja ja pelaajien kirjoittamia peliesittelyjä ja -arvosteluja.

Tutkielmassa määritellyistä lajityypeistä tärkeimmät ovat fantasia, tieteispelit (scifi-pelit), kauhu, sekä fantasian ja tieteispelien yhdistelmä tieteisfantasia. Muita huomattavia lajityyppejä ovat muun muassa tieteispeleihin kuuluva kyberpunk ja tieteisfantasiaan kuuluvat suurkatastrofin jälkeiseen maailmaan sijoittuvat pelit ja aika- ja ulottuvuusmatkailupelit.

Asiasanat: roleplaying game, genre

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CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

To save space, some rather central terms that are used often in this study will be usually referred to with abbreviations. Most of these are fairly standardized in roleplaying game products, so I have not changed them. All of these abbreviations are explained in some detail in the glossary (appendix A). They are presented here only to prevent confusion. I would advise readers unfamiliar with roleplaying games to read the entries of these abbreviations in the glossary.

RPG	Roleplaying game
GM	Gamemaster
PC	Player character
NPC	Non-player character
D&D	*Dungeons and Dragons*
AD&D	*Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*

The following abbreviations of encyclopedia titles are also used:

TEF	*The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*
TESF	*The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (Note that there are actually two encyclopedias with the this title. The year of publication easily tells them apart, however.)
NESF	*The New Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*

1 INTRODUCTION

Roleplaying games (RPGs for short) have been around since the early 1970s, so they are not a very new form of entertainment, but they have not been studied much. This study is intended to provide an overall look at what RPGs are like and how they can be divided into different genres. As the title suggests, the main focus will be on genres, but since understanding that part will require a rudimentary understanding of RPGs, I will begin with a general description of what RPGs are and how they work. A secondary purpose of this study is to attempt to define genres so that there is little overlap between them and they can be easily combined with each other (and the combination does not have to be described separately as a new genre).

The general description part (chapter two) will draw on a little of narrative and game theory to explain things like the difference between players and their characters and to put RPGs in a more academic perspective. The genre part (chapter three) will naturally draw on existing genre theory for an academic background, but since no ready RPG-related genre theory exists, and RPGs are very different from both literature and film (which the existing genre theories focus on), I will present my own theory to fill the gaps. This is, however, mostly a descriptive study of existing RPGs and is not intended to cover every remote possibility. Chapter four will describe individual RPG genres and give examples of them (some film and literature examples are also given to provide a wider perspective). A glossary of common RPG terms is also included as an appendix.

There will be few attempts in this study to show what good RPGs can be, although they can easily be used, for example, for educational purposes. This is because I recently read an article by Alf Rehn, which I wholeheartedly agree with. He points out that in almost all studies of play,

> when play is reflected on, we immediately try to find higher values in it: learning, health, development et cetera. By doing so we have begun to make play serious, i.e. we try to explain play in culturally accepted ways. Play for play's sake is unacceptable as it

isn't 'serious', therefore we need to re-make it so that we can find seriousness in it. (Rehn 1999:145.)

And this is wrong because play is not, and was never meant to be, serious. Granted, it can aid in learning, health, development and so on, but if it does, it does so only as a byproduct. Playing is first and foremost frivolous entertainment. Its value is that it is fun, not what purpose it can serve. Besides, the scope of this study would expand considerably if – in addition to explaining what they and their genres are like – I tried to explain how RPGs can be used for educational purposes.

1.1 Conventions and Notes

To begin with, there is a matter of spelling. There seems to be little consensus in whether one should write "roleplaying game" or "role-playing game" (I checked several RPG books and in about half of them it was written one way and in the other half the other way). Since I will mostly use the abbreviation 'RPG', this is not a major issue, but I prefer "roleplaying game" without the hyphen.

I will make a difference between a 'RPG' (as a system, or a set of rules and a description of a world) and an instance of playing one (to which I will refer to as a 'game'). This is important, because while a single RPG may include a set of rules and a description of an environment, every group of players playing that same RPG may play it in a very different way. In other words, there may be many different games based on a single RPG. To use a musical analogy, a scale such as 'A minor' could be compared to a RPG and all the songs written in A minor would be different games based on the single scale. They have something in common, a shared basis, but they can be very different from each other. Thus when I say something like "games can be set in..." it means I refer to individual games played by various groups, not different RPGs. In this case various games could share a setting even if the groups played different RPGs (i.e. used different systems). Games other than RPGs (such as chess) will be differentiated

by referring to them with phrases like "as in other games" or by calling them "normal games" or some such.

I will also be using the word 'story' in a very broad sense that includes not only RPGs (or rather their game instances), but also short stories, novels, television series, oral stories, movies, documentary films and so on. A phrase like "as in any other story" will appear quite often and will mean all the other forms of story besides (but including) RPGs.

The term 'fantasy roleplaying' or 'FRP' will appear in some quotations. It is the same thing as a RPG, though it often also means that a RPG described as an FRP game will belong to the fantasy genre. This is not always the case, however, and it is generally easiest to simply regard the two terms as synonymous.

The other conventions and notes presented here are more personal and are not really that relevant for understanding my arguments, but will help to clarify why I argue some things the way I do. Those in a hurry may safely leave them unread and move on to chapter 2. However, I still feel these should be included to explain and justify some of my choices.

1.1.1 He and/or She

I am aware that it is nowadays advisable to use phrases like "he or she" or "s/he" or try to use about half and half of each instead of using only "he". I have also been told that Ursula Le Guin has invented a neuter pronoun "per" (a contraction of "person", I believe), but I do not know what its plural, objective, possessive and so on forms are. Therefore, I will use "s/he", "his/her" and so on instead of simple "he" when referring to a generic "somebody". Since I will occasionally be referring also to imaginary creatures to which gender is irrelevant, I should perhaps also include "it", but that would be too awkward.

Incidentally, while the majority of roleplayers are male, a significant proportion of them are female. I have not encountered a study on the subject, but based on my experience, I would *guess* that some 20-40% are female. Female players often seem to like LARPs better, and I would guess that as much as 40-50% of LARP players are women. Of course, very many people play both types of games so these numbers are probably inaccurate.

1.1.2 Postmodernism

I am generally not enthusiastic about postmodernism, finding most postmodern texts too dense to be worth the effort of deciphering them. However, when someone takes the trouble of explaining them to me, I often find myself agreeing with them. I have also been told that the subject of this study is very postmodern. Be that as it may, there are some rather postmodern arguments that I would like to make.

First of all, whenever a person reads or writes a text, s/he does not do so impersonally or on a tabula rasa basis. S/he always uses his/her previous experience and linguistic and literary competencies. I know it is often expected that academic texts be written as impersonally and "objectively" as possible, and as far as logical arguments and supporting evidence are concerned, that is of course a good thing. However, nobody can write entirely objectively, and trying to write "invisibly", so that the author is not noticeable is not unlike the way most Hollywood films use impersonal and invisible camerawork and other conventions like the actors not looking directly at the camera to make the audience forget that they are watching a movie. Likewise, in an "objectively" written text, it is all too easy to forget that one is reading someone else's opinions, especially if the reader agrees with them. This study is based on my experience and opinions and is full of my arguments, and I feel the reader should be reminded of this every now and then. Therefore I will be using phrases like "in my experience" and "I think" quite often. Furthermore, since I do not propose to know the ultimate truths about all the RPGs and their

players, words like "usually", "typically", "commonly" and "often" will also be frequently used.

In the light of the above, it may also be important to realize that this study has been written from a Finnish, sort of middle class (based on the environment I was raised in, actually lower-lower class if one considers that I am a poor student) male, Lutheran-Protestant (i.e., I believe in God and good intentions, but only go to church for weddings and funerals and sometimes feel a little guilty about that) perspective. I am also rather introspective, optimistically cynical, heterosexual (but open-minded), and have been playing RPGs for about 12 years. It is perhaps also worth noting that like most people, I do not actually believe in vampires, lycanthropy, magic, psionics and so on, even if I often amuse myself by pretending that I do. This study will routinely address such things as fictional and supernatural, even if some people may believe in them. No offense to individual beliefs is intended, I am simply following the general consensus and conventional norms of reason of this age and society.

Many players always play the same game, often the one they started with (which is often *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*) or *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* (*AD&D*)), while others try many different games. I belong to the latter group. I also enjoy modifying the rule-systems of RPGs, making up my own rules, and mixing various genres and ideas.

2 INTRODUCTION TO ROLEPLAYING GAMES

As the heading implies, this chapter explains what RPGs are and what they are like. It is perhaps easiest to start with the latter, so that the reader will first have some idea of what goes on in a game. Those who are already familiar with RPGs obviously do not need to read this, but may want to read the sections

about 'RPGs as stories' and 'RPGs as games', and perhaps 'what RPGs are' as well.

As Charlton and Fenlon say in the introduction of *Character Law & Campaign Law* (part of the *Rolemaster* system, 1989:6):

> The easiest way to understand a role playing game is to think of it as a work of fiction such as a novel or a play or a movie. In a novel the author determines the setting of the novel along with the actions of all of the characters and thus the plot. In a role playing game, the author (called the Gamemaster) determines the setting and some of the basic elements of the plot. The actions of the characters (and thus part of the plot) are determined during the game by the game "players" and the Gamemaster.

In other words, playing RPGs is about taking the role of an imaginary character for the duration of the game and interacting with other imaginary characters in an imaginary gameworld. To put it yet another way, N. Robin Crossby (1988) defines it as "Fantasy Roleplaying is essentially a process whereby gamemasters (and publications) create/define worlds in which players live alternate lives" or, to borrow his lovely alternate phrase, "gamemasters build castles in the sky, players live in them..." (1988). *Heavy Gear* describes it as (Boulle et al. 1997:12):

> Roleplaying is a form of interactive storytelling in which a director (called the Gamemaster, or GM) prepares a story and its various threads, and guides a group of Players (usually from 3 to 6) through their meanderings. [...] During game sessions, the Players are encouraged to create interesting personalities for these characters and act out their decisions and reactions to the settings and situations described by the Gamemaster.

And *Timelords* offers one of the shortest definitions of roleplaying that I have ever seen: "Defined simply, it is escapism through imagination" (Porter 1990:4). The explanation of this definition does, however, take a few pages along the same lines as the other quotations above.

RPGs are usually played in groups of about three to five people (normally at least two people are required, but there is no upper limit apart from what is practical, which is about five or six). One person becomes the gamemaster or GM and others are players. Each of the players has his/her own character, while the GM controls all the characters and beings that the characters of the players meet and interact with. The GM also controls the game world, including such

things as animals, weather and laws of nature, and directs the story that s/he creates together with the players. A distinction is made between player characters (PCs) and non-player characters (NPCs). The difference is that PCs are controlled by the players and NPCs by the GM.

> NOTE: A glossary of RPG terms is included in this study, and all of the relevant terms and acronyms are explained there as well. For example, at this point it might be a good idea to look up the entries for GM, PC, NPC and character for more information.

During play the GM describes the surroundings of the PCs and the NPCs they meet, while the players explain what their characters do or attempt to do. Usually the GM then tells them to roll dice to see whether they succeed in what they do or not. Then the GM tells them what the consequences of their actions are. The players then react to this new information, and so the cycle is repeated. Thus RPGs are (as they are often called) interactive storytelling, because the players and the GM create the story together. The players do not just listen to the GM tell a story, they actively take part in shaping that story through the actions of their characters. As the introduction of *Call of Cthulhu* says (Petersen and Willis 1992:9. In this game the term for GM is 'keeper' and the PCs are called 'investigators'):

> Call of Cthulhu is an evolving interaction between players [...] and the keeper, who presents the world in which the adventures occur. Actual play is mostly talking: some situation or encounter is outlined, and then the players tell the keeper what they, in the guise of their investigators, intend to do. Using the rules to keep matters consistent and fair, the keeper then tells them if they can do what they proposed, or the steps they must follow, or if impossible, what happens instead. Unpredictable dice results keep everybody honest, add drama, and make for surprises, dismal defeats, and hair's-breadth escapes.

To illustrate this, the following is an example of the kind of interaction that typically goes on during play. This example is entirely fictitious and is not a transcription. The type of game and setting is generic medieval fantasy. There are two players: the first player's (P1) character is a rather Robin Hood-like noble rogue called Albert, while the other (P2) is a sorceress called Vera. They have decided to go to a city to get some supplies and hire a guide to help them find the hut of a hermit wizard in the nearby mountains. Albert has earlier insulted a local noble and the city guard has been told to arrest him, but he is

not famous so it is not likely that they will recognize him. The parts dealing with game mechanics are in square brackets.

GM: "The city is surrounded by a solid looking stone wall. There are four guards standing by the gate, idly watching the people and wagons passing by."

P1: "I hope they do not recognize me. I try to act normal."

GM: [Rolls dice to see if the guards recognize him. They do not.] "They are more interested in bragging about how much ale they are going to drink after their shift is over. The city streets are crowded with people. Many of them are travellers, so you do not attract any special attention."

P2: "We will go to the market to get the supplies first. I'll need some herbs and crystals for my spells, will you get the food?"

P1: "All right. I will also get some more arrows. Let's meet at the Merry Boar tavern at midday."

GM: [Secretly makes a few more rolls to see if either of them meets anyone special or if Albert is recognized. He is not, but a thief attempts to steal his purse while he is staring at a juggler at the market. The thief fails, but Albert also fails his perception roll and does not notice anything.] "You both get your supplies without any problems. The Merry Boar is almost empty at this hour, the only customers are a few travellers like yourselves."

(NOTE: The GM could well have decided to also play the scenes where the players wander around the market and haggle with merchants for the supplies, but decided not to, because it would not have been particularly interesting and s/he wanted to save some time for more important scenes.)

P2: "All right, now we need to find a guide. Is there anyone around who looks like a he could help us?"

GM: "There are only three customers around. One is a surly-looking mercenary, who seems to be rather drunk, another is a plump merchant who smiles to himself as he thinks about his profits and the third looks like a hunter. Would you both also make notice rolls."

P1: [Rolls dice, they turn up badly] "Well, I certainly don't notice anything..."

P2: [Also rolls dice] "I succeeded, do I notice anything special?"

GM: "You notice a man standing outside, pretending to be listening to a street minstrel, but watching you through a window at the same time. He doesn't seem to have noticed that you noticed him."

P2: "Uh-oh, he's probably thinking whether the city guard would pay him if he informs them about Albert. I'll try to keep an eye on him to see if he leaves. We still need a guide, but we'd better be quick about it."

P1: "Right. I guess we should start with the hunter. If he is from around these parts, he probably knows the forests and mountains well." [P2 nods agreement. P1 speaks to the GM as Albert] "Hello, we are looking for someone who could take us to the Blackwood mountains. Would you..."

GM [as the hunter]: "No. Them mountains are cursed. Been there once, and there's nothing there but this crazy old hermit who puts curses on honest people."

P2: "Actually, we need to talk to this hermit, you see..."

GM: "I said no and I meant it. The hermit must have put a curse on me, 'cause I got lost on them mountains and I never get lost. Took me a week to figure out where I was and I almost starved to death. But you go ask that Gaed fellow (points to the

mercenary), he's been a caravan guard in these parts for years. He knows what paths to take to avoid brigands and them bloody orcs. Needs money too, so he'll probably be crazy enough to help you. He's quite handy with that sword of his and not a bad fellow as long as you don't let him drink too much."

And so on. In other words, the players talk to the GM and each other both as their characters and as themselves, and the GM alternates between describing things and speaking as a NPC. While I did not include such, off-game comments are also common enough. These are the players making comments as themselves on something unrelated to the game, such as "I'm hungry, lets take a break while I get something to eat". Off-game comments can also be related to the game, as when a player makes a comment about the game to other players (as opposed to a character making a comment to other characters). The most typical instance of such would probably be arguing about whether the rules are fair and realistic enough or not.

The kinds of stories the GM and players create is up to their personal preferences. Some people like action and adventure, while others prefer an emotional and romantic style. I personally prefer a mixture of drama and adventure with an occasional action scene (about three parts adventure, two parts drama and one part action, with a bit of horror or mystical elements added to make things more interesting.). *Indiana Jones* (1981, 1984 and 1989) and *Star Wars* (1977, 1980, 1983 and 1999) are good film examples of this kind of mixture. This is also the main perspective from which I judge RPGs, though where relevant, I will attempt to adopt a different viewpoint.

RPGs in general often seem to be geared more towards action and adventure than peaceful romancing, but in many cases this is only because there are more rules for resolving physical conflicts. There are several reasons for this. First of all, since the lives of the characters are at stake in a physical conflict, the players often prefer to have rules for these situations to make sure things are fair to their characters and there are no "Bang, bang! You are dead!" "No I'm not, you missed!" arguments as in Cops and Robbers or Cowboys and Indians. Secondly, I believe most people who play RPGs have a more or less similar orientation to

them as I do (i.e. they like adventure with action scenes every now and then to keep up the pace of the game), in which case the rules for conflict will be needed sooner or later. Third, it would often be impossible or at least unwise to roleplay combat scenes in full detail, and thus rules for abstraction are needed, whereas the negotiation and politics of a more peaceful kind of game can be roleplayed in full detail and do not require as much abstracting.

2.0.1 Why play RPGs?

Why do people play RPGs? For the same simple reason stories are usually told: to have a good time. While it is entertaining enough to read an interesting book or to watch an exiting film, in RPGs it is possible to affect the outcome of the plot. To actively shape it, in fact, as opposed to just passively reading or watching a ready-made one. Furthermore, there is no need to feel alienated from the main character or frustrated because s/he constantly does something the reader/viewer does not like, since the player gets to decide what s/he is like, and what s/he does. In other words, playing RPGs offers friends a chance to spend some time together, doing something creative and challenging instead of sitting passively watching television.

Other major reasons are curiosity and sense of exploration. The characters can do and experience things the players can not, and they can do it without any risk of harm to the players. As with books and movies, adventures and drama are exciting when they happen to the characters, but they would be only frightening in real life.

Unlike more visual forms of entertainment, such as films or most computer games, there is no visual attraction in RPGs. Since the actions of the characters are only described and imagined, there is usually little to "see" in them. As in literature, the attraction is based more on the plot, characters and imagining things. Of course films and computer games have plots and characters too, but they also often get carried away by the visual aspects and creating more and

more spectacular special effects. In RPGs and literature (though both may occasionally use pictures as well) the reader or player has to rely more on his/her own imagination to visualize things. However, unlike literature (where the reader takes a passive audience role), in RPGs interacting with other characters and solving problems are also important attractions.

Summary of section 2.0

This section presented some definitions of RPGs, but to put it shortly, RPGs are "interactive storytelling" where all participants act together to create an interesting story and have a good time. I also described what they are like in terms of what goes on during a game, but RPGs can be played in different ways by different groups, and the types of plots and adventures as well as style of playing varies considerably, so any such description (especially one as short as this) will provide only a broad, generic view.

The most important terms introduced in this section were gamemaster (GM), player character (PC) and non-player character (NPC). The gamemaster is the person who directs or guides the story and referees the game. S/he is the one who comes up with the basic plot and presents it and relevant situations, places and NPCs to the players. The players, on the other hand, play characters (PCs) who live in the world described by the GM and interact with other characters and beings there.

2.1 What RPGs are

This section will begin to describe what RPGs are, as opposed to what they are like. Of course this is a rather arbitrary division, but it is useful for the purposes of an introduction, as it is easier to understand the elements that constitute a RPG when one has some idea of what they are like.

N. Robin Crossby (1988) considers roleplaying to be composed of three elements, gamemastering, environment and rules. In his own words:

> Fantasy roleplaying is a trinity of three vital elements; in order of importance, they are gamemastering, environment and rules. GMing is, obviously, the province of the gamemaster; all publications can do is offer suggestions. Rules are no more than a mechanical set of guidelines, an attempt to formulate common sense while incorporating some pretty weird stuff. (Crossby 1988.)

In my opinion, RPGs are basically a combination of two things: a story and a game. They are like a combination of pretend-games like Cops and Robbers or Cowboys and Indians (hopefully with a little better developed characters, though) and rule-games like *Monopoly* or chess. As was explained earlier, in the process of playing RPGs, the players and the GM tell stories. All coherent stories have characters, and this is where the "role" and "roleplaying" come from. However, RPGs are not only stories, they are also games (in a general sense). RPGs evolved from wargames (see 'wargames' in the glossary for more information about them), which are more ordinary games where players take sides and both (or all) sides try to win the game. RPGs are not wholly stories or games, though the degree of dominance of one or the other varies.

My more dualistic view does not mean that I disagree with Crossby, however. His 'rules' are obviously the same thing as my 'game', and his 'environment' is not very far from my 'story'. This leaves 'gamemastering', some of which I consider to belong to the story part and the rest is used to bring the story and game together into a RPG. This is because the GM must at the same time be a storyteller and a referee, guiding the story and taking care that everyone follows the rules. I think Crossby is also right about the relative importances of the elements. A good GM can save a mediocre game, but nothing will save a game that the GM is not inspired by. In my opinion, the rules are the least important aspect of RPGs. It is of course a good thing if they work, but even if they do not, the GM and the players can always ignore or change them. Environment, on the other hand, cannot normally be changed in mid-game so it will have to be one that the GM and the players like or at least can relate to. (The environment will be further discussed under the story section of this chapter.)

Roleplaying is nothing new, most people do it all the time by behaving in a certain way or adopting a certain "face" while they are at work, another when they are at home, a third one when going to see a game of hockey with their friends and yet another one when spending a romantic evening with a loved one. The difference here is that the players adopt certain roles because of the game and for the duration of the game. Furthermore, these roles are not just different "faces" a person might develop for use in specific circumstances, but predefined roles like the characters of a theater play are. However, unlike normal theater plays, there are no set lines to recite and the actions of the characters are improvised according to circumstances.

The early RPGs were often more games than roleplaying. They emphasized using rules and skill checks instead of negotiation to resolve situations. However, RPGs have since developed more towards storytelling, though the game aspects are still usually included, especially for resolving various conflicts. Much also depends on the actual playing style and preferences of a given group and the type of the adventures that they play. For example, adventures that center on courtly intrigue and politics would probably require much more roleplaying and in-character negotiation than making skill checks, while an action-packed adventure where the characters make a daring raid on an orc stronghold would probably require rules and skill checks almost constantly but roleplaying only occasionally.

The obvious distinction here is that everything that has to do with game mechanics, such as rules and making skill checks, is included in the game part of RPGs and those things that require describing things and negotiating are included in the story part. However, they are often interrelated. For example, even in a storytelling-oriented game, the GM may require a character to make skill checks to see if s/he manages to persuade others to do something, but s/he probably would make the skill check easier if the player acted well and in character, and had good arguments. Likewise, even an action-oriented game could include plenty of opportunities for roleplaying the fear, excitement and reactions of the characters. For example, the GM might require a morale check

for a character who has to face multiple enemies. The player would then be expected to accept the result (whether his/her character panics, stands his/her ground or berserks) and roleplay according to it.

Even if the group plays their game entirely by acting as their characters and without any skill checks or dice, the game can still be considered to be a game, because it is differentiated from the real world by being in effect only during a certain period of time, perhaps in a certain place and by the players accepting the rules of the game and the roles of their characters, and whatever advantages and limitations they confer. This is not unlike children's games of pretend where the game begins when they all agree that it has begun, and ends when they agree it has ended or they have to go home. During the game, one of them may, for example, suddenly warn the others that s/he saw a dragon flying overhead, and if that fits in the game, the others do not try to dispute it, they accept it and try to hide under bushes, watching the sky warily. In other words, as Thomas J. Roberts says (regarding fiction in general, but this applies equally well to RPGs): "It is not pretending or believing or supposing or assuming: it is what follows an invitation to others to *share in pretending*" (1978:9 as quoted by Rath 1985:47. My emphasis.).

A distinction can be made between RPGs and live-action roleplaying games, or LARPs (or LRPs as some people prefer), though it could be argued that either is a subclass of the other. This study is about RPGs, not LARPs, but I want to make the distinction clear to avoid confusion. The difference is mostly in implementation. RPGs are typically played at home with few props and about three to five participants. If there are more than six, it is hard to pay sufficient attention to everybody and the players have to wait too long for their turns. LARPs, on the other hand, are normally played at some suitable place outside home with plenty of props and appropriate costumes. The number of players in a LARP is usually something like 20-50, though games with more than a hundred participants are not uncommon. The biggest difference, however, is that in RPGs the action is usually described, whereas in LARPs it is acted out. In LARPs props like toyguns, padded swords and costumes are very common,

but they are not often used in RPGs. Another difference is that while it is common in LARPs for the GMs (there can be several) to give a ready-made character for a player to play, in RPGs the players usually create their own characters (there are exceptions to both, of course). Also, in a LARP a given player's adversaries are not GM-controlled monsters or NPCs, they are other PCs who have opposing or competing goals. In real life, things are not, of course, simple and clear cut, and both varieties can include many aspects of the other, not to mention that there are several very different ways of playing both varieties. For example, in LARPs it is often necessary to simply describe and explain actions it would be impossible or dangerous in real life to act out, and in RPGs props and things like background music, sound effects and special lighting can be used to set the atmosphere, and the players can act out what their characters are doing, if they think it is more convenient or effective than simply explaining.

Summary of section 2.1

In my opinion, RPGs are composed of two different but interrelated aspects: story and game. As stories they have characters, events that form a plot and a setting that acts as a background. As games they have rules that dictate how certain events are handled in the story and what the characters are capable of in relation to each other and the game world.

This study is about normal RPGs, not LARPs. The biggest differences are that RPGs are played at home and the actions of the characters are described, whereas LARPs are played at some suitable location (usually not someone's home) and in them most actions are acted out.

2.2 RPGs as stories

As has been explained above, RPGs are stories that are collectively made up by a group of people. They are also continuous and, in a way, endless stories. The collectivity, interactivity, endlessness and improvised nature are what most set RPG-stories apart from "normal" stories of the kind that literature, film, television and radio present. These issues will be addressed in more detail later, first I will explain some more general issues, such as characters.

It should perhaps be noted that the book or books that mainly comprise a RPG are not proper stories themselves: they have no characters, setting or events. They do have examples of different kinds of characters, perhaps some sample settings, and in short examples of play there are even some events, but these do not make up a meaningful story with a beginning, middle and end or causality. They are manuals for creating stories and have rules for creating characters, description of the world and setting and rules for handling certain types of events, such as sword fights and car chases. A RPG rulebook will not tell the reader an exciting story about a car chase, it tells him/her how to conduct a car chase if such a thing happens to take place in his/her story. In other words, a RPG book (assuming it is of the proper genre, obviously there are no cars in medieval fantasy) will probably have a few example cars with statistics such as maximum speed, acceleration, maneuverability, and rules that say how difficult it should be, for example, to control a skid on dry, wet or icy road at high speed.

2.2.1 Characters

The character is – in my opinion – one of the most central concepts of almost any story, and certainly is in RPGs. The concept is introduced in *Blue Planet* (Barber et al. 1997:4) as:

> In a roleplaying game, most of the players will create and control unique personas, called player characters. Each player will design his character from the ground up,

detailing his physical and mental characteristics, personality, background, and professional aptitudes. Once the characters have been created, the players will verbally act out their characters' adventures, in a way similar to actors in a movie or play.

To begin with, it is important to understand that there is a difference between the player and the character. Every player has a character s/he plays (and the GM plays the roles of many NPCs) in much the same way as actors play the roles of imaginary characters in theater or movies. Indeed, in live-action games the idea is practically the same (though there are some major differences between theater and live-action games). In most RPGs, however, the physical aspects of acting are less important as most actions are simply described. The character also does not have to resemble the player in any way. Where RPGs differ from films and most theater plays is that all of the action is improvised and there are no set lines to recite. In some ways this is more challenging, but in others it is much easier. Sometimes it can be hard to come up with as brilliant plans as the characters in movies often do, but on the other hand, there are no lines to remember, and the audience is much smaller and less critical of "good acting". Another difference is that most of the action is only imagined, even if pictures, drawings and some physical acting are often used to make sure all players imagine what is happening in more or less the same way.

One of the most obvious differences between the player and his/her character is that one may be more knowledgeable or ignorant about something than the other. A modern player will have a very different worldview from his/her medieval character, for example, and may be tempted to use his/her modern understanding of physics, chemistry or mathematics to solve problems in ways that his/her character would not understand. Even if the player knows how to make black powder, for example, does not mean that his/her ignorant peasant character would know it (or even invent it if it was previously unknown in the game's world). Even more often, however, the character has knowledge and/or skills the player does not. The character may know how to use magic (in a fantasy game) or repair a broken hyperdrive engine (in a science fiction game), but the player will not. The character may be more skilled or knowledgeable even in mundane skills like mathematics, climbing or fencing. The same applies

to a character's attributes, as s/he may be stronger, clumsier or smarter than the player, but this is often less obvious as the use of skills more often requires esoteric knowledge only experience in the given skill would provide. Personality or ideological differences may lead to conflicts between the player and his/her character if they are too extreme. For example, a kindhearted player may find himself disgusted by his/her character's actions if s/he plays a cruel or sadistic character. However, this is not a problem as long as one remembers that the game is, after all, only a game. As a matter of fact, such conflicts can be quite interesting, at least for more introspective players.

An interesting issue about characters is also what are often called 'flat' and 'round' characters. Flat characters are stereotypes, and they are not meant to be developed through the plot. Good examples are the typical villains in most Disney movies: they are instantly recognizable as villains (at least to the audience) and remain such throughout the movie. Round characters are psychologically more complicated and they may change and develop during the story. In RPGs, the PCs are often the roundest, but developing them is up to the player. If a player decides that his/her character has a sudden revelation and changes completely overnight, it is up to him/her. On the other hand, if the player wants to play with a one-dimensional flat character s/he has no intention of developing, s/he can do so, though s/he may get bored with the character quickly. Stereotypes are a useful tool for the GM, because s/he has plenty of work to do without fully developing every single character the players might meet. It is often convenient to simply use generic stereotypical characters. However, because of the interactivity and open-endedness of RPGs, no character needs to remain flat. If the players begin to regularly interact with an originally flat character, she can develop new traits and become rounder if necessary.

> (NOTE: There is more information and discussion about characters and creating them in the glossary.)

2.2.2 Environment or the game world

All of the terms 'environment', 'world' and 'game world' will here be used as synonymous, since I will use them to refer to the same thing: the world of the game. Only 'real world' will be used differently to refer to our own reality.

As was briefly explained earlier, the environment of a RPG cannot normally be changed in the middle of a game (though there are time- and dimension-travelling stories where a change of environment is justified). This would be like moving the pieces from *Trivial Pursuit* to the game board of *Monopoly* or chess, or vice versa. Imagine it also from the point of view of the characters; it would be very disorienting and surreal (like something written by Franz Kafka) to have the world constantly changing in geography, ecology, society or otherwise. A good and stable environment is therefore important (though there are, as always, exceptions like games that are set in dream worlds or highly magical and fluctuating realms like faeryland, or stories where the perceptions of the characters are purposely distorted).

Furthermore, to quote Crossby again (he is writing about fantasy, but this applies to RPGs of other genres as well):

> All great works of fantasy are woven of familiar threads. While there may be outlandish beasts with strange powers, wielders of the weirding way or odd cultural phenonomae [*sic*], there is still a feeling that one has been here before. Deja-vu is a natural consequence of trying to describe an entire alien world. The audience has to fill huge gaps with concepts drawn from their realworld experience. Any fantasy world must, in this sense, be familiar. There is a basic assumption that whatever is not specifically described will correspond to the real world. The test of acceptability is one of degree, a matter of how much, and in what manner, the viewer/player must suspend his disbelief. (Crossby 1988)

In other words, the world must make sense and the players must be able to relate to it. If the world does not make sense or it is too alien to the players, it is highly likely that they will not enjoy it very much. Suspension of disbelief is not the same thing as ignoring gaps in the internal logic of the world. The above also means that while players can accept small differences from the real world in the process of the game as they come up, the GM should make the major ones clear to them from the beginning or the players will assume everything is like it

is in the real world. For example (a fictitious example again, in a modern, *The X Files* type of setting):

> GM: "You see a man walking towards you. His skin is light blue, and his third eye is red."
>
> P1: "What? Must be an alien, I hope he's not hostile."
>
> GM: "No no, he's not an alien. Didn't I tell you everybody in this world has blue skin and three eyes? I only mentioned it because most people are dark blue and all of their eyes are of the same color and red is unusual."
>
> P2: "No you didn't. Do you mean our characters are blue and have three eyes as well?"

And so on. A rather superficial change, but the point is that it is worthwhile to discuss most of the differences and similarities between the game world and the real world before the game begins to avoid confrontations like this.

2.2.3 Time in game and reality

As in any story, time flows differently in the game's reality (referred to as 'game-time'), and in the real world outside the game (referred to as 'real-time'). Sometimes game-time is compressed or skipped over, at others it is stretched out to allow for the slowness of game mechanics. As in any other story (unless used for special effect) the most mundane and boring things, such as driving a car on an empty highway or shopping for food are generally skipped over. If the characters' car is being pursued or the shop is just being robbed, these are of course no longer mundane and boring events, and are then played. Similarly, when the characters stop for a pizza, it is often just summarized by a simple statement like "ok, the pizza tastes good", unless, again, somebody comes up with something interesting that happens while they are eating. In other words, where everybody knows the typical script the proposed mundane actions follow, they will not be interesting enough to waste a lot of time on. Thus, RPGs follow quite well the typical requirement of storytelling: the story must be worth telling. The game-time is stretched out in action scenes or in other situations where things in real life would happen very fast, but in the game they require discussion, rolling of dice, writing down the results of actions and other such

activities. (This theme will be further discussed in the section about improvised storytelling.)

2.2.4 Collectivity and interactivity

As has been pointed out, RPGs are collective storytelling. This means that the GM and the players create the story together, as opposed to the more typical situation where someone tells a story and the others just listen. This also means that there is no audience as such in RPGs, although when someone describes or explains what his/her character is doing, the others listen and thus do act as a sort of audience. But there is a difference since all of the players take turns in speaking and listening, whereas in a normal audience situation the audience does not take part in shaping or telling the story, they just watch and listen. Thus the role of being an audience for the others is only temporary and secondary. It should perhaps also be noted that there usually is no single main character (assuming there are more than one). All of the PCs are usually equally important, though this may depend on the circumstances (for instance, in a Western game a character who speaks Spanish would be more important than usually if the characters wander into Mexico and the other characters only speak English).

It is perhaps a little misleading to speak of interactivity in connection with RPGs, as the term suggests only a limited sort of audience participation, and in RPGs there is no audience, only players. The term 'interactivity' is usually used to mean the sort of interactivity that some radio and television programs achieve by taking calls from viewers/listeners. In that type only a handful of people from the audience get to participate, and the rest just watch and listen. Usually the callers only get to express some of their opinions on a given subject and maybe to pick the next song or music video instead of actually making a difference in how the program proceeds. To give another example, if the audience in a game of, say, football could affect the game somehow, they would describe the game as "interactive", whereas it would be pointless to consider whether it is

interactive from the point of view of the players in the field. Likewise, it is perhaps silly to say RPGs are interactive as there are only players and they obviously can affect the game. However, I still use the term in a broader sense to mean that all participants in a given situation affect each other, just like gravity is not just a matter of Earth pulling an apple towards it, but the apple also pulling at the Earth and *all* objects exerting this kind of force on *all* other objects. Similarly, all participants in a RPG can affect it. The GM, as the guide, director and referee obviously has a large role in shaping the story, but all players can also at almost any time come up with something that may drastically alter the plot and/or character relations. In other words, as Charlton and Fenlon say in *Character Law & Campaign Law* (1989:6): "The creation of the plot of a FRP game is an on-going process which both the Gamemaster and players may affect, but which neither controls."

2.2.5 Continuity and "endlessness"

Definitions of a narrative usually say something to the effect that a narrative (although 'narrative' is not synonymous with 'story', the difference is not important here) is a non-random progression of events. For example, Toolan defines it as "a perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events" (1988:7) and Bordwell and Thompson as "a chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space" (1997:90). Toolan makes the point that a narrative depends on being perceived as one:

> perceiving non-random connectedness in a sequence of events is the prerogative of the addressee: it is idle for anyone else (e.g., a teller) to insist that here is a narrative if the addressee just doesn't see it as one. (1988:8)

This is true, a GM cannot play a game and tell the story by himself, s/he needs the cooperation of the players. However, for the sake of simplicity I will assume that the GM and the players do cooperate and that the players do perceive the GM descriptions as a story without any problems.

A story where one event logically leads to another is, naturally, continuous. This also applies to RPGs. It would be very odd to have the characters jump from one situation and/or location to another without any causality or logic. I believe that even if some group might conceivably do such a thing, there would be a reason for it, in which case it probably would not be as random as it might first seem. I will, however, ignore this notion as it is safe to say that in RPGs the events are linked by causality (most likely as a result of the characters' actions).

In addition, one would normally expect a non-random chain of events to have a beginning and an ending. This is in a way also true of RPGs, but at the same time it is not, at least in the same way as in most other types of narratives. RPGs are different in that they often have no definite endings and continue indefinitely, and are thus (in a way) endless. This does not mean that individual adventures do not have beginnings and endings, but that several different adventures may overlap and one may continue where another ended and so on. In other words, in individual adventures the events form a logical continuum, but on a higher level the adventures themselves may form a non-random progression of stories. Such a progression of individual stories is called a 'campaign'.

Most narratives are not like this, they are more of a single-use type where all (or at least most) threads of the plot are brought to some sort of conclusion in the end. Therefore, when we read a novel or watch a film or a play, we know it will end. Whether it is a happy ending or not is not important. It will end somehow, normally with some sort of conclusion and not abruptly in the middle of things (as is possible in RPGs if the characters unexpectedly die, for example). As David Lodge says in *The Art of Fiction* (1992:224),

> As Jane Austen pointed out in a metafictional aside in *Northanger Abbey*, a novelist cannot conceal the timing of the end of the story (as a dramatist or film-maker can, for instance) because of the tell-tale compression of the pages.

So when reading a novel we know approximately when it will end, while when watching a film or a play we do not always know (though we still know that the story *will* end, and if we know when the next program, film or play is scheduled to begin, we will know approximately when the one we are watching will end).

In most cases, we even want stories to end, because we expect stories to have beginnings, middles and endings, or what Toolan (1988:4) calls narrative 'trajectory'.

On the other hand, when playing RPGs, the players and the GM are the creators of the story, not just spectators. They can, therefore, control when the story ends, if it ever does. As creators, they will be more in control of their characters and the world they live in than if they read or watched somebody else's story. Thus when we read or watch a story and it ends, we will have to accept that and let it go. In a RPG, however, even if the players, after numerous conflicts and characters have come and gone, decide to retire their current characters and just say that they live happily everafter, the characters and their world will still be there if the players decide to continue the game later. And even if they decide to create new characters in that same game and game-world, their old characters will also exist in that world. After they die, new characters will take their place and continue or create a new story.

However, RPGs are not unique in this respect as some television series and serials (especially soap operas like *The Bold and The Beautiful*) can be considered endless, because they go on and on year after year. Yes, they too will some day end (when the producers decide to stop producing them), but the point is that the audience does not know when that will happen and watch them for their continuity, not because they want to see a certain conflict resolved in a certain way. This is not perhaps quite true, as the audience (or the players in the case of RPGs) do actually want to see conflicts resolved, but they also want more conflicts to arise so that they in turn may be resolved. In addition to television and RPGs, many comic book series and comic strips may also continue for years or even decades, though their plots are often less connected to what has happened earlier.

The major area of difference between such continuous stories and RPGs is in character and story development. According to Veijo Hietala (1996:38), television shows can be divided into two main types: 'series' and 'serials'. Serials

have continuous, developing stories in them (as in the aforementioned soap operas, for example, though they tend to run in circles with the same characters falling in and out of love with each other over and over again), or they may have an ongoing background story with a fresh problem or few for each episode (shows like *Ally McBeal, The X Files* and *Babylon 5* are good examples). In a series, on the other hand, each episode or show is independent of the others and in each episode the same group of main characters is confronted by new problems which are then solved during the show, and more or less the same status quo is reached after every episode (this is especially common in situational comedies and most comics). While RPGs can, I suppose, be played in all of these ways, they are much closer to serials. However, even serials are different from RPGs in that while they do develop the storyline, they seldom develop the characters very much, at least quickly. They are also less drastic in their developments if they do. In adventurous RPG styles, for example, it is not uncommon for one or some of the main characters (as the PCs are in RPGs) to die or be so badly hurt that they have to retire for a while to recover. In other words, RPG stories may be unpredictable. This is because they are for a very large part improvised, and not carefully planned and crafted as most other stories.

2.2.6 Improvised storytelling

Narratives are usually carefully planned and constructed. In the case of written, filmed or taped stories this is often obvious (though usually the real author tries to make him/herself invisible), but even most oral stories we hear (unless completely improvised) have "a degree of artificial fabrication or constructedness not usually apparent in spontaneous conversation" (Toolan 1988:4). In RPGs this may be true of some of the things the GM says, as s/he may have planned of thought about how s/he will present some situations and new characters to the players. However, the players normally have to react to things as the GM describes them, without prior rehearsal. Often they do have a little more time to think about their characters' reactions than they would have

in real life (it does take considerably longer to describe a thing or an action than if the players were to see it with their own eyes), but they still have to decide fairly quickly how their characters will react to various situations.

One of the side-effects of collectivity and interactivity is that the plot of the story may be rather unpredictable. The GM directs the story, or at least makes sure that all of the players are telling the same story instead of wandering in their own directions without heeding the others. Stories normally begin with the GM having an idea for an adventure. S/he then creates an outline for the story and considers possible courses of action the players might decide to take during the story, what sorts of places they are likely to visit and what sorts of NPCs they are likely to meet and so on. However, the players will almost invariably come up with something the GM did not foresee, so s/he will have to improvise as well.

Another point related to the improvised nature of RPGs is that stories (even science fiction or a novel written in the present (or even future) tense) are considered "past experience" or "events that have already happened" by the reader (Toolan 1988:6). I think this applies only to such forms of narrative that are "ready-made" or finished at the moment of telling. For example, a novel has obviously been written before it is read, and even many oral stories have been thought out or rehearsed before they are told, or they may be retellings of an old story. In this respect RPGs are very different from ordinary narratives. As all improvised stories they are not "ready" at the moment of telling. In them, the story may change at any moment. They are not "past experience" either, since the story is made up as it is being told. This is also reflected in the fact that in novels, the past tense is commonly used to describe the events, whereas in RPGs the present (and sometimes future) tense is more common (in movies the characters also speak in the present tense, but the viewer is not fooled because s/he knows the movie has also been filmed long before it is watched). This is due to the negotiatory nature of RPGs and the way the characters' actions are resolved in them. All characters are assumed to act almost simultaneously in very quick succession, but since the players cannot speak on top of each other

(or quickly enough) and be understood, time in the game is stretched out and divided into 'rounds' (or 'turns', depending on the game). There are two ways of declaring actions: either during the round in order of character initiative or before the round begins. In the first type, each player first determines his/her character's initiative which determines how quickly the character can act (the fastest character acts first, the next fastest second and so on). Each player then declares what his/her character does in order of initiative. In the other type, each player first explains what his/her character will do in the *next* round, and then that round takes place (initiative is determined in the beginning of the round, *after* the actions have been declared). I will provide an example again. (Since most games sooner or later do have an action sequence, I think I should also give a short example of one. These are the same fictitious players and characters as in the first example. They have been attacked by two orcs.) This example is of the first type, as I believe it is much more common.

> GM: "Make initiative rolls. [Rolls dice twice] The bigger orc gets eleven and the smaller eight."
>
> P1: [Rolls dice] "I got twelve."
>
> P2: [Rolls dice] "Ten."
>
> GM: "All right. Albert goes first, what do you intend to do?"
>
> P1: "I slash at the bigger orc with my sword."
>
> [P1 and the GM roll dice to see if Albert hits the orc and whether the orc manages to parry the blow. Albert hits, but the orc fails his parry roll and is badly wounded.]
>
> GM: "The orc screams in pain and falls down."
>
> P2: "I cast a spell. I'll try to put the other orc to sleep."
>
> GM: "It takes a while for you to complete the spell, so the smaller orc gets to act first. He takes one glance at the fallen bigger orc, and turns and runs."
>
> P2: "I'll still cast my spell, we don't want him to come back later with a small army." [Rolls dice to see if the spell succeeds. It does, and the orc fails his resistance roll.]
>
> GM: "The smaller orc slows to a walk, stops and falls down quietly. He won't wake up in quite a while."

This means that in RPGs, the narration is typically considered more or less simultaneous with what happens, but is sometimes also 'anterior', to borrow a term from Genette (1972 as explained by Rimmon-Kenan 1983:90), which means that things are narrated before they happen. It is also quite possible that if, for example, one player could not participate during a playing session, s/he will be told later what happened. Likewise it is possible that some character tells

other characters about his/her past. In these cases the events are narrated after they have happened, and we have 'ulterior' (Genette 1972 as explained by Rimmon-Kenan 1983:89) narration (which is the most common type in literature and in real life). However, as is probably apparent by now, the narration in RPGs fluctuates between all of these styles, so it is actually 'intercalated' (as above 1983:90).

2.2.7 Levels of narration

In *Narrative Fiction*, Rimmon-Kenan discusses levels of narration. These describe surprisingly well how a RPG works, so I will briefly explain them. The highest level is extradiegetic (1983:91), which is above the actual story level. In RPGs this is the real-life level, where the GM and the players discuss the rules, tell jokes, explain things (in terms that do not belong to the game world, such as describing a magical sword in a fantasy game with a *Star Wars* reference by saying that it looks like a light saber), comment on things and talk about things that are not related to the game. Below the extradiegetic level is the diegetic level, which is the story itself, and where the characters exist and interact. It is on this level that all the action takes place, and where the players and the GM describe the characters and their actions. Below this are hypodiegetic levels, which are sublevels used when the characters begin to tell stories of their own (to other characters), as may occasionally happen.

Although very much use is made of the extradiegetic level for clarification purposes, the "default" level is diegetic. This means that unless it is made clear (even by such simple means as the tone of voice) that some comment or explanation is the player's, it is normally assumed to be the character's.

Requests for information ("How much was your character's perception score again?") or skill checks ("you need to make an agility roll, or you'll fall") are very clearly extradiegetic. Descriptions of events like "in the study there's a large, old desk on the right and a window on the left" or "you hear a faint

scraping sound behind you" are clearly diegetic. There are also some utterances that could arguably be either, like "I hope they remember it this time", which could as well be a player's comment as her character's and "they" may just as well refer to other players or their characters (unless it is made clear by the context or other communication signals, of course). This is also an aspect where using "he" or "I" to refer to one's character comes in. Whereas "I'll take the lead" sounds like a character speaking on the diegetic level, "my character proceeds cautiously" sounds more like an extradiegetic explanation (though, as I will soon explain, it is both diegetic and extradiegetic). In the examples that I have given the players use "I" because that is what I prefer, though in the previous one P1, for example, might have just as well said "my character slashes at the orc with his sword" (or "Albert slashes...") and so on.

Some things belong to both diegetic and extradiegetic levels. For example, "I'll search the study" is not only a diegetic element that describes what one player's character will be doing for the next few minutes or so, it is also an extradiegetic request for the GM to tell what is in the study. Likewise, if a player says "I'll proceed cautiously", the utterance also belongs to both levels: it at the same time shapes the story so that the other players imagine his character moving cautiously, and tells the GM that he should take this into account in case there is some kind of a trap waiting for the character. Thus many elements of RPGs are actually multi-diegetic, though some clearly belong only to the extradiegetic or diegetic levels.

Summary of section 2.2

This section dealt with RPGs as stories. As most stories, RPGs need characters, events and a setting. Characters are played by the players (PCs) and the GM (NPCs). This is not unlike playing a character in a film or a play, but there are no lines to remember and the players are free to act in any way they think their character should, not according to a script. Events are what the characters do in

the game. A logical, stable setting is also important, as it helps the players to relate to the game instead of being constantly puzzled by and alienated from it.

RPGs have no audience in the normal sense of the word. All participants are players, i.e., active participants (an audience is usually passive). All participants also create the story together, and while the GM is most responsible for it, all of the players can also affect it. RPGs are thus collective storytelling. They are also interactive in a broad sense of the term (as it is also normally used to refer to a semi-passive audience, not active participants). RPG stories often form a continuum, where individual stories overlap or continue from where other stories ended. They are thus continuous and endless like television serials, but still different because their plots are not carefully planned and constructed and may contain many surprises even for the "creators" of the story (i.e. the players and the GM). This is because they are improvised, and when several people create a story together and they all improvise, unpredictable situations and plots are likely to arise.

2.3 RPGs as games

RPGs are not only stories, they are also games, as is evident even in them being roleplaying *games*, not roleplaying stories. Players also say that they "play RPGs", not that they "tell collective improvised stories". But what makes RPGs games? In *Play as a Formal Paradigm in Modern Fiction* (1985:39), Sura Prasad Rath summarizes his historical review of game theories to four premises that are meant to define a game, or answer the questions "what is a game?" and "what is it to play?". These are:

> (1) The ethos of game is separate from and independent of the common reality of everyday living; (2) game takes place within limited time and space; (3) game controls and is controlled by the players, its rules functioning as the determinants of interaction among players just as social, political, and economic constraints structure life outside play; (4) game involves a frame of mind in which the two paradoxical realities of non-play and play come together toward a coalescence or clash. (Rath 1985:39)

As I see it, however, the first and last of these describe much the same thing: what Rath calls the "ludic frame of mind". He says play begins when the players depart from ordinary reality and adopt a state of mind that regards the game as real. This does not mean, of course, that the players become completely oblivious to the real world. Rather, it is like the "spell" of a good film where the viewer becomes so intent on following the plot and visual and aural presentation of the film that s/he forgets s/he is watching a movie. To avoid breaking this spell, the actors in a classical Hollywood cinema normally avoid looking directly at the camera or commenting or the script, or doing anything else that would remind the viewer that he is only watching a film. In Rath's words: "we simultaneously experience the natural, though momentarily suspended, reality of ordinary life and the created, but predominant, reality of the game" (1985:46). Since the GM and the players often do have to explain things (on the extradiegetic level) as themselves and not as characters, they are constantly being reminded that they are only playing a game, but this can be ignored and it is fairly easy to maintain focus on the characters and the game-world.

Rath also says that play "marks its difference from our regular life by asking us, spectators and players, to gather at a certain place and to set apart a certain length of time" (1985:41). In other words, the play has boundaries in space and time. This does not apply to RPGs as well as it does to such games as football and basket ball which are played on a clearly marked area and during rounds that last a predefined length of time. Since RPGs are essentially mind-games, the physical arena is less important. It is typically the home of the GM or one of the players, but may as well be a different place each time. The actual location is unimportant as long as all of the players are in the same place and relatively undisturbed. Likewise, the length of time that is set apart for the game is less fixed. The game begins when all players agree that it has begun and ends when they agree to stop playing. Note that this does not mean the end for the whole game, only a break until the next time when the game continues. Since almost everything in RPGs happens in the players' minds, neither the actual time or place are very important. This does not mean that time in the game's reality is

unimportant, of course. In the game, the characters may be severely restricted in both space and time, and in what they can do and accomplish.

On the other hand, as was noted earlier RPGs are still differentiated from the real world by being in effect only during a certain period of time, perhaps in a certain place and by the players accepting the rules of the game and the roles of their characters. Thus they still do require a separate real-world time and place, even if these are much more variable in this respect than in many other games. Accepting the rules and their limitations is like the "ludic frame of mind" mentioned above. In other words, when the players accept that the game and its rules are in effect, the game has begun and they are bound by it.

The third premise is that the game has rules. Since they are the most important and obvious game aspect of RPGs, they will be discussed in their own section.

2.3.1 RPGs and rules

Rules are the most obvious game-aspect of RPGs, and it can be argued that a game does not exist without its rules. In *Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, Ronald Wardhaugh (1992:287) explains Rawls's (1955) theory of constitutive and regulative rules. Regulative rules regulate what is right or wrong, and sometimes prescribe sanctions for breaking the rules. Constitutive rules, on the other hand,

> are like the rules of baseball, chess or soccer: they actually define a particular activity in the form of 'doing X counts as Y' so that, in certain prescribed circumstances, you strike a ball in a particular way or succeed in moving it into a certain place, that counts as a 'hit' or a 'goal'. *The rules constitute a game: without them the game does not exist.* (1992:287, my emphasis).

Some rules that affect RPGs are regulative, but they are the kind of rules that normally apply to any game or storytelling situation. They govern things like turn-taking and interruptions. Constitutive rules are more interesting in this case, since in any storytelling situation a lot of "doing X counts as Y" occurs: for example, when someone speaks as a character, the actual person who utters

the words means them to "count" as the words of that character in the situation that is being described. This means that when a player says to another player that she will run him through with her sword if he does not start being more polite, the words are of course considered to be one character's words to another character. But that is obvious and these are not the sort of rules one finds in a RPG book, or what is meant here either. Constitutive rules constitute the game because they are arbitrary in nature. Because of the rules, doing something counts as something else than it normally does. Outside the game, there is no significance to doing the things that in the game count as hits or goals, but in the game they are important. However, RPGs are not games where scoring points or winning is important, so they do not have rules that say that when doing something in a certain way (throwing a ball through a hoop or getting to a certain square on a game board, for example) a player or a team should be rewarded with a certain amount of points. In a LARP there may be rules that say, for example, that a player who is hit with a padded toy-sword (representing a real sword in the game) is injured in the game and must act accordingly. However, normal RPGs are mind-games with fairly little physical activity so there are no rules like this either. The constitutive rules of RPGs are more like agreements that when someone says his/her character does something to another character, the characters do interact in the described way (unless the other character resists or the action is declared impossible by the GM). The rules that RPG books contain are more typically descriptions of skills and abilities so that all characters (unless an exception is defined elsewhere) use them in the say way. For example, it would be unfair if one character had to have separate skills in, say, German and French, and another character had an overall "languages" skill, which s/he claimed covered all the languages of the world. Likewise, if two characters have the same item, such as a sword, both of their swords will have the same game statistics (unless the game's rules make a difference between different types of swords).

Furthermore, most RPG rulebooks include the sentence "if you don't like a rule, don't use it" in some form. The rules are there to help resolve conflicts in a fair way, not to be blindly followed. Besides, the players will invariably come up

with something that is not covered by the rules, and the GM is forced to improvise. While some people seem to feel the rules are the core of the game, they are actually not that important, and can distract the players from the story, which I consider the more important aspect of RPGs. Good roleplaying and description of events can avoid the use of rules and dice almost completely. Nevertheless, RPGs are still games in part and that fact alone requires that at least some rules are followed, even if they are only such unspoken and obvious ones as judging character's abilities and actions in the game world's terms, not the real world's.

On the other hand, Petersen and Willis (1992:9) claim that "the game rules make the game world understandable, define what can and cannot be done, and objectively determine successes and failures", but this is taking a very broad view of what is included in rules, as in my opinion the matters of making the game world understandable and defining what is possible or impossible in it are a matter of world description. Arguably that is a part of the game's rules, but I will take a more narrow view of the rules and consider them to apply only to determining successes and failures and, in a small degree (because I think it belongs more to the GM's domain), to defining what can and cannot be done.

As was mentioned earlier, the reason for the existence of rules is to make the game fair to all players and their characters. To be fair, and also more interesting, the rules must also often involve some element of chance, and that is typically introduced by using dice, as in many other games. (See 'dice' in the glossary for information about different types dice and some conventions of their use.) Other tools, such as playing cards, are occasionally used in some games, but dice are by far the most common. Chance makes things both more fair and more interesting, because the players can never be entirely sure whether their characters will succeed in what they try to do or not. As Rath observes, unpredictability of the outcome is important for enjoying a game (1985:44). If the game always followed the same pattern to reach the same outcome, it would soon become boring and arguably would not even be a game. Each character must have a chance to succeed and win even when it is not likely that she will.

Without random variation, a more skilled character would always win a less skilled character in a contest. Chance makes it possible for a lucky less skilled character to win occasionally.

As this implies, the characters have attributes and skills that describe, for example, how strong or intelligent they are, and how well they can program computers, drive a car, swim or whatever is deemed appropriate for a given game. Numerical values are typically used to make it easier to determine who is the strongest or most intelligent or the best singer or whatever the situation calls for. As an example a character might have a dexterity rating of eight on a scale of one to ten, but from a storytelling point of view it would be better to describe him/her as agile, dexterous, lithe or graceful than to just say that s/he has an eight. The attributes, skills and dice are used to determine how successful the characters are in what they try to do. For example, a storm might be brewing, and some character is trying to get a boat out the water. If s/he is strong, s/he can simply try to drag the boat using nothing but force. On the other hand, if s/he has experience and skill in boating, s/he might know an easier way, or s/he could attempt to use some kind of a lever or pulley to help, if s/he knows something about physics. In any case, succeeding would probably call on some combination of strength and skill, with the roll of dice determining whether s/he succeeds at all, and how long it will take. If the storm breaks before s/he succeeds, things can get much more difficult. With bad luck the character may not succeed at all or may even lose hold of the boat. (See 'skill check' in the glossary for the most common ways of performing these kinds of tests in various games.)

What remains to be said about the rules of RPGs is that they are less strict and fixed than those of most institutionalized games such as cricket. As has been explained earlier, the rules exist to make the game fair and to allow all characters to have a chance of succeeding in a task proportionate to their skills and abilities. However, if the GM is merciful, s/he may bend or ignore the rules every now and then if s/he considers that they would hamper playing or the plot.

Thus, the GM can be considered to be a referee or an umpire, because s/he directs the game, reminds the players of the rules when necessary (or tells them to ignore the rules if necessary) and settles any disputes over them. However, unlike an ordinary umpire or referee, the GM is not really present in the "field", because (while s/he plays many different roles) s/he does not have a personal character in the same way as the players do. Furthermore, in a RPG the GM does much more than any umpire in any other game. To continue the sports metaphor, the players would make up one team, and the GM would not only be the referee, s/he would also be the opposing team, audience and weather, not to mention that s/he would control the rules. This brings up the same sort of paradox that Rath (1985:57) sees in the umpire's role: s/he is an official "within the game, but he always protects the rules which control the game". In other words, the GM controls both characters in the game and the rules of the game. S/he is, however, (as a real person, as s/he also has to play the *characters* of the antagonists) on the same side as the players.

While it is important for any game that the players consider themselves bound by the game's rules and do not cheat, in any game the rules can also be changed. Once they have been changed, however, the players must agree to be bound by the new rules. RPGs are no exception. Although in RPGs the rules can be changed in mid-game, and the players may even raise arguments about the fairness or realism of the rules during play, it is still important that when the GM gives his/her final word on the matter, they accept it. For the GM it is important to be fair, and although s/he may tell the players to ignore a certain rule when s/he so chooses or impose new rules, s/he should be rational and consistent about it. The GM is the final authority on the rules, but s/he should make sure that the rules are acceptable to the players or they will not enjoy the game as much.

2.3.2 Different types of games

According to Rath (1985:21), Roger Caillois (in *Man, Play and Games*) develops Huizinga's model of play as a contest by placing games under four categories (the numbers in parentheses are references to Caillois 1959):

> agon, alea, mimicry, and ilinx--based respectively on the dominant role of competition, chance, simulation, and vertigo (12). In his scheme, agon comprises games in which "equality of chances is artificially created" (14). These are games based on "rivalry which hinges on a single quality (speed, endurance, strength, memory, skill, ingenuity, etc.)"; alea (Latin for dice) designates all games that are "based on a decision independent of the player," an outcome over which he has no control (17); mimicry denotes modes of play where one can "escape himself and become another" (19); and ilinx represents an attempt to "momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic on an otherwise lucid mind" (23). (original emphasis)

RPGs are based on the first three of these. They are primarily mimicry in that the mode of playing is by adopting the guise of a character different from the player. Many areas of them are also based on both chance and skill, though by these definitions considerably more alea than agon. The reason agon is not so well suited for RPGs is actually mimicry: the skills of the character are in the end more important than those of the player, and the character's skills are used through chance or alea (whereas using the player's skills would result in agon). However, the characters can engage in various kinds of contests in the game, and these often take the form of agon (for the characters). As I understand it, ilinx games are of the type in which amusement park devices such as centrifuges and distorting mirrors belong. These are not relevant to RPGs.

According to Jouko Seppänen (1999:13), game theory (as a separate and defined entity) began with John von Neumann's and Oscar Morgenstern's *The Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (1944). He summarizes (1999:33) how they divide games into different classes according to (I only list the relevant distinctions) the number of participants, the result of the game and the cooperation or non-cooperation of the players.

The number of participants has been dealt with earlier, but to use the game theory term, RPGs are "n-person" games as opposed to "two-person" games

(i.e. there are N players, where N is more than two). RPGs are also "cooperative" games, as the PCs are normally friends or at least on the same side. Because of the ongoing story aspect, I would say that they are actually cooperative even when the PCs oppose each other (normally the GM takes the role of the opposition), since the players are still in the same team creating the story together. This also applies to the GM.

What I mainly wish to discuss here is the result of the game, or actually the lack of it. Von Neumann and Morgenstern (again according to Seppänen (1999:34)) define two varieties, "zero-sum" and "non-zerosum" games. As I understand it, zero-sum games (Seppänen 1999:35) are ones with a very clear, definite ending (either a victory or defeat), whereas in non-zerosum games there may be different degrees of winning or losing, and even both sides may win ("plus-sum") or lose ("minus-sum"). Furthermore, in non-zerosum games the interests of the players may be more or less similar, competing or opposite, but rarely exactly the same (as they often are in RPGs), and the players may have to use complex strategies like negotiation, competitiveness, alliances, threats and so on. If we accept these terms, RPGs are clearly non-zerosum games. However, it is assumed here that the game can be said to end somewhere, and that various degrees of winning or losing can be established after that. This is entirely reasonable as far as most games go, of course, but RPGs are an exception because they are played for the sake of continuing play, instead of winning as most games are. Thus there obviously are no clear winners or losers either.

Most games have a way of determining who wins and who loses. In some cases this is simply a matter of who is faster, stronger or has a better memory (though I believe all such games are also dependent on skill and technique to some extent), as in running or weightlifting, for example. Others may have a way of scoring points and the players either have to reach a certain score to win or there is a time-limit after which the winner is the one who has more (or in some games less) points. Football and ice-hockey are such games. In some games, such as chess and wrestling, the way to win is to force the other player or

players into a situation from which they cannot escape and have to give up. These are all finite, victory-oriented agon-games. In them someone (or some team) wins the contest, the others lose, and that is all there is to the game. Sometimes tournaments, championships or some such are held, where the players or teams do for a time play for the sake of continuing play, but in the end their purpose is also to find a single, undisputed winner.

Chance-based alea-games are often similar. Some of them may be based on pure chance (such as flipping a coin or simply rolling dice to see who gets the highest or lowest result), but most are a combination of chance and skillful use of the game's rules (such as *Monopoly*) or chance and use of skills or knowledge unrelated to the game (such as *Trivial Pursuit*). In any case, these are also victory-oriented finite games. They end when someone wins and to play again, they must be restarted from the beginning.

RPGs, on the other hand, are infinite games. While the characters may have some short term goals such as survival, getting enough money to purchase something or just plain victory of some competition, the players play the game for the sake of playing more of it. Even if a character dies, the player can always make a new character and continue playing. While a character can in some cases win (a battle against an evil knight or the heart of a fair maiden, perhaps) in a short-term struggle, there is no way for a player to win a RPG (unless having a good time is considered as a form of "plus-sum" winning). This is because in a RPG, when compared to chess, for example, a player does not control an entire side against a clearly defined opposing side. Instead, s/he would control a single character, which in a game of chess could be a pawn, knight, bishop, king or queen. Just as a single piece of chess cannot plausibly declare to have won the entire game, a character in a RPG (and by extension the player) can never say s/he has won the game. Furthermore, as noted above, the game of chess is over when one player wins, whereas in a RPG, the story goes on and new battles might emerge. It is also in the nature of chess that there is a limited amount of pieces which, once removed from the board, do not return during the same game. In RPGs a player whose "piece" has been "removed from the board"

could make a new character and re-enter the game. Imagine a game of chess where pieces wander off the board and back or where a skilled veteran pawn might actually successfully defend its square against an attacking knight, or where the queen might be cheating on the king with the bishop, and instead of fighting, the black and white pawns would just sit down and start telling jokes to each other. How could one ever win a game like that? If it was interesting enough, why would one even want to?

The terms 'finite' and 'infinite' games used above are based on a quotation of James P. Carse's *Finite and Infinite Games* in *Mage* (Wieck et al. 1993:20): "A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game is played for the purpose of continuing play". I have, unfortunately, been unable to locate a copy of Carse's book, but I think this makes sense, and I have used the distinction above. However, it should be noted that my interpretation is based on this short quote and may differ from the original. A game that is played for the purpose of winning it will obviously end (and thus be finite) when someone wins and it thus becomes impossible for the other players to win. A RPG, on the other hand, as explained above, is not played for the sake of winning, but for the purpose of continuing play. They can thus be continued for as long as the players wish to continue, and are infinite.

2.3.3 Computer games

Finally, I will discuss a few aspects of computer games and how they relate to RPGs. The first similarity between RPGs and computer games is that in both, the player actively does something, as opposed to being a passive audience. However, although there are many multiplayer games where several players may participate at the same time, computer games in general are a more solitary activity, whereas a RPG requires at least two people.

Suoninen (1999:149) divides computer games into nine main categories of which the most relevant ones to RPGs are card and puzzle games, fighting and

action games, roleplaying and adventure games, and strategy games. In RPGs solving problems is often an important activity, and while the problems are not often actual puzzles (except for intellectual ones) there is some common ground with computer puzzle games. However, in a computer game the only goal is to solve the puzzle, whereas in a RPG it would be only a part of the plot. Fighting and action computer games (such as *Mortal Combat* and *Doom*) are not unlike action-oriented RPGs, though in computer games, as in most films of this type, much of the attraction is visual, and spectacular special effects are often considered to be more important than the plot or characters. RPGs, on the other hand, still have very little for the players to see and they have to rely on their imaginations. Strategy or wargames differ from action games by being much larger in scale, so that instead of a single combatant, the player controls a whole army. They also focus more on out-smarting or out-maneuvering the opponent than on special effects. In fact, they are a computer adaptation of the strategy boardgames (wargames) from which RPGs evolved. They are, however, more impersonal (due to the large scale) and war-oriented than RPGs.

This leaves computer RPGs and adventure games. Some of these are actually based on RPGs. For example, there have been several games (such as *Pool of Radiance*), that use the rules system of *AD&D*, and as Kuittinen (1999:189) points out, Rogue-like games, such as *Moria, Angband, Nethack* and *Rogue* itself, have borrowed many features from (and in my opinion were probably inspired by) *D&D* and *AD&D*. However, these games are only vaguely RPG-like and in my opinion they are all only adventure games. This is because their plots are often fixed or linear so that while there may be several ways of completing the game, the player has to choose one of these ways and the end result is always more or less the same. Furthermore, these games normally do have an end result and can be completed and thus "won", so they are finite games. Usually they are also aimed at a single player, though they may allow him/her to play with several characters, and the playing itself requires more puzzle-solving and combat than any sort of roleplaying. The interactivity in these games also tends to be fairly limited. The player may be allowed some freedom in which order s/he solves the problems the game presents as long as

s/he solves them, but the game may allow the characters to interact with the gameworld in only limited ways. For example, even if the background art of a given scene features trash cans, it is futile for the player to try to make his/her character to search them if such a feature has not been programmed into the game (incidentally, it usually is, and trash cans are a valuable source of clues in most computer games of this kind). However, the point is that a computer game only allows actions that have been programmed into it, whereas a human GM allows the players to take any action s/he thinks they possibly could do, even if they are pointless.

Summary of section 2.3

RPGs are not only stories, they are also games. The most obvious game aspect is that RPGs have rules for controlling and resolving various kinds of situations that may arise during the game. The purpose of rules is to make the game fair so that everyone is bound by the same rules and they allow all characters a chance of succeeding in a given task proportionate to their skills and abilities. Random chance is also used to make the game more unpredictable and interesting.

Just as RPGs are endless as stories, they are infinite as games. This is because they do not aim at winning the game, but continuing to play it. In fact, it is impossible to win in a RPG. On the other hand, it is quite easy to continue playing one indefinitely. Even if a given player's character dies, s/he can create a new character and re-enter the game at any convenient time (though from a story point of view the appearance of a new character to replace an old one must make some kind of sense).

RPGs are also different from computer games, even the so-called computer RPGs, because computer games are more limited and less interactive. They also focus more on solving puzzles and combats than on any sort of roleplaying.

3 GENERAL GENRE THEORY AND RPGS

This chapter will deal with genres in general and individual RPG genres will be dealt with in the next chapter. First I will have to define what a 'genre' is, of course, but that is a difficult task (as Bordwell and Thompson (1997:51) point out, genres are easier to recognize than to define). To put it simply, a genre is a category in which certain types of works belong. To begin with, it is possible, for example, to divide books and films into two categories: fiction and non-fiction (since RPGs are clearly fictional, I will focus on genres of fiction), which can both be divided into a multitude of subgenres on some basis, such as form, style or content. However, a large problem with genres is precisely that they are often based on different criteria. For example, detective stories have mystery and investigation as their primary elements (i.e. based on a certain type of plot and action), whereas horror stories aim at creating feelings of shock, disgust, fear or horror in their audience (i.e. based on intended effect). On the other hand, some genres, such as science fiction, cover such a vast range of themes, moods and styles that any definition may seem overly narrow and restrictive. Often it is also impossible to say exactly where one genre begins and another ends, as between fantasy and science fiction, which can both be argued to be subgenres of each other (although the argument that science fiction is a subgenre of fantasy seems more plausible to me). This is not unlike the world of colors, where if shown a smooth progression from, say, yellow to green, it is difficult to say where the color stops being yellow and becomes green. Any such decision is arbitrary and depends on the viewer. However, it is much easier (and consistent) to pick out a *typical* green or yellow.

In short, a genre is a category. Works of a given genre are a certain type of fiction that is in some way different from other types of fiction (although it often shares some ground with some other types). Genre is, and can only be, a generic (no pun intended) category. This means that definitions of genres can never be absolute. This is mostly because,

> each example [...; of works belonging to a genre] repeats certain characteristics which have come to be recognized as indispensable features of the genre, but each one also

> exists in a relationship of difference from the general rule. (*The Bloomsbury Dictionary of English Literature* 1997:263)

In other words, as will be later argued in more detail, it is not enough for a work of fiction to just belong to a genre, it must also be an individual work that is somehow different from other works of its genre.

Although occasional references to RPGs will be made, the first part of this chapter will discuss genre theory in general, which means film and literature theories rather than RPG ones. What genres mean specifically to RPGs will be discussed later, from section 3.5 onwards.

3.1 Some initial considerations about genres in general

When one begins to define genres, it is not possible – or at least not very meaningful – to define just one. As Ralph Cohen says,

> a genre does not exist independently; it arises to compete or to contrast with other genres, to complement, augment, interrelate with other genres. Genres do not exist by themselves; they are named and placed within hierarchies or systems of genres, and each is defined by reference to the system and its members. A genre, therefore, is to be understood in relation to other genres [...]. (1986:207)

In other words, when I define 'fantasy', I will need to explain how it relates to 'science fiction', how that in turn relates to 'horror', where the 'superhero' genre fits in this system and so on. The existence of different genres means, of course, that some lines have to be drawn between them, but I will rather make them broad enough to allow many different things than so narrow that they will immediately be riddled with exceptions. (The criteria that I will base my decisions on will be discussed later.)

Cohen has also pointed out that

> since each genre is composed of texts that accrue, the grouping is a process, not a determinate category. Genres are open categories. Each member alters the genre by adding, contradicting, or changing constituents [...]. (1986:204)

This does not mean that there first exists a genre that we then add texts to, nor that various texts exist from whose common features we form a genre, but both.

A genre is first defined on the basis of perceived common features of multiple texts, but since new texts continue to be created (and all of them will be somehow different from each other and the earlier works), more texts with similar features can be later added to it. Genre is thus not frozen in time but, as Cohen said, a process. In relation to this it is relevant to note, as Rick Altman has done (1999:57) that Hollywood does not attempt to create films within a certain genre, they try to create films that as many people as possible would want to see, and therefore link them to as many genres as possible. Indeed, "Hollywood's stock-in-trade is the romantic combination of genres, not the classical practice of generic purity" (Altman 1999:59). This is because people do not want to see the same film over and over again, they want to see something that is new, but also familiar in many ways. The same applies, to an extent, to literature, although I believe generic purity is more common in novels than in films. In short, authors and film-makers strive to produce works that are unique (at least in their details), not copies of existing works. On the other hand, as Bordwell and Thompson point out, familiar features of a film (i.e., similarities to other texts of its genre) allows "the genre movie to communicate information quickly and economically" (1997:53). To borrow their example (1997:53), a close-up of a tommygun lifted out of a 1920s Ford would instantly conjure up in the viewer's mind the world of Gangster movies without the need for extensive background work. Of course, once set up, these expectations can easily be used to mislead and surprise the viewer, but nevertheless,

> The pleasure which an audience derives from watching a particular tragedy [or any other genre] emanates in part from its fulfilling certain requirements stimulated by expectations arising from within the form itself. (*The Bloomsbury Dictionary of English Literature* 1997:263.)

This is also, in my opinion, a major way in which genres operate. Recognizing familiar elements in a work of fiction is the criterion according to which the reader/viewer assigns it into a given genre (or genres) and begins to expect other familiar elements of that genre. For example, if the first thing we see in a film or read about in a novel is a lonely man on horseback, gun on his hip, dressed in a dusty poncho and a Stetson, we immediately recognize this image as belonging to the Western genre (provided we have seen or read other Westerns before). We would then expect other Western images (cattle, settlers,

bison, Indians and so on) and themes (conflict between civilization and wilderness, law and the lack of it, and so on) to justify our initial genre guess.

Incidentally, as far as RPGs are concerned, this can be useful or detrimental. Often the genre is decided collectively by the players and the GM, so they know what to expect and genre conventions (in analogy with films and novels) conveniently take care of much of the background. Sometimes, on the other hand, it can be useful to mislead the players a little. For example, if the players know they are playing an *X Files* type of game, they will not be surprised if their characters meet aliens or vampires, they will even expect it. If they thought they were playing a game set in a more "normal" reality, they would be surprised and puzzled if something extraordinary or (apparently or really) supernatural happened.

To summarize, a genre is derived from shared features of existing works, but is constantly modified by new works that are perceived to belong to that genre. Films, and other types of fiction as well, strive to attract a wide audience and thus often combine features of many popular genres. In addition, all works of fiction strive to simultaneously satisfy the audience expectations (formed on the basis on the work's perceived genre), but also to be unique and different from other similar works of fiction.

3.2 Mixing genres

According to Altman (1999:4), neoclassical genre theory, based on Aristotle and Horace (especially because of the latter's prescriptive dictum against mixing genres), strove for generic purity and reacted strongly against any attempt to mix genres. In the seventeenth century, however, neoclassical critics were forced to admit a hybrid 'tragicomedy', mixture of two genres that might at first seem diametrically opposed. Similarly, while a more modern example of horror-comedy may seem almost a paradoxical creation, as it aims to create both amusement and disgust, examples are easy to find: take a look at *The*

Return of the Living Dead (1985) and its sequels, or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (the series (1997-) is better than the film (1992)). Although, as Bordwell and Thompson note, "comedy, it seems, can combine with anything" (1997:52).

In the nineteenth century, romantics reacted against generic purity and, "Whereas the neoclassical approach to all composition began with identification and separation of genres, romantic inspiration was based on the breaking down of all generic differences" (Altman 1999:5). While genres and theories have continued to develop since then, this romantic tradition still continues. As has already been noted, Hollywood strives to link its films to as many different genres as possible, often without explicitly identifying them with any (see Altman 1999:57). Indeed, mixing genres is not exceptional: as far as films go, it is almost the rule. Genres can be mixed almost at will, and even some fairly unlikely couplings have occurred, such as Western and horror in *Billy the Kid versus Dracula* (1965).

My favorite example of genre-mixing is the film *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987), which brilliantly and effortlessly combines horror, comedy, action, adventure, drama, love-story and perhaps even some Western-like plot elements, such as a hermit of unparalleled fighting skills, who wants to be left alone and live outside civilization, but is forced to help the other characters because he cannot simply leave them to die. (In other words, he is like the typical Western hero as described by Bordwell and Thompson: "at home in the wilderness but naturally inclined toward justice and kindness, [...] often poised between savagery and civilization" (1997:56).)

3.3 What makes genres different from each other?

As was briefly mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, different genres often depend on different criteria. This is one of the reasons it is difficult to make any hard and fast rules and several things have to be taken into account. Bordwell and Thompson list four differentiating factors, along with five aspects of genre

conventions. For RPG purposes we can ignore such film-related ones as manner of presentation (e.g. song and dance for a musical) and characteristic film techniques (lighting, cutting, use of slow motion and so on). This leaves us with three differentiating factors (1997:52, my emphases in each case):

> Some genres stand out by their *subjects* or *themes*. A gangster film centers on large-scale urban crime. A science-fiction film features a technology beyond the reach of contemporary science. A Western is usually about life on some frontier (not necessarily the West [...]).

> The detective film is partly defined by the *plot pattern* of an investigation that solves a mystery.

> And some genres are defined by the distinctive *emotional effect* they aim for: amusement in comedy, tension in the thriller.

The remaining genre conventions echo these. They are (1997:53):

> Plot elements ("We expect an investigation in a mystery film, a revenge motive in a Western, and a song and dance situation in a musical. [...]")

> Characters (For example, "In a cop thriller [...]: the shifty informer, the comic sidekick, the impatient captain who despairs of getting the squad detectives to follow procedure")

> Thematic, "involving general meanings that are summoned up again and again. The Hong Kong martial arts film commonly celebrates loyalty and obedience to one's teacher. A standard theme of the gangster film has been the price of criminal success [...]"

> Iconography, or "recurring symbolic images that carry meaning from film to film". For example, the revolvers, Stetsons, horses and Indians of the Western, the suits, tommyguns and 1920s Fords of the gangster film, the kimonos and swords of the samurai film and so on. In films, these are obviously visual, but the same symbols are easily used in both novels and RPGs as well.

Some of these are difficult to apply to RPGs since such things as plot, characters and themes depend on how the GM and the players play their game. That does not, however, completely invalidate the meaning of genre conventions. Typical characteristics are, after all, considered typical because they are so common, and while players are free to break conventions as much as they wish, I will assume that for the most part they do not do so.

However, this approach still assumes that genres are created by film makers (and perhaps critics) and only recognized and followed by the audience. Rick Altman has argued that on the contrary, genres depend very much on how the audience responds to them. An easy example is that a comedy that depends on subtle irony may be considered to be a drama by an audience that fails to notice that irony. This approach will be presented next.

3.4 The syntactic/semantic/pragmatic approach to film genres

In *Film/Genre*, Rick Altman proposes a convincing syntactic/semantic/pragmatic model of genre theory. The first two are explained as (1999:89, original emphasis),

> At times we invoke generic terminology because multiple texts share the same building blocks (these *semantic* elements might be common topics, shared plots, key scenes, character types, familiar objects or recognizable shots and sounds). At other times we recognize generic affiliation because a group of texts organizes those building blocks in a similar manner (as seen through such shared *syntactic* aspects as plot structure, character relationships or image and sound montage).

Or, to put it another way, "The semantic approach thus stresses the genre's building blocks, while the syntactic view privileges the structures into which they are arranged" (1999:219). Altman considers both to be essential ("the term *genre* takes on its full force only when semantic and syntactic similarities are simultaneously operative", 1999:90) and the most durable genres combine both semantic and syntactic elements.

The pragmatic addition to this means that one has to consider everything in connection with genres from the aims of the producers via the history of the genre to diverse audience groups and how they affect each other and perceive (and thus remake) the genre. This is because, for example, different audiences may disagree about the genre of a given film and interpret it differently, and all conclusions they draw from it may be very different from those of its producers, which in turn are likely to be very different from the conclusions film critics and genre theorists will draw, not to mention the historical aspect of how the film

relates to earlier films and how its success or failure will be reflected in the particulars of subsequent films, thus possibly transforming the whole genre it belongs to and so on.

> [...] genres now appear to me not just discursive but, because they are mechanisms for co-ordinating diverse users, multi-discursive. Instead of utilizing a single master language, as most previous genre theoreticians would have it, a genre may appropriately be considered multi-coded. Each genre is simultaneously defined by multiple codes, corresponding to the multiple groups who, by helping to define the genre, may be said to 'speak' the genre. (Altman 1999: 208)

What does this mean from a RPG point of view? To begin with, semantic features – the building blocks – of genres are largely defined by RPG rulebooks, although the players can and probably will modify them and provide some of their own ones as well. As for syntactic issues, since it is up to the GM and the players to create and tell their own stories, it is also up to them to arrange the building blocks in any way they like. Likewise, the pragmatic aspect is very relevant for RPGs, because they, being only a framework and background for a story, actually force the individual user groups to "finish" them, to tell their own stories and make what they want of the game, thereby ultimately leaving the defining of the game's genre to the group that plays it. Even if a RPG has a built-in genre (as they normally do, unless they are so-called universal systems), individual groups will probably play it in different ways, thereby remaking the genre into what they like.

Furthermore, most RPGs allow a lot of leeway for personal preferences. For example, in many games that combine fantasy and science fiction (*Shadowrun* (1989), *Rifts* (1990) and *WarpWorld* (1991) for example) it is quite easy to downplay one aspect and focus on the other, thereby effectively playing the multi-genre game as a single-genre game. To give a more detailed example, in *Shadowrun* it would be easy to downplay magic and focus on technology and city environment, thereby playing a straightforward cyberpunk game; or conversely to play in a rural setting, focusing on magic instead of technology, thereby playing a fantasy game (though not a very traditional one since the modern cities and technology would still exist). In other words, two different groups can even play the same RPG in very different ways.

An issue related to the above example is that, as Cohen says, "since the purposes of critics who establish genres vary, it is self-evident that the same texts can belong to different groupings or genres and serve different generic purposes" (1986:204). For example, it could debated whether the abovementioned games are fantasy, science fiction, fantasy subgenre of science fiction, science fiction subgenre of fantasy or some such. In my opinion they are both fantasy and science fiction, and the real debate is about whether either of the two is more important than the other. That, as the above example indicated, depends very largely on how a given group plays the game, but some guidelines are also given in the game itself.

3.5 How RPG genres relate to film and literature genres

RPGs are in many respects very different from both films and novels. As has been noted earlier, RPGs are not ready at the moment of telling as films and novels are. This also means that there are no ready plots, no ready characters, no set lines, no ready story or narrative as in more traditional texts, and thus no textual structure to analyze. Even if a group played the same adventure more than once, the outcome would probably be different each time. Films and novels, on the other hand, are essentially "single-use" items. Of course it is possible to watch the same film or read the same novel again and again, but it is still the *same* film/novel every time with the same characters, plot and ending. By contrast, a RPG is only a framework and a background for adventures or stories and can be used constantly for years. In addition, when compared to films, RPGs do not have stars in them (unless one considers the players to be the stars) and they are not visual, depending instead on the imagination of the players. Compared to novels, they are oral instead of written. Both film and literary genre theories that are based on such criteria as plot and textual structure, characterization, themes, style and so on that RPGs for a large part lack are problematic to apply (or even inapplicable) to RPGs. There are differences even when one considers such things as typical characters (because

film and novel characters normally are not "random" characters but predestined and tailored for their roles in the story by the author) and typical plots (because detective stories, for example, always feature investigation but detective RPGs may feature various kinds of adventures). Only iconography is more or less shared so that one will find the same sort of details in detective and Western genres in films, novels and RPGs.

Despite these differences, films and literature are where the RPG genres have come from and thus they are not entirely incompatible. However, as Altman says regarding film genres (substitute "RPG" for each instance of "film"),

> Even when a genre already exists in other media, the film genre of the same name cannot simply be borrowed from non-film sources, it must be recreated. [...] Not surprisingly, this recreation process may very well produce a genre that is decidedly *not*, in spite of the shared name, identical to the non-film genre. (1999:35, original emphasis.)

Nevertheless, the general features are often similar enough that the easiest way to describe RPG genres is to do so by referring to the relevant film or literary genres, noting the similarities and differences between them.

3.6 My approach to RPG genres

This section addresses most of the issues and arguments presented above specifically from a RPG viewpoint. Although I will try to avoid excessive repetition of earlier points (at least without adding anything new), re-addressing them means some repetition is unavoidable.

To begin with, RPGs are commercial publications like films and novels, and they naturally also attempt to attract as many potential players as possible. Therefore, RPGs also follow the model of promising familiar genre features for those who like a particular genre, but also promise something new and special, or combine many popular genres. However, unlike Hollywood films, many RPGs readily label themselves as horror, science fiction, fantasy or whatever genre. *Heavy Gear*, for example, describes itself as "the science fiction

roleplaying & tactical game" on the front cover (Boulle et al. 1997), and promises to be "the new generation of giant robot game" on the back cover. The post-holocaust genre, on the other hand, is a good example of mixing popular genres, because its technofantasy setting (the most common setting for post-holocaust) provides possibilities for almost any kind of playing from horror to grim survivalism to light action-adventure to humorous, and allows science fiction and fantasy motifs to be used with equal ease. Since it also typically includes the possibility of dimensional travel, its possible settings are also virtually unlimited. Of all RPG genres, the post-holocaust is probably the one that usually has the widest possible range of features that should attract plenty of potential players. On the other hand, I believe some people dislike RPGs that attempt to include a bit of everything and favor those that specialize in whatever their favorite genre is.

To move on to Altman's syntactic/semantic/pragmatic approach, it is an excellent idea as far as film genres are concerned, but most of it is very difficult to apply to RPGs (it was intended as an approach to film genres, after all). The syntactic and pragmatic issues depend entirely on how different groups of players play a given RPG. This is actually what the pragmatic aspect is largely about, individual user-groups redefining genres for their own purposes. Unfortunately, taking these issues into account would require huge amounts of case studies of how players play their RPGs (or a particular RPG), and I do not have the resources for this kind of study. I will not completely ignore the syntactic and pragmatic aspects, as I do believe they offer valid viewpoints in combination with the semantics. However, it is important to note that because I lack the resources for a complete and all-encompassing study their full inclusion would require, I will pay most attention to the semantics and use my own experience as the basis of syntactic and semantic judgments that I make. To rephrase, any syntactic and pragmatic claims that I make will be based on my experience as a player and a GM, not on careful study of the issues.

However, the semantic features, the building blocks of stories, actually are largely defined by RPG rulebooks. Of course, players will modify them, add

their own ideas and once again remake the RPGs into whatever form they like, but nevertheless, the semantic issues of RPG genres are much more stable, easily generalized and are more accessible than syntactic and pragmatic ones. Therefore, although Altman specifically denies that genres pre-exist spectators (1999:211), or in this case players, I will consider them only on the basis of the semantic aspects that can be found in RPG rulebooks, even if I acknowledge that in the end it is the players who define their own genres. I have to admit that this is dodging the pragmatic (and syntactic) issue, but RPGs are created with a certain genre and style in mind, and I argue that whatever genre a given group of players likes, it is much easier to define if the RPG they use has already done most of the work for it. For example, while a cyberpunk RPG could be adapted for playing a medieval fantasy game, why do so when there are several RPGs that have been designed for medieval fantasy in the first place? I will thus downplay (but not entirely disregard) the part of the players by assuming that they use RPGs more or less as planned and do not extensively modify them.

Altman also says that "Attention to textual semantics produces generic statements that have the benefit of broad applicability, easy recognition, and general consensus" (1999:89), which is precisely what I want to accomplish with this study. However, the other side of the coin must also be acknowledged, and Altman continues by pointing out that genre statements based on semantic criteria can be criticized for shallowness and being little more than labels. On the other hand, while syntactic analysis might tell us much more about a few specific examples, it would only tell us about those examples (Altman 1999:89). In other words, whereas semantic genres are shallow but broadly applicable, syntactic ones are detailed but only apply to those particular cases that were studied. Since the aim of this study is to describe RPG genres from a RPG viewpoint and to make these genres easy to understand and apply, semantic criteria works well enough for my purposes.

In the beginning of this chapter it was argued that genre definitions can never be absolute or complete, since new works are constantly being created and added to genres, and with their new and unique features, these new works will also

constantly modify the genre they are added to. A genre description that was absolute and binding would probably quickly result in a "dead" genre that no-one bothered to create more works for, since nothing new could be done with it anymore. The reason for this constant incompleteness is that genre definitions often attempt to include too much detail. For example, let us assume that horror was defined as a genre that attempt to scare its audience and tells a story about vampires or werewolves. Now, if we came across a new horror RPG that was about zombies, we would have to redefine horror or add a new subgenre to it. If, instead, we had defined horror in the first place as a genre that simply aims at creating feelings of fear and horror, and only *usually* being about vampires or werewolves, there would have been no problem. Even if we later encountered other horror games that were about aliens or killer robots, we would have no difficulty in defining them as horror games as well.

This is, basically, what the next chapter is about. My genre definitions are based on what might be called essential or primary elements. As the above example shows, they may be somewhat shallow and simplistic, but they are (hopefully) still descriptive, easy to understand and apply and, most importantly, do not require constant redefinition. Typical features are important too, of course. If I simply equate, for example, fantasy with magic and the supernatural, that will hardly be a very useful description of fantasy. If, in addition, I describe what the setting (a romanticized and idealized medieval society), technology level, characters, themes, subjects and so on are usually like in fantasy, the reader will hopefully have a much better idea of what fantasy as a RPG genre generally is like. Yet since these latter features are not definitive but only typical, usual or common, they allow a lot of variation in the details and even allow new kinds of details without problems.

Cohen has pointed out that sometimes "the traits that are shared do not necessarily share the same function" (1986:207). For example, many kinds of monsters (vampires, zombies, werewolves and so on) exist in the horror genre and also in many works of fantasy. What differentiates them is that in horror the monster is an essential feature and something that does not belong to the normal

order of things, whereas in fantasy it is only a common feature that does belong to the fantasy world (i.e. a vampire in a fantasy world is a natural predator like a wolf or a bear, just a little more scary). It must be noted, however, that Cohen also argues that members of the *same* genre do not need to share a single trait (1986:210), but I prefer to think that in the case of essential traits they do. For example, if the superhero genre is defined by the superpowered individuals in colorful costumes who fight crime and evil, then all films, novels and RPGs that include such beings do belong to the superhero genre, but those that do not include them do not.

But what actually are the essential semantic building blocks that definitions of RPG genres can be based on? By far the most important one is the setting. This is not just a matter of whether the world the game is set in is the real world, an alternate world or another planet or dimension, but more along the lines of what makes the setting special (such as giant robots in a rather special type of science fiction). Normally this revolves around something that is impossible in the real world, but possible in the game's world (such as magic or faster than light travel). Other defining or at least important elements can be taken directly from Bordwell and Thompson (1997:52): subjects and themes (as in conspiracy and war genres, for example) and emotional effect (in horror and humor). Plot pattern is a syntactic feature and I do not use it as a defining element. While the genre conventions (plot elements, characters, themes and iconography) listed by Bordwell and Thompson (1997:53) are described, they are rarely defining, only what I have considered typical or common for the genre in question. Character type is an exception, as it is used as a defining element in, for example, superhero, agent and pirate genres.

To summarize the above, most of the defining features are setting-related (such as the presence or absence of magic), but there are also genres that are defined by their intended emotional effect (horror and humor), character types (pirate and agent) and thematic elements (conflict between natural and supernatural in the fantastic, conspiracy in conspiracy, fighting and action in war and so on), although the setting is also important in most of the latter types of genres. In a

way, this is not unlike the neoclassical approach to genres which aimed at "identification and separation of genres" (Altman 1999:5). On the other hand, my intention is that, once identified and separated, these genres can also be used as building blocks. In other words, far from generic purity, but rather in the more romantic style, the genres as I define them are meant to be combined. While these genres can function independently and do not have to be combined, they very often are. For example, the post-holocaust genre, while by definition being only set in a world that has been devastated by some catastrophe or another, is nearly always combined not only with both fantasy and science fiction, but also with dimensional travel and frontier genres. Although this issue would be relevant to discuss here, it is easier to explain after I have described the genres themselves. Therefore, combining different genres will be discussed further at the end of the next chapter even if this causes some overlap.

The rest of this section will provide some explanations about the settings of RPGs. To begin with, as was stated above, my genre definitions often depend on what kind of a world the RPGs of a given genre are usually set it. For example, a Western is typically set in the historical (although romanticized) real world, since there is no need to modify it. On the other hand, science fiction stories are often set on other planets or dimensions where different rules of reality may apply. Similarly fantasy stories where magic works, while they may be based on the real world, really need to be set in a different reality. Horror may be set in the real world (if the source of horror is realistic or psychological), or a fantastic version of it (if there is a monster like a vampire or a werewolf). Conversely, a story set in the real world would preclude fantasy stories (other than drug- or dream-induced ones), since fantasy is by definition something that does not fit in the real world.

As was exemplified by the above paragraph, the "real world" will be referred to often and it is what other types of settings will be compared to, so it should perhaps be explained a little. The real world naturally refers to our own everyday world. Of course, any work of fiction is actually set slightly outside the real world, since by definition a fictional story tells us about something that

has not actually happened in the real world, and may not be likely to ever happen either. But taking such a restricted view would be silly, and any story which takes place in a reasonable, realistic setting (even if fictional) that is clearly based on and can be easily placed somewhere in the real world, and does not require too much suspension of disbelief can be argued to be set in the real world.

For example, many of Stephen King's novels take place in Castle Rock, Maine, which is a fictional setting, but believable enough that it might as well be a real town as far as I am concerned. Many other parts of these novels can hardly be called realistic, however, but since the setting is believable they seem to be set in the real world (which is a large part of their effect, I believe).

Other types of worlds that some genres are typically set in will be described under the relevant genres. For example, fantasy worlds are often rather liberal combinations of different cultures and eras, with diverse terrain types to allow many kinds of adventuring environments and exotic creatures. Often they are original creations with no defined relation to the real world, but sometimes they are set in a vague mythical period in the history of the real world – such as Robert E. Howard's "Hyborian Age" where his Conan stories are set, which is about "12,000 years ago, after the sinking of Atlantis but before recorded history" (according to L. Sprague de Camp (1985:60)). Science fiction settings, on the other hand, are often remote planets somewhere in a very large galaxy. In addition, some RPGs are set on alternate Earths, which are based on the real world, but different in some significant way (often this means that magic works, but sometimes it is just a matter of an alternate history which results in a different present or future). In addition, in some genres (as in time and dimensional travel), the setting can actually be changed in the middle of a game.

3.7 Other genre-related distinctions in RPGs

There are some distinctions that are related to RPG genres that may not be immediately obvious. These are mood and style, both of which depend on the genre of a given RPG, but can, on the other hand, also modify the genre somewhat. For example, different groups can play the same game in very different ways: one preferring heroic action and adventure and other a gritty, grimy, realistic and desperate type of game. These are obviously highly dependent on how a given group likes to play RPGs (or perhaps just a particular RPG). However, most RPGs have built-in mood and style, and are thus better suited for that kind of playing. Most of the time, the mood and style labels are hopefully rather self-evident. Nevertheless, I think they need to be briefly explained. Most of the RPGs mentioned here as examples will be described in more detail in chapter 4.

3.7.1 Mood

The 'mood' of a RPG refers to what the game is like emotionally. Mood ranges from light to normal, dark and desperate. The list is not intended to cover every possibility and these are fairly general labels. Mood does not include realism as such, though it does tend to affect realism slightly because the lighter games are more likely to favor the heroic style and the darker moods are more likely to lean toward more realism.

Some genres determine their own moods. For example, film noir (a film genre, not a RPG one) is usually described as a film (very often a detective story) with a gloomy or dark mood. While it could conceivably be combined with humor, perhaps in a parodical way, a light film noir would seem like a contradiction in terms. Likewise, a game of the humor genre (such as *Toon* (1984)) might be awkward if one attempted to play it in a dark mood.

A *light* game is non-serious and is meant to be above all fun to play. It is usually combined with a heroic or an adventurous style (see below). In a light game the characters, story and having fun come first, and if realism intervenes, it can be overruled. In a light game, the PCs can be optimistic about their prospects. They are the good guys, after all (or at least the main characters). Even if there is something wrong with the world, it is not too serious and will eventually be set right. *Heroes Unlimited* (1984), *Rifts, Shadowrun, AD&D* and *D&D* are, I think, good examples of primarily light games, though they do not necessarily have to be played that way.

A *normal* game is between light and dark, and may on occasion swing towards either if it suits the plot. In a normal game the characters have no particular reason to expect that they will triumph or lose, it depends on the opposition and how well they plan for it. This is the usual mode of playing, and the most common built-in mood. Such diverse games as *MERP, Timelords* (1987), *Heavy Gear* (1996) and most universal and generic systems like *GURPS* (1986) and *Rolemaster* (1980) fall into this category. However, since the normal mood is nothing very special, it will generally not be referred to. If games are not described as light, dark or desperate, it can be assumed that they are normal. A normal game can usually also be played in a completely light or dark mood with little effort.

A *dark* game, by contrast, is gloomy and pessimistic, and there definitely is something wrong with the world. In a dark game, the "bad guys" not only can win, but they may even be likely to do so. However, even in a dark game there is still hope, and with skill and effort (in other words, with blood, sweat and tears) the "good guys" can win. The main characters are not necessarily very heroic (in the chivalric sense of the term), and they may even be the bad guys. Encyclopedia GEAS says that:

> [...] a good dark game is a careful balance of hope and despair. If your character is plummeting into despair, the GM should let them see the light at the end of the tunnel, if they start relying on aid from somebody, it should get cut off, characters, and indeed players, in dark games should always be on the edge, not trusting any but the closest of

friendships forged with care. Look at the X-files and you'll see all these points. (<http://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/societies/geas/CYCLO/D/Dark.html>)

For example, most games of the horror genre (if taken seriously) are dark. A non-horror example of dark mood could be *Millennium's End* (1992). *Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0.* (1988) is a marginal case. Its setting is basically quite desperate, but it also has its light elements and is meant to be played in a "cool" mode rather than a desperate one, so I would say it is dark.

In a *desperate* game things are much worse: the characters have no hope and they are doomed from the start. They may still win their battles, but they will never win the war. This is, as far as I know, the built-in mood of most of White Wolf's World of Darkness games, even if they are marketed as dark. For example, in *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) the characters are powerful and immortal vampires, but they are monsters who prey on humans. The main theme is the self-disgust of the characters, how they deal with what they are, and how they try to retain some of their humanity instead of becoming complete monsters. At the same time, it is made clear that eventually they will lose this internal battle. On top of this is heaped the corruption and decadence of the world the game is set in and the intrigue and back-stabbing of the Machiavellian vampire-society. In other words, all the hope the characters may have is for short-term goals. If they struggle with rigorous self-discipline they can control the vampiric "Beast" inside them for a while, but eventually the Beast will inevitably win. I have to admit that I am somewhat biased in this matter because I do not really like the game. However, *Vampire* is a very popular game so maybe others like this kind of desperation or play it in a lighter mood (see my note above about *Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0.*). The other World of Darkness games are less "doomed", but they still seem desperate to me. In *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* (1992), for example, the werewolves are fighting against pollution and destruction of nature, but it seems equally hopeless, and in *Mage: The Ascension* (1993), the mages oppose the collective worldview of the rest of the mankind and the technocrate conspiracy that has shaped that worldview.

3.7.2 Style

Style can be defined in terms of what kind of PCs the game was meant to be played with. These range from heroic to adventurous and ordinary. These are not the only possibilities, as the PCs can in rare games also be almost god-like in their powers or even below ordinary, but they are the most common ones. Style can be divided into realism and power-level, which tend to be related so that as one decreases, the other increases.

With realism I mean the overall, generic realism level of the game, although a given game can be more realistic in some areas and less in others. For example, *Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0.* has a reasonably realistic combat system, but the use of computers in the game is closer to fantasy (this is intentional, I believe). The level of realism is reflected in the role of the characters in many ways. In a realistic game, the characters are just like everybody else: if they do something socially unacceptable, they will catch the attention of law enforcement and media; if they get shot, they die; if they get bitten by a radioactive insect, they will get an itch; and if they get a knock on the head they will get a concussion and a headache. In more heroic games, on the other hand, the plot is more important than realism. If the characters are shot, they are likely to get "just a flesh wound"; in some stories, radioactive insects may bestow supernatural powers on those they happen to bite; and a knock on the head almost invariably causes loss of memory, which can of course be restored by a second knock on the head.

With power-level I mean how powerful the characters can be or become, more in terms of personal power than authority. Authority is somewhat problematic, since theoretically a character in any game can gain considerable status and power through promotion in rank or position, being knighted for service to the crown and so on. However, since this depends largely on the GM and the players and what they like, I will not take it into account very much. In some games, however, this issue is addressed, and in *King Arthur Pendragon* (1985; hereafter referred to simply as *Pendragon*), for example, the characters are

supposed to be knights, and thus nobles and fairly powerful individuals. Usually the PCs are expected to be of a fairly average status, or high enough that they can go adventuring without too many social repercussions. Personal power is more genre-dependent and thus more important in this respect. In some games PCs can be perfectly average individuals, though very often they are slightly above average (i.e. slightly stronger, smarter and/or agile than an average person). In some other games, on the other hand, they are expected to be competent specialists, heroes or even superheroes.

In the *heroic* (sometimes also called cinematic) style, the heroes are powerful individuals and are usually supposed to win in the end. While they may occasionally save the world, they usually operate in a somewhat smaller scale. The heroic style is usually rather low in realism, and high on the power scale. In the heroic style, for example, such heroic stunts as single-handedly defeating dozens of "ordinary" bad guys in combat while keeping up a witty repartee are perfectly acceptable, perhaps even encouraged. Superheroes and more "ordinary" Zorro or Robin Hood-like characters are good examples of heroic style. This style is usually combined with the light mood.

Dungeons and Dragons and most class and level based RPGs derived from it (including especially *AD&D*) generally start out either as ordinary or adventurous, but the characters become more and more powerful as they gain experience and levels, and the game may fairly quickly become heroic in style. Superhero RPGs also obviously fall into this category, as well as those RPGs that were meant to be cinematic, such as *Feng Shui* (which is based on Hong Kong action movies) and *7th Sea* (1999). *Feng Shui* (1996) makes a distinction between unnamed bad guys (called "mooks"), who are just cannon fodder, and named villains, who are much tougher. *7th Sea*, on the other hand, has so-called "brute squads" that are groups of nameless NPC thugs that the PC heroes can fight and defeat as groups (and, again, named villains that take much more effort to defeat).

An *adventurous* game is a step down from heroic. Adventurers are competent and may sometimes be heroic, but they are not superhumans and are mostly fending for themselves. They are still usually the main characters and may be special in some way. An experienced adventurer will probably win most fights with ordinary bad guys (unless badly outnumbered), but there is always a risk of injury or even death. In other words, this style is fairly balanced in terms of realism and power, although both may vary considerably depending on the game. This is a diverse style, ranging from Westerns to detective stories to fantasy and so on. The mood of an adventurous game can vary over the full spectrum.

This is also the most common style of RPGs. In *Millennium's End*, *Hârn*, *Timelords*, most *GURPS*, *Heavy Gear* and many other games the characters tend to be competent and often somewhat more capable than an average person, but usually not extraordinarily so. These games are also fairly realistic. *Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0.* falls somewhere between adventurous and heroic, because it is fairly realistic but favors more powerful characters than adventurous games normally do.

Ordinary PCs are just that: ordinary. They are normal, fairly average people like everybody else in the game world. This is the style of ultra-realistic games, but they are not very common, because most players prefer their characters to be somehow a little special and above average. All of the RPGs mentioned as examples above in the adventurous style can just as well be played in the ordinary style if it pleases the GM and the players. However, the realism level is likely to be a little higher. In this style, the power-level is as low as it usually gets in RPGs. The mood of the ordinary style can be light, but it is more likely to be normal or dark. Ordinary PCs are fairly common in many horror games, such as *Call of Cthulhu*.

Summary of chapter 3

As far as film and literary genres are concerned, they are usually derived from shared features of existing works, but also need to be constantly modified, because new works often do not fit very neatly into existing genre descriptions. This is because films and novels seek to attract as wide an audience as possible and thus both strive for new and special features, and often combine features of many popular genres. In other words, new works of fiction usually attempt to satisfy the expectations of the audience (formed on the basis on the work's perceived genre), but also to be unique and special. This also largely applies to RPGs.

My intention is to define RPG genres on the basis of what Altman has called semantic features, or the building blocks of a story. Although Altman also considers syntactic and pragmatic features to be equally important, they are more difficult to apply to RPGs than to films because RPGs and films are in some ways very different. While I do not entirely ignore these aspects, they are not as relevant for this study as they would be for a study of film genres. The most important semantic features that I base my genre definitions on are largely the same ones that Bordwell and Thompson have listed, with the addition of setting. The setting and its special features is actually the most important criterion, but subjects and themes, emotional effect and iconography are also important, as are (in some cases) characters types.

The genres that I describe will of course be different from each other, and in most cases "pure" examples of a given genre can be found. However, these genres were meant to be combined with each other, and indeed some of them nearly always are combined. For example, both post-holocaust and conspiracy are practically always combined with fantasy and/or science fiction. (This issue will be further discussed at the end of chapter 4.)

In addition to genre, there are differences in style and mood. For example, a given group can play a humorous and light-hearted Western or a desperate,

gritty Western, or they can play an adventurous Western with characters whose abilities border on superhuman, or a realistic Western with ordinary characters, who may still be inexperienced "greenhorns". I think such distinctions are also useful. Although they are often more descriptive of individual RPGs, they do also apply to many genres. For example, the superhero genre is very different from the technothriller in terms of mood, realism and characters.

4 SPECIFIC GENRES

This section contains descriptions of specific genres. The descriptions are written from a RPG viewpoint, but I will also refer to literary and film sources for examples and explanations. I will also point out where my definitions of RPG genres significantly differ from established film or literary genres of the same name. For example, science fiction as a RPG genre is significantly narrower in its range of themes and settings than science fiction as a literary genre is.

From now on, I will rarely need to refer to instances of playing RPGs (or to other types of games), so the terms 'game' and 'RPG' will be used synonymously to refer to RPGs as published products. Generally this means the main rulebook of a given line of RPGs, although in some cases the main rules are divided into more than one book (for example, I use a collective term *Hârn*, which includes both *HârnWorld* and *HârnMaster*). Most RPG lines also offer many other books in the form of supplements that give more information and details about different aspects of the game's setting (or rules), or alternative settings. (*GURPS* especially is notable for its huge amount of supplements.) However, for the most part I have confined this study to just the main rulebooks, although supplements are an integral part of many RPGs.

The main genres are fantasy (for which see section 4.1), science fiction (4.4), technofantasy (4.8), horror (4.15), humor (4.16), and "normal" (4.17; though "normal" is not really a genre itself, just a group of genres that do not belong to fantasy, science fiction or other primary genres). To these are linked several minor genres so that fantasy includes sword and sorcery (4.2), toon (4.3), anthropomorphic animals (4.3.1) and anime (4.3.2), whereas science fiction includes space opera (4.5), cyberpunk (4.6) and giant robot (4.7). Technofantasy includes the fantastic (4.9), dimensional and time travel (4.10), post-holocaust (4.11), superhero (4.12), steampunk (4.13) and conspiracy (4.14), and "normal" includes frontier (4.18; and its subgenre, the Western (4.19)), pirate (4.20), war (4.21), technothriller (4.22), agent (4.23) and oriental (4.24) genres. All of these will be described in their own entries. Fantasy and science fiction are the most important genres and will be described in the most detail. Some, such as toon and anthropomorphic animals are more marginal and I have no personal experience of them so they will be dealt with with less detail.

Although I used the word "includes" above, some of the genres listed as being included in a more important genre can also belong to other main genres. For example, I have included post-holocaust in technofantasy because it typically combines science fiction and fantasy elements, but this is not always the case and some post-holocaust games should really be included in science fiction or even "normal". The above are thus only generalizations.

I emphasize again that my descriptions of these genres are from a RPG point of view. In other words, when I describe, for example, science fiction, I describe it as a RPG genre, not as a literary or film genre (although, as I said before, I will refer to these sources as well). For this reason my definition of especially science fiction will most likely seem narrow and restricted to those who think of the literary science fiction genre. This is because many of the themes and plots that science fiction novels explore would be awkward and unwieldy in a RPG, and RPGs tend to focus on more straightforward action, adventure, exploration and solving of mysteries. For example, according to Peter Nicholls (*TESF* 1993:254) a very major theme in science fiction literature is 'conceptual

breakthrough', which basically means that the characters achieve a new understanding of their world or recognize its true nature. While such a theme is quite possible in RPGs as well, a writer can conveniently climax and end his/her story with such a revelation, whereas in a RPG the story would continue and the characters would still be faced with the opposing worldviews of other characters, robbing the theme of much of its impact. This is not to say that social commentary, conceptual breakthrough or other more sophisticated themes could not be explored in RPGs, just that adventuring and having a good time are more likely reasons for playing RPGs.

These genres are not intended to be absolute, as obviously exceptions could be found for any definition. Instead, they are intended to be informative and describe what different types of games are generally like. Of course, all RPGs of a given genre (or a given combination of genres) will also have their unique features and details. Neither is this list of genres all-inclusive, as obviously I cannot know all games that have ever been (and much less those that will be) published. These are what I consider to be the most common and typical RPG genres. The examples cited for each genre may not always be absolutely the best examples that could be found either, but I have tried to select as examples novels, films and RPGs that I have actually read, seen or played, or at least know something about, and that seem to be good examples. Choosing examples that I have direct experience of has not been possible in all cases, however, and where I use as an example a RPG that I have not read or played myself, I have noted this. In these cases no particular source of information is usually cited, however, because the description of the game has usually been formed on the basis of several (in some cases up to a dozen) reviews or descriptions (mostly from RPGnet, Role-Play News and John Kim's RPG encyclopedia, as well as "fan" sites of various games) and publisher descriptions and advertising, and is so condensed that it would be impossible to point to any particular source. Where my description is based on a single source or actually quotes from a source, the reference is of course cited.

These genres are also intended to be sort of "building blocks" that can be combined in various ways in individual RPGs. This means that a game like *Blue Planet* (1997), for example, is primarily set on a frontier world in a science fiction universe, but also has some cyberpunk and post-holocaust elements (*Blue Planet* is described in more detail below as an example of the frontier genre). This idea is intended to make combining genres easier, as well as making it a simple task to add new genre elements later on. This also means that, technically, technofantasy is an excessive genre since it is simply a combination of science fiction and fantasy. However, technofantasy is a popular mixed genre and considering it as a genre in its own right allows some other genres (such as post-holocaust and time-travel) to be more easily grouped together. Combining genres will be discussed further in section 4.25.

To avoid possible confusion, it should perhaps be noted that the year given after the first mention of a particular RPG is the year it was first published. The years in actual quotes or references often refer to later editions and may be different. For example, in the description of the technothriller genre, *Millennium's End* will first be dated 1992, because that is when its first edition was published. My quotes from the game, however, are from the second edition, which was published in 1993, so the different years are not an error.

4.1 Fantasy

Fantasy is perhaps the best genre to begin with, since it is the most important RPG genre. It is common in a "pure" form (fantasy by itself with no other genres mixed in) and extremely common as an extra ingredient in other genres. In other words, it is very common for a RPG of any genre to include some fantasy element as well, typically magic, psi-powers or supernatural creatures. Fantasy includes as variants and subgenres sword and sorcery, toon, anthropomorphic animals and anime. Sword and sorcery is a variant of fantasy differing in its lighter, more adventurous and action oriented style. Toon is a different type of fantasy, involving cartoon characters and logic, whereas

anthropomorphic animals and anime are variations of toon. This section deals with fantasy in general, the variants will be described in more detail in their own entries.

In *TEF*, Clute and Grant define fantasy in general as (1997:*viii*, though see also p.338):

> a fantasy text is a self-coherent narrative which, when set in our REALITY, tells a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it [...]; when set in an OTHERWORLD or SECONDARY WORLD, that otherworld will be impossible, but stories set there will be possible *in the otherworld's terms.* (Original emphasis and capitals.)

I like this definition and agree with it. There are two important things to note in it. These are that the essence of fantasy is (in real-world terms) the impossible, and that when the fantasy is set in a world or reality other than our own, it will be possible in the terms of that other world.

Granted, it is always arguable what is possible and what is impossible. Some people believe in, for example, telepathy, God, science or UFOs. For them, these things are possible, while those who do not share their faith (or believe in different things) will consider them impossible and say they do not exist. What one person considers a fact, another may consider fantasy. However, as far as RPGs are concerned, this is of little importance, since they are obviously imaginary tales. Yet, it is interesting to note how many players argue over how realistic a given fantasy game's rules are. For example, a player may consider it silly that his/her character has to hit a goblin, say, ten times with a sword to kill it. S/he may then argue that in the real world swords cause serious wounds and may sever limbs and kill with one blow. This is, of course, a valid argument in real-world terms. However, unless it is specifically detailed otherwise, it is possible that in the given fantasy world people (and goblins) actually are homogenous lumps of organic material, and do not register different kinds of wounds and do not bleed or go into shock. On the other hand, in games, as in all fiction, what is not specifically defined otherwise is assumed to be like it is in the real world. In other words, fantasy games can still be judged in real-world terms. As N. Robin Crossby says in his introduction to *Hârn* (actually a

combination of the rules system *HârnMaster* (1986) and the world *HârnWorld* (1983)),

> The starting framework in designing a fantasy world is, therefore, the real world, of which everyone has their own picture. Those who think they are creating from scratch are fooling themselves. Even if their world were 100% original, unless they were somehow able to describe every single aspect of it, it would still be perceived as a variant of the real world. (Crossby 1988.)

Therefore, the most important feature of fantasy is that it is not possible in real world terms. The most common actual feature where this rule applies is that in fantasy worlds magic works. Other similar features are psi-powers like telepathy and telekinesis, supernatural creatures or comic book-like superpowers.

In many games magic is spectacular and flamboyant in its effects and is mainly used for blasting the wizard's enemies to pieces and healing or otherwise aiding his/her companions. This is also true of most fantasy literature, although there are refreshing exceptions like Katharine Kerr's novels. Of course, most games also allow a more subtle and complicated use of magic, but unfortunately magic does tend to be viewed as the fantasy equivalent of missiles, flame-throwers and artillery even in the more serious fantasy games. (See the glossary entry on 'magic' for a further discussion of different types of magic.)

Other typical (but not defining) features of fantasy RPGs (and fantasy in general) are various non-human races like elves, dwarves, halflings (another name for hobbits), orcs, goblins, trolls, dragons and so on. The names and details vary (orcs, for example, are called gargun in *Hârn* and are fairly small and have fur) but mostly the descriptions of these races follow the lead of J.R.R. Tolkien. In other words, elves are tall, fair, slender and long-lived (or even immune to aging). Dwarves are short, strong, hardy and bearded, as well as greedy and warlike, but honorable. Halflings are short and dexterous, but not as strong as dwarves and more peaceful. Orcs are ugly, strong, cruel and warlike, as are goblins, who are only smaller and more devious. Trolls are large and as dumb as they are strong. Often there are also lizardmen, who are humanoid lizards, usually strong, agile and warlike. Of course, there are also humans, but unlike the other races, they show significant variation in their physique and

psychology. In games that have an alignment system elves, dwarves and hobbits are almost invariably good or neutral, whereas orcs, goblins and trolls tend to be straightforwardly evil and humans can be anything. There are exceptions, of course, and in *Orkworld* (2000), for example, orcs (or in this case orks) are the main characters and the usual roles of the races are reversed (in this game elves are the nasty ones). Dragons tend to be huge, winged reptiles who are intelligent and often (but not always) evil. Their abilities and alignment are often linked to their color. In *AD&D* (1978), for example, red dragons breathe fire, green dragons are poisonous, black dragons spit acid and so on, and only metallic dragons (at least silver and gold) are good, whereas the others are, I believe, evil or at best neutral.

In any case, none of these races or beings are aliens (to contrast with science fiction) because they all belong to the same world. Likewise, because they belong to and are an integral part of the fantasy world, they are not true monsters either (to contrast with horror where the monster is usually "a thing that should not be"). For the same reason, traditional horror monsters like vampires and werewolves are not really monsters in fantasy because they are a normal part of the world much like bears, wolves and gryphons. Nevertheless, the word monster is normally used even in fantasy to refer to most beings that are supernatural from the real-world point of view (sometimes even those beings that are of good alignment).

Fantasy can be divided into high and low fantasy according to how much magic, non-human races, fabulous creatures and other impossibilities it contains. In high fantasy the use of magic is commonplace and part of everyday life, and most inhabitants of the world have at least some magical talent or ability. *RuneQuest* (1978) is a good example of high fantasy, because its world, Glorantha, is so infused with magic that practically all characters do have some magical ability. In low fantasy, on the other hand, magic exist but is not common. It may still be powerful, but most inhabitants of the world never come face to face with anything magical. In very low fantasy the fantasy element may be no more than rumors or old legends of elves, dragons, wizards and such.

They exist (otherwise the genre would not really be fantasy), but most people have not seen them and may not believe in them. *Pendragon*, being Arthurian fantasy, is a good example of low fantasy. As adventuring knights, the PCs may sometimes meet fantastic beasts or magicians, but most ordinary people in the game do not. *Pendragon* also points out that even if everyone in the game's world knows magic exists, it should be rare, mysterious, subtle, dangerous, hidden and something the PCs do not know or understand (Stafford 1999:29). To take a literary example that is also relevant to RPGs, J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth is an interesting mixture of high and low fantasy. Most of Tolkien's characters have no magical abilities whatsoever, although many of them do possess magical items of varying potency. However, those beings who are magical or can use magic (valar, nazgul, balrogs, Sauron, Gandalf and so on) are often very powerful indeed. Nevertheless, I think Tolkien is low fantasy due to the relative rarity of magic, and *Middle Earth Role-Playing* (1984; usually called *MERP*, and obviously set in Tolkien's Middle Earth) is another good example of a low fantasy RPG, especially since the PCs in it will not be anywhere near as powerful as Tolkien's main characters. Of course, no definite line can be drawn between low and high fantasy and there is plenty of middle ground between them. The purpose of the terms is that when a particular game is described as low or high fantasy, the potential players will know whether to expect little or a lot of magic.

The typical fantasy world (high or low) bears more than a passing resemblance to J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth, and usually includes a multitude of different terrain types from jungle to tundra to allow diverse flora, fauna (not to mention magical and mystical creatures and non-human races) and adventuring environments. The worlds of fantasy games are usually original creations (though there are games set on, for example, the abovementioned Middle Earth). Fantasy worlds usually are rather liberal combinations of a wide variety of technology levels and societies. Some games actually point this out. For example, because of the timelessness of King Arthur, in *Pendragon*

> we have two chronologies crunched together. The dates and politics are those of the sixth century, the so-called Dark Ages or Early Middle Ages, when King Arthur really

lived. But the customs and fashions are those of the High Middle Ages, when the literature about him was first written. (Stafford 1999:4.)

Normally fantasy worlds are medieval in their technology level (plate armor, crossbows, windmills and occasionally clocks being the pinnacles of technology) and government types (feudal kingdoms and monarchies being abundant, though oligarchies and Ancient Greece-type elitistic democracies are not unheard of), but often not in social attitudes. Female characters in adventurous and/or militaristic professions are hardly given a second thought and societies tend to be less rigid in their class systems (and much less quick to punish any transgressions) than they probably were in the Middle Ages. However, in *Ars Magica* (1987) the discussion of what the medieval world was like begins thus:

Ars Magica requires that you forget many modern concepts. Such values as equality, tolerance, and the separation of Church and state were largely foreign to the medieval European mindset. This mindset is what we call the "medieval paradigm." (Tidball 1996:212, original emphasis.)

Some other games (such as *Hârn* and *Pendragon*) also take a more realistic attitude to the social system, but I believe most players actually prefer more modern and relaxed attitudes. This kind of romanticized medieval setting is what the term "gothic" in literature (and architecture as well, I believe) originally meant, but in modern usage that term has darker and more sinister connotations. Therefore I will refer to this kind of world as a romantic-medieval world. Fantasy worlds are usually alternate worlds with no defined relation to Earth, but there are some games, such as *Pendragon* and *Ars Magica*, that are set on alternate Earths (*Pendragon* in Arthurian Britain and *Ars Magica* in Mythic Europe (around the year 1220), where most folk legends are true).

As far as the subjects and themes of fantasy go, restoration is a major theme in literary fantasy. To put it shortly, this means defeating a dark lord who has been enslaving and destroying the world. Once the dark lord is defeated, the world will be restored to its normal order and natural vitality. However, defeating a powerful and even semi-competent dark lord requires a lot of fate and destiny from the characters, which is not a problem for the protagonists of literary fantasy, but since the actions of RPG characters are normally resolved through dice rolls and other random methods, they would require immense amounts of

luck as well as a lenient and merciful GM instead. Therefore fantasy RPGs are much more likely to focus on exploration and less epic adventuring. Politics, trade, intrigue and scheming are quite possible themes as well, of course, as are the universal subjects of love and other personal relationships. Thus, there are no particularly prevalent themes, subjects or intended emotional effects in fantasy RPGs apart from what is normal in RPGs in general.

The iconography of fantasy is determined by the romantic-medieval setting, so that wilderness filled with various flora, fauna and monsters, peasants tending their crops, knights in armor, busy towns, castles, manors and so on are typical. What sets fantasy apart from any medieval iconography are the other races (elves, orcs and so on) fabulous creatures (dragons, gryphons, pegasi and so on) and magic users. There is some variation in imagery depending on the game and its focus so that in Arthurian fantasy (as in *Pendragon*) knights are obviously important and magic users are mysterious and rare, whereas in a more magic oriented game (as in *Ars Magica*) magic users are ubiquitous and other characters may be seen as necessary but secondary.

Obviously, typical characters depend on the focus of a particular game (see above for an example), but in most fantasy RPGs (even in games that do not have a character class system) some variation on the pattern set out by *D&D* is normal. In other words, typical characters are various types of warriors, magic users, thieves or priests (or whatever the appropriate term for a given religion is). This is because the players usually play RPGs because they want to seek out adventures and excitement as their characters, and playing peasants, shepherds, servants or chandlers is not particularly exciting (even if there is a long tradition in literary fantasy of lowly peasants or shepherds to be hidden monarchs destined for greatness). Therefore, more mobile and adventurous character types who have some reason (and preferably liberty) to go adventuring are preferred.

There is no set mood in fantasy and it can vary from light to dark. Even desperate is not unheard of, though it is rare. The style of fantasy, however, is

hardly ever ordinary (with the possible exception of *Hârn*). Adventurous style is the norm in both low and high fantasy. High fantasy tends to have more powerful characters than low fantasy, and so it more often uses the heroic style as well.

Examples of the fantasy genre

Literary examples of fantasy are easy to find. *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954-1955) by J.R.R. Tolkien is an obvious and good example. The Kingdom of Deverry (1986-1990) and the Westlands Cycle (1991-1994) series (both consisting of four novels; the latter continues from where the former ends) by Katharine Kerr are another good example as is The Sword of Truth series (1994-) by Terry Goodkind. There are literally thousands of others and these (except for Tolkien) are not meant to be taken as the definitive fantasy novels. They are, however, ones I have personally read, and do not focus only on action and adventure, but also contain character introspection and development, as well as complicated plots.

Fantasy films are more rare and due to their high action and adventure content and corresponding non-seriousness, tend to be of the sword and sorcery type (see below) rather than more "serious" fantasy. Two good examples, however, are *Dragonslayer* (1981) and *Excalibur* (1981).

Fantasy RPG examples are numerous, of course. The first fantasy RPG (and the first commercially published RPG as well) was *Dungeons and Dragons*, published in 1974, and followed in 1978 by *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*. Both, as well as the dozens of games they inspired (some are rather blatant copies) use character classes and a level based advancement system. The original publisher TSR has been acquired by Wizards of the Coast, who have now published a third edition of *Dungeons and Dragons* (or apparently rather a new edition of *AD&D* retitled as *D&D*), which is intended to replace both the old *D&D* and *AD&D*. (See glossary entry for *AD&D* for more information

about it. Character class and level are also explained further in their own entries). However, *D&D* and *AD&D* are both generic fantasy systems. This means that they have little or no world information in themselves, though several different worlds (such as *Dark Sun, DragonLance* and *Forgotten Realms*) are available separately. These vary in mood and style depending on the world. I am no expert, but I believe they tend towards the normal mood (though *Dark Sun* is apparently dark) and adventurous or heroic style. The basic system is more or less neutral.

Other generic systems are *GURPS* (1986; no classes or levels) and *Rolemaster* (1980; class and level based). In both, the mood varies, but style is ordinary to adventurous, though they can easily do heroic as well. Games with worlds of their own include, for example, *Palladium Fantasy Role Playing Game* (1983), *Earthdawn* (1993) and *Hârn*. The *Palladium Fantasy RPG* is a traditional class and level based RPG, somewhat similar to *AD&D*, but with skills. I have never played it so I cannot say anything about the mood or style for sure, but based on other Palladium games that I have more experience with, I would guess it to be normal to light in mood and rather heroic in style. *Earthdawn* is a post-holocaust fantasy game, set in a mythic era of an alternate Earth after some great ancient evil "Horrors" have ravaged most of the world, and survivors hide in cave strongholds. In his review of the game on RPGnet (http://www.rpg.net/news+reviews/reviews/rev_2174.html), Curtis Batt describes it as a combination of *AD&D* and *Call of Cthulhu*. *Hârn* is set in a parallel world and bears some resemblance to Earth. The island of Hârn lies about where Great Britain lies in our world (though a little further south and west), but otherwise there is little resemblance between them (apart from climate). *Hârn* has neither classes nor levels, but the character's occupation, talents and culture do affect what skills s/he may select, at least initially. The mood is normal to dark (because it is set in a realistically brutal medieval society) and the rules are realistic enough to make the default style ordinary, though it can easily be used for adventurous games as well. *Ars Magica* and *Pendragon* are also good fantasy RPGs. *Ars Magica* is set in the Mythic Europe around 1220, and the primary PCs are powerful wizards, though they will have

to spend a lot of time doing magical research so the players are encouraged to also create more mundane characters to help the wizards and to be used as secondary PCs. *Pendragon*, on the other hand, is set in Arthurian Britain in the sixth century. The PCs are usually knights (other character types are possible as well), whose duty is to seek glory and adventure, but also to take care of their holdings and raise a family.

4.2 Sword and sorcery

Sword and sorcery is a subtype of fantasy, and differs in the style of playing it favors. To put it simply, sword and sorcery is action and adventure oriented fantasy (with much more emphasis on action and much less emphasis on consequences and realism than in fantasy in general). Consequently, sword and sorcery is usually heroic in style and light in mood.

If J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1954) is considered an example of more serious literary fantasy, then sword and sorcery can be said to be largely based on Robert E. Howard's Conan series (first published in the 1930s, but other writers have written Conan stories since). There have been numerous other sword and sorcery writers and characters, of course, but Conan is the most famous one. The difference is that in Tolkienesque fantasy the overall mood is optimistic and positive because the protagonists are heroes and the "good guys", and usually strive to defeat some dark lord who is trying to conquer the world. The heroes, of course, are expected to win in the end. Sword and sorcery, on the other hand, is darker in mood and more concerned with such short-term goals as hacking various monsters and adversaries into pieces with a sword and finding treasures, wine and a pretty maiden or two for the night, than making the world a better place. While sword and sorcery does of course have a main character, s/he is usually not very heroic in the chivalric sense of the term. If s/he saves the world from an evil sorcerer, s/he tends to do so for personal revenge for some past encounter with the said sorcerer or by simply happening

to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and having to – once again – carve his/her way out of trouble with a big sword.

To a great extent this applies to sword and sorcery as a RPG genre as well, although being focused on adventure, action and excitement makes it decidedly non-serious and thus the mood is generally very light. Furthermore, in literary sword and sorcery the main characters will be muscular warriors and not magic users (who will usually be the antagonists and occasionally allies). In other words, as *TEF* puts it, sword and sorcery is a

> fantasy subgenre featuring muscular HEROES in violent conflict with a variety of VILLAINS, chiefly WIZARDS, WITCHES, evil SPIRITS and other creatures whose powers are – unlike the hero's – supernatural in origin. (1997:915, original capitals.)

In RPG sword and sorcery, by contrast, magic using PCs are perfectly possible – indeed even likely (though not all of them, as a typical group of PCs will include diverse character types). Magic using characters in sword and sorcery will generally have little more than combat spells.

Since defeating dark lords is uncommon in fantasy RPGs in general, the most important difference between fantasy (as defined above) and sword and sorcery is – as was noted above – in the attitude of playing. Whereas in more serious fantasy themes and subjects like politics, trade and personal relationships are common, sword and sorcery focuses entirely on adventuring and the related action. Otherwise, sword and sorcery is still fantasy and the same descriptions of primary features, the setting and so on apply to it as well. The typical characters are also similar but with more emphasis on character types (and their skills and abilities) that will be useful in adventuring and fighting, so that there will be even more specialist warriors, wizards and thieves with emphasis on their "useful" skills like fighting, climbing, disarming traps and picking locks.

Examples of the sword and sorcery genre

Conan stories were already cited as examples of sword and sorcery literature. Apparently at least Michael Moorcock and Fritz Leiber (who, incidentally, is credited in *TEF* (1997:915) as having coined the term sword and sorcery) have also written sword and sorcery, but I am not familiar with either. Most films labeled as fantasy fall into the sword and sorcery category. Obvious examples are *Conan the Barbarian* (1982) and *Conan the Destroyer* (1984) as well as *Red Sonja* (1985).

Although *D&D* and *AD&D* (and most of the games derived from them) were mentioned in connection with generic fantasy above, they actually tend to be sword and sorcery. Although any fantasy RPG can be played in the sword and sorcery style, it is considerably more difficult to play a game designed for sword and sorcery style in a more serious manner. By all accounts and reviews that I have read (at RPGnet and Role-Play News) *SenZar* (1995) is a prime example since it quite simply aims at creating powerful characters whose only aim is to become (through fighting and gaining experience and magical items) even more powerful.

4.3 Toon

Toon is defined by being set in a cartoon world with cartoon characters. It is, in my opinion, a subgenre of fantasy because cartoons are, by their nature, quite fantastic. It differs from most fantasy in that while fantasy typically follows fairly conventional logic despite taking some liberties with realism, toon has its own logic and own set of rules, much like Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1871). Therefore, it does not need to even consider realism or logic. On the other hand, while toons often include plenty of impossibilities, for some reason magic is rarely used.

Because toons are by their nature also amusing and exist only for fun, they could alternatively be considered a genre of humor. Humor is, however, in my opinion and as far as RPGs are concerned, more a style of playing than a real genre so I include toon in fantasy. Nevertheless, toon should be considered to be a combination of fantasy and humor where humor is dominant (in other words, if something is funny, it does not matter how much logic and realism must be twisted or ignored to accommodate it). Obviously, toon is light in mood. Style is more or less inapplicable since even the heroic style assumes some level of realism and concern with such issues as heroism, bad guys, adventuring and so on, which toon does not need to worry about.

Other features of toon depend on the subject of game that is played. As toon is often parodical (there is only so much generic loony anarchy a person can take), other features and similarities to other genres or institutions depend on what is being parodied. If the players decide to make fun of science fiction, then science fiction iconography will be used; if they make fun of Formula One racing, then obviously F1 imagery and conventions will be borrowed. In a toon Western, for example, the bad guys will be instantly recognized from their black Stetsons, whereas the good guys will wear white Stetsons. Likewise, the setting of toon can be practically anything from a generic Toon-land to borrowing (and most likely distorting in the process) a world and setting from specific games, novels, films or even the real world. Likewise, the iconography of toon is obviously dependent on whatever cartoons the players have been watching lately, and on whether they borrow them (for purposes of parody) from other sources.

Obviously, the subjects and themes of toon revolve around having fun. As was mentioned already, I believe there is only so much generic silliness and anarchic looniness one can take, so parodying the conventions, subjects and themes of other games, genres, films or novels are a very likely theme. But since there are practically no rules for storytelling in toon, subjects and themes can be changed at will in mid-game.

Typical characters are also quite obviously various toons. There are some conventions along the lines that dog characters hate cat characters, and cat characters should try to catch mouse characters, who in turn love cheese and will invariably escape the cat characters and so on. Animal characters are much more likely than human characters (who will also be toons, not real humans), but toon is one genre where literally anything is possible. There is only one very special rule about characters is toon, which is that no character should ever truly die, even if someone drops a piano on their head.

Examples of the toon genre

Literary and film examples are numerous. Walt Disney, Hanna-Barbera and Warner Brothers have all produced plenty of comics and animated films. One notable example is *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988) which combines toons with real actors (this serves to highlight many toon conventions).

As for RPGs, an obvious example is *Toon* (1984). I have not played it myself, but the only point of the game seems to be having fun, and the characters receive plot points when they manage to make the GM or other players laugh. The mechanics are simple, and (to illustrate my point about characters above) a more or less unique feature of this game is that no character will ever die. If they run out of hit-points, they just fall down and return to the game three minutes later as if nothing had happened. *Toon* also does not really parody cartoons (although it does make fun of plenty of other things), it works just like them.

4.3.1 Anthropomorphic animals

Anthropomorphic animals are a variant of toon. Anthropomorphic animals are actually very much like most cartoon characters: they are animals who act like humans (i.e. they talk, often walk on their hind legs and use their front paws −

or even wings – as if they were manipulative hands). However, they are not toons and do follow a more conventional logic. The realism level is not high, but it is higher than with toon. Humans normally do not exist in these games, as their place is taken by the animals. Otherwise anthropomorphic animals work much like toons.

The mood of anthropomorphic animals is probably most likely to be light. A dark mood would draw uncomfortable attention on such things as "do the carnivorous animals actually eat the other animals?" and so on. Thus I believe a light and non-serious mood would best suit this genre. The style is probably heroic or at least adventurous.

Examples of the anthropomorphic animals genre

As for literary examples, see most of the same comic books as for toon, but more in the *Donald Duck* vein which is more dependent on actual stories than just anarchic fun. Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) as well as A.A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926) might also qualify, although both also have humans in them. As for film and television examples, many children's animated films have talking animals in them that act just like humans. A good non-cartoon example would be *The Muppet Show* (1976-1981), though it also has human guest stars.

Though I have not personally seen it, *Furry Pirates* (1999) appears to be the best RPG example, because it by all accounts has good background information and world description. The world is based on our history but changed to suit the anthropomorphic animals (anything from dogs, cats and weasels to elephants) and a little magic. Yet it is apparently logical and well thought out, and does not require too much suspension of disbelief (provided one can accept the anthropomorphic animals in the first place). Of course, as the name implies, it focuses on pirate adventures on the high seas. The system has drawn some

criticism for not making much difference between various animals, so that an elephant and a dog, for example, primarily differ in terms of size.

4.3.2 Anime

Anime means Japanese animated films (usually released on video rather than in film theaters). The related term manga refers to comic books with similar (or same) characters and themes as anime has. It is therefore a variant of toon genre. Anime and manga (though I am by no means an expert on the subject) are, however, significantly broader in their possible themes and subjects and most of them are intended for an adult audience rather than children as most western comics or animated films. They are also based on a more conventional logic (Japanese logic, however, which may at times seem odd to western viewers) and resemble toons only by virtue of being drawn rather than live-action. Some live-action films like Chinese kung-fu films (*A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987), *Once Upon a Time in China* (1991) and so on) could arguably also be included in this category due to their rather similar conventions.

The main feature of anime as a RPG genre is that it is based on these Japanese animated films or comics (I will use 'anime' as the label for this genre, although some of the games may be based on manga sources). The minor features vary, but action and adventure as well as various fantasy and science fiction themes from magic and superpowers to robots and space ships seem popular. Non-RPG anime and manga are very varied in their scope and range from romantic comedies (or tragedies) to slightly odd fantasy or science fiction stories to decidedly weird (to my western mind, at least). Usually they also mix all sorts of genres together. What other genre could even attempt to fit *Pokemon*-like cute pet monsters, equally cute superpowered schoolgirls, only marginally less cute giant robots and non-cute evil demons into the same story?

As can be guessed from the above, the setting of anime RPGs can vary widely from fantasy worlds to medieval Japan to modern Japan to futuristic urban

environment to post-holocaust wasteland to other planets or outer space. The level of realism can also range from fairly realistic to "anything goes", though usually settles around what is more or less normal for non-serious fantasy or science fiction. Style tends to be heroic and the mood light, but there can be considerable variation in both.

The most common subjects and themes are action and adventure related, with romantic entanglements a close second (at least in non-RPG anime). Following the tradition of Japanese monster-movies, those games that feature superpowers or giant robots will most likely also feature plenty of destruction of buildings surrounding the scene of the action.

Iconography obviously depends a great deal on whether the game is modeled after a particular series of anime or manga, but tends to be visually cute. In medieval styles swords and magic are probably popular, whereas in more futuristic styles all sorts of gadgets, guns and giant robots are likely. The same goes for character types, although on the basis of the anime that I have seen they are likely to be young, cute and embarrassed about getting crushes on each other. At least in film sources cute and very capable female characters seem fairly common.

Examples of the anime genre

Examples of manga include *Appleseed* and *Dirty Pair* in science fiction vein, *Maison Ikkoku* in a more realistic romantic style, *Ranma 1/2* in a non-realistic, humorous, martial-arts vein, and many others. Anime examples include *Akira* (1988), *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) and *Bubblegum Crisis* (1985), again all in science fiction vein. There are plenty of fantasy anime and manga as well, but the ones I have seen have mostly been science fiction.

The most important RPG example is *Big Eyes, Small Mouth* (1997; I have briefly paged through it once, but this short description is mostly condensed

from other people's reviews and descriptions) which is a generic anime RPG that allows a very wide range of styles to be explored from realistic romance to superpowers and magic to giant robots and science fiction, with notes for the special features of genres of anime. The system is fairly simple since there are only three attributes (body, mind and soul), but it is flexible and a lot of various normal and super abilities are included. There are also games based on anime series such as *Dominion Tank Police*, *Sailor Moon* and others, but I do not know anything about them, though in all likelihood they will follow the conventions of the series they are based on.

4.4 Science fiction

This entry deals with science fiction in general. Science fiction's variants and subgenres are space opera, cyberpunk and giant robot. Space opera is to science fiction what sword and sorcery is to fantasy, a lighter and more action-oriented style. Cyberpunk is a dark and dystopian near-future variant of science fiction and giant robot centers around huge walking vehicles. Each of these variants will be described in more detail in its own entry.

As has been noted earlier, science fiction as a literary genre is very broad in its themes, subjects and moods. Many writers, critics and researchers have attempted defining it, but there are always numerous exceptions to be found for any definition. Those who are interested in science fiction as a literary genre are advised to turn to *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (Clute and Nicholls, 1993), which in turn recommends *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy* (1986) by Gary K. Wolfe (*TESF* 1993:314). This entry, however, will deal with science fiction as a RPG genre.

Luckily, I doubt most RPG players are interested in considering the subtexts and metaphoric resonances of the stories they tell. Rather, they usually aim at fun and excitement, though their seriousness varies widely. From this point of view, a robot is a robot and does not necessarily represent dehumanization or

some such, and space ships do not stand for transcending metaphysical boundaries, they are a means of transportation and so on. Admittedly some more experienced GMs and players may graft very sophisticated subtexts into their stories, but such are not written into actual RPG books, which provide just frameworks for creating stories. Consequently, science fiction RPGs can be interpreted fairly literally and most are rather straightforward settings for adventuring. This greatly simplifies the task of defining science fiction for RPG purposes.

Earlier I pointed out how fantasy has the impossible as its most important element. This is very often true of science fiction as well. Thus science fiction and fantasy are not each others opposites (though they might seem to be if one considers their typical settings), they are simply divergent viewpoints on the impossible. Fantasy deals with the impossible by letting it be impossible and calling it magic. Science fiction, conversely, takes the view that if something impossible has indeed happened, then it is not in fact impossible, just currently unexplained. As Peter Nicholls (*TESF* 1979:161) argues, whereas fantasy may suspend natural law, science fiction must adhere to it [or at least pretend that it does]. In other words, science fiction also deals with what is impossible in real world terms, but which is considered to be possible or explainable in science fiction terms, and is made to seem more plausible by scientific – or at least pseudo-scientific – rationalizations. In other words, as *NESF* (1988:*vi*) puts it, "At the simplest level, fantasy asks to be read with a suspension of disbelief, while SF [science fiction] offers plausible arguments for suspending disbelief." Faster than light travel, anti-gravity and teleportation may be impossible in the real world (at least according to current scientific theories), but in science fiction they are not only possible, they are entirely natural and normal, and not miraculous or magical in any way. Usually the argument is that even if something is not considered to be possible today, it may become possible in the future once science and technology have advanced enough. Actually many conventional science fiction icons like faster than light travel (and the related hyperspace), force fields, anti-gravity and so on have been explained (in various

ways) so many times by so many authors that they are often accepted with little or no explanation at all in both novels and RPGs.

One exception to the potentially possible and arguable features of science fiction are so-called psi-powers or psionics. These mean such things as telepathy, telekinesis, pyrokinesis, extra-sensory perception and so on. While these obviously should be considered to belong to the realm of fantasy, they are a traditional feature of many literary science fiction stories and tend to be unthinkingly accepted as a part of science fiction. Perhaps this is because for characters who have such powers, they are considered to be innate abilities, and thus natural, as opposed to magic which is supernatural. The effects of psi-powers are certainly similar to magic, however, and I for one am of the opinion that they are a fantasy feature and not a science fiction one, and therefore science fiction that makes use of psi-powers includes them as a fantasy element.

The defining feature of RPG science fiction is therefore the view that sufficiently advanced science and technology are capable of miraculous feats, but it must be emphasized again that these miracles are considered natural (and thus scientifically explainable) and not supernatural or magical. This view (in RPGs) normally manifests not as quasi-scientific and philosophical discussion of the nature of the universe, but as straightforward advanced or miraculous technology. (I must again emphasize that I mean to say that advanced technology and a technological viewpoint are a defining feature of science fiction only as regards RPGs. Science fiction as a literary genre is extremely varied, and if one considers this definition from that perspective, it is very narrow and simplistic.)

Technology can be viewed from three different perspectives: it can be seen as a positive thing or even as mankind's salvation, a negative thing or something to be feared, or simply used as a more or less neutral setting or background. These viewpoints are often combined, however, and technology can simultaneously offer a brighter future (better medical treatment, cleaner and abundant energy,

improving the general quality of life) and threaten mankind with extinction (more efficient means of killing and destruction, pollution, exploitation of natural resources), as well provide a high-tech background for the story (details about setting).

The technological marvels that science fiction includes depend on how advanced the technology in general is, but relatively easy and accessible (even effortless) space travel is normal, although there is a difference between interplanetary and interstellar travel (and whether the latter is slower or faster than light). Since it has become quite clear by now that most of our own solar system will be unable to plausibly sustain more than fairly small colonies, some means of interstellar travel is required. Often this means faster than light travel through hyperspace or a space "warp", or at least so called wormholes that allow rapid slower than light transit between distant points in space. Hyperspace or warp are the most common and are amply demonstrated in *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* respectively (both films and RPGs). A wormhole appears at least in the RPG *Blue Planet*, where it links our solar system with that of Lambda Serpentis, allowing the intervening distance of 35 light years to be traversed in about six months.

Another typical feature of science fiction are of course aliens, who obviously are equivalents of fantasy's elves, orcs and so on. Although some more serious literary science fiction works have demonstrated how incomprehensible aliens can truly be, they are generally (in literature, RPGs and especially in films) seen merely as exotic-looking and exotic-thinking humans. Aliens (even the non-humanoid ones) also tend to have rather human psychologies, although all alien species will of course have their own idiosyncracies. To borrow two simplistic examples from *Star Trek*, the Klingons are honorable and the Vulcans are logical. As far as aliens go, neither Klingons nor Vulcans differ much from humans physiologically either.

Science fiction is also normally set in the future. Obviously the amount of time-displacement corresponds directly to how great technological marvels and

social or political changes science fiction can plausibly use. The usual scales are near future (from a few years to a few decades) and far future (from a few centuries to several millennia). Most space opera (see below) is set in the far future, whereas cyberpunk (see below) and post-holocaust (see below) favor near-future. The intermediate area (from a century to a few centuries) is for some reason less popular, though *Blue Planet* is again a good example, being set only two centuries in the future. There are some exceptions, of course. In time-travel games, for example, travel to the past is much more frequent than travel to the future. Furthermore, if Earth is not included in the game's world, reference to past or future has little relevance. *Star Wars*, for example, claims to be set "a long time ago in a galaxy far away" leaving it unclear whether that is in relation to Earth and our own time or some other point of reference in the film's own universe.

The settings of science fiction are obviously numerous and show a great deal of variation, but various planets, moons, space stations (or large spaceships) and asteroids are the most common. If these settings are numerous, they are likely to be seen as oddly homogenized (along the lines that modern nationalities are sometimes stereotyped, for example "all Finnish people are quiet and reserved until they get drunk" and analogously "all Martians are aggressive and like to get drunk"). If the game focuses on a single or few settings, however, more different interest groups within the setting will be detailed. Space is also a possible setting for encountering diverse spaceships or interesting space anomalies. In any case, science fiction settings tend to be either futuristic and high-tech or combine rural idyll and high technology. Rarely is anything truly primitive, unless the characters go exploring or crash land on uninhabited planets.

Exploration, politics and trade between different planets, species and so on are the usual themes and subjects of science fiction RPGs, although action and adventure elements are not likely to be forgotten either (traders often have to defend themselves against pirates, for example). Explorations will probably mean charting uninhabited planets and interacting with the local exotic (and

often dangerous) flora and fauna, perhaps solving some related mystery or encountering unexpected alien intelligence. Politics often revolves around aliens and their psychological idiosyncracies, and trade involves trying to make a profit. Depending on the scale, warfare (or at least unofficial skirmishing) between various interest groups on a planet, between planets, between multi-planetary organizations (corporations or governments) or between species are also possible, and various human values and philosophies can also be explored and contrasted with the help of alien ones.

The iconography of science fiction generally includes spaceships of varying sizes, lasers (or other "death rays") and other trappings of advanced technology, planetary or multi-planetary organizations from corporations to galactic empires, planets with exotic (and often dangerous) flora and fauna, and, of course, aliens. The details vary too much to list.

Typical characters depend on the focus of the game, but explorers (both adventurers and scientists), traders, rogues, politicians, soldiers, pirates, privateers, aliens and psi-talented individuals are common. If the game focuses on trade and politics, more peaceful character types are more likely (although there is always room for spies and agents). If, however, there is an interplanetary war going on, space pilots, mercenaries and soldiers will be more central.

I doubt science fiction has any particular intended emotional effect as horror and comedy do. Some might argue for a sense of wonder, fun and excitement, but that argument applies to RPGs in general, not just science fiction. This also depends on the game and the preferences of the players, of course. Cyberpunk games tend to be much darker in mood than generic science fiction, whereas space opera is definitely light. Science fiction in general is probably normal in mood and adventurous or ordinary in style, although both can vary very widely. Heroic science fiction tends to be space opera.

Examples of the science fiction genre

There are huge amounts of science fiction literature available in any library and there are so many writers that any listing of "good ones" can be argued over endlessly. Nevertheless, to give just a few examples (I am sure most readers will object to my having forgotten to include some obvious names), Isaac Asimov, Ian M. Banks, Arthur C. Clarke, Philip K. Dick, Harlan Ellison, Harry Harrison, Robert A. Heinlein, Frank Herbert, Vonda McIntyre, Jules Verne and H.G. Wells are all famous science fiction writers.

The obvious film and television examples are of course *Star Wars* (1977) and its sequels, and *Star Trek* (1966-) in its various guises, but *2001: Space Odyssey* (1968) and *Alien* (1979), as well as *Aliens* (1986) and the other sequels, are almost as famous. There are others, of course, but most science fiction films are actually space operas (as indeed are *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*) rather than more serious science fiction.

A good early example of a science fiction RPG is *Traveller* (1977). It was not the first science fiction RPG, even if it is often introduced as such, having been preceded by at least two games: *Metamorphosis Alpha* (1976), which appears to be little more than *D&D* in a science fiction setting (a generation starship where things have gone wrong) and *Starfaring* (1976), which, according to John Kim's RPG encyclopedia was the first science fiction RPG and was a humorous mix of science fiction clichés, Hollywood science fiction and ideas on futuristic computers and biomechanics. Nevertheless, *Traveller* is the most famous science fiction RPG and for that merit deserves a somewhat more detailed introduction. It has even made its way into *NESF*, where it is introduced (in the entry on 'games') by Matthew J. Costello as:

> Mark Miller's role-playing game Traveller (Game Designers Workshop, 1977) successfully captured all the elements of SF in one game: contact with aliens, space travel and combat, and vastly different economic and political systems. Using Miller's backdrop of the Imperium, a far-flung galactic empire, players are free to explore, battle, and trade. (*NESF* 1988:194)

Unfortunately, I have no direct experience with *Traveller*, so I will have to rely on outside sources for more information. According to Rory Hughes's review of the game on RPGnet (http://www.rpg.net/news+reviews/reviews/rev_3146.html), it is arguably the most innovative RPG system ever, because it introduced a skill system, technology levels, single dice-type game mechanics (as opposed to *D&D* and other games at the time, which used several different dice-types and rule mechanics in different situations), rules for designing new star-ships, worlds, animals, robots and of course characters (most of these are template based, the animal design is based on the animal's ecological niche and character design on careers), star-ship combat and maneuvering are based on vectors, and there are systems for economics and computers. Although the game is mostly realistic and hard science fiction oriented, there are also rules for psionics. In other words, as the above quote indicates, *Traveller* included more or less everything the hard science fiction genre needs. However, being an early RPG, and intended as a semi-generic system, it seems to focus more on rules and the game system than world background (it included, after all, rules for GMs to create their own worlds and settings), though a lot of background information apparently was later available in the form of supplements. There have been numerous revised editions of *Traveller*, including *MegaTraveller* (1987), *Traveller: The New Era* (1993) and *Marc Miller's Traveller* (1996). The game mechanics and setting were apparently changed considerably in each of these, but I do not know the exact details. *Traveller 2300* (1986; also known as *2300 A.D.*) is apparently unrelated in background or system, but was designed and created by the same writers and published by the same company. Two more recent excellent examples of a science fiction RPGs are *Blue Planet* and *Heavy Gear*, but they will be described under the headings of frontier and giant robot, respectively.

4.5 Space opera

Space opera is to science fiction what sword and sorcery is to fantasy: a lighter and more heroic and action-adventure oriented style. To begin with a non-RPG explanation of the term, according to Brian Stableford the term is "loosely applicable to any space adventure story, but particularly to those in which the scale of the action is extravagant" (*TESF* 1979:559) and can be "applied [...] to colorful action-adventure stories of interplanetary or interstellar conflict" (*TESF* 1993:1138). In other words, *Star Wars* – as well as *Star Trek* and most other science fiction films – are prime examples. Literary and film space opera often include great battles between huge starship armadas and doomsday weapons capable of destroying entire planets (or even suns), whereas RPGs tend to favor a somewhat smaller and more personal scale.

Space opera is very closely related to so called pulp science fiction. The only real difference, if any, is that whereas pulp adventure can take place anywhere, space opera – as the name implies – usually involves starships and space stations. Pulp science fiction got its name from the type of cheap paper it was printed on. In late 1890s many new cheap pulp magazines had come into being, and the market for magazine science fiction expanded considerably. This meant that science fiction readership also expanded, but the expectations of the audience were more along the lines of an action-packed adventure than thoughtful scientific extrapolation. According to Nicholls (*TESF* 1979:285), already by the time of H.G. Wells, a rift had opened between pulp and serious science fiction, which has never since really closed. According to Richard Lupoff (*NESF* 1988:328, 'SF' stands for 'science fiction'):

> Pulp SF is primarily concerned with physical problem solving and/or combat. Conflict is seen in terms of good protagonist versus bad antagonist (or occasionally natural catastrophe). Moral and psychological ambiguities are few. Style tends to be simple and structure of narration straightforward.

This could just as well be a description of space opera (including RPGs). The term is sometimes used pejoratively as this kind of story is quite simplistic, but I think uncomplicated adventure can sometimes be quite entertaining.

Another way to clarify the difference between more serious science fiction and space opera is to distinguish between hard and soft science fiction. In hard science fiction things are realistic and much closer to "scientific". In other words, mathematics, physics and current scientific developments are revered and physical laws are generally obeyed (although some conventions like faster than light travel are common exceptions). Soft science fiction, on the other hand, takes liberties with physical laws and is more concerned with an exciting story than realism. Encyclopedia GEAS distinguishes between high and low science   fiction (<http://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/societies/geas/CYCLO/H/High_Science_Fiction.ht ml> and <.../L/Low_Science_Fiction.html>), which are the same thing. (Their 'high' corresponds to my 'soft' and their 'low' to my 'hard'. I have substituted my terms for theirs for clarity.) In soft science fiction, "we don't need to understand how technology works, we just know it does and what it can do", whereas in hard science fiction

> reality is controlled by physics and rules that are within the reach of our minds. Where science fiction is often the interpretaion [*sic*] of science fact and where technology is not only important, but described in detail.

They also make a point that in soft science fiction space fighters often fly like planes and the world or crew can be saved by "technobabble". Space opera is clearly soft science fiction and what I have described above as general science fiction is generally hard (although there is variation in the actual "hardness" of individual RPGs). The more serious style of science fiction (as described above) is here referred to as hard science fiction.

To summarize, space opera is defined by the same advanced technology features as science fiction in general (it is, after all, also science fiction). Where space opera differs from hard science fiction is in its attitude to this technology and storytelling. Space opera is unconcerned with technological realism and is more interested in colorful and non-serious action and adventure.

The settings of space opera are obviously similar to hard science fiction. Starships and space stations are perhaps more frequent (since life in them is, due

to less realistic and simpler approach, much easier) and planets are only places for adventuring, not living in. Space opera is also never constrained to only a few planets. Instead, it is set in a huge area of space so that there is always a sufficient supply of exotic places to explore and space pirates, rebels or galactic empires to fight.

The subjects and themes of space opera have already been described above. To summarize, action and adventure are important, whether they stem from exploring the galaxy or fighting for some cause (money, freedom or just the fun of it). The plot elements are related to these. In other words, whatever provides a cause for action, adventure or an interesting mystery to solve (in short, anything that is exciting or fun) are good plot elements. The adventurous style also guarantees that the adventures the PCs get into are invariably seen as exciting, whereas in more serious science fiction they might be considered (from the character's point of view) frightening and unpleasant.

The iconography of space opera is also similar to that of science fiction in general, although there are likely to be even more spaceships and they are likely to be much better armed and either much larger or smaller and more airplane-like than in hard science fiction. As was noted above, they are also likely to be flown like airplanes. Personal weapons are also likely to be more frequent and, besides all sorts of guns, include even swords (normal or *Star Wars*-style light sabers). Obviously, space and personal combat are much more frequent in space opera than in hard science fiction. Aliens are also extremely frequent, but they are also more likely to be merely exotic and not truly alien. Space opera, being in general less realistic, also invariably includes psi-powers, which also tend to be more powerful than in hard science fiction.

Character types will obviously be more adventure-oriented as well. Often this means Han Solo-like rogues, mercenaries or rough traders who have frequent run-ins with space-pirates. Explorers are more likely to be adventurers or prospectors rather than scientists. Surprisingly perhaps, I believe actual soldiers

are less frequent because they would have to have superiors and follow rules and orders. Freedom of action is important in space opera.

Examples of the space opera genre

According to *TESF* (1993:1139) the five most important early writers of space opera were E.E. "Doc" Smith, William B. Ellern, David A. Kyle, Stephen Goldin and Edmond Hamilton, but I am not familiar with their writings. Of course, almost all science fiction writers have on occasion used some space opera elements, but it is in the world of cinema (and television) that the genre is most easily exemplified. All of the *Star Wars* films are pure space opera, as is *Star Trek* (all of the television series and films) and almost every film that is considered science fiction and set in space (action and adventure contents of these films tend to be high).

As for RPGs, *Star Wars* (1987) is again a good example. The game is set in the same universe as the films and is otherwise similar to them as well. I believe most characters are somewhat less legendary in power-level than those of the films, however, but still fairly heroic and powerful. The Encyclopedia GEAS lists *Star Trek* (the RPG) as low (hard) science fiction, however. I have no experience with the game so I cannot argue. Perhaps it is harder than the series and films are. Most hard science fiction RPGs can be rather easily adapted for space opera style as well.

4.6 Cyberpunk

Cyberpunk is a subgenre of science fiction that has enjoyed some popularity in the RPG field. The Encyclopedia GEAS explains quite well what cyberpunk is like:

> Cyberpunk concerns itself with the world of the near future, transformed into a dystopia by the influence of advanced technology. The Cyberpunk world is one

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controled [*sic*] by availablility [*sic*] of information, one in which multinational
companies have replaced governments as world powers, and one in which most people
have been relegated to an information-poor undercalss [*sic*] where they must fight for
money any way they can get it. It is a world full of virtual reality, computers, private
police   forces   and   Artificial   Intellegences   [*sic*].
(<http://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/societies/geas/CYCLO/C/Cyberpunk.html>)

The origins of the term itself, on the other hand, are well explained by John

Kessel (*NESF* 1988:116, original emphasis):

Although no story perfectly exemplifies cyberpunk, the movement can be described as
a fusion of high-tech ambience (thus, the prefix *cyber-*) with a countercultural, third
world, or even cheerfully nihilistic denial of middle-class American values (thus the
suffix *-punk*).

In other words, the defining features of cyberpunk are a dark, dystopian, violent

and selfish mindset (although somewhat lightened by being "cheerfully nihilistic"

and "cool"), the idea that information (from classified military intelligence to

research data to the whereabouts of wanted criminals) is the most valuable

commodity there is, extremely urbanized and industrialized environment and the

polarization between brand new glittering technology and poverty and squalor

(for example, due to high-tech industry and pollution, technology is cheap but

clean food is expensive). Of course, large and very powerful multinational

corporations, cybernetic implants or replacements (i.e. machine augmentations

of the human body) and the streets as a setting are important, too (few

characters in a cyberpunk game have permanent homes, although this is much

more emphasized in *Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0.* (1988) than in *Shadowrun* (1989)).

Cyberpunk is obviously set primarily in an urban environment, though rural or

wasteland settings are also possible. In the cities, the streets are the usual

setting, though that depends on the types of characters the players play. Most

characters live and work in the streets, but highly paid corporate executives, for

example, would of course live in luxurious apartments and work at the offices

of their corporation. It is not uncommon for street characters to be hired for

breaking into corporate compounds to steal (or retrieve) valuable information,

however, so settings vary between the streets and corporate compounds.

Nevertheless, the street is the default setting. There are other minor setting

possibilities such as military and orbital stations, but they are not as common.

As was mentioned in passing above, cyberpunk is generally set in the near future, from the year 2020 of *Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0.* to 2050 of *Shadowrun.*

Being a subgenre of science fiction, cyberpunk shares its emphasis on technology (although this emphasis is even more extreme in cyberpunk than in science fiction in general) and non-magical world-view. However, the latter is violated in *Shadowrun,* which mixes in the fantasy elements of magic, other races (orcs, elves, dwarves and trolls) and fabulous beasts. Nevertheless, in all cyberpunk, technology is literally everywhere. Being set in the near future, the level of technology is not as high as in science fiction in general. Space travel, for example, is slower than light and limited to the solar system. In other words, it is not much better off than in the real world today, although orbital stations are more common and people actually live in them.

Survival, selfishness, violence, being cool and maintaining "the edge" (whatever makes a character special and gives him/her an edge in certain situations) are cyberpunk's major subjects and themes. This applies equally to corporate characters as to hackers, police, gangsters and other street characters, although there may be differences in actual details (for example, a corporate character is more likely to order or pay for the murder of his/her rival than to personally shoot or hack him/her to pieces). All cyberpunk characters will probably live every day as if it were his/her last, because in the violent cyberpunk world, it may very well be.

I am a little uncertain of what emotional effect cyberpunk aims for. I personally find the violence and desperation depressing, but most people who like cyberpunk seem to think it is cool. It should be noted that my reservation applies only to the more serious cyberpunk. *Shadowrun,* for example, is not serious and thus can actually be fun to play. Then again, the fans of more serious and angst-ridden cyberpunk would probably consider it trivial and too light. Normally cyberpunk is dark or desperate in mood (although *Shadowrun* is light) and adventurous in style.

The usual character types are cyborg killers, computer experts, technological geniuses, pilots and drivers, police, corporate executives, rock musicians, media personnel, gang members, gangsters (mafia, yakuza or some other similar organization) and so on. *Shadowrun* also adds wizards, shamans and a few other magic-oriented types to the list.

The typical plot elements vary depending on the types of characters. Street characters (except perhaps for the police) will probably get hired for various illegal and shadowy operations from data or physical thefts (laboratory specimens, prototypes and files being the usual target) to retrieving stolen data or goods, or from finding lost persons to assassinations to terrorism and mayhem, usually involving the corporations or street gangs. Normally the last person to be trusted is the one who hires the characters in the first place. Law enforcement characters will probably be trying to maintain order while fighting violence, gangs and corruption. Corporate characters, on the other hand, will be involved in various power-games and political maneuvering against their rivals and each other, trying to get promotions and more power and money.

The iconography of cyberpunk has already been indirectly touched upon. The barren urban environment with huge buildings and crowded streets are ubiquitous. Everything is either dark, dirty and run-down or new, chromed and glowing under neon signs. Computers, weapons and technology are cheap and everywhere, but food and comfort are scarce. The characters, regardless of their occupation, are tough, selfish, self-reliant, paranoid, cool and probably cybernetically enhanced.

One important note about cyberpunk's iconography is that (like the technothriller), it is generally very much concerned with details about technology. No character in a cyberpunk novel will simply have a gun, s/he will have a ".42 caseless Ares P210 Rhino with an extended 16-round magazine, custom grip, recoil compensation and a laser sight" or something like that. The same applies to other gear and especially cyberware. This attention to detail makes the genre predominantly hard science fiction. However, in some areas,

such as the cybernet or matrix (basically the Internet evolved into virtual reality), which is essentially a fantasy world within the cyberpunk world, it is perhaps less realistic, but with the pace computers are being developed today, who can say?

Examples of the cyberpunk genre

Although they were not the first nor the last to write cyberpunk, the most popular authors of the genre are William Gibson (whose most important works are *Neuromancer* (1984), *Count Zero* (1986) and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988)) and Bruce Sterling (who has, for example, edited an influential cyberpunk anthology *Mirrorshades* (1986)). *Hardwired* (1986) and *Voice of the Whirlwind* (1987) by Walter Jon Williams are also a good examples.

There are no definitive film examples of what cyberpunk is really like (because Hollywood will not make a film dark enough in mood), but *Robocop* (1987) and its sequels, *Blade Runner* (1982), *Strange Days* (1995) and *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995) are all fairly good examples. Especially *Robocop* provides a good example not only of the casual violence and desperation of the streets, but also of the corporate politics and the power they have.

The most famous cyberpunk RPGs are *Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0.* and *Shadowrun*, though the latter has magic and supernatural elements and is actually technofantasy (see below). It is also much lighter in mood than *Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0.*, which in turn is quite dark. Cyberpunk RPGs are mostly interested in the appearances and trappings of cyberpunk, and not so much in what the movement itself stood for. Here is what John Kessel says about cyberpunk as a movement of science fiction literature (*NESF* 1988:118):

> beneath the emphasis on its most easily grasped features – the drugs and violence and computerese – the cyberpunk debate was really about the re-visioning of SF for the 1980s, about what is essential to the form, about the utility of the baggage that had been accumulated over fifty years of genre publishing. Like the New Wave, the cyberpunk movement invigorated the field.

In contrast, to illustrate my above claim about the more superficial nature of cyberpunk RPGs (and to offer another theory about the origins of the term), here is a quote from *Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0.* (Pondsmith et al. 1990:3, original emphasis):

> *Cyberpunk* comes from two words. *Cyber* – from the term cybernetic, or a fusion of flesh and machine technology. *Punk* – from an early 1980's rock music style that epitomized violence, rebellion and social action in a nihilistic way. The term was popularized in the Pre-Collapse days by a group of writers who specialized in writing science fiction with this kind of techno-melange. Their works featured a streamlined blend of rock, pop, sex, drugs and the highest, hippest technology – usually grafted onto your body somewhere. The archetypal cyberpunk heroes of the 80's ranged from technobarbarians roaming a Postholocaust world, to cyberchipped jet setters with designer bodies.

Not that this is a fault of cyberpunk RPGs in particular, as to varying degrees the same can be said about all science fiction RPGs. Nevertheless, cyberpunk as a RPG genre is a particular style of setting and mood and is not concerned with how it relates to science fiction in general.

Although it is not a very typical cyberpunk game (*Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0.* would perhaps be more representative) I will use *Shadowrun* as a more detailed example, since I have played it more often and know more about it. *Shadowrun* is clearly a cyberpunk game, although it is lighter and more humorous than most other cyberpunk games are. Nevertheless, it is set in the near future, primarily in an urban environment (the default setting is Seattle), and while the world is not as dark and dystopian as in most other cyberpunk games, the typical characters still live on the streets and spend most of their time and money on cybernetic enhancements, guns and equipment in order to become better killers, thieves, hackers or riggers (vehicle specialists). *Shadowrun* also adds magic and supernatural creatures – and hence fantasy – to the cyberpunk world. Magic in this game is fairly powerful, and comes in two varieties: wizard and shamanic, although the differences between them are mostly in philosophy and details. There are also so-called meta-humans, who are the traditional fantasy orcs, elves, dwarves and trolls. While their origins are magical and mysterious, there is nothing supernatural about them as such. There are, however, some truly supernatural beings (such as dragons) as well as purely magical ones like spirits and elementals.

4.7 Giant Robot

Giant robot is a subgenre of science fiction, and as such follows its conventions, settings, iconography and so on. The special feature of the genre are, naturally, giant robots. Actually, they are not really robots, as they usually require pilots to operate them. Nevertheless, they are about four to ten meters tall, usually humanoid, heavily armed, walking (rather than tracked or wheeled) vehicles. Sometimes giant robots can transform themselves into different forms such as cars or planes, as in the cartoon *Transformers* (1984; where they actually are robots rather than vehicles). This is rather rare, however, although there are a few plane to humanoid (and vice versa) transforming ones in *Mechwarrior* (1986; a RPG offshoot of the *Battletech* wargame). In *Heavy Gear* (1996) they also often have wheels or tracks which can be used for faster movement on roads and other level surfaces, though their primary movement mode is still walking.

In Japanese Manga (comic books) and Anime (animated films, such as *Robotech* (1985)) the giant robots are usually called 'mecha'. In *Mechwarrior* they are called BattleMechs or simply 'Mechs. In *Jovian Chronicles* (1997) they are exo-armors and in *Heavy Gear* they are gears, heavy gears or striders (though gears and striders are slightly different).

The settings of these games are usually various planets, though *Heavy Gear* is based solely on the planet of Terra Nova, and *Mechwarrior* and *Jovian Chronicles* also feature space settings. The giant robots are convenient because they can operate in diverse environments from urban to forests, mountains and swamps as well as in space and underwater. These games are also generally set in the far future, *Mechwarrior* in the thirty-first century and *Heavy Gear* in sixty-second, although *Jovian Chronicles* is the inevitable exception, being set apparently only in the twenty-third century.

As was mentioned above, the giant robots tend to be heavily armed, and although there may be civilian variants (at least in *Heavy Gear* there are), they

are typically military vehicles and as such their use in combat is a common subject of these games. Thematically these games also often revolve around military affairs, from reconnaissance and patrolling to all-out warfare and scrounging for spare parts. Although *Heavy Gear* and *Jovian Chronicles* can very well be played with civilian characters who may never go near, or even see, a gear/exoarmor, I believe most players will like to include them in an active role. As such, typical characters are pilots (military or mercenary) of these vehicles. Other military types and technicians are also popular, but any civilian character types are also quite possible. However, even if they can be played as simple wargames, these RPGs are not so restricted and the full range of the usual science fiction themes and subjects from exploration to romance can be used.

The iconography is normal for science fiction, although space ships tend to be rather more rare and less advanced than is common (except in *Jovian Chronicles*, I believe). The obvious addition to the usual science fiction imagery are the huge walking vehicles, typically bristling with various cannons and missiles.

Perhaps surprisingly, however, these games tend more towards hard rather than soft science fiction. Though the plausibility of giant robots themselves is arguable, they are generally treated in a rational, realistic manner. Therefore, although the common focus on combat and action might suggest that giant robot as a genre is a variant of space opera, it is actually closer to the more serious hard science fiction. Consequently, the style of giant robot games tends to be adventurous and they are more likely to vary in the direction of ordinary than heroic. The mood is generally neither particularly light or dark.

Examples of the giant robot genre

There are few literary examples to cite. Some Manga comics apparently feature giant robots, but I am not very familiar with them. Several novels have been

written for the *Battletech* (and, by extension, *Mechwarrior*) universe by Michael A. Stackpole, William H. Keith, Jr. and Robert Charrette. I have read some of those written by Stackpole and they are certainly good examples of all the features of the giant robot genre.

Film sources are equally scarce and more marginal, except for some Anime films like the aforementioned *Robotech* series. *Transformers* might also qualify, though in this case the giant robots are actually robots. In live-action films, the giant walkers used in the Battle of Hoth in *Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and in the smaller ones used in Battle of Endor in *The Return of The Jedi* (1983) are a marginal example because they are not humanoid (they are more like the striders of *Heavy Gear*). In *Aliens* there is a walking vehicle that is used to load cargo (and to fight the alien queen), which is a fairly good example as well, though rather small and open.

RPG examples have already been cited. *Mechwarrior* is rather militaristic (it is, after all, based on a wargame), though it does allow other characters besides pilots. In the *Battletech* universe (in which *Mechwarrior* is set) the giant robots are the most popular fighting unit in the field, though there are also rules for tanks, planes and infantry. The focus of the game is in fighting other BattleMechs and salvaging destroyed ones for spare parts, as the technology of producing them has deteriorated due to constant warfare so that only a few remaining factories can produce new ones.

Heavy Gear, on the other hand, is set on the planet of Terra Nova, which is an old colony of Earth which was left to fend for itself for over three centuries. It survived and successfully repelled Earth's later attempt to reclaim it as a colony. To be fair, this game is about much more than giant robots (or 'gears'), but since they are a very prominent (even eponymous) feature, I have included *Heavy Gear* in this section. The planet is torn by conflicts between two coalitions of states (and by their internal conflicts), but they are held somewhat in check by the unifying threat of renewed invasion from Earth. The two coalitions are Confederated Northern City-States and Allied Southern Territories, each

controlling one hemisphere of the planet. There is also a more anarchic stretch of wasteland, called the Badlands, between them. The northern coalition is generally characterized by political freedom, but almost fanatical religion, whereas the southern coalition is characterized by spiritual freedom, but totalitarian government. In this game the gears are state of the art rather than almost lost technology, and they are also only half the size (from four to six meters tall) and less than a tenth of the weight of the *Mechwarrior*'s BattleMechs. Again, they are the most popular battlefield unit, although the rules for infantry, tanks and other vehicles are again included and are used more often than in *Mechwarrior*.

4.8 Technofantasy

Technically, this section is excessive as the genres that are included in technofantasy could be described just as effectively as being both science fiction and fantasy. However, being considered as technofantasies allows them to be conveniently grouped together. These genres are the fantastic, dimensional and time travel, post-holocaust, superhero, steampunk and conspiracy. All of these will be described in more detail in their own entries, but brief summaries are perhaps in order. The fantastic focuses on the conflicting natural and supernatural codes (whereas technofantasy in general combines rather than conflicts them). The dimensional and time travel genre obviously focuses on travel between dimensions and/or in time. Post-holocaust focuses on adventurous exploration of a world almost destroyed and changed by a great catastrophe. The superhero genre deals with costumed superheroes (and supervillains) with special superhuman abilities and secret identities. Steampunk is an interesting blending of science fiction and fantasy elements with a historical nineteenth century setting, and conspiracy focuses on conspiracies, which normally in RPGs deal with aliens, magic or monsters.

Technofantasy is a combination of fantasy and science fiction. Normally this means that the two are indeed combined so that they can coexist. In other

words, technofantasy includes both fantasy elements (magic, supernatural beings and so on) and science fiction elements (advanced technology). The setting is often science fiction derived with magic and/or other fantasy elements added. Alternatively it can be science fiction that features technology that is so unbelievable that it cannot be considered anything but fantasy (even if it is technology) or fantasy that employs technological marvels without justifying or explaining them. Usually technofantasy combines both advanced science fiction-like technology and magic. This coexistence is not always entirely peaceful, but White Wolf's *Mage: The Ascension* (1993) is unusual in that in that game, magic and technology are incompatible. Actually the game explains it so that technology is a form of magic that is so strictly formalized and controlled that it has lost its magical nature. The actual magic in the game is a dynamic force (always mutable and requiring intense willpower to control), whereas technology is seen as static (it always works the same way and does not require more than pushing a button). Although the game is set in an alternate version of the contemporary world and its science fiction elements (worldview and the related conceptual breakthrough are major issues and there are cyborgs, genetics and space travel) are relatively few, they are sufficient to make the game technofantasy rather than pure fantasy.

The subjects and themes of technofantasy are perhaps closer to science fiction than fantasy. Exploration, adventuring and action are again typical, but there is some variation depending on the actual genre so this issue will be further discussed under the headings of the genres that are included in technofantasy, as will iconography, common plot elements and characters types.

Examples of the technofantasy genre

TEF considers Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) to be an ancestor of technofantasy, because, while it is often considered to be an ancestor of science fiction, it "in fact contains no science whatsoever outside vague allusions to the mysterious powers of electricity [...]" (*TEF* 1997:935). Thus *Frankenstein* will

serve as a literary example of technofantasy. There are also many science fiction stories that focus so completely on the fantasy notion of psi-powers that they could technically be considered technofantasies. With a similar argument, *Star Wars* can be seen as a technofantasy, because of the central and powerful role that the Force plays in it (and much of the technology is rather fantastical as well).

RPG examples are *Star Wars* (again) and, in a very different style, *Mage: The Ascension*, which was already briefly described above. The premise of the game is that in the Middle Ages magic worked and was normal, and wizards strived for enlightenment. Then a group of wizards (which later became known as the Technocracy) decided that instead of a few wizards reaching enlightenment, they should try to enlighten the masses by making magic accessible to them in the form of technology (which is a static, predictable and controllable form of magic). Thus the technological and scientific worldviews of the modern world were formed and history was rewritten so that magic had never existed. In the contemporary world, the old-school wizards, known as the Traditions, fight against the dominance of the Technocracy, because technology is making the world static and suffocating its vitality. The PCs are expected to belong to one of the Traditions and to oppose the Technocracy (which is also divided into factions), though both the Traditions and the Technocracy fight against insane renegade wizards and evil demons. Major issues in the game are those of worldview and viewpoint. Obviously, the Traditions and the Technocracy have very different worldviews (and all of the factions that make up both have their own worldviews as well), and whether any of them can be called right depends of the point of view one wishes to adopt.

4.9 The Fantastic

The fantastic is included in technofantasy because of its related, but more rare and minor theme. The defining feature of the fantastic is a conflict between the real world and both fantasy and science fiction. In other words, in the fantastic

the real world is incompatible with fantasy and science fiction elements. However, the existence of such a conflict means that the fantasy and science fiction elements do actually exist in the real world of the fantastic, even if they are considered impossible. Hence, the fantastic belongs to technofantasy.

I have borrowed the notion of the fantastic from Tzvetan Todorov (from *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, 1975), as modified by Amaryll Beatrice Chanady. To put it shortly, for Todorov, the fantastic is the hesitation between a natural explanation (even if strange) and a supernatural or impossible one. Chanady (1985:12), however, argues that this hesitation is far too fleeting in works of the fantastic, and uses the term 'antinomy', explained thus:

> [...] the simultaneous presence of two conflicting codes in the text. Since neither can be accepted in the presence of the other, the apparently supernatural phenomenon remains inexplicable. (Chanady 1985:12.)

I think this is valid, and it does make the fantastic more lasting, since in most works the hesitation indeed does not last very long until some kind of an explanation is accepted. In any case, in both fantasy and science fiction, what would be considered supernatural or impossible in our world are often accepted to be normal. For example, in fantasy magic is perfectly natural, and while we may still be made to hesitate between a magical explanation and a mundane one, they are both natural explanations. Or in Chanady's terms, there are no conflicting codes, since the magical belongs to the normal code. Likewise, in science fiction such things as faster than light travel and antigravity which are not considered possible in our world are often accepted as possible and are unremarkable. Thus when we encounter a man who can fly in these genres, there is no conflict or hesitation between possible and impossible, we will accept that he either uses magic or some kind of technological marvel.

The real fantastic appears when something unexplainable happens in the real world and we have two conflicting codes: the supernatural and the natural. Theoretically the conflicting codes do not have to be supernatural and natural, they could as well be two conflicting codes of magic in a fantasy game.

However, normally the conflict is between the real world and something that is impossible in it. This is the defining feature of the fantastic.

A common related feature is evidence (or lack of it despite witnesses) both for and against the supernatural code, which deepens the conflict because it cannot be easily dismissed. The television series *The X Files* (1993-), for example, repeatedly makes the UFOs and aliens appear either real or just a part of an elaborate hoax created by a government conspiracy. The same applies to many of the more supernatural themes the series explores. Very often the audience is made to hesitate between the conflicting supernatural explanation (normally presented by Mulder) and the unlikely but natural one (normally presented by Scully). To the series's credit, both viewpoints are often argued rather convincingly.

As was mentioned, the setting is normally based on the real world, because that is the easiest way to provide any conflict between natural and supernatural. Otherwise the players (or viewers or readers) will simply adjust their view of the story's world towards fantasy (or science fiction) so that the conflict disappears. In other words, if the setting is not firmly grounded in the real world, the players will simply accept the seemingly impossible by assuming that the story's world does actually allow it. They adopt the technofantasy viewpoint and combine the two codes instead of conflicting them. Therefore the real world is important for emphasizing that there is a conflict and the supernatural is indeed impossible in the story's world. The iconography of the fantastic is therefore also (except for the supernatural or impossible elements) as close to the real world as possible.

The emotional effects that the fantastic aims for are hesitation, mysteriousness and a sense of wonder. Although often rather close to horror (which takes a similar viewpoint in that the monster often conflicts with the real world because it does not belong there), the fantastic usually is intended only to puzzle the players rather than scare them. Consequently, the mood is perfectly normal and the style ordinary.

In pure fantastic (which is extremely rare in RPGs), the plot elements usually relate to mundane events, depending on what the characters do for a living and what their hobbies are and so on. Occasionally, however, something odd, strange and apparently supernatural or impossible happens. Normally this results in the PCs beginning to investigate such phenomena. Whether they ever reach any conclusions depends on how long the GM can sustain the fantastic (because once they do reach the conclusion that the supernatural is possible, the conflict disappears and the genre shifts to technofantasy). This is a very difficult genre to sustain, because if the supernatural and impossible events are frequent or explainable, they will soon begin to be accepted as possible and normal, whereas on the other hand, if the supernatural events are rare, the players may get bored of playing mundane real-world characters.

Therefore, the fantastic is normally combined with some other genre that is based on the real world, such as technothriller or war, so that the PCs have something exciting and challenging to do even when nothing special or supernatural happens. Thus the character types of the fantastic, while technically any normal, everyday person would suffice, tend to be some sort of investigators (such as field researchers or special agents) so that they have a reason to encounter odd phenomena repeatedly, or in other "interesting" lines of work, such as military special forces or private detectives so that they have something to do even when nothing fantastic happens.

Examples of the fantastic genre

Literary examples are actually fairly few and far between. Most horror and technofantasy start out as fantastic, but soon the characters and readers come to accept that the supernatural is not impossible and the conflicting codes that the fantastic depends on are reconciled. One example could be Stephen King's *Cujo* (1981), where it is left unclear whether the eponymous dog is possessed by a

demon or simply has rabies. However, as was explained earlier, *The X Files* is a very good television example of the fantastic.

RPG examples are fairly few as well, because as was explained above, the fantastic by itself is a very difficult genre to sustain effectively. *Call of Cthulhu* (1981), although primarily horror, might qualify in some parts. Its insanity rules, for example, reflect the way that the characters' minds react to the conflict between natural and supernatural: they cannot resolve it and insanity results. Most games listed as examples under the conspiracy genre might also qualify, at least until the characters discover the truth about the conspiracy. Rather, the fantastic is primarily an add-on genre that can be used for an occasional effect in any game that is set in the real world. I personally think that a realistic technothriller game like *Millennium's End*, for example, would benefit from an occasional touch of the fantastic.

4.10 Dimensional and time travel

The main feature of dimensional travel is obviously travel from one dimension to another. Actually this means travelling from one world to another that is removed from it along some spatial dimension other than the normal three. Brian Stableford uses a nice analogy for this. He says these parallel worlds lie alongside our own "in the same way that two two-dimensional universes may lie together like pages in a three-dimensional book" (*TESF* 1979:447). Because of this dimensional displacement, parallel worlds are often called "other dimensions". The dimensional displacement means that whereas worlds in our own universe are separated from each other by simple distance, the worlds in other dimensions can actually coexist in the same location. In any case, the real significance of this device is that travel between these different worlds is more or less instantaneous.

This entry also includes the notion of time travel, which means travelling back and forth through the dimension of time. In RPGs dimensional travel is more

popular, however, and sometimes the two are combined. The means may be magical or technological, portable or a fixed portal (whether one-way or two-way, stable or fluctuating on and off or between various times and/or places). Time and dimensional travel occur in both science fiction and fantasy, the only real difference is in the means. In science fiction, a technological device is used, whereas in fantasy the means are magical (often in the form of portals). Technofantasy can use either or both methods. In any case, the effect is so marvelous as to border on magical even if technologically explained. Besides, some of the different worlds found in other dimensions tend to have different rules of reality that allow, among other things, magic.

The settings of dimensional and time travel games obviously vary in time, space and realism. Often time travel games begin from contemporary Earth, but equally often there is no telling where or when the characters will end up. Dimensional travel also usually begins from Earth (though not as often the normal, contemporary Earth), but may as well begin from any other world. In *Hârn*, for example, there are mysterious Godstones which allow teleportation between two such stones, some which may be in different worlds.

The subjects and themes vary mostly between two poles. Dimensional travel is either used for exploration of different worlds, or the original world must be defended against invaders from other dimensions. Time travel likewise tends to be either exploration or defending history against time bandits who try to change or exploit it. In dimensional travel the defensive approach is much more common (i.e. strange beings – hostile or not – come to Earth from other dimensions, and the characters mostly stay on Earth), but in time travel the characters more often actively travel through time. If the two are combined, travel and exploration are the norm. Although time travel could be used to teach history, I believe its purpose is more often than not to throw the characters into strange and potentially dangerous situations, where they cannot always rely on modern technology (it is hard to find replacement batteries and suitable ammunition for modern firearms in historical settings, for example).

The iconography varies somewhat depending on approach. Some means of travelling between times and/or dimensions is obviously required, but the form that this takes varies. In *TimeLords* (1987; in which travel between both times and dimensions is possible) it is a small object that is used by mental commands, whereas in the films *Stargate* (1994; dimensional travel) and *Time Bandits* (1981; mostly time but also dimensional travel) they are portals that the travellers must step through. Similarly, in most post-holocaust games (see below) there are fixed areas (usually the sites of nuclear explosions) that link Earth to "somewhere else". In *Continuum: Roleplaying in the Yet* (1999), there is no device or portal, the time-machine is the human body once the character learns the trick of travelling through time. Usually time travel is facilitated by some kind of a technological device, but dimensional travel is dependent on fixed portals or places where two dimensions happen to touch each other. In *WarpWorld* these portals are explained as "think of it as two world maps on different sides of the same sheet of paper, with a pinhole in the paper allowing passage from one to the other" (Porter 1991:7). Other than the means of travelling, the iconography obviously depends on the settings that the characters end up in, whether it is historical or alien.

Characters vary according to whether they are accidental travellers, in which case they can be anything, or a selected team of specialists, in which case they are likely to be military, scientist or researcher types. Accidental travellers are more likely, in which case any group of PCs may stumble upon a device or portal that will take them to a different time and/or place. Specialist teams are more likely in the type of time (less commonly dimensional) travel where the characters are part of some "time police" organization that captures criminals who try to change and exploit history. In *Fringeworthy* (1981), for example, the PCs are specialist dimensional exploration teams.

Accidental travellers most likely start out as ordinary, although they may quickly gain experience and move on to adventurous style. Specialist teams are more likely to be adventurous to begin with. Dimensional and time travel genre

has no particular mood, although if anything, it is more likely to vary in the direction of light.

Examples of the dimensional and time travel genres

Arguably the most influential literary example is H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) which introduced a device that facilitated controlled back and forth travel in time, instead of just dreams or random displacement. Good film examples are *Time Bandits* (1981), *12 Monkeys* (1995), *The Terminator* (1984) and *Terminator 2* (1991), *Stargate* (1994) and *Back to the Future* (1985), as well as the television series *Dr Who* (1963-89).

There are some time-travel RPGs, but the theme is not very common because of the problems of handling all the paradoxes and other complications that quickly turn up in such stories. In *Continuum: Roleplaying in the Yet* this is handled by the history being essentially unchangeable, and trying to change it will only hurt the character himself. *TimeLords*, on the other hand, dodges the paradoxes and other problems by giving the PCs not only one time-line to explore, but an infinite amount of them. In essence, every time something significant (or even not so significant) happens, time splits into two or more branches (Porter 1990:7). For example, in one time-line a person might get hit by a car, but in another s/he manages to jump out of the way. The result is a huge variety of alternate worlds, referred to as the multiverse (a term apparently coined by Michael Moorcock, see *TEF* 1997:668). Some of the worlds are similar to ours, others may be very different. Some may work according to science fiction principles, while others may be pure fantasy. The game also has two settings: in one the players play characters who represent the players themselves (this is, as far as I know, a feature that is unique to this game) in an alternate time-line. There is a simple system for determining the player's approximate attributes, but also a system for creating normal characters if the players do not want to play themselves. In any case, one of the PCs has found a strange device called a Matrix that randomly throws them around both time and dimensions until they

learn to control it. In the other setting the PCs are members of some sort of time patrol (guidelines are given for a few different approaches), where they solve problems created by time-traveling criminals (who try to change history to suit their own needs) or accidental time-travelers (such as the characters of the primary game).

As was mentioned above, *Hârn* is an example of a fantasy game that allows travel between different worlds. Dimensional travel is more common than time travel, but it is also more peripheral in that in most games that feature dimensional travel it is not a very central issue. For example, most of the games listed under post-holocaust feature dimensional portals, but these portals are less important in these games than the post-holocaust theme. One game where dimensional (and not time) travel is central is *Fringeworthy*, where a dimensional gate is found in 2008 in Antarctica, and the U.N. begins to send elite teams to explore other dimensions.

4.11 Post-holocaust

Post-holocaust usually combines elements of both science fiction and fantasy and I have therefore included it in technofantasy. There are exceptions, however, and *Twilight: 2000* (1984), for example, has no fantasy or science fiction elements in it and is a combination of realistic post-holocaust and war genres.

The most important feature of the post-holocaust genre is that a major catastrophe has almost destroyed the Earth and killed most of its inhabitants. It is noteworthy that post-holocaust games are rarely very interested in the holocaust itself, which is typically quickly explained in the introduction. Rather, they focus on the life after the catastrophe, varying from immediately to several generations afterwards. By far the most common catastrophe is a Third World War, which is featured in, for example, *Twilight: 2000*, *WarpWorld* (1991), *Rifts* (1990), *The Morrow Project* (1980) and *Afterwars* (1991). There are other

possibilities from theological (the Apocalypse in *The End* (1997)) and magical cataclysms (as in *Tribe 8* (1998), where powerful demons suddenly appeared, destroying and enslaving most of the world) to ecological (as in *Blue Planet*, where an a man-made virus destroys most of Earth's edible plants, resulting in catastrophical food shortages).

In any case, the post-holocaust or post-catastrophe setting is the defining feature of the post-holocaust genre. As was noted above, this setting can be entirely realistic and contain no fantasy or science fiction elements at all (except that the post-holocaust setting itself is generally considered to be a science fiction element). However, almost all post-holocaust RPGs do also feature magic and/or the supernatural. The reasoning usually is that the tremendous amounts of energy released by nuclear weapons and the millions of souls freed from their bodies by these energies cause magic (and sometimes old gods) to return to the world and portals, gates or rifts to open into other dimensions. Mutants are another fairly common feature of post-holocaust games. These are rarely realistic, the super-powered or simply grotesque and bloodthirsty varieties are the norm. There are also more realistic games without any fantasy features, of course, and *Twilight: 2000*, *The Morrow Project* (apparently) and *Blue Planet*, for example, are such.

The setting is normally Earth. Although science fiction might include similar themes on other planets, those games that focus on life after the holocaust are set on Earth, where the characters usually cannot simply escape on a spaceship. The time of the catastrophe is generally in the near future (or was for those games that were set on the year 2000) but the time that has passed between it and the beginning of the game varies. Some (such as *Twilight: 2000*) are set almost immediately afterwards, but usually a few decades or even a couple of centuries have passed.

The main subjects and themes are exploration and survival. Exploration is important, because the humans who have survived live in well-defended and isolated settlements, and since all communications with other settlements were

severed during the catastrophe and all sorts of mystical, magical and dimensional beings have appeared after the catastrophe, no one really knows what is out there. In other words, there is a whole world filled with old and new marvels to be explored. The dimensional gates have allowed various strange beings to have come to live on Earth (many of them hostile, some friendly), and magic and surviving or rebuilt pre-catasthrophe technology allow for all sorts of player characters, making post-holocaust an ideal genre for those who like unpredictable multi-genre adventuring.

The ravaged world of these games is often rather hostile, however, and those characters who go outside established settlements will be faced with trying to survive in the wilderness. Consequently, most post-holocaust games are also action and adventure oriented, and the characters will be faced with a constant shortage of safe food, supplies, ammunition and other things they will need to see the next day and compete with others who have the same goal.

The typical plot elements are usually related to action and adventure oriented exploration and survival. In other words, exploring the remains of old cities for pre-catastrophe goods and technology while fighting other explorers, mutants, strange creatures and dimensional invaders is normal in most post-holocaust games. In the more realistic ones (such as *Twilight: 2000*), the idea is much the same, except that mutants, strange creatures and dimensional invaders are replaced by enemy soldiers and bandits.

It would be easy to assume that the emotional effect that post-holocaust games aim for would be dark and desperate, but because most of them (such as *WarpWorld*) are not very serious and center on adventure and exploration, or (such as *Rifts*) simply on fighting outlandish mutants and monsters from other dimensions, the mood is actually usually light. The more realistic games have potential for very dark and grim survivalism, but they too tend to get carried away by non-serious action and adventure. Style generally varies from adventurous to cinematic, though many *Rifts* characters are certainly powerful enough to approach an epic class.

The iconography of post-holocaust includes the ruins of the old cities and buildings, wild and overgrown fields and parks and the pockets of remaining civilization (more or less civilized), as well as dwindling resources of pre-catastrophe technology (especially ammunition for high-tech weapons, perhaps also gasoline and canned foods). In most games fantastic beings (such as dragons) and mutants, as well as even stranger beings from other dimensions and the dimensional gates and magic are also frequent.

The typical characters in post-holocaust games are often either fighters (mercenaries, soldiers, adventurers and so on) or magic users (or have powerful psi-abilities). Then again, in this genre they have to be to survive in the wilderness. The more peaceful character types are better off staying in established settlements. Some games (such as *Rifts* and *WarpWorld*) allow non-human characters as well, but the same applies to them.

Examples of the post-holocaust genre

There are probably hundreds of literary examples of the post-holocaust genre in science fiction, but they are often either somewhat more serious in mood, or result in a utopian pastoral idyll. To give just a couple of examples, Stephen King's *The Stand* (1990) is a long and detailed story of a non-nuclear holocaust where the characters actually live through the ordeal. Laurence James has written (as James Axler) a rather pulpish Death Lands series (1986-1992), which is nevertheless quite close to the mood and style of most post-holocaust RPGs. Notable film examples are *Mad Max* (1979) and especially its sequels *Mad Max 2* (1981) and *Mad Max Beyond the Thunderdome* (1985). More recent ones are *Waterworld* (1995) and *Postman* (1997), though none of these films are particularly good examples of what post-holocaust as a RPG genre is like.

RPG examples, on the other hand, are numerous. Both *WarpWorld* and *Rifts* are post-World War III games where the nuclear explosions have created dimensional gates and magic has returned to the world. The main differences are that *WarpWorld* is low on technology level and the characters are capable but not superhuman, whereas *Rifts* features a lot of very advanced science fiction technology and favors extremely powerful characters. *Rifts* is also more action-oriented, although *WarpWorld* is quite adventurous as well. In *WarpWorld* there is also a unique feature that ensures technology level stays low: all technology higher than black powder will mysteriously fail to work, or will work for a while every now and then but will then fail again. This makes magic the more reliable and powerful, though also the more difficult, alternative in the game.

In the non-fantasy vein, *Twilight: 2000*, for example, is set right after the World War III has started and nuclear weapons have destroyed much of Europe, leaving various scattered military units to fend for themselves. The game assumes that the PCs will be soldiers, but civilians can also be played (though their chances of survival are rather slim). *The Morrow Project* is apparently rather similar in idea. I have no personal experience with it, but in John Kim's encyclopedia (<http://www.ps.uci.edu/~jhkim/rpg/encyclopedia/index.html>) it is described as:

> A realistic post-holocaust game, centering on agents deliberately frozen to wake up 150 years after World War III and rebuild the world. However, something has gone wrong with the Project. This game has a lot of attention paid to detail and hardware, reflecting the survivalist genre. The system is combat-focussed, with other issues covered only after the 3rd edition.

As was mentioned above, *Blue Planet* features an ecological catastrophe, but while important to the game's overall setting, this catastrophe took place on Earth while the game's primary setting is another planet, Poseidon. Therefore, while post-holocaust is featured in *Blue Planet*, it is not central to it, and the game will be discussed further under the heading of the frontier genre.

4.12 Superhero

Superhero is very strongly a comic book genre, and the examples of superhero characters or groups given here are from comic books, not RPGs. The defining feature of the superhero genre are obviously characters who have special superhuman powers and who dress in colorful costumes. Ron Tiner nicely summarizes the characteristics which define a typical superhero (*TEF* 1997:905):

> the possession of one or several superhuman abilities; the use of these abilities against injustice and criminality; a dramatic costume expressing the unique powers; a perceived need to hide these powers from the general public, necessitating the establishment of an "ordinary" persona to hide the secret identity [...]; consequent difficulties in personal relationships, especially romantic ones.

Tiner goes on to point out that these special abilities are usually not explained as magic but are almost always given a nonsense-science rationale, such as various cosmic, gamma or other rays (e.g. The Fantastic Four and The Hulk), being bitten by a radioactive insect (e.g. The Spiderman), exposed to strange experimental substances some scientist has been working on (usually the scientist him/herself is the one exposed, such as the Swamp Thing) or the ever-popular mutation (e.g. nearly all of the X-Men), which has been used so much that it seems that in the superhero world all mutations are beneficial because they confer superpowers. The superhero genre therefore naturally belongs to technofantasy since it combines clearly fantastic elements (the superpowers) with pseudo-scientific explanations. Very often there are also genius inventors, who design and build science fictional gadgets or robots (Reed Richards of the Fantastic Four, for example, though the evil supervillains are usually the ones who build robot armies). It is also not unusual for these inventors to lack other superpowers and to build themselves a powered suit of armor which allows technological replication of many superpowers like flight, shooting rays, superhuman strength and so on (e.g. the Iron Man). Sometimes superheroes are just "normal" humans (they are rather exceptional, but have no superpowers) who are dedicated to (or obsessed with) fighting crime (Batman is a famous example). In rare cases, the superpowers are indeed given a magical or mythical origin (Dr. Strange, Thor and Captain Marvel, for example).

Superhero RPGs tend to be much like the comics in that the PCs are superheroes who fight various supervillains or other superbeings. One major difference is that it is much easier for heroes, villains and bystanders (ordinary people) to get hurt or die in the fights. While this is not unheard of in comic books, in them the characters are more likely to spend several pages punching, kicking and blasting each other with no obvious result other than damage to their surroundings, and bystanders are seldom hurt and rarely killed.

Superhero games are generally set on an alternate Earth, though excursions to other worlds or dimensions are also possible. While individuals with superpowers are not particularly common (in the *Heroes Unlimited* (1984) RPG it is estimated that about one person in a million has superpowers (Siembieda 1998:39)), they are often through their activities and costumes a visible and important part of their world. As Kevin Siembieda says in *Heroes Unlimited* (1998:39, original emphasis):

> The fundamental concept in any game, comic book or story about superbeings is that such people are *real*. Thus, in this fictional version of our modern Earth, us ordinary folk have come to accept that superhumans, mutants, and nonhumans possessing extraordinary power, soar through our smog-filled skies and fight for truth and justice.

The actual setting is usually urban, probably because there are more people (and therefore there will more plausibly be more than one superhero or supervillain in the same area) and opportunities in cities. Furthermore, while the heroes are of course supposed to protect the lives and property of ordinary humans, it is appropriately dramatic that a fight between superheroes and villains will endanger bystanders and the surrounding buildings.

The subjects and themes of superhero games are often rather straightforwardly fighting crime and supervillains (and sometimes other superheroes as well), although as the continuing popularity of various superhero comic books suggests, quite a lot can be done with this concept. One likely recurring theme is a conflict between the law and superheroes, because the latter are normally vigilantes who, while they fight for law, order and justice, do so on their own and thus their actions are, paradoxically, illegal. Personality clashes and perhaps

even romantic entanglements are normal as well, and maintaining the secret identity is always important.

Some darker games have different subjects and themes, however. In *UNSanctioned* (2000) and *Brave New World* (1999), for example, the superpowered beings are not heroes as much as renegades who fight against an oppressive government. In these games the subjects and themes are more along the lines of survival and trying to avoid capture rather than just heroic action and adventure.

Superhero RPGs are not as light in mood as superhero comics generally are. Indeed some RPGs are even dark (such as the aforementioned *UNSanctioned* and *Brave New World*). Although the focus in both RPGs and comics is on action and adventure, due to the higher casualty rates of heroes, villains and bystanders, RPGs are – surprisingly perhaps – somewhat more serious and not as funny. For example, in the aforementioned *Heroes Unlimited*, the heroes, villains and ordinary people are far from invulnerable and are even likely to get hurt or killed in fights. This is not to say that superhero RPGs are serious (far from it, usually), just that they are a little darker than superhero comics normally are.

The most important part of the iconography of superhero RPGs are obviously the costumed heroes and villains. Likewise, the typical characters in a superhero RPG are very obviously superheroes. Of course it is possible to play an ordinary human in a superhero RPG as well, but I cannot imagine why anyone would want to. Normally it is assumed that the players will be heroes, though in some games (as in, again, *UNSanctioned* and *Brave New World*) they are persecuted, and of course some players may want to try playing supervillains.

All superheroes (even the "normal" ones like Batman) are naturally much more powerful than most ordinary humans, but there are large differences between the powers of various superheroes. Although superhero RPGs naturally tend towards a heroic style, the usual power level of the heroes and villains is far

from omnipotent. Most characters have one or two impressive powers and perhaps a few lesser "side-effects", but there are definite limits to what they can do. Usually creating a Superman-class character (practically invulnerable and extremely powerful) would require GM's permission, as it would be so powerful that game balance would very likely suffer. Nevertheless, the style is usually quite heroic, although in some grittier games it can be only adventurous.

Examples of the superhero genre

Superheroes in general are not entirely confined to the comic book realm, since James Bond and other world-saving heroes are arguably rather superheroic in their deeds. However, the type of hero in a strange costume with strange powers that the term 'superhero' normally refers to for the most part does appear only in comic books. Apparently the first comic book superhero was Superman, who began his adventures in the 1930s. It was soon realized that ordinary mortal villains were too easily defeated and various supervillains emerged. Other superheroes also soon appeared, including Batman, Spiderman, the Fantastic Four, the X-Men and so on. I do not know of any novels about superheroes (although some surely exist), but obviously there are several comic books by DC Comics (e.g. Batman and Superman) and Marvel Comics (e.g. Spiderman, the Fantastic Four and the X-Men). Superheroes are also given a more realistic and insightful, as well as darker, treatment in the excellent *Watchmen* (1987) by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons.

Noteworthy television and film examples are not many. Batman appeared in a television series in the 1960s (though this was more of a comedy series) and later in some more serious films. The Superman has also appeared in a number of films (first in 1978), but the most recent superhero film (and the one with the best special effects, at least) has been *X-Men* (2000). There are also some animated series, but they tend to be rather poor.

Heroes Unlimited is a generic superhero RPG, which allows a staggering range of different major and minor superpowers and extraordinary but not "super" talents. It does not, however, have any particular setting apart from the real world (except with superheroes, so "real" is relative) and the only focus seems to be on combat rules so action and adventure are the preferred style.

Aberrant (1999; I have only a passing familiarity with the game) is a more recent superhero game where the heroes (called "novas") are really heroes and have worldwide support. The game is set in the near future in 2008, where a satellite accident which spilled radioactive materials into the atmosphere has caused people to turn into novas. Since then a worldwide Project Utopia has harnessed their powers for worldwide common good, and has apparently worked quite well. The novas in this game are powerful to begin with and the power-system appears to be flexible. However, while there are hints of conspiracies and things are not quite as blissful as they seem, there is nothing concrete, and there is very little for the novas to fight against. There are only a few thousand of them worldwide to begin with, and it appears very few of them are what one would call supervillains, so this is not a very typical superhero setting.

Of the darker style of superhero RPGs, the aforementioned *Brave New World* and *UNSanctioned* deserve a brief description. (I have not seen either, so the following descriptions are condensed from other people's descriptions.) In *Brave New World* the superpowered individuals are called "Deltas". The world is divergent from the real world, the major turning point being that a group of villainous Deltas attempted to assassinate J.F. Kennedy. Kennedy survived, but his wife did not, and soon Kennedy forced a law that required Deltas to register and work for the government or face lifelong imprisonment. It is assumed in the game that the PCs will be renegade Deltas who fight against the oppressive government. The superpowers in the game are ready-made packages, of which the player must choose one for his/her character. This makes character creation easier, but does not allow much customization. *UNSanctioned* is similar in that the superpowered individuals are required to register themselves and the players

are assumed to be fighting oppression. The source is this time the United Nations instead of the US government, however.

4.13 Steampunk

Steampunk is basically technofantasy set in the nineteenth century (generally the Victorian era or the Age of Steam) instead of the future. The defining features are the era of the setting, along with some fantasy and science fiction elements. The term 'steampunk' was coined in analogy with cyberpunk, because as a literary genre steampunk is set in a very Dickensian nineteenth century (corrupt and polluted, especially reminiscent of *Hard Times* (1854)). However, as a RPG genre steampunk is more optimistic and concerned with high adventure and defeating evil masterminds like doctor Moriarty. A rather light and adventurous mood is thus also important to steampunk.

The setting is generally Europe, with the British Empire and London being especially important. *Space: 1889* (1988), however, extends the European empires into space and allows the Moon and other planets to be used as settings as well. Obviously, the era is an essential part of the steampunk setting, and the attitudes, customs and politics of the Victorian era are important. In *Space: 1889* the year is eponymously 1889 and in *Castle Falkenstein* (1994) it is around 1870. In this era social class is very important, and both games (the only "pure" steampunk games that I know of) are primarily designed for upper class characters, because working class characters would not have the time or the resources to go adventuring. This also means that some of the dirt, coal heaps, steam engines and worker-exploitation of the period is hidden from view, emphasizing progress more than corruption. Thus the mood of RPG steampunk is much lighter than that of its literary counterpart.

In both games the marvels of technology are mechanical rather than electronic in nature, so that there are steam-powered cars, James Bond-like gadgets that work with miniature clockwork mechanisms and so on. In the steampunk world

Charles Babbage will also probably eventually succeed in his attempts to build a mechanical computer. In *Space: 1889* steam-powered spacecraft can also fly through the "ether" in space (a device also used – even seriously – in early science fiction stories of travel to the Moon and other planets) and explore (and of course colonize) the Moon, desert-like Mars, jungle-filled Venus and other planets. *Castle Falkenstein*, on the other hand, includes magic and supernatural elements like dragons and faerie, as well as many fictional characters of the period, such as Sherlock Holmes, Moriarty, Captain Nemo, Phileas Fogg, Victor Frankenstein, Dracula and so on.

The subjects and themes of steampunk in both *Space: 1889* and *Castle Falkenstein* focus on exploration and romantic, dashing and heroic adventuring. *Space: 1889* is perhaps more dependent on exploration, as *Castle Falkenstein* (despite being Earth-bound) has a more varied scope. In any case, the characters will be fighting for justice, hope and good things against corruption and evil plots, which, in my opinion, is more or less the opposite of cyberpunk. This also means that the emotional effects that steampunk aims for are the usual fun and excitement rather than angst, depression and catharsis.

Examples of the steampunk genre

According to *TESF* (1993:1161), K.W. Jeter's *Morlock Night* (1979) and *Infernal Devices* (1987), Tim Powers's *The Anubis Gates* (1983) and James P. Blaylock's *Homunculus* (1986) and *Lord Kelvin's Machine* (1992) are all good examples, but I have not read any of them. I have read William Gibson's and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine* (1990) which is very dystopian and bleak. In a similar vein, some of Charles Dickens's novels (though by no means science fiction or fantasy, and thus not really steampunk either) are also worth noting for their bleak depiction of the period. It should be kept in mind, however, that literary steampunk has a very different attitude from RPG steampunk (which is light and adventurous).

I doubt there are any real film examples of steampunk. *TESF* (1993:1161) mentions David Lynch's *Eraserhead* (1976) and *The Elephant Man* (1980) as well as *Young Sherlock Holmes* (1985, produced by Steven Spielberg) and some episodes of *Dr Who*. Although set in the USA, *The Wild, Wild West* (both the original television series (1965-1969) and the more recent film (1999)) are in a similar style and can be thought of as a combination of steampunk and the Western.

The two most important RPG examples, *Space: 1889* and *Castle Falkenstein*, were already given some details of. Since I do not know either game personally, I do not think I could provide much more detailed descriptions of them.

4.14 Conspiracy

At the heart of the conspiracy genre is, not surprisingly, a conspiracy (or conspiracies, more often than not). Actually there are likely to be all sorts of minor conspiracies and evil schemes in practically any RPG, because they promote mystery, treachery and make fine twists in plots, but in the conspiracy genre they are a central theme. Just like in the post-holocaust genre, while there is nothing fantastic about conspiracies as such (there are plenty of them in the real world, after all) the conspiracy genre is included in technofantasy, because in RPGs the major conspiracies practically always involve fantasy or science fiction themes. In other words, the truth which the conspiracy conceals and/or exploits is usually something along the lines that magic or aliens are real. Note that this means that the conspiracy genre itself (like the post-holocaust) does not include fantasy or science fiction elements, but it is nearly always combined with them. The rest of this entry will deal with the conspiracy genre with these elements included.

The minor features of the conspiracy genre depend on the nature of the conspiracy. There are three basic types: occult, alien and mundane. If the conspiracy is occult, then magic, supernatural beings and/or some other fantasy

or horror features are to be expected, whereas if the conspiracy involves aliens, science fiction features are more likely. Actually, most games that feature occult conspiracies can often also be described as belonging to the horror genre. Mundane conspiracies do not involve any fantasy or science fiction elements. They are entirely "normal" in that they could happen in the real world. Mundane conspiracies range from organized crime to plots to assassinate the head of state of any country the PCs happen to live in.

It should be noted that the PCs can either try to discover the truth about and act against a conspiracy, or work for the conspiracy (in which case they may be mere hirelings or the actual conspirators). Actually there are often several conspiracies (some of them may even be mundane), usually with conflicting aims and often with conflicting "truths" about the world. Not that the players will ever discover the ultimate truth about or the extent of all these conspiracies, of course (except perhaps about their own, if they work for one). The point is that they will usually receive conflicting and confusing information and run into strange occurrences, much like in the fantastic genre (*The X Files* is a good example of the conspiracy genre as well).

The setting of the conspiracy genre can be practically anything, but I believe remote rural settings or small towns are fairly likely (UFO crash-landing sites and worship locations of obscure cults are not often found in cities). On the other hand, the headquarters of conspiracies may very well be in cities. Although fantasy and science fiction themes are normal in conspiracies, the RPGs of the genre appear to be set in the real world for the same reasons as the fantastic and horror. To be effective, an occult or alien conspiracy should be something special, not something the players will expect and anticipate. This may sound prescriptive rather than descriptive, but it is true. An obvious conspiracy is hardly a conspiracy at all (which also applies to the mundane ones).

As can be expected, the most typical subjects and themes (as well as plot elements) of conspiracy are suspecting that there is a conspiracy, trying to find

evidence about it, and the resulting constant back and forth struggle between discovery and cover-up. This is again well exemplified in *The X Files*: every time the characters find evidence, it turns out to be fake or mysteriously disappears. Alternatively, if the PCs are the ones who try to keep the conspiracy from being discovered, they will be responsible for disposing of evidence, silencing witnesses, controlling the aliens, magic or whatever the conspiracy is about and so on.

The emotional effect that the conspiracy genre creates will probably alternate between the frustration of cover-ups and missing evidence and the exhilaration of discovery or that of finally solving a demanding puzzle, even if it turns out to be only a part of a larger puzzle. Danger and the related excitement are also a large part of the emotional effect, since those in charge of the conspiracy will want to keep it hidden. I have never really played a game where the PCs are a part of the conspiracy, but I believe the fear of discovery is significant in that style. All in all, I believe the mood is likely to be fairly dark (unless the game is meant to be humorous). The style is probably more or less ordinary, although it can also easily be adventurous.

Iconography will probably include government agents (often the infamous "men in black" type) as well as private crusaders for truth, the agents of the conspiracy (or conspiracies) and so on. Various files marked "top secret" or "classified" will probably also be frequent if the government is involved. Naturally, whatever the conspiracy tries to keep hidden or aims for (magic, aliens, monsters or whatever) will make an occasional appearance as well. The PCs are likely to be either brave individuals trying to find out the truth about one conspiracy or the other, or agents of the conspiracy, or even the conspirators themselves.

Examples of the conspiracy genre

There are plenty of agent and spy stories, thrillers and technothrillers and so on that feature mundane conspiracies. Most of H.P. Lovecraft's (and that of later writers who have continued his work) fiction is concerned with occult conspiracies where cultists worship horrible alien entities (Elder Gods and Great Old Ones) and may try to summon them to Earth or awaken those already on Earth but dormant. In a more humorous style (though I have not read it),

> the conspiracy-theory work *par excellence* was Robert SHEA's and Robert Anton WILSON's *Illuminatus!* (3 vols **1975**), in which recent political history is explained in terms of a dazzlingly complex series of interlocking conspiracies by rival secret societies, some with histories going back to ATLANTIS. (*TESF* 1995:911. Original emphases and capitals.)

In the realm of television, *The X Files* is certainly a sufficient example of alien and government conspiracies and cover-ups.

The conspiracy theme is dealt with somewhat differently in different RPGs. *Call of Cthulhu* and *Delta Green* (1997?), being based on the abovementioned Lovecraft's writings, are prime examples of the type of occult or horror conspiracy where the PCs first discover a secret cult and then must thwart its plans. These are generally considered to be occult and horror conspiracies, although most of the monsters in this case are actually powerful aliens, so technically they could serve as an example of alien conspiracy as well. However, almost none of these aliens are the usual science fiction technologically advanced variety, but magic using aliens so the style and mood are much more in line of occult horror than science fiction. More examples of this type of conspiracy (occult where the PCs oppose the conspiracies) can be found in the horror genre.

In *Conspiracy X* (1996) and nearly all of White Wolf's games (*Vampire: The Masquerade, Werewolf: The Apocalypse, Mage: The Ascension* and so on) the PCs are actually part of the conspiracy. In *Conspiracy X* (which I know fairly little about) the PCs work for a conspiracy that tries to keep aliens from exploiting Earth and the Earth from knowing anything about the aliens.

Apparently there are also some rules for magic and psychic abilities to add some variety to the game. In *Vampire*, *Werewolf* and *Mage* (all of which I am fairly familiar with) the PCs are the eponymous mythic beings whose societies secretly coexist with humanity. In the case of vampires, they feed on humanity, whereas the werewolves and mages fight other conspiracies that threaten the world. All of these groups will try to keep themselves hidden from humanity, which is a major theme of these games so I think they are at least part conspiracies (although they too are often described only as horror RPGs).

4.15 Horror

Unlike most other genres, the horror genre is actually fairly easy to define in terms of the emotional effect it attempts to create. If a given book or film (or RPG) strives to horrify, shock or disgust its audience, it is horror (Bordwell and Thompson 1997:58). Of course, things are not quite this simple in real life, as many horror stories (especially films) are more amusing than scary (intentionally or not).

The first distinction to be made within the horror genre in general is between mundane horror and supernatural horror. Mundane horror is set in the real world and has nothing supernatural or particularly special about it. It does not often approach even the fantastic, it is mere sadism. This type of horror is not very relevant to RPGs. It is possible some groups might employ it, but I personally would rather not, and I do not know of any game that could be called mundane horror (though cyberpunk may sometimes come close). For the shock value, some games may involve an occasional scene of brutality or sadism, or a psychopathic killer character, but this is applying a touch of horror to another genre, not pure horror.

Horror in RPGs is therefore primarily supernatural in origin. Typically, as in horror films and novels, this manifests as a monster. Although referred to here as supernatural, the monster is not always given a fantasy explanation. Instead,

it may be a rationalized science fiction monster. Actually many of the same types of monsters (vampires, zombies, lycanthropes and so on) can be explained both fantastically or with a pseudo-scientific rationale. Nevertheless, the important thing about monsters in horror is a sense of wrongness, that they do not belong. In other words, the monster must be perceived as a threat, as a monster. As Bordwell and Thompson (1997:58) point out, in the film *E.T.* (1982), for example, the alien is not presented as a threat (quite the opposite, in fact) and thus is not perceived as such, and therefore *E.T.* could not be called a horror film. Likewise, vampires, zombies, lycanthropes and other traditional monster types usually exist in fantasy games as well, but they are seen as normal parts of the fantasy world. While they may still be scary and threatening, they belong to the world and are not seen as a horror element any more (or at least not very much more) than bears or wolves would be. A mere physical threat is not enough, or any action and adventure story could be seen as horror. There must be a sense or wrongness and evil about the monster. This also applies to monsters who look like (or can disguise themselves as) normal humans, such as vampires. Incidentally, I believe the funniness of some horror stories that was mentioned above actually comes from the story's failure to present the monster as wrong and unholy. If the audience (be they viewers, readers or RPG players) does not accept the monster's wrongness (does not perceive horror as horror), its outlandishness will quickly begin to seem comical. The reason I mention this is because traditional horror RPGs (where the PCs are not the monsters) can be played in two primary ways: either in a true horror fashion, where the PCs try to defeat monsters who are evil, wrong, unholy and much more powerful than the PCs are, or in an action-adventure style where monsters are perceived only as exotic adversaries and the horror element is lost. The latter style is obviously not truly horror, but uses horror's monsters and iconography so it is included here as well.

The setting of horror RPGs is usually close to the real world to emphasize the alienness and wrongness of the monster or monsters. This is for much the same reason as in the fantastic genre. If the game is set in the real world, the PCs will (hopefully) hesitate and say things like "but vampires don't exist" instead of

immediately accepting that they do. Of course, this effect is quickly lost, since once it becomes obvious that vampires, for example, do exist in the game's world, only small steps are required to accept werewolves, magic and so on as well. Nevertheless, in a game set in the real world the monster can be considered to present a threat to the normal world, whereas in a fantasy game they would be a part of the normal world. To borrow an analogy from the fantastic, the codes of horror and the real world conflict, but those of fantasy and horror do not.

Traditional horror is thus theoretically often quite close to the fantastic in that the characters hesitate between accepting a supernatural explanation or dismissing it as a hoax. Actually, however, if the players know they are playing a horror game, they will usually accept the supernatural explanation rather quickly. Horror is also often quite close to the conspiracy genre. An individual monster will not form much of a conspiracy but, for example, a society of vampires that secretly feeds on humanity (several such societies exist in *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991)) does. Likewise, in more traditional horror obscure cults with connections to various monsters (as in *Call of Cthulhu*, for example) or secret societies which try to protect humanity from monsters (as in *Chill* (1984), for example) are not infrequent.

In addition to what I have called traditional horror (where the PCs are more or less normal humans), there is a type of horror where the players actually play the monsters. In other words, the PCs are vampires, werewolves or other monsters. Here the horror element and wrongness of the monster is again lost, but an interesting insight is gained to what it feels like to be totally outside the normal human society (something most teenagers and others who consider themselves rebellious or special probably want to relate to, which may explain some of the popularity of these games). Arguably, this means they are not truly part of the horror genre at all, but since they use horror's iconography (the traditional monster types are used as characters and so on), I think it is justified to include them in horror games.

So what is the point in these games? The vampire that originally was intended to create feelings of disgust and loathing has long since (mostly through numerous films on the subject, but also in no small part due to the popular novels by Anne Rice and others of that subgenre) turned into a tragic, romantic and "cool" figure. Vampires are immortal, powerful and have many superhero-like special abilities, but are also limited to a "life" of darkness and violence and have many equally superhero-like vulnerabilities (the difference between kryptonite and sunlight is that the latter is more common and often fatal to vampires). This does make the vampire an interesting, if rather melodramatic, character to play. The same goes for werewolves, though to a slightly lesser extent (they are mortal, less dramatic and their special powers (except for the shapeshifting) and vulnerabilities are less spectacular). These games actually do share quite a lot with the superhero genre, but the powers are often less flashy and the costumes are somewhat less silly. They also feature more politics and power-games than superhero RPGs, which tend to focus more on action and adventure.

The subjects and themes of horror depend on the type of horror. In the traditional type fighting monsters, whether in true horror or action-adventure style, is very important. Obviously the themes of the action-adventure style are likely to be much less serious. Some elements of the fantastic and conspiracy genres may also figure into traditional horror in one way or another, and there may be conflicts with the mundane reality (in *Call of Cthulhu* (1981), for example, it is actually quite likely that the characters will sooner or later be confined to a mental institution by the authorities, and the weapons that the characters need to destroy monsters (flame-throwers, crossbows, silver bullets and so on) may be rather difficult to explain to the police).

The subjects and themes of the type of horror where the PCs are the monsters are different. Politics and power-games within the monster society are often important and the mundane human society is seen more as a food source, pawns and cannon fodder than a threat. There will still be plenty of opportunities for action and adventure, of course, but the monsters are more likely to fight other

monsters (or others of their own kind) than humans, because with their superhero-like powers, the monsters have little to fear from humans. Some games have more specific themes. For example, in *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* (1992), the werewolves attempt to protect nature against pollution and destruction, which often pits them against human greed and indifference.

What this means as far as plot elements go is that in traditional horror the normal world is invaded by a monster, which is then investigated, discovered, fought and (hopefully) defeated. Some of the conflicts with mundane world that were mentioned above will probably also come in at times. In the games where the PCs are monsters there typically are several interest groups within the monster society that all have conflicting (or occasionally similar) interests. This results in endless scheming with an occasional eruption of violence. There is some variation, however. In the aforementioned *Werewolf*, for example, a conflict with a company that secretly dumps toxic waste into the territory of a pack of werewolves will involve different plot elements from a *Vampire* game, which more typically consists of scheming between groups of vampires.

The iconography of horror obviously includes all sorts of monsters from the obvious vampires and werewolves to more rare zombies, ghosts and even aliens. Giant monsters like King Kong and Godzilla generally do not appear in horror RPGs, although some of the more powerful monsters in *Call of Cthulhu* are an exception (the eponymous Cthulhu, for example, is much more powerful than either King Kong or Godzilla).

The human character types are generally brave (or at least determined) investigators whose job it is to defeat the monsters and make the world a safer place. In the action-adventure style of horror the humans can actually hope to defeat the monsters by fighting them, whereas in true horror the monsters are too powerful for that, and more indirect ways of destroying them must be found. Thankfully, I believe the frail and screaming female characters who are frequent in horror films are more or less absent from RPGs (except, perhaps, as NPCs). While the characters can theoretically be from any walk of life, if they

are supposed to meet monsters more than once in their lives, they will probably become some sort of investigators or crusaders. In those horror games where the PCs are monsters, they will be various types of vampires, werewolves, mages, faeries or other monsters. The style of horror ranges from ordinary to adventurous, though it is rarely heroic (at least in the "hero" sense of the term) even in those games where the PCs are monsters.

While the emotional effects that horror aims for are fear, horror, disgust, loathing and so on, there is also hope, as in most games it is expected that the characters *can* actually defeat the monsters (though it does not have to be easy). Nevertheless, true horror (when taken seriously) is dark in mood, while the action-adventure style is more likely to be light, even if it may be at times scary. Most of the games where the PCs are monsters (especially *Vampire: The Masquerade*, *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* much less so) are in my opinion hopeless and desperate in mood, although they are generally marketed as dark.

Examples of the horror genre

There are many literary examples, of course. Stephen King's novels are popular, and in them the characters are usually normal people faced with unexpected horrors. The same applies to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and most of H.P. Lovecraft's writings. Anne Rice's Vampire Chronicles (beginning with *Interview with the Vampire* (1976)) are an example where the protagonists are vampires, as are a series of novels starring a female vampire Sonja Blue (starting with *Sunglasses After Dark* (1989)) by Nancy A. Collins. Collins has also written *Wild Blood* (1993) where the main characters are werewolves (one is actually a werecoyote).

There are also plenty of horror films. To begin with, there are dozens of Dracula films (*Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) is a recent example) and probably hundreds of more generic vampire films. There are likewise dozens of Frankenstein films (*Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994) is a recent example).

There are also surprisingly many zombie films (*Night of the Living Dead* (1968) is a good example) and some about demonic possession like *The Exorcist* (1973). *Fright Night* (1985) is a good example of a horror-comedy. In the more action-adventure style, see *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (the television series (1997-) is much better than the film (1992), and despite the action-adventure and comedy elements, is at times genuinely scary) and the *Evil Dead* trilogy (the first two are also true horror, the third is more of a comedy).

There are also several horror RPGs, many of them also featuring some conspiracy aspects. For traditional horror, the most legendary example is *Call of Cthulhu*, which (as was mentioned earlier) is based on the stories of H.P. Lovecraft, and is considered something of a classic not only as a horror RPGs but in the whole of RPG field. It was, apparently, the first horror RPG published (first in 1981, the latest edition is 5.5 from 1998). The PCs are called investigators, and they deal with strange occurrences and dangers and horrors beyond human comprehension. The default setting of the game is the real world in the 1920s, but 1890s and 1990s are also supported. The game system is a fairly straightforward percentile system, but includes the notable feature of insanity rules. All characters have sanity points which are depleted when they encounter horrible events or monsters, or come to understand the true nature of the world. It is very difficult to regain sanity, so (in keeping with some of Lovecraft's stories) the characters will sooner or later be neurotic and fragile, probably ending their days in a mental institution. The monsters in this game are derived from Lovecraft's writings (and from the writings of others who have continued his work), although more traditional vampires, werewolves, zombies, mummies and so on are also possible. These monsters are generally very powerful and totally alien, having no human features at all. Some of them are huge and extremely powerful, but thankfully lie dormant, although some vile cultists may attempt to awaken them (and must be stopped from doing so, of course).

Other examples (which I have little personal experience with) could be *Chill* (1984), *Hunter: The Reckoning* (1999), *Kult* (1993) and *All Flesh Must Be*

Eaten (1999). The first two are fairly straightforward monster-hunting games in the action-adventure style. In *Chill* the characters are members of a secret organization (called S.A.V.E.), which is dedicated to defending humanity against evil monsters. In *Hunter* there is no such organization, and instead the PCs are monster-hunters who have received some supernatural powers from mysterious "Heralds". Actually there is more to *Hunter* than just destroying monsters, but in the end the PCs are supposed to protect humanity from the monsters, which does tend to translate as "destroy monsters". *Kult* is more surreal and resembles Clive Barker's horror stories more than the traditional vampire/werewolf/zombie style. The game's premise is apparently that God has gone missing and the Devil has also left to look for Him/Her/It, and after that no-one really knows what is going on, the reality of the world begins to fray at the edges and practically anything might happen. The characters are humans, and although they have potential to become "enlightened" beings, again the main focus of the game seems to be on protecting humanity. *All Flesh Must Be Eaten* is a generic game of zombies, presenting various types of them (from voodoo zombies to those animated by strange radiation or toxic waste) and describes different settings that can be used for games about zombies.

Of the type of horror where the PCs are monsters, the most popular games of this type are the aforementioned World of Darkness games (*Vampire: The Masquerade, Werewolf: The Apocalypse* and so on), though they were not the first. *Nightlife* (1990) did the same earlier, but it was more generic and not as successful. *Vampire: The Masquerade* is about the power-games of several different "Clans" of vampires, all with their own goals, hierarchies and abilities. The vampire society is Machiavellian and its scheming is ruthless. There is also a theme of the vampire character's self-integrity, as all vampires will sooner or later succumb to "The Beast" and lose the last remnants of their humanity. Thus the characters not only have to scheme against each other, but cling to their remaining humanity as well, fighting The Beast. As has been mentioned above, the game shares much with the conspiracy ("The Masquerade" refers to the vampires keeping their society hidden from humans) and superhero genres.

4.16 Humor

Horror and humor are special genres in that they are easily defined by the emotional effect they attempt to create. Humor obviously aims at being funny, and everything else from plot to realism is subservient to this goal. Humor is not really a very common RPG genre and is included here more as a counterpoint to horror.

The humor genre includes comedy, satire, pastiche and basically anything that is meant to be amusing. It is arguable whether those unfortunate games that are unintentionally amusing should be included, though sometimes it is hard to tell what the author's intention has been. Nevertheless, if something is funny, it is funny, even if it was not meant to be. In any case, humor can be combined with anything so the settings, subjects, themes and character types of humor can be virtually anything as long as they are funny.

I believe the main purpose of playing RPGs in the first place is to have fun, so humor can be found almost everywhere, even in those dark games that take themselves seriously. However, humor tends to be simply an addition (a secondary genre, so to speak) in most games, and examples of pure humor are very few. In other words, whereas some humorous elements can be found in virtually any RPG, games that focus on humor as their primary concern are rare. Those that do tend to be parodies of other games, films or novels (although the most notable example, *Toon*, is not).

Examples of the humor genre

Examples of humor are easy to find. Personally, I have enjoyed Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels. They are sometimes parodical, but never overdo it and parody themes and subjects more often than the details of well-known works. Harry Harrison's Stainless Steel Rat stories are a good parody of the excesses of science fiction. Most comic books and animated films are also primarily

humorous. In television and film media, *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969-70 and 1972-74) as well as *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) and *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979) are (in my opinion) good examples.

The best RPG example of humor is *Toon*, which has already been described under the toon genre. It is noteworthy that the game does not parody cartoons, it works just like them. Another apparently funny game (that I unfortunately have not seen) is *Land of Og* (1995), which is a mini-RPG about cavemen and dinosaurs. The rules apparently parody *D&D* and make fun of some other games as well, but the main point about the game is that the cavemen only know 18 words, with each caveman starting out with only one or two. That means the characters can only use those words to communicate with other characters, which in turn means the players can only use a few words when talking in-character, so they have to do a lot of amusing grunting, gesturing and pointing to get anything done.

4.17 "Normal"

"Normal" is not really a genre at all (hence the quotation marks). Rather, it is a collection of genres that are neither fantasy or science fiction. What these games have in common is that they are based on the mundane real world and do not in themselves involve any fantasy or science fiction themes at all. They can be divided into modern and historical groups with technothriller and agent genres in the modern group and Western, pirate and oriental genres in the historical. War and frontier genres are also included here. Technically, the conspiracy genre could also have been a "normal" genre, but since the subjects of conspiracies normally involve fantasy and/or science fiction themes, it was easier to include it in technofantasy.

Although these genres are considered to be "normal" because they are set in the real world and do not in themselves feature fantasy or science fiction elements, the latter can actually be also included. For example, the Western normally has

no magic or science fiction gadgets in it, and there is nothing fantastic about the setting or the characters. However, the Western can still be combined with fantasy by, for example, giving the Indians real magic. The Western can also be combined with steampunk to add some science fiction flavor to it (see the film *Wild, Wild West* for an example). Normally, however, in these combinations the "normal" genre remains the primary one and the fantasy and science fiction elements are more marginal and not as powerful as they would be in pure fantasy or science fiction (as easily as magic can be added to the pirate genre, pirates can be added to full fantasy).

The settings of "normal" genres vary, and will be described in more detail separately for each genre. What they have in common is that they are based on the real world. Although many of these genres could actually be relocated with little effort to other worlds, they will still be mundane and normal realities and not too spectacular.

It would be awkward to list specific literary or film examples for such an umbrella "genre". More specific examples (especially RPG examples) will be given separately for each included genre in their own entries. Generally, any novel, short story, film or television series that is set in the real world and does not require suspension of disbelief (apart from the probability of some coincidences) is "normal". For example, most documentaries and new reports would count as "normal".

4.18 Frontier

The frontier is defined by its setting, namely a frontier. This means a place where civilization has only begun to tame the wilderness and the two often conflict. As Bordwell and Thompson say about Westerns, "quite early the central theme of the genre became the conflict between civilized order and lawless frontier" (1997:56). On the frontier pockets of civilization can be found in the middle of wilderness, but on the other hand the civilization is often seen

as stifling the energy of the wilderness and upsetting its natural balance. Civilization also brings both law and those who break it to the wilderness. Often the law exists in settlements and the lawless take the wilderness as their own, giving the appearance of conflict between civilized order and surrounding anarchy and chaos.

Actually, the frontier genre is my generalization of the Western. The Western is very much concerned with its own frontier, but has so many other ideas and images associated with it that I felt a more neutral term was needed. Actual physical frontier areas can be found in practically all fantasy and science fiction RPGs, and in a way the much of horror, fantastic and conspiracy games can be said to inhabit the frontier between the rational real world and the unknown supernatural world.

In fantasy RPGs, where all of the world has typically not been explored and settled, very real frontiers exist. Indeed, since fantasy is generally set in a medieval world, all the PCs have to do is to walk out through town gates and they have entered the countryside frontier between inhabited world and complete wilderness. Science fiction is also filled with whole planets to be explored and settled. However, even in fantasy and science fiction the frontier itself is nothing magical or special. It is just an area that has not been explored, charted and settled yet. Of course, all manner of strange, mythical, mystical and special beings and settings can be found within a frontier. They are elements of fantasy and/or science fiction that exist in the frontier, but the frontier itself is natural and normal. The frontier is, therefore, a "normal" genre.

Also, while frontier has until now been described as wilderness, that does not necessarily mean that it is uninhabited. In addition to the local flora and fauna, there may be intelligent life there, be it human or not. Obviously, the most famous frontier of the real world, the American West, was not uninhabited either, and the Indians had their own civilizations there. What makes a frontier a frontier is that one culture decides the frontier area belongs to them and then

proceeds to explore and settle it. It is not uncommon for fantasy, science fiction and other frontiers to be previously inhabited as well.

The themes and subjects of the frontier genre are thus exploration and conflict. Obviously a frontier, an unknown territory, needs to be explored (and sometimes conquered in the process). Since the frontier tends to be a wild and dangerous place, there are generally plenty of opportunities for action and adventure as well. Conflict may be between the explorers and the frontier area's previous inhabitants (human or otherwise), between law and criminals, order and anarchy, or between the explorers or settlers and nature itself. Protecting the settlers and settlements against various dangers is also common. Simultaneous reliance on civilization and nature is another common theme (what would a cowboy be without both a gun and a horse?). In more modern games (typically non-utopian science fiction or more enlightened Westerns) the exploitation of natural resources (and the destruction and pollution this causes) and the indigenous population are also a possible theme. Sometimes (more commonly in science fiction) the settlements become secure enough to seek independence, but this often means that the frontier has been tamed and is no longer a frontier.

I doubt the frontier genre seeks any emotional effect in particular, besides the usual fun and excitement. The frontier is likely to be rather survivalist in attitude, though the harshness of the setting depends on the game and preferences of its players. The sort of pastoral idyll seen in some films and novels is unlikely. It may be fine as an idyllic ending, but would make a boring setting. Therefore, the mood of the frontier genre is most likely to be normal.

The iconography of the frontier depends on the technology level of the game. The imagery will be related to the subjects and themes listed above, but obviously, in a medieval game the details will be very different from those of a Western or a science fiction RPG. Nevertheless, explorers, prospectors, outlaws, lawmen, soldiers, natives (Indians, faeries, aliens or something else), pioneers, settlers and farmers are likely to be found in one form or another.

The typical plot elements are also related to the subjects and themes. Exploration and enforcing civilization against nature and outlaws are the most typical ones. Depending on the character types, other plot elements from politics to smuggling to helping or fighting the natives are also entirely possible.

The usual types of player characters are generally not settlers or farmers due to their intention of finding a suitable piece of land and staying there. As always, the PCs are likely to be more mobile and adventurous types such as explorers, cowboys (or their equivalents), law enforcement, military, prospectors, smugglers, rogues and so on. Depending on the game, the PCs can perhaps even be the natives (though the natives will probably not consider the frontier to be a frontier). Despite favoring more adventurous characters, the style of the frontier genre is probably somewhere between ordinary and adventurous.

Examples of the frontier genre

One good non-Western literary example of the frontier genre is *Heart of Darkness* (1902?) by Joseph Conrad, where the protagonist quite literally travels from orderly civilization through a frontier into complete wilderness. There are plenty of more action-adventure oriented so-called "lost world" novels like Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* (1912) and some of Edgar Rice Burroughs's Tarzan stories. Film examples tend to be either Westerns (for which see below) or science fiction. Many *Star Trek* episodes, for example, deal with exploring the mysteries of new planets and space (which is referred to as "the final frontier" in the beginning of each episode).

As was explained above, frontiers very often appear in fantasy and science fiction, but often in a fairly routine way. I mean that in a fantasy game, for example, when the characters go exploring the wilderness, it is not seen as a frontier, just wilderness. Likewise, in science fiction, unexplored planets are often thought of as places to be explored and mysteries to be solved rather than

as frontiers. Thus while the frontier is a common feature, it is not usually a central one. This is not always the case, and one RPG that I know of that pays attention to its setting specifically as a frontier is *Blue Planet* (1997). *Blue Planet* is a hard science fiction game, set primarily on the planet Poseidon in the year 2199. Poseidon orbits around the star Lambda Serpentis, 35 light years from Earth, but connected to it through a "wormhole" which allows the distance to be traveled in about six months. Poseidon is also a planet where 99% of the surface is covered by ocean. The game's background and setting are very well developed and realistic, and details are given about the history of the future, the Earth's government, corporations, biotechnology, other colonies on the Moon, Mars and asteroids, Poseidon's flora, fauna and environment, and notes are even included about oceanography to help players who are not experienced sailor or divers.

Poseidon was colonized by Earth (the colonists being humans genetically modified to be better suited for life on an ocean-covered world and uplifted (intelligent) dolphins and orca), but the colony had to be almost immediately abandoned to its own devices for decades due to a release of an engineered virus which decimated Earth's vegetation and caused massive food shortages. Then Earth recovered somewhat and decided to recolonize Poseidon, only to find that the original colony had survived. The game specifically refers to almost all of Poseidon as a frontier and makes several analogies to Westerns. For example, "the Peacekeepers [GEO (former UN) soldiers] are in a situation similar to that of the US Cavalry in the 19th Century American West" (Barber et al. 1997:66), and a species of marine mammaloid called Sunburst or caneopoise "is essentially the marine ecological equivalent of the buffalo that once ranged the central and western plains of North America in the millions" (Barber et al. 1997:147), and is, in a further analogy, being killed by the thousands and rapidly approaching endangered status. Furthermore, there are natives (the survivors of the first colony) and newcomers from Earth (many of them prospectors mining an ore known as Long John in a gold rush analogy) and all sorts of conflicts and unexplored mysteries. Of course, since *Blue Planet* is also a science fiction game, there are also mysterious intelligent alien

aboriginals on the planet. Although genetic modifications and cybernetics are not seen as anything particularly special (humans with gills and webbed hands and feet, for example, are quite normal on this water-world), *Blue Planet* is also a cyberpunk game. It is not, however, a typical one since it downplays the most traditional cyberpunk themes (cybernetics, guns, drugs and violence) and takes the rest "in new directions and, and turns others on their heads" (1997:198).

4.19 The Western

Surprisingly, the Western does not seem to be a very popular RPG genre. It is included here in some detail because it is such an obvious genre in the film world, and leaving it to a brief mention would perhaps seem like an oversight. Furthermore, it is a special and specific case of the frontier genre. Or rather, the frontier is a generalized Western. Actually, I first considered *Blue Planet* and the like as a combination of science fiction and the Western, but then I thought about it and decided that Western has too much of its own iconography and themes that are so well established, that calling all games set on frontiers Westerns would be misleading. Thus I decided to broaden the Western's scope and to abstract its setting and ended up with the frontier genre that was described above.

The Western actually has the same defining features as the frontier genre (for which see above), they only tend to be more specific. Instead of a generic frontier, the Western is normally set in the late nineteenth century Central and Western America. This can vary somewhat, as Western can just as well be set in nineteenth century Canada or Mexico, or twentieth century Texas. Nevertheless, the typical Western is set in nineteenth century America. The historical accuracy of Westerns also varies. Much like the typical fantasy world is a romanticized version of the medieval world, so the typical Western (RPG, film or novel) is set in a romantic and idealized version of the real West.

The conflicts between wilderness, anarchy and chaos on the one hand and civilization, law and order on the other are much the same as in the frontier, but instead of an uninhabited frontier, or one inhabited by aliens, orcs, elves or other strange beings, the Western frontier is inhabited by Indians. The Indians are entirely human, of course, but may seem to the white men to be just as strange as orcs and elves (considering the stereotypical fantasy orcs and elves and some real life accounts of Indians, possibly even more strange, actually).

Some of the more subtle subjects and themes like racism, the exploitation of the Indians and nature (such as the mass killings of the buffalo) depend on whether the players want to play an action and adventure style Western or a more serious and realistic one. In a simplistic action Western, as in similar films, the Indians tend to be seen as unreasonable savages, whereas in more serious Westerns they may be seen more as victims of the white man's greed.

One theme that was not as prominent in the more generalized frontier, but which is a very common feature of the Western is revenge. In most Western films, for example, there is at least one character (often the protagonist), who is seeking to avenge the murder of his family or friends. Of course, this theme could appear in practically any genre, but I believe it is particularly prominent in the Western. There are also some more specific subjects related to the historical setting, such as the telegraph, railroad, gold rush and former slaves. Again, while similar themes can appear in other frontier games, in the Western these are quite specific.

I suppose the emotional effects that the Western aims for are the usual action and adventure related fun and excitement, though Westerns can be either serious or non-serious. Nostalgia is also a possibility, if playing a Western RPG is seen as a continuation of childhood Cowboys and Indians play or reminiscing about old Western films. Thus the mood varies, although it is fairly likely to be more on the light side.

The Western iconography is derived from Western movies and historical sources. Cowboys probably have a much more prominent role than they really had. Stetsons, revolvers, horses, Indians, settlers, farmers, prospectors, Wells & Fargo and the railroad (usually both), sheriffs and outlaws and so on are all part of it. One does not have to watch very many Westerns (or play a Western RPG many times) to see all of these icons. Bordwell and Thompson (1997:56) point out that the iconography of Westerns also reinforces the basic duality of its central conflict between civilized order and lawless frontier by setting the wagons and railroads against horse and canoe; the schoolhouse and church against the lonely campfire in the hills; the settlers' starched dresses against the Indians' tribal garb and the cowboys' jeans and Stetsons. Once again, in a Western all of these images are specific, whereas in the frontier genre they can take many forms.

The plot elements of Westerns (at least films) often feature the abovementioned revenge, which can often be fulfilled while defending poor farmers or town folk against evil outlaws, cattle barons or other powerful individuals. The friction between strangers and town folk is also a common plot element, as well as the ubiquitous saloon brawls and shoot-outs. In the wilderness fighting or trading with the Indians, defending isolated farms and hunting gold, furs or outlaws are the usual pastimes.

As for typical player characters, they once again tend to be the more adventurous types rather than farmers or settlers (except for those who farmers and settlers who seek vengeance). The military, while they have a reason to see action, is too strictly controlled for the liking of many players. Thus the PCs are most likely to be independent and mobile cowboys, hunters, guides, explorers, prospectors, bounty hunters, agents and so on. The style of Western is more likely to be adventurous or even heroic than that of the frontier genre in general.

Examples of the Western genre

I am sure some Western novels exist, but I do not recall having read any. Good comic book examples are Lucky Luke, Blueberry and Tex Willer series. Lucky Luke is a humorous and parodical treatment, but the other two are more serious (Blueberry is also reasonably realistic). As for Western films, there must be hundreds of examples. John Ford and Sergio Leone are legendary directors of Western films, so practically any of their films will be good examples. A couple of more recent and highly regarded ones are *Unforgiven* (1992) and *Dances with Wolves* (1990).

As was mentioned above, the Western has not been a very popular RPG genre. There are some Western games, but not nearly as many as, for example, fantasy and horror games. An enduring example is *Boot Hill*, which was originally published in 1975. According to a review of the game at RPGnet, it is a generic Western game, offering no particular viewpoint of special features, but plenty of good basic material. *GURPS Old West* (1991) is probably easier to find, but it is only a sourcebook and not a complete RPG. A more recent Western game is *Deadlands: The Weird West* (1996; I have no direct experience with it), though it features magic, supernatural, horror and steampunk elements and is not a pure Western. In this game magic and the supernatural returned to the world during the American Civil War, which is still going on during the game's setting in the mid 1870s. With the return of magic, the Indians have managed to reclaim many of their lands, and all sorts of supernatural horror monsters like werewolves roam the wilderness. There are also some steampunk gadgets like steam-powered jet-packs and robots. The system is a fairly original variation of the popular dice-pool type and uses multiple dice types, and also requires some extra paraphernalia like poker chips and cards.

4.20 Pirate

The pirate genre is a historical "normal" genre, although its historical accuracy is generally at about the same level as the Western's (or lower). The pirates of the pirate genre are also more likely to resemble ones in such romanticized treatments as Errol Flynn swashbuckling adventure films rather than the bloodthirsty and ruthless criminals that they probably really were. It is not a very important genre, or at least has not been until fairly recently (*7th Sea* (1999) has been a popular and successful pirate game).

Obviously the pirate genre centers on pirates. Typically they sail around the Caribbean or the Indian ocean, usually in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. Although pirates can easily appear in fantasy or science fiction settings as well, games that feature pirates in a prominent role are usually based loosely on the historical real world (although space pirates are not infrequent in most space opera games).

The setting is obviously a maritime one, although such land-bound themes as seeking buried treasures (or burying them) and raiding towns are also possible. The sea and ships are still the most important setting feature of pirate games. This naturally also applies when pirates appear in fantasy RPGs, and may be true even in science fiction games (if set on a planet), though space pirates are surely much more frequent in science fiction. The Caribbean is a popular pirate setting in games that are based (however loosely) on the historical real world, though in general any ocean will do (although tropical or warm environments are preferred). Of course, piracy still exists in the real world so pirate games could also be set in the contemporary real world instead of sixteenth or seventeenth century.

The subjects and themes of the pirate genre are rather action and adventure oriented, I believe. Since pirates are by definition sea-going bandits, attacking and boarding other ships and the resulting violence are parts of their profession. Of course, games that do not wish to focus entirely on naval combat (or combat

in general) can of course involve the characters in politics or romantic entanglements as well. Nevertheless, the pirate genre is likely to feature plenty of action and adventure, whether in a romantic and heroic or dirty and deadly serious mood and style. The emotional effect that pirate games aim for is thus generally the usual fun and excitement, though in more serious style of gaming the emphasis will be more on excitement than fun. The pirate genre is most likely to be light in mood, but can also be dark. The style is likely to be heroic or adventurous, but ordinary is also possible.

The iconography of piracy includes all sorts of sail-ships, the Jolly Roger, treasure islands, wooden legs and hooks in place of hands, cutlasses, muskets and cannons. The characters vary from clean and heroic to rough and mean but honorable to downright evil, though the first is likely to appear only in non-serious and adventurous style of gaming, whereas in the more serious and realistic styles the characters will probably tend towards the rough, mean and evil, without much honor involved. Obviously, the characters will usually be either pirates, privateers, navy or heroic adventurers who have to fight pirates (as in the most famous – and in my opinion the best – pirate novel of all time: Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883)). Merchants are needed as well, of course, but they tend to be the victims, so they are more likely to be NPCs.

The usual plot elements mirror the usual subjects and themes. Two ships meet on the sea and fighting, boarding, more fighting and plundering results. Alternatively, seeking or burying treasure is a good pastime, as are raiding (or defending) towns and dueling. Captures and escapes are always popular in adventurous games as well. Keel-hauling prisoners or offenders, or throwing them to the sharks are also fairly frequent occurrences.

Examples of the pirate genre

The *Treasure Island* was already mentioned as an excellent literary example of the adventurous pirate genre. Pirates are also important in J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1911), though it is more of a fantasy variant of the theme. The film *The Princess Bride* (1987) is rather similar in theme, though piracy is not as important in it. Other pirate films include *Blackbeard the Pirate* (1952) and *Cutthroat Island* (1995).

RPG examples include *Furry Pirates*, *Run Out the Guns!* (1998) and the abovementioned *7th Sea*. *Furry Pirates* has already been introduced briefly in the anthropomorphic animals genre (as a pirate game it is definitely non-serious). *Run Out the Guns!* is a realistic and serious pirate game, set in the seventeenth century Caribbean. It provides detailed information on various types of ships, what it means to work on a ship (what are the duties of the crew and so on), how much food is needed for long voyages, common sicknesses and so on, as well as maps of the Caribbean area. *7th Sea* I do not know personally, but it has apparently enjoyed some popularity, so it will serve as a more detailed example, although its setting is an alternate Earth where magic exists, and despite the name, piracy is only one of its themes (it is intended for general adventurous gaming in a seventeenth century Europeish world, so it is not only for pirates, but the Three Musketeers, Zorro and their kind as well). The game system is very adventurous. The PCs are supposed to be real heroes, and can attack bad guys in groups with no fear of death (the worst nameless thugs can do is to cause flesh or dramatic wounds). Only the named Villains can actually kill a Hero (or vice versa). The world resembles ours, with close resemblances between, for example, its Avalon and England/Ireland, Montaigne and France, Eisen and Germany and so on. Magic exists, but is only available for nobles and each country has its own type of magic (except for Castille (equivalent of Spain), which has The Church and Eisen, which has a special metal that is stronger than steel).

4.21 War

The main features of the war genre are combat and fighting. An actual war or military characters are not absolutely necessary as long as there is some cause to concentrate on fighting and action. The difference between war as a RPG genre and actual wargames is that RPGs focus on single individuals as characters and the players do not control entire armies. RPGs that focus totally on war are not common, but on the other hand almost all RPGs have rules for combat, and action and adventure are popular themes. There are two basic varieties of the war genre: one where war is taken seriously (dark mood and probably ordinary style) and the other where it is seen as exciting and adventurous (light mood and at least adventurous style). The latter is more common.

The setting is irrelevant for the war genre, humans can find something to fight over anywhere. Whether it is jungle, desert, prairie, urban or space is only a detail or a complication. Since action and adventure are the more common style of the war genre, its themes and subjects tend to focus on fighting and survival, and usually also on military characters. In more serious style, other aspects of war like politics, espionage, medical emergencies and suffering civilians are also likely themes. This is, again, also reflected on the usual plot elements. In action-adventure style little is needed apart from finding a group of enemies and fighting them, but in more serious style plots can vary enormously.

The iconography depends on the era, but is always militaristic, whether that means swords, muskets, assault rifles or laser guns. The characters will typically be soldiers, although in the more serious style less action-oriented types like medical or media personnel are also possible. In both styles special forces (SEALs, SAS and so on) are likely because they are specialists, have more interesting and complicated missions and can get into action even during peacetime. A SWAT team (or similar) would also qualify if tactical scenarios are the main point of the game with little roleplaying between them.

Examples of the war genre

Literary examples are easy to find. There are plenty of pulp or serious novels (both factual and fiction) about the Second World War and the Vietnam War (and other wars as well, of course). There are even more films, ranging from serious and anti-war to ridiculous action-adventures. *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) is a serious and bloody film about the Vietnam war, whereas *Rambo: The First Blood Part II* (1985) is fairly typical of the more ridiculous action films (the third Rambo film is even sillier, but the first one is more serious). *Aliens* (1986) is a good example of a science fiction treatment of the theme.

The most notable RPG examples are *Twilight: 2000* and its variant, *Merc: 2000* (1990). *Twilight: 2000* has been described earlier under the post-holocaust heading. As a war game, the setting is realistic (though, in my opinion, the same cannot be said about the system), serious and fairly desperate, but since the PCs are supposed to be soldiers, the game's focus is definitely on fighting and action. *Merc: 2000* is more or less the same game without the holocaust, but with plenty of minor conflicts all over the world, and likewise focuses on action and fighting. *Recon* (1982) is another example. It is a fairly simple game where the PCs are ordinary U.S. soldiers fighting in the Vietnam war.

4.22 Technothriller

Technothriller is a modern or near-future (generally a few years or a decade in the future) "normal" genre that is set in what is essentially the real world, though there may be some small differences. Since the primary example of technothriller RPGs, *Millennium's End* (1992), goes to some trouble to define the technothriller, I will follow its lead. To begin with, a thriller is usually thought of as an exciting murder or crime story. A technothriller, then, is a thriller where technology plays an important role, whether in the plot or as the background. However, as Charles Ryan says in the introduction of *Millennium's End*, "but technology is a fact of life in today's world, and the mere fact that it

finds its way into a work of fiction doesn't make it a technothriller" (1993:4). Ryan also considers it important that technothriller characters are intelligent and resourceful, that its plots focus on modern problems like terrorism, hate-crime, fanaticism, corruption, drugs and pollution instead the old murder mysteries and espionage, and that technothrillers are meticulously accurate in their details.

It is hard to find any single defining feature for a technothriller, but to sum up the above, a technothriller is a story about modern crime or modern problems with intelligent and resourceful protagonists, and it pays a lot attention to details. Also while technology is very important to a technothriller, it is more of a background and a part of the setting rather than mere gadgets. As Ryan puts it, "it is high-tech without being science-fiction" (1993:4).

The setting of a technothriller is (as was mentioned above) very close to the real world. Not only does this allow the use of modern real world problems and modern crimes, it adds realism and makes the attention to detail much easier since the GM and the players do not need to invent all of the details themselves, they can borrow things from the real world. Usually, however, the setting is a few years to the future to allow small changes like aggravating some modern problems to more serious ones and increasing the technology level slightly. The focus on problems and the real world (or its close equivalent) mean the mood of the technothriller is likely to be on the darker side of normal.

As for shared features, the technothriller obviously shares the real world as a setting with other "normal" genres, but besides that, its high-tech ambience and aggravated modern problems resemble the cyberpunk genre, although they are not as advanced or aggravated in the technothriller as in cyberpunk. Cyberpunk and technothriller also share an obsession about the details of technology, although in cyberpunk, most of the technology is invented and in the technothriller it is mostly what is found in the real world. In cyberpunk, the details are also more likely to be just for flavor, whereas a technothriller plot can actually hinge on whether the PCs realize some technological detail about a mysterious crime (such as "she couldn't have taken this picture from so far

away, because that camera of hers only has a 35-105mm objective and the zoom isn't sufficient"). There are also likely to be many mundane conspiracies (no aliens or magic in the technothriller normally, although GMs who wish to add them can of course do so).

The subjects and themes of technothrillers typically involve crime and investigation. As was mentioned above, the crimes are not only the murders and small-scale conspiracies of older thrillers, but more modern issues:

> most technothrillers derive their conflicts, and hence their plots, from the most up-to-date issues facing society today: drug trafficking, gang violence, and terrorism in its many forms, to name a few. Those that focus on more lasting issues, like organized crime, insurrection, and espionage, tend to give them an entirely new spin. (Ryan 1994:6)

Normally the PCs will be involved in investigating and/or fighting these modern problems, or solving the related crimes. While a technothriller focuses more on investigating and solving crimes and mysteries than fighting, violence is also easy to find in the modern world and all sorts of covert operations from breaking into a corporate office and stealing data from the corporation's computer network to rescuing hostages to fighting drug cartels in jungles are entirely possible. Of course, other modern issues like pollution and soaring divorce rates, or older ones like politics and romantic encounters, are not forgotten either.

Technothriller is probably rather special in its emotional effects as well. Since it deals with investigation of crimes and problems, it will most likely challenge the players at least as much as their characters. Though other types of RPGs will also often force the players to think and not just rely on the skills of their characters (this issue is also dependent on the way the GM and the players like to play), it seems to me that technothrillers are particularly likely to do so. Thus a sense of accomplishment is likely if all goes well. In more adventurous tactical situations the usual fun and excitement is of course normal.

The iconography of the technothriller is based on the real world, but it is likely to include a lot of cutting edge modern technology from computers to

surveillance and forensics equipment. Other than that, the visible aspects of the modern problems and crime are also a part of technothriller's imagery, as are the competent, intelligent and professional characters.

The typical technothriller characters are, according to Ryan:

> Technothriller heroes [...] are never super-sleuths or Rambo-types – they are ordinary cops, soldiers, intelligence analysts, teachers and others who happen to be intelligent, perceptive, resourceful and determined, and in the right place at the right time. (1994:6)

In other words, competent professionals, but not superheroes. Depending on the game and its usual setting, the characters can be police, investigators, computer experts, medical professionals and so on, who more often have to deal with the effects of the modern problems. Alternatively, they can also be agents and special forces soldiers who may also get to deal with some of the sources of these problems. In any case, the style is somewhere between ordinary and adventurous.

Examples of the technothriller genre

The novels of Tom Clancy and Michael Crichton are the usual literary examples of technothrillers. Good film examples are *The Fugitive* (1993) and *Patriot Games* (1992), but *Die Hard* (1988) can also be seen as an action-oriented version, because most of the bad guys are very competent and they try to break into a computer controlled vault (i.e., the crime is technology oriented).

Millennium's End is the most important RPG example. While any RPG that has a modern setting (especially if it also focuses on espionage) can be used for technothriller gaming, *Millennium's End* goes to some trouble to define its genre specifically as a technothriller and the setting for it, so it is the best example. *Millennium's End* is set in 1999, which was a few years in the future when the game was first published but has now become an alternate history. Nevertheless, the setting is well thought out and logical, and I see no reason not to use it even today. It is "darker" than the real world, in that there have been

more wars, fuel and energy shortages and pollution. Cars are less common than today and some run on electricity. Computers and cellular phones are at about the same level, but data transfer, virtual reality and genetics are slightly more advanced and the game's GenNet works better than the real world Internet. The most important differences, however, are in the mood and attitudes of the game's world. Everything is a little more run-down, and there is an air of neglect and desperation.

> The mood of *Millennium's End* lies not in the bush wars, terrorism, hate crime and corporate combat that lie behind most adventures, but in the feeling that nobody can or will do anything about these things. This decay, this slow erosion of our world by the inexorable flow of news nightmares, is what will set a *Millennium's End* campaign apart from any other modern or near-future game. (Ryan 1993:118.)

The game's system pays attention to details and realism without being too complicated. The characters are competent and capable but not superhuman or unreasonably crippled. The same goes for most adversaries. In this game good planning and resourcefulness are important and the characters will definitely not be performing cinematic stunts such as swinging from chandeliers with one hand while hosing down bad guys with a machinegun. In this game firearms are as deadly as they should be, and when any character can be killed or crippled with a single lucky hit, the players would be wise to use violence only as a last resort. The PCs are expected to work for a Blackeagle/Blackeagle company, which is a private investigation and troubleshooting organization. Of course, this is not mandatory, but it is also well developed and a good reason to keep the PCs getting into all sorts of trouble as a group.

4.23 Agent

The main element of the agent genre are special agents and spies. This is not entirely sufficient, as there are also minor features like an adventurous and heroic attitude and special bad guys. The agent genre resembles the technothriller, but is less serious and more action and adventure oriented. The easiest way to understand the difference is to compare technothrillers like the novels of Tom Clancy and agent stories like James Bond films. In the

technothriller, the characters are competent but human, whereas the agents of the agent genre (of which James Bond is a prime example) are almost superhuman in their abilities. Agents are Heroes, whereas technothriller characters are ordinary professionals. Agents also tend to fight other agents, spies or extraordinary Villains. They also not only save a few lives here and there, but not infrequently the entire world as well. Technology in the technothriller is an integral part of the background and setting, whereas in the agent genre technology means gadgets and exotic weapons (plenty of examples of both are also found in the James Bond films).

The setting is usually modern, though many RPGs of the agent genre were, not surprisingly, created during the 1980s when the Cold War still encouraged a clear polarization between Western good guys and Russian bad guys (though the independent Villains are of various ethnic origins), but also offered the occasional possibility of an even more dramatic cooperation against a third party, such as a Villain seeking personal world domination. Nowadays, judging largely by the James Bond films, the themes and settings of the agent genre have moved closer to the technothriller by adopting terrorism, drug lords, large criminal organizations and more independent Villains as its main adversaries. Nevertheless, the usual subjects and plot elements of the agent genre have always involved uncovering evil plots for world domination or destruction and thwarting them. Also, since the agent genre is usually pure heroic action-adventure, its emotional effects are uncomplicated fun and excitement. Thus its mood is also purely light and the style unabashedly heroic.

The iconography of the agent genre includes high-tech gadgets, exotic weapons, fast cars, martial arts and guns, beautiful women (agents or damsels in distress) and, of course, evil Villains with personal armies (often with rather silly uniforms, so that the bad guys can be identified at a glance and the heroes can disguise themselves simply by wearing a borrowed uniform). The characters are obviously special agents, often specialized in some element of the above list of iconography features. Of course, the agents will need support personnel (researchers and technicians who create and repair gadgets, special cars and so

on, and analyze pieces of evidence in their laboratories), as well as superiors, but they are usually NPCs. The usual adversaries include the aforementioned Villains and their private armies, but also foreign agents and spies. Assassins and ninja are also likely to be fairly frequent adversaries.

Examples of the agent genre

The obvious literary and film examples are the numerous James Bond films and novels. There are others, of course, but Bond is the most famous and popular agent character. There are quite a few RPG examples, but not many of them have, to my knowledge, been very successful. *Danger, International* (1985) and *Ninjas and Superspies* (1988) are two of the more apparently popular ones (I have not played either). Both are modern (more or less, considering they were created in the 1980s) action-adventure agent games, focusing on a lot of fast-paced action and martial arts in particular. In these games, problems can and will be solved with violence, but they are so non-serious it does not really matter.

4.24 Oriental

The main feature of the oriental genre is an oriental setting. Usually this means medieval Japan, but sometimes, as in *Legend of the Five Rings* (1997), the setting is more generic. This means that the setting is to the oriental world what the typical medieval fantasy world is to the western world, a liberal blending of features from different cultures and eras. Even so, however, the dominant culture is likely to be Japanese.

Oriental is included in "normal" genres, because there is nothing particularly supernatural about an oriental setting, although I must admit that some magical elements are practically always included. These are, however, usually not very spectacular, but more like the special superhuman maneuvers one sees in martial

arts films, for example. An oriental setting is also typically seen as slightly mysterious by westerners. Arguably, oriental RPGs are very low fantasy, but their fantasy aspects are often low-key and can be easily ignored if so desired. Besides, as I already said, there is nothing particularly supernatural about the oriental setting itself.

The setting was already described as oriental. Usually this means Japan, and tends to be predominantly Japanese even if it is more generic. The iconography is obviously related to the setting and is also oriental or Japan-related. The era is predominantly historic, so samurai, swords, ninja, artisans, peasants, rice fields, mountains and Japanese or oriental buildings are normal parts of the setting. One typical difference, as in western medieval RPG-worlds, is that women are better off than historically to allow female PCs with less difficulty.

The subjects and themes are also related to the setting and its attitudes. Honor, duty and loyalty (and the frequent conflicts between them) are very important. Samurai (or equivalent) are perhaps the most usual character type, so fighting, improving fighting skills and following the code of bushido (or similar) are also important. Politics and treachery may also be important, though often they are handled by the PCs' superiors and enemies. Besides fighting, a recurring plot element is likely to be the abovementioned conflict between duty and honor (for example, a character may be ordered by his/her superior to perform a dishonorable act, or be torn between revealing an important and harmful secret or honoring a vow of silence). The mood in these games is probably normal.

As was mentioned above, samurai or their equivalents are the most common character type, because they are most likely to get into various adventures and conflicts. Artisans, merchants, monks, priests or even geisha and ninja are other possibilities, but once again, I believe peasants would be too downtrodden and immobile to interest most players. If magic is included in the game, wizards or supernatural creatures may also be possible as player characters. The style is most likely ordinary for non-fighting characters and adventurous for warrior characters. It can be heroic as well, but that seems more rare.

Examples of the oriental genre

Good, if lengthy, literary examples are *Shogun* (1975), *Gai-Jin* (1993) and *Tai-Pan* (1966) by James Clavell. As I recall, they are entirely mundane without any supernatural elements. *Shogun* (1980) is also a good enough example as a television mini-series, but there are many more genuine oriental films as well, such as the famous *The Seven Samurai* (1954) and others by Akira Kurosawa. Several Chinese films such as *A Chinese Ghost Story* and *Once Upon a Time in China* are also good examples of the more magical or supernatural style of the oriental genre.

Significant oriental RPG examples are *Sengoku* (1999) and *Legend of the Five Rings* (1997). *Sengoku* (which I have paged through, but am not really very familiar with) is set in feudal Japan in the sixteenth century. In this era, gunpowder weapons and Europeans are not particularly remarkable in Japan anymore, but the Tokugawa Shogunate has not yet stabilized the country so there are plenty of conflicts and adventures to be found. The game includes an immense amount of historical detail about Japan of this era and its caste system, daily life, manners, customs and so on. The historical setting is (for all I know about sixteenth century Japan) extremely well researched and realistic. The game system is simple and character creation is geared for three different power levels from normal to superheroic without fixed classes (though plenty of example character templates for different occupations are provided). There are also rules for magic and supernatural creatures, but they can be easily ignored by those who wish to play a more realistic game.

Legend of the Five Rings (which I have no direct experience of) is a fairly popular oriental RPG, but it is more generic (though Japan-based) and features magic in a more prominent role so it is fair to say that this game is an oriental fantasy game rather than just an oriental RPG. *Legend of the Five Rings* is set on a large land empire of Rokugan, which is ruled by emperor Hantei, who is served by seven major clans and several minor clans (and clanless Ronins) – each in turn broken down into different families. The clans and families will, of

course, often conflict with each other. Women in Rokugan are much better off than in historical Japan, and even female warriors are unremarkable. The main rulebook only allows two character classes: 'bushi' (samurai-like warrior) and 'shugenja' (sorceror/priests), though later supplements apparently provide other possibilities. Despite this, it is not only an action-adventure game, and plenty of opportunity is available for politics, intrigue and romantics if the players desire them. Apparently, the game also provides a lot of information on day to day life on Rokugan instead of only abstract information on politics and major powers as some RPGs do.

4.25 Genres as building blocks of generic description

Different genres are often combined. Indeed, many of the RPG examples I have given above are not "pure" representatives of their relevant genres, though I tried to find such. Since mixing genres is so common, this is may not seem very important. However, besides defining and describing different RPG genres, my purpose was to see them as building blocks that can be combined in various ways and degrees in different games. It is perhaps easiest to explain this idea through a few examples.

To begin with, suppose we have a Western game, itself a variant of the frontier. Now, assuming we do not wish this game to be entirely realistic, but to include some rather strange things, we include a few more or less mad scientists. One of them starts to design and build huge steam-powered walking vehicles, roughly humanoid in shape. Obviously, we have now combined Western with not only the giant robot genre (and by extension science fiction), but also steampunk, since this giant robot works on steam power and is a little too fantastic even for a science fiction device, considering the overall technology level of the period. Next, let us assume that the Indians (or their shamans, at least) in this game know how to work real magic. It does not have to be spectacular or common, if it works, we have just added fantasy to our Western. Now, suppose the PCs are special government agents who have just discovered a lead on a horrible occult

conspiracy that seeks to secretly assassinate the president and turn him/her into a zombie who follows their orders, and elements of agent, conspiracy and horror genres are also added into the mix.

To revisit some of the example RPGs I have described above, I will now describe some of them in terms of their mixed genres. To begin with, *Blue Planet* was earlier described as a combination of primarily science fiction and frontier with some post-holocaust and cyberpunk elements as well. The game is set in the year 2199, when space travel and genetically modified humans and animals (especially "uplifted" or intelligent cetaceans) are, if not effortless or easy, at least nothing remarkable. The setting is also realistic so obviously this game is hard science fiction. It is also set primarily on the planet Poseidon, which is being colonized, explored and exploited by humans, and is thus clearly a frontier world with distinct echoes of some Western themes and icons. While Poseidon is still largely intact, Earth has been devastated by an ecological catastrophe, so there is also a post-holocaust setting (of the more realistic variety, there are no interdimensional portals or magic here). While very far from a typical cyberpunk game, some cyberpunk themes (such as corporations that are too powerful for their own good and cybernetic, bionic and genetic modifications) are included as well. Consequently, *Blue Planet* is indeed mostly a science fiction frontier game, with secondary post-holocaust and cyberpunk themes. Furthermore, since 99% of Poseidon's surface is water, modern pirates should not be forgotten either, and plenty of (mundane) government and corporate conspiracies can also be found if one is so inclined.

WarpWorld is another example. Its world has been destroyed by a nuclear war, so it is obviously a post-holocaust game. It is of the more usual technofantasy variety of post-holocaust RPGs, since there are magic and supernatural beings. There is also a science fiction element of gateways to other dimensions (which are given pseudo-scientific rationale, not a magical one) and mysterious Orbs, which "dampen" high technology devices, keeping the technology at about eighteenth century level in average. More advanced devices will work for a while, but will then fail (i.e., be "damped" by the Orbs). Furthermore, in this

game the dimensional gates are actually meant to be used, rather than just to let strange beings come to Earth, so dimensional travel is also an element (but time travel is not). Since most of the world has also been unexplored and uninhabited (by humans, at least) since the great war (which took place in 2016, the game is set in 2312), *WarpWorld* can also be considered to contain some frontier elements.

Granted, this conglomeration of genres is not as elegant as a single label would be, but it is convenient and – hopefully – clear. For example, if *WarpWorld* were described as a post-holocaust game which is (as usual) combined with technofantasy and dimensional travel genres, with a bit of frontier in it as well, I would know instantly what to expect from it. The details of individual RPGs vary, of course, but attempting to include too much detail will quickly invalidate any genre description since the creators of new RPGs, films and novels will always strive to make them somehow novel and different from old RPGs, films or novels, and the most efficient way of doing this is by varying the details or inventing new ones.

While this building block approach may sometimes lead to long strings of major and minor genre influences in describing RPGs, I believe it is more flexible than more detailed and specialized genre descriptions would be. In other words, whereas a genre description that includes a lot of detail will often quickly be found exceptions to and will then require a redefinition or new subgenres, if a significant new trend appears in RPGs, all my building block genre approach requires is the addition of a new genre, which can then be combined with the relevant old ones.

For example, let us suppose that someone invented a new theme or setting that began to appear in all sorts of RPGs. This could be, say, a virtual reality setting. In other words, the game's world is (whether the characters know it or not) a virtual reality construct. (This is not, in fact, a new idea, but for the sake of argument, let us pretend it is. At least one game, *Dream Park* (1992), is apparently based on it, and virtual reality is a standard feature of cyberpunk

games. The film *Matrix* (1999) is also a good example of this idea.) All sorts of virtual reality games might then begin to appear, some set in fantasy lands, some in a pulpy Western, some in seemingly normal reality and some in cross-genre settings. Instead of having to define virtual reality subgenres for all pre-existing genres, we could just define a new virtual reality genre and combine it with other genres.

The post-holocaust genre is perhaps an even more relevant example. Because it so often includes technofantasy and dimensional travel elements, it would be tempting to describe it so that it indeed included them. However, since there are also games like *Twilight: 2000*, which do not have these features, we would then need either two definitions of post-holocaust or a realistic subgenre of the normally technofantasy post-holocaust genre. In the building block approach this is not necessary, since the post-holocaust genre is defined solely by its setting, which both types of post-holocaust games share. This allows us to describe both *WarpWorld* and *Twilight: 2000* as post-holocaust RPGs, but also to easily introduce other features and say that *WarpWorld* also includes technofantasy and dimensional travel elements, whereas *Twilight: 2000* is a combination of post-holocaust and war genres, and the major differences between these games become immediately apparent.

While genres can mostly be mixed quite freely, as even science fiction and such "historical" genres as the Western and pirate are easily combined, there are some exceptions and more awkward combinations. To begin with, since it is an integral part of the definition of the fantastic that it is set in the real world where fantasy and science fiction elements are clearly impossible, it obviously cannot be combined with them. Granted, it is also an integral part of the fantastic that occasionally something unexplainable does happen, but that much fantasy or science fiction is already included in it by definition. The point is that fantasy and science fiction worldviews are fundamentally incompatible with the real world of the fantastic, although they do occasionally clash. Likewise, the technothriller is also, although to a lesser extent, normally so closely tied to the real world and its competent but human and limited characters, that combining

it with something like the superhero or agent genres would be awkward. Furthermore, genres that differ in terms of playing style, like fantasy and sword and sorcery, cannot be combined, since sword and sorcery already is fantasy. Similarly, a subgenre cannot be combined with its parent genre (such as the Western with the frontier) because the subgenre already is a part of its parent genre.

Summary of chapter 4

To begin with, I will summarize the most important and defining features of the genres defined in this chapter. Firstly, *fantasy* is defined by being impossible in real world terms. Normally this means that it is set in a world that is impossible, because it includes magic and supernatural beings. In this alternate world, however, they are clearly not impossible, though they may still be remarkable. Magic, supernatural elements and other impossibilities can also be included in the real world, but since they are considered to be possible in fantasy, this "real world" is actually an alternate world that only resembles the real world. Thus the definition of fantasy is setting related. *Sword and sorcery* is fantasy that is further defined by its style. It is light-hearted, non-serious and often highly focused on action and adventure.

Fantasy's subgenre *toon* is defined by being set in a cartoon world where conventional logic and realism do not apply. The characters of toon are obviously also cartoon characters, who can also bend and break conventional logic to absurd degrees. Toon is therefore defined by its setting and (to a lesser degree, since they arguably belong to the setting) character type.

Anthropomorphic animals and *anime* are variants of toon. They both follow more conventional logic and are slightly more realistic. In anthropomorphic animals, humans have been replaced by various animals, who talk and act like humans, and are not cartoon characters. Its defining element is thus a special character type. Anime, on the other hand, is set in a cartoon world and has

cartoon characters, but in other ways usually resembles fantasy or science fiction (or technofantasy) more than western cartoons. Like toon, anime is defined by a cartoon setting and characters, but depending on its other features, will share other genre definitions (such as science fiction).

Science fiction is normally defined by its very high-tech setting and its viewpoint that what may seem impossible in real world terms now, may still be possible in the future. In science fiction, marvels are technological in nature, not magical or supernatural. The most obvious feature of science fiction is often highly advanced technology. *Space opera* is science fiction that is further defined by its light-hearted, non-serious and highly action and adventure oriented style. It is also typically much less concerned with realism than science fiction and will more often feature technology that seems to belong more to fantasy than to science fiction.

Cyberpunk is a variant of science fiction that is set in a dark and dystopian near future (often in the early to mid twenty-first century), typically in an urban environment. The setting is important in cyberpunk, but like space opera, it is also partly defined by its style, which is dark, dystopian, violent, rebellious and selfish, but also cheerfully nihilistic and "cool". The most obvious features of cyberpunk are cybernetic enhancements, violence and drugs.

The *giant robot* genre is a subgenre of science fiction that is, besides the usual science fiction definitions, further defined by the prominent role of the giant robots. Actually, they are not robots, as they usually require pilots, but more like walking vehicles. These are often heavily armed military vehicles, but nevertheless the giant robot genre is usually closer to hard science fiction than space opera. This genre is defined by its "character" type, so to speak, although the giant robots are not actually characters. Nevertheless, the setting is usually no different from science fiction in general, so the giant robots are what sets it apart from other science fiction.

Technofantasy is a combination of fantasy and science fiction. Normally they are indeed combined, though their coexistence is not always entirely harmonious. The *fantastic* is a rather special case of technofantasy in that it conflicts these fantasy and science fiction (usually fantasy) elements with the real world. The fantastic is defined by its setting-related theme, which is this conflict between the real world and the fantastic. It is important in the fantastic that this conflict is irreconcilable. The impossible is indeed impossible in the real world. If it is accepted as possible, the rules of the real world have changed and the genre shifts to technofantasy.

Dimensional and *time travel* are defined by their way of changing their settings. Dimensional travel obviously means travelling from one dimension to another, whereas time travel means travelling from one time to another (but in the same dimension). The two can also be combined, and it is not always necessary for the characters to do the travelling, as long as the possibility exists and someone (such as invaders from another time or dimension) uses it.

Post-holocaust is also defined by its setting, which, as the name implies, is a world (usually Earth) that has been ravaged by some horrible catastrophe. Though the setting is a sufficient defining feature for the post-holocaust genre, and it can be realistic and mundane, it nearly always also includes fantasy and science fiction elements (which is why it was included in technofantasy), as well as some dimensional travel and frontier ones. Furthermore, its style is nearly always light and action-adventure oriented.

The *superhero* genre, on the other hand, is defined by its special character type, namely superheroes (although arguably they are a part of the setting, which is usually an alternate version of the real world). Superheroes are humans who have special powers (which are fantastic, but typically given pseudo-scientific rationale) that allow them to, for example, fly or shoot rays from their eyes or hands (superhuman strength and resistance to damage are also popular). They also typically wear colorful costumes to hide their real identities, and fight crime and/or supervillains.

Steampunk is a rather odd genre that is set in the nineteenth century, and includes some fantasy elements (magic, faeries and so on) and/or science fiction notions (like space being filled with "ether" and steam-powered clockwork robots). It is defined by its setting, but the style is also invariably highly adventurous and heroic.

The *conspiracy* genre is defined by its theme: conspiracies (often there are several rather than just one), which in RPGs (although they can be mundane) generally involve aliens, magic or supernatural monsters. Thus the conspiracy is considered to be a technofantasy genre. The setting is ostensibly the real world, although since the conspiracies generally involve fantasy and science fiction notions, it is obviously an alternate world. The characters can either try to find out the truth about conspiracies and often fight them in the process, or they can be the conspirators themselves and try to keep the conspiracy secret.

Horror and *humor* genres are easily defined by their intended emotional effects: horror seeks to create fear, horror, loathing and disgust in its audience, whereas humor means to be amusing. Humor is rare as a pure genre, although it is an extremely common minor ingredient in RPGs. Horror, on the other hand, is fairly common and comes in two basic varieties: traditional horror, where the PCs attempt to destroy the monsters (this can be done either seriously or in an action-adventure style), and more modern horror where the players play the monsters.

There are also several "normal" genres, which are generally set in the real world (or a fairly close and realistic variant of it) and normally have no fantasy or science fiction features in them, although the normal genres can of course be combined with them. The "normal" *frontier* genre is defined by its setting, namely a frontier. This means an area that is mostly wilderness that some civilization is attempting to tame. The frontier genre's conflicts usually are between the wilderness and its inhabitants and civilization (and its inhabitants).

The *Western* is a special and the most famous type of frontier genre, and is further defined by its more specific iconography and themes.

The *pirate* and *agent* genres are defined by their favorite character types (although in the pirate genre the pirates can also be the adversaries). Pirate games also have a secondary defining feature of the maritime setting, although this follows from favoring pirates as character types. Generally pirate games are set in sixteenth or seventeenth century Caribbean, although this is by no means an absolute rule. The agent genre, besides agent characters, is further defined by being non-serious and action-adventure oriented.

In the *war* genre the setting is largely irrelevant as far as the genre is concerned (it is obviously very relevant for actual fighting). Instead, the war genre is defined by its themes: fighting, action and warfare. Usually it is non-serious and action-adventure oriented, but may also be more serious, in which case its usual character types and other thematic and plot elements are greatly expanded. The war genre as a RPG genre is differentiated from wargames by its smaller scale. The PCs are single individuals and the players do not control entire armies.

It is more difficult to find clear defining elements for the *technothriller* genre. While the real world (or a slightly alternate version of it) is fairly important, the most important features of the technothriller are its themes (modern problems and crimes like fanaticism, drugs, hate-crime, pollution and so on) and character type (intelligent, competent and resourceful). The technothriller usually includes some sort of investigation, typically of a crime or something that would be a crime if it was made public.

The final genre to summarize is *oriental*. It is easily defined by its oriental setting, which is usually Japanese or at least largely Japan-based, even if it is more generic. The subjects and themes (or at least their details, as some themes like fighting and love are, of course, more universal), characters and iconography all follow from or are modified by this special setting. Naturally, oriental RPGs are generally created by western authors, and thus the details may

not be entirely correct. However, the most important thing about an oriental setting is that it is exotic and mysterious to most western players.

I also think it is worthwhile to compare and contrast some features of the most important genres. To begin with, both fantasy and science fiction deal with the impossible, but in different ways. Fantasy usually relocates itself into an alternate world, or an alternate version of the real world, where the impossible is possible. Science fiction, on the other hand, usually relocates itself into the future, arguing that even if something is not possible now, it will be in the future once science has developed enough. The defining feature of both fantasy and science fiction is therefore that they are impossible in the real world's terms. The difference is that fantasy is obviously so, while science fiction argues that its impossibilities are in fact possible and rationalizes them. In fantasy, the typical manifestations of the impossible are magic and supernatural beings. In science fiction, they are technological marvels like faster than light spaceships and anti-gravity vehicles. Technofantasy combines fantasy and science fiction viewpoints, or at least their typical features like magic and technology.

Horror and the fantastic, on the other hand, contrast both fantasy and science fiction elements with the real world. In both the real world conflicts with the impossible. In the fantastic, however, this conflict cannot be resolved (if it is, the genre shifts to technofantasy), whereas in horror it often can be. In horror, the codes of the real world and the impossible only seem to conflict initially, but typically the monster or monsters that offend the real world code are in the end accepted as being real and thus possible and ultimately part of the real world (even if they do not belong there). Therefore, horror is in a way also technofantasy, although its primary defining element is the emotional effect it attempts to create.

Besides simply describing different genres, my purpose was to define them so that they could be easily combined with each other (although some, like the fantastic and fantasy, for example, are not compatible). This is even necessary, because genres are very often combined. While this may lead to long strings of

major and minor genre influences in describing RPGs, such an approach will hopefully be more flexible than more detailed and specialized genre descriptions would be. In other words, whereas a genre description that includes a lot of detail will often quickly be found exceptions to and will then require a redefinition or new subgenres, if significant new trends appear in RPGs, all my "building blocks" genre approach requires is the addition of a new genre, which can then be combined with the old ones.

5 CONCLUSION

My purpose was to provide an overall description of what RPGs are in the first place, what kinds of RPGs there are in terms of genres and how they differ from and relate to each other. In other words, the primary purpose of this study was to identify and describe the most important roleplaying game genres. The secondary purpose was to see if genres could be defined so that they could be used as building blocks, or to be combined with each other so that the combinations would not need to be described separately as new genres.

The beginning of this study described RPGs in terms of narrative and game theories. The purpose was to explain what they are like to those readers who are not very familiar with RPGs, and also to demonstrate how different RPGs are from literature and films. This difference naturally carried over to genre theory, because the existing genre theory is primarily interested in literature and film genres. Nevertheless, films, novels and RPGs do share some common ground and I adapted some genre theories for the purposes of this study. Most notably, I used a modified list of differentiating factors as originally described by Bordwell and Thompson and explained some of its shortcomings in terms of Rick Altman's syntactic/semantic/pragmatic approach to films genres. Of these three, only semantic features were used as defining ones in my study, although I admit that this puts the focus on RPG rulebooks and theoretical games instead

of actual case studies of how RPG players actually play and modify their games. However, since I play RPGs myself, I have made up for this lack of case studies with my own experience as a player and a GM, although this admittedly generates a slight bias since my experiences may be different from those of other players. Naturally, I have attempted to ignore and point out my biases as much as possible, so I hope this study is no more biased than any other academic study is.

The RPG genres described in this study were fantasy and its variants sword and sorcery, toon, anthropomorphic animals and anime, science fiction and its variants space opera, cyberpunk and giant robot, technofantasy and its variants the fantastic, dimensional and time travel, post-holocaust, superhero, steampunk and conspiracy, as well as the "normal" genres frontier, Western, pirate, war, technothriller, agent and oriental. They were defined in terms of their most essential elements and typical but lesser features. The most important defining element was the setting and its special features, but subjects and themes, emotional effect and special character types were also used. The genres have been grouped in a rather traditional way in a sort of triangle consisting of science fiction, fantasy and mundane with horror and humor in the center. There would have been other possibilities as well, such as grouping genres together depending on whether they are defined by setting, emotional effect, special character type and so on.

Although I honestly have to admit that some of my genre descriptions, the ones I have little personal experience of (especially toon, anthropomorphic animals and anime), are rather vague, they are still based on multiple reviews of games of those genres by people who have actually played them, and I do believe that my descriptions still give the reader a fairly good idea of those genres. I am not entirely happy with my descriptions of fantasy and science fiction genres either, because they are so wide and varied genres that a lot of generalization was necessary. Furthermore, in all fairness it must also be admitted that in accordance with Rick Altman's pragmatic genre theory, it is in the end the individual groups of players who define their own genres, and therefore some

people who have always played a certain genre in a certain way may argue against my definitions. I tried to make my descriptions broad enough to admit various playing styles and variation between individual games, but exceptions can always be found to practically any definition. Although they are sometimes a little vague, the good thing about my genre definitions is that they are also stable. This means that even decades from now, the horror genre will still aim to create feelings of fear, disgust and horror, the superhero genre will still continue to focus on superheroes instead of, say, guitar players and so on. Perhaps this could in a way be argued to be a partly prescriptive instead of a purely descriptive way of defining genres, but what point would there be in, say, the pirate genre without pirates in it? Obviously these genres will require refining, modification and inclusion of new details in the future, but their fundamental essential elements will remain the same. I think this is a good thing.

The reason for my defining all these genres was to provide an overall picture of what kinds of RPGs there are and how they differ from and relate to each other, and in this I believe I have been fairly successful. However, this means my genre descriptions are by necessity broad, generic and, unfortunately, also rather vague and shallow. I am a little unhappy about that, but since I aimed to provide an overall description of RPG genres in general, a certain amount of vagueness could not be avoided without making this study overly long. Nevertheless, I think this study has been a good start and although I could not cram in everything I learned about RPGs in general and about literally dozens of interesting and unique RPGs that I had not even heard of until I started this study, I have learned a lot and this has been a very valuable experience to me personally.

My secondary building block genre approach seems to work fairly well. The idea was that just because genre A nearly always includes certain features of genre B, they do not automatically have to be considered essential features genre A as well. In such a case genre descriptions are better served if both genres are defined by their primary features while explaining what normally happens if they are combined with each other. In this way there is less overlap

between genres and less exceptions and special cases. Since mixing genres is a common practice, there is nothing particularly novel about this idea. After all, a traditional horror-comedy is the same thing as a combination of my horror and humor genres. However, the neat feature of my approach is that there is no problem in deciding whether a movie like *Alien* is horror science fiction or science fiction horror, it is simply a more or less equal combination of the two so it matters little which is primary.

The implications of my study for RPG studies is potentially major, if other researchers like or dislike my findings, descriptions and discussions and either use them or refute them. At least I hope to have provided insight into the world of RPGs for those who have never played them but are interested, and perhaps some new ideas even for those already were familiar with RPGs. Since my description of RPGs from narrative and game theory perspectives was brief, hopefully someone interested those areas will also take an interest in RPGs and study them in more detail. The implications for genre studies in general are probably very minor, since literature and films remain more important objects of study and I have not presented any revolutionary new genre theories. Genre analysis based on few essential features would be much more difficult for both films and novels, and consequently a 'genres as building blocks' approach of some sort would also be much more difficult to define and use. Nevertheless, RPGs are also a popular form of entertainment and perhaps they will some day be a more popular field of academic study, in which case someone may yet find a use for this study.

The obvious next step for further study would be to further refine these genres and describe them in more detail and with more examples. A good way of doing this would be to focus on one genre at a time or to contrast a few related genres. Another obvious possibility would be to actually use these genres as building blocks in describing many of the most popular and important RPGs (preferably in more detail than has been possible in this study). It would also be worth further study to expand RPG genre studies to include Altman's syntactic and pragmatic aspects as well. This would mean conducting surveys of how

people actually play RPGs, how they combine (the syntactic aspect) the building blocks of stories (the semantic aspect) that RPG rulebooks provide for them, and how they in the process define their own genres (the pragmatic aspect). Conducting such surveys was outside the scope of this study, but it would certainly be interesting. However, since all player groups have their own particular styles, such a study should be wide and include many groups of players. From syntactic and pragmatic viewpoints it would also be interesting to study how the roles of players and GMs differ from and relate to each other. RPGs would provide a unique perspective to such a topic, since both GMs and players are actively involved in shaping the story and, by extension, its genre. To move outside genre theories, as was mentioned above, RPGs could also be further studied from narrative and/or game theory viewpoints. This would probably also involve case studies of how players actually play RPGs.

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Ryan, Charles 1993. *Millennium's End v2.0: Modern Roleplaying in the Technothriller Genre*. 2nd edition. USA: Chameleon Eclectic.

Ryan, Charles 1994. *Millennium's End GM's Companion.* Blacksburg, USA: Chameleon Eclectic.

Siembieda, Kevin 1998. *Heroes Unlimited.* Revised second edition. Taylor, USA: Palladium.

Stafford, Greg and Sam Shirley 1999. *King Arthur Pendragon: Epic Roleplaying in Legendary Britain.* 4th edition. USA: Green Knight Publishing. (The above is the full title, even the rulebook refers to the game simply as *Pendragon.*)

Tidball, Jeff and John Nephew 1996 (2000). *Ars Magica.* 4th edition. USA: Atlas Games.

Wieck, Stewart, Chris Earley and Stephan Wieck 1993. *Mage: The Ascension.* USA: White Wolf.

Roleplaying games that have been used as examples

NOTE: These games have been referred to as examples, but most have not been quoted from. The games that have been quoted have already been listed above, but for completeness, they are included here as well (in some cases the editions may be different).

When I have used a game as an example, I have referred to it by title. Therefore, this list is organized by the game's title, not by author. The title and year of publication are also given first, followed by author and publisher. The year of publication is that of the latest edition that I know of, and the year of the first publication is given in parentheses. It should perhaps also be noted that the first and later editions often have different publishers and different lists of authors (or editors). The ones given are for the latest edition (while this is unfair to the original authors and publishers, it makes finding a recent copy of the game much easier). For further information, I recommend John Kim's RPG Encyclopedia (<http://www.ps.uci.edu/~jhkim/rpg/encyclopedia/index.html>).

7th Sea 1999. John Wick, Jennifer Wick and Kevin Wilson. USA: Alderac Entertainment Group.

Aberrant 1999. Justin Achilli, Andrew Bates, Robert Hatch, Sheri M. Johnson, Steven S. Long, Mark Moore, Ethan Skemp and Fred Yelk. USA: White Wolf.

Advanced Dungeons and Dragons 1989 (1978). Gary Gygax and David Cook. USA: TSR. (The third edition (2000) reverted to the title *Dungeons and Dragons.*)

Afterwars 1991. Timothy J. McFadden. USA: Stellar Games.

All Flesh Must Be Eaten 1999. George Vasilakos, Albert Bruno, Richard Dakan, CJ Carella and M. Alexander Jurkat. USA: Eden Studios.

Amber Diceless Role-playing 1991. Wujcik, Eric. Phage Press. (Mentioned in the glossary.)

Ars Magica 1996 (1987). Jeff Tidball and John Nephew. USA: Atlas Games.

Big Eyes, Small Mouth 2000 (1997). David L. Pulver and Mark C. MacKinnon. Canada: Guardians of Order.

Blue Planet: Science Fiction Roleplaying on the New Frontier. 2000 (1997). Jeffrey Barber, Greg Benage, John Snead and Jason Werner. USA: Fantasy Flight Games.

Boot Hill 1984 (1975). Steve Winter. USA: TSR.

Brave New World 1999. Matt Forbeck. USA: Pinnacle Entertainment Group.

Call of Cthulhu: Horror Roleplaying in the Worlds of H.P. Lovecraft 1998 (1981). Sandy Petersen and Lynn Willis. USA: Chaosium.

Castle Falkenstein 1994. Mike Pondsmith. USA: R. Talsorian Games.

Changeling: The Dreaming 1997 (1995). Ian Lemke. USA: White Wolf. (Mentioned in the glossary.)

Chill 1990 (1984). David Ladyman, Jeff R. Leason and Louis J. Prosperi. Mayfair Games.

Conspiracy X 1999 (1996). Rick Ernst, Shirley Madewell and Chris Pallace. USA: Eden.

Continuum: Roleplaying in the Yet 1999. David Fooden, Chris Adams and Barbara Manui. USA: Aetherco.

Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0. 1990 (1988). Mike Pondsmith, Colin Fisk, Will Moss, Scott Ruggels, Dave Friedland and Mike Blum. USA: R. Talsorian Games.

Danger, International 1985 (1983, original title *Espionage*). L. Douglas Garrett, George MacDonald and Steve Peterson. USA: Hero Games.

Deadlands: The Weird West 1996. Shane Lacy Hensley. USA: Pinnacle Entertainment Group.

Delta Green 1997?. Dennis Detwiller, Adam Scott Glancy and John Tynes. USA: Pagan Publishing.

Dream Park 1992. Mike Pondsmith. USA: R. Talsorian Games.

Dungeons and Dragons 2000 (1974). Jonathan Tweet, Skip Williams and Monte Cook. Wizards of the Coast. (This was the first commercially published RPG. Originally by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson. Published by TSR until 2000.)

Earthdawn 1994 (1993). Greg Gorden and Louis J. Prosperi. USA: FASA.

The End 1997. Joseph E. Donka. Scapegoat Games.

Feng Shui 1999 (1996). Robin Laws. USA: Atlas Games.

Fringeworthy 1990 (1981). Richard Tucholca. Tri-Tac Games.

Furry Pirates 1999. Lise Breakey and Bruce Thomas. USA: Atlas Games.

GURPS 1988 (1986). Steve Jackson. USA: Steve Jackson Games.

GURPS Old West: Adventure on the American Frontier 2000 (1991). Ann Dupuis, Lynda Manning-Schwartz, Robert E. Smith and Liz Tornabene. USA: Steve Jackson Games.

HârnMaster Core Rules 1996 (1986). N. Robin Crossby. Blaine, USA: Columbia Games. Collectively referred to as *Hârn* together with *HârnWorld*.

HârnWorld 1990 (1983). N. Robin Crossby. Blaine, USA: Columbia Games. Collectively referred to as *Hârn* together with *HârnMaster*.

Heavy Gear: Into the Eye of the Storm 1997 (1996). Philippe Boulle, Jean Carrières, Élie Charest, Gene Marcil, Guy-Francis Vella and Marc A. Vézina. Montréal, Canada: Dream Pod 9.

Heroes Unlimited 1998 (1984). Kevin Siembieda. Taylor, USA: Palladium Books.

Hunter: The Reckoning 1999. Andrew Bates, Phil Brucato, Ken Cliffe, Greg Fountain, Ed Hall, Jess Heinig, Michael B. Lee, Richard Thomas, Mike Tinney, Stewart Wieck et al. USA: White Wolf.

Jovian Chronicles 1997. Philippe Boulle, Jean Carrières, Wunji Lau and Marc A. Vézina. Montréal, Canada: Dream Pod 9.

King Arthur Pendragon: Epic Roleplaying in Legendary Britain 1999 (1985). Greg Stafford and Sam Shirley. USA: Green Knight Publishing. (The above is the full title, but even the rulebook refers to the game simply as *Pendragon*.)

Kult 1997 (1993). Michael Petersén and Gunilla Johnsson. Metropolis. First published in Swedish in 1991, 1993 is the date of the first English edition.

Land of Og 1998? (1995, first published as *Og: the Roleplaying Game*). Aldo Ghiozzi. Wingnut.

Legend of the Five Rings 1997. John Wick and D. Williams. USA: Alderac Entertainment Group.

Mage: The Ascension 1995 (1993). Stewart Wieck, Chris Earley and Stephan Wieck. USA: White Wolf.

Mechwarrior 1999 (1986). Brian Nystul. USA: FASA.

Merc: 2000 1990. Loren Wiseman. USA: GDW. (Not a complete RPG, but an alternate world supplement to *Twilight: 2000*.)

Metamorphosis Alpha 1976. James Ward. USA: TSR.

Middle Earth Role-Playing (usually called *MERP*) 1993 (1984). S. Coleman Charlton. USA: Iron Crown Enterprises.

Millennium's End v2.0: Modern Roleplaying in the Technothriller Genre 1993 (1992). Charles Ryan. Blacksburg, USA: Chameleon Eclectic.

Millennium's End GM's Companion 1994. Charles Ryan. Blacksburg, USA: Chameleon Eclectic.

The Morrow Project 1983 (1980). Kevin Dockery, Robert Sadler and Richard Tucholka. Timeline.

Nightlife 1992 (1990). Bradley K. McDevitt et al. USA: Stellar Games.

Ninjas and Superspies 1988. Erick Wujcik. USA: Palladium.

Orkworld 2000. John Wick. USA: Wicked Press.

Palladium Fantasy Role Playing Game 1998 (1983). Kevin Siembieda and Erick Wujcik. USA: Palladium.

Prince Valiant 1989. Greg Stafford, William Dunn and Lynn Willis. USA: Chaosium. (Mentioned in the glossary.)

Recon 1999 (1982). Erick Wujcik. USA: Palladium.

Rifts 1990. Kevin Siembieda. USA: Palladium.

Rolemaster 1999 (1980). S. Coleman Charlton and John Curtis. USA: Iron Crown Enterprises. (Actually split into several sections: *Arms Law*, *Spell Law*, *Character Law*, *Claw Law*, and *Campaign Law*.)

Run Out the Guns! 1998. Jason Hawkins and Todd McGovern. USA: Iron Crown Enterprises.

RuneQuest 1984 (1978). Steve Perrin with Greg Stafford, Steve Henderson and Lynn Willis. Avalon Hill.

Sengoku 1999. Mark Arsenault and Anthony Bryant. USA: Gold Rush Games.

SenZar 1995. Todd King with Joseph Giacone Jr. and John Bruner. USA: Nova Eth Publishing.

Shadowrun 1998 (1989). Bob Charrette, Paul Hume and Tom Dowd. USA: FASA.

Space: 1889 1988. Frank Chadwick. USA: GDW.

Starfaring 1976. Ken St. Andre. USA: Flying Buffalo. (This was the first science fiction RPG.)

Star Trek: The Next Generation 1998. Christian Moore, Kenneth Hite, Ross Isaacs and Steve Long. USA: Last Unicorn. There is also *Star Trek: The Original Series* (1999).

Star Wars 1996 (1987). Bill Smith, George R. Strayton, Greg Farshtey, Peter Schweighofer, Eric S. Trautman and Paul Sudlow. West End Games. (There seems to be a new version (or a completely new game) by Wizards of the Coast (2000).)

Toon 1991 (1984). Greg Costikyan, Warren Spector et al. USA: Steve Jackson Games.

TimeLords: Adventure into forever... 1990 (1987) Greg Porter. USA: BTRC.

Traveller 1996 (1977). Mark Miller. USA: Imperium Games. Originally published by GDW. *MegaTraveller* (1987) and *Traveller: The New Era* (1993) are related but have different game mechanics and setting. *Traveller 2300* (1986, also referred to as *2300 A.D.*) is not related to the original *Traveller*, but was designed and created by the same people and also published by GDW.

Tribe 8 1998. Philippe Boulle with Stephane Brochu and Joshua Mosqueira Asheim. Canada: Dream Pod 9.

Twilight: 2000 1990 (1984). Frank Chadwick. USA: GDW.

UNSanctioned: The Dream Corrupted 2000. Greg Poehlein and Paul Arden Lindberg. USA: Nightshift Games.

Vampire: The Masquerade 1998 (1991). Mark Rein·Hagen. USA: White Wolf.

WarpWorld: The Old Gods Waken... 1991. Greg Porter. USA: BTRC.

Werewolf: The Apocalypse 1994 (1992). Mark Rein·Hagen, Robert Hatch and Bill Bridges. USA: White Wolf.

Wraith: The Oblivion 1996 (1994). Mark Rein·Hagen, Jennifer Hartshorn, Richard Dansky and Sam Chupp. USA: White Wolf. (Mentioned in the glossary.)

Novels referred to as examples

Here are novels and novel series (as well as some comic books) used as examples in this study. In many cases I have been unable to find certain information about the original publisher, but these are only examples and thus very secondary sources, and most have been reprinted or republished numerous times by various publishers, so I do not think this is very important. One version or another of most of these novels can be easily found in almost any library.

Axler, James 1986-92. The Deathlands series (begins with *Red Holocaust*). UK: Gold Eagle Books (?).

Barrie, J. M. 1911. *Peter Pan*. (Actually the title of the 1951 edition, the 1911 title was *Peter and Wendy*. Based on the play *Peter Pan, or The Boy who Would not Grow Up* (1904).)

Blaylock, James P. 1986. *Homunculus*. New York (?): Ace Books.

Bonelli, Giovanni Luigi and Aurelio Galleppini 1948-. *Tex Willer* comic book series. Originally in Italian (?).

Carroll, Lewis 1865. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (or later *Alice in Wonderland*).

Carroll, Lewis 1871. *Through the Looking-glass, and What Alice Found There*.

Charlier, Jean-Michel and Jean Giraud. *Lieutenant Blueberry* comic book series. Originally in French (?).

Clavell, James 1966. *Tai-Pan*.

Clavell, James 1975. *Shogun*.

Clavell, James 1993. *Gai-Jin*.

Collins, Nancy A. 1989. *Sunglasses After Dark*. USA (?): Onyx (?). (There are other novels about Sonja Blue as well.)

Collins, Nancy A. 1993. *Wild Blood*. USA: Roc.

Conrad, Joseph 1902. *Heart of Darkness*. (Apparently first published in *Youth: A Narrative, and Two Other Stories* 1902.)

Dickens, Charles 1854. *Hard Times*.

Doyle, Arthur Conan 1912. *The Lost World*.

Gibson, William 1984. *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace Books.

Gibson, William 1986. *Count Zero*. New York: Arbor House.

Gibson, William 1988. *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. New York: Bantam Spectra.

Gibson, William and Bruce Sterling 1990. *The Difference Engine*. UK (?): Gollancz.

Goodkind, Terry 1994-. The Sword of Truth series (begins with *Wizard's First Rule*, which appears to have been first published by Millennium).

Grahame, Kenneth 1908. *The Wind in the Willows*.

Harrison, Harry 1961-1999. The Stainless Steel Rat series (begins with *The Stainless Steel Rat*, New York: Pyramid).

Jeter, K. W. 1979. *Morlock Night*. USA (?): Grafton (?).

Jeter, K. W. 1987. *Infernal Devices: A Mad Victorian Fantasy*. USA: St. Martin's Press (?)

Kerr, Katharine 1986-90. The Kingdom of Deverry series (begins with *Daggerspell*, which seems to have been first published by Doubleday).

Kerr, Katharine 1991-94. The Westlands series (begins with *A Time of Exile*, which appears to have been first published by Grafton).

King, Stephen 1981. *Cujo*. USA: The Viking Press.

King, Stephen 1990. *The Stand*. (The complete and uncut version, first published (cut) in 1978. Originally published by Doubleday, the complete and uncut version possibly by Doubleday and/or King himself.)

Milne, A. A. 1926. *Winnie-the-Pooh*. UK: Methuen (?)

Moore, Alan and Dave Gibbons 1987. *Watchmen*. USA (possibly by DC Comics). Originally published as 12 individual comics in 1986-87.

Morris and Goscinny (Maurice De Bévère and René Goscinny) 1955-??. *Lucky Luke* comic book series. Originally in French, apparently published in English by Glo'worm.

Powers, Tim 1983. *The Anubis Gates*. New York: Ace Books.

Pratchett, Terry 1983-. The Discworld series (apparently begins with *The Colour of Magic*).

Rice, Anne 1976. *Interview with the Vampire*. (Filmed with the same title in 1994.)

Shea, Robert and Anton Wilson 1975. *The Illuminatus trilogy*. Dell (?).

Shelley, Mary 1818. *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*.

Sterling, Bruce (ed.) 1986. *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*. Arbor House.

Stevenson, Robert Louis 1883. *Treasure Island*.

Stoker, Bram 1897. *Dracula*.

Swift, Jonathan 1726. *Gulliver's Travels*.

Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel 1954-55. *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. UK: George Allen & Unwin (?).

Wells, H. G. 1895. *The Time Machine: An Invention*. USA.

Williams, Walter Jon 1986. *Hardwired*. USA: Tor.

Williams, Walter Jon 1987. *The Voice of the Whirlwind*. USA: Tor.

Film and television references

Here are films and television series I have referred to as examples. Since they have been referred to by title, they are also organized by title. The format is title, release/production year, production company (or companies), director, notes. I have gathered the production company, director and release year data from *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* and the Internet Movie Database (<www.imdb.com>).

12 Monkeys 1995. Atlas Entertainment, Classico, Universal Pictures. Dir: Terry Gilliam.

2001: A Space Odyssey 1968. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Polaris. Dir: Stanley Kubrick.

Akira (animated film) 1988. Akira Committee, Dragon, Nakamura, Telecom Animation Film, Tokyo Movie Shinsha. Dir: Katsuhiro Otomo.

Alien 1979. 20th Century Fox. Dir: Ridley Scott.

Aliens 1986. 20th Century Fox, Brandywine Productions. Dir: James Cameron.

Ally McBeal 1997-. 20th Century Fox Television, David E. Kelley. Various directors.

Babylon 5 1994-98. Babylonian Productions. Various directors.

Back to the Future 1985. Amblin Entertainment, Universal Pictures. Dir: Robert Zemeckis.

Billy the Kid versus Dracula 1965. Circle, Embassy. Dir: William Beaudine.

Blackbeard the Pirate 1952. RKO Radio Pictures. Dir: Raoul Walsh.

Blade Runner 1982. Blade Runner Partnership, The Ladd Company. Dir: Ridley Scott. *Blade Runner: The Director's Cut* version 1992.

Bram Stoker's Dracula 1992. American Zoetrope, Columbia Pictures, Osiris Films. Dir: Francis Ford Coppola. There are literally dozens of Dracula films (and even more vampire films), this is one of the most recent and is fairly faithful to Stoker's original story.

Bubblegum Crisis (animated film) 1985. Dir: Akiyama Katsuhito, Hiroaki Goda et al. There is also an animated series of the same name, 1987- (AIC, Artmic).

Buffy the Vampire Slayer 1992. 20th Century Fox, Kuzui Enterprises, Sandollar. Dir: Fran Rubel Kuzui. There is also a television series with the same name, see below.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (television series) 1997-??. 20th Century Fox Television, Kuzui Enterprises, Mutant Enemy, Sandollar Television. Dir: Daniel Attias and Reza Badiyi. This is a television series follow-up to *BtVS* film. The series has entirely different cast and location and is set after the events of the film. The series is, in my opinion, much better than the film.

A Chinese Ghost Story 1987. Cinema City Film, Film Workshop. Dir: Ching Siu Tung.

Conan the Barbarian 1982. Dino De Laurentiis, Universal Pictures. Dir: John Milius. (The above is from the Internet Movie Database. According to *TEF*, the production data should be Dino De Laurentiis, Edward R. Pressman, 1981.)

Conan the Destroyer 1984. Dino De Laurentiis, Edward R. Pressman. Dir: Richard Fleischer.

Cutthroat Island 1995. Beckner, Gorman, Carolco, Cutthroat Productions, Forge, Guild, Laurence Mark Productions, Le Studio Canal+, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, RCS Video, Tele-Communications. Dir: Renny Harlin.

Dances with Wolves 1990. Majestic Film, Tig Productions. Dir: Kevin Costner.

Die Hard 1988. 20th Century Fox, Gordon Company, Silver Pictures. Dir: John McTiernan. There have been two sequels: *Die Hard 2* (1990) and *Die Hard: With a Vengeance* (1995).

Dragonslayer 1981. Paramount Pictures, Walt Disney Productions. Dir: Matthew Robbins.

Dr Who (television series) 1963-1989. BBC.

E.T. – The Extra Terrestrial 1982. Universal Pictures. Dir: Steven Spielberg.

Excalibur 1981. Warner Bros. (and Orion?). Dir: John Boorman.

The Exorcist 1973. Hoya, Warner Bros. Dir: William Friedkin. Based on the novel of the same name by Peter Blatty. There have been two sequels: *Exorcist II: The Heretic* (1977) and *Exorcist III* (1990).

Fright Night 1985. Columbia Pictures, Delphi III, Vistar Films. Dir: Tom Holland.

The Fugitive 1993. Warner Bros. Dir: Andrew Davis.

Full Metal Jacket 1987. Natant, Warner Bros. Dir: Stanley Kubrick.

Ghost in the Shell (animated film) 1995. Bandai Visual, Kodansha, Manga Entertainment. Dir: Mamory Oshii.

Johnny Mnemonic 1995. Alliance Communications, Cinévision, TriStar. Dir: Robert Longo.

Mad Max 1979. Dir: George Miller. There are two sequels, *Mad Max 2* (1981) and *Mad Max Beyond the Thunderdome* (1985).

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein 1994. Columbia Tri-Star, American Zoetrope, Japan Satellite Broadcasting, IndieProd. Dir: Kennet Branagh. There have been literally dozens of Frankenstein films. This is to my knowledge the most recent one, and fairly faithful to Shelley's original story.

The Matrix 1999. Groucho II Film Partnership, Silver Pictures, Village Roadshow Productions. Dir: Andy and Larry Wachowski.

Monty Python and the Holy Grail 1975. Python, Michael White. Dir: Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones.

Monty Python's Flying Circus (television series) 1969-70, 1972-74. BBC.

Monty Python's Life of Brian 1979. Hand Made Films. Dir: Terry Jones.

The Muppet Show (television series) 1976-1981. ITC Entertainment. Produced by Jack Burns and Jim Henson. Directed by Philip Casson.

The Night of the Living Dead 1968. Image Ten, Laurel. Dir: George Romero. There are two sequels: *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Day of the Dead* (1985), and a color remake of the original from 1990.

Once Upon a Time in China 1991. Film Workshop. Dir: Tsui Hark.

Patriot Games 1992. Paramount Pictures. Dir: Phillip Noyce.

The Postman 1997. Tig Productions, Warner Bros. Dir: Kevin Costner.

The Princess Bride 1987. Act III Communications, Buttercup Films, The Princess Bride. Dir: Rob Reiner.

Rambo: First Blood Part II 1985. Anabasis N.V., Carolco. Dir: George P. Cosmatos.

Ranma 1/2 (Ranma Nibun no Ichi) (animated television series) 1990. Takahashi, Kitty Film. Dir: Rumiko Takahashi.

Red Sonja 1985. MGM-United Artists, Famous Films, Dino De Laurentiis. Dir: Richard Fleischer.

The Return of the Living Dead 1985. Cinema 84, Hemdale Film Corporation. Dir: Dan O'Bannon. There are two sequels from 1987 and 1993.

Robocop 1987. Orion. Directed by Paul Verhoeven.

Robotech (animated television series) 1985. Harmony Gold, Streamline Pictures. Dir: Noboru Ishiguro.

The Seven Samurai (Shichi-nin no Samurai) 1954. Dir: Akira Kurosawa.

Shogun (television mini-series) 1980. Paramount Television. Dir: Jerry London.

Stargate 1994. Carolco Pictures, Centropolis Film Productions, Journal Film, Le Studio Canal+. Dir: Roland Emmerich. There is also a related television series *Stargate SG-1* (1997-??) which apparently continues from where the film ended.

Star Trek (television series) 1966-1969. Desilu Productions, Norway Corporation, Paramount Television, NBC. Created by Gene Roddenberry.

Star Trek: The Next Generation (television series) 1987-1994. Paramount Television. Created by Gene Roddenberry.

Star Wars 1977. 20th Century Fox. Dir: George Lucas. The two original sequels were *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *The Return of the Jedi* (1983). There is also a more recent prequel, *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* (1999) with two more prequels being produced. The latter ones are by Lucasfilm Ltd. (and 20th Century Fox (?)).

Strange Days 1995. Lightstorm Entertainment. Dir: Kathryn Bigelow.

Superman 1978. Dovemead, International Film Production. Dir: Richard Donner. There have been at least three sequels: *Superman II* (1980), *Superman III* (1983) and *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* (1987).

The Terminator 1984. Cinema '84, Pacific Western, Orion. Dir: James Cameron.

Terminator 2: Judgment Day 1991. Lightstorm, Carolco, Tri-Star. Produced and directed by James Cameron.

Time Bandits 1981. Hand Made Films. Dir: Terry Gilliam.

Transformers (animated television series) 1984. Hasbro, Marvel Productions, Sunbow Productions, Toei Goda. Dir: Jay Bacal, John Gibbs II et al.

Unforgiven 1992. Malpaso Productions, Warner Bros. Dir: Clint Eastwood.

Waterworld 1995. Davis Entertainment, Gordon Company, Licht/Mueller Film Corporation, Universal Pictures. Dir: Kevin Reynolds.

Who Framed Roger Rabbit 1988. Warner, Touchstone, Amblin. Dir: Robert Zemeckis.

The Wild, Wild West (television series) 1965-1969. Michael Garrison, CBS TV. There has also been a more recent (1999) film adaptation of the same name and theme.

The Wild, Wild West 1999. Peters Entertainment, Sonnenfeld, Josephson Productions, Warner Bros. Dir: Barry Sonnenfeld.

The X Files (television series) 1993-??. 20th Century Fox Television, Ten Thirteen Productions. There has also been a film (1998) of the same name and theme and with the same central cast.

X-men 2000. 20th Century Fox, Bad Hat Harry, Donner/Schuler-Donner Productions, Genetics Productions, Marvel Films, Springwood Productions. Dir: Bryan Singer.

APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY

As might be expected, RPGs have many special terms and jargon. In this section I will try to explain terms that are in common usage or refer to common game mechanics or conventions. Where variation exists, I have given the most common variants of a term. The list is alphabetic, but those who are new to RPGs may want to start with 'Character' and 'RPG' entries.

AD&D: *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*. As might be expected, this is an advanced version of *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*). *D&D* was the first published RPG, originally in 1972 "by Gary Gygax as a set of small white pamphlets (now much valued) and then properly released as a series of boxed sets starting in 1974 by his company, TSR" (Encyclopedia GEAS (<http://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/societies/geas/CYCLO/D/Dungeons_and_Dragons.html>). The original *D&D* was a simple game consisting mainly of treasure gathering expeditions in various dungeons by a group of adventurers (the PCs). Later when game plots grew more varied and intellectual, the rules were further developed into what became *AD&D*. The Encyclopedia GEAS (see above), goes on to add:

> AD&D is still the largest RPG of all, with hundereds [*sic*] of supplements, game worlds and rules, and most roleplayers will have played it at least once. However many roleplayers also regard it as a sytem [*sic*] past its time, with an emphasis on complex rules, combat and fantasy settings.

These games are rather strange in that they have very little skills the players can take for their characters. Instead, skill checks use case- and class-specific rules.

AD&D and *D&D* are also by far the most common RPGs recognized by non-roleplayers. In fact, many of them equate RPGs with *D&D*. For this reason *AD&D* and *D&D* have had to face most of the attacks of religious fanatics against RPGs.

The original publisher TSR has been acquired by Wizards of the Coast, who have published a third edition of *Dungeons and Dragons*, which is intended to replace both the old *D&D* and *AD&D*. Actually it seems that this is a new edition of *AD&D*, retitled simply as *D&D* (the original title).

See also: Wargames, Magic.

Adventure: An adventure is often compared to an episode of a television series or a novel. It usually has a self-contained plot, which may be connected to other plots and may include sub-plots. For example, an adventure for police characters may be begin when they are given a crime to inspect, and consists of their efforts to find and interrogate suspects and solve the mysteries involved. If the characters arrest a suspect that might conclude the adventure, and next week a new adventure in the form of another crime could present itself.

Many game companies publish ready-made adventures. These contain the plot, NPCs, maps and other material that is relevant to the adventure. They are designed to save the GM's time, so s/he does not have to do all the preparation work him/herself. In my (rather limited in this case) experience these tend to be either far too difficult or too easy (more often too difficult) and need to be modified accordingly. Many RPG rulebooks also contain a short example adventure, or at least some ready-made NPCs, locations and ideas for adventures.

See also: Campaign.

Alignment: Basically, alignment is a way of placing the character on a moral spectrum that goes from good to evil. Many modern games have abandoned the concept of character alignments, but most of the older games still use it, and just about every player knows what the term means and may use it every now and then as a convenient shorthand to describe his/her character. In many games that have an alignment system it is often expected that a character's alignment is consistent, so that, for example, an evil character will always be plotting some harm to others. In more modern games the alignment system is regarded as too simplistic, and such labels as "good" and "evil" are rarely used. Instead, characters have various motivations (love, hate, greed, kindness etc.), loyalties and philosophies. This is not quite fair, as some alignment systems do actually recognize the complexity of the issue as well. *HârnMaster*, for example, says that a person who is "principled" is "although honorable and dutiful, this character is capable of vanity, greed, and hatred, but will be troubled by guilt when this occurs" (Crossby 1996: Character 10), so even the "good" characters are not perfect. *HârnMaster* also uses less abstract terms like "unscrupulous", "corruptible" and "law-abiding" to describe character morality, and makes the point that a character's actions should determine his/her morality, not the other way round.

Furthermore, in many alignment-using games, there are various gods and beings who personify these alignments and moralities. In the game's world these beings indisputably exist and are often very real powers. In this case, they may expect their worshippers to follow moral codes that can be classified as Lawful Chaotic or some such (see below). I personally think this is still rather simplistic, but for a simple adventure-oriented game it is certainly an adequate, easy and convenient system.

Like many RPG conventions, the alignment system was originally used in *D&D*. The standard *AD&D* alignment system classes characters as Good, Evil or Neutral, which can all be modified by being either Lawful, Neutral or Chaotic (the double Neutral is called "True Neutral"). Good and Evil are rather self-explanatory, but Neutral might be better described as Selfish, as Kevin Siembieda does in *Heroes Unlimited* (and other games by Palladium Books as well). He goes on to argue that (Siembieda 1998:22):

> There is no such thing as an absolute or true neutral alignment. An absolute, true neutral person could not make a decision, fight crime, hurt others, go adventuring, or take any action of any kind without leaning toward good, evil, or self-gratification.

A Lawful character is obviously one that is law-abiding, and believes in law, order, government and so on. A Chaotic character does not, and is perhaps easiest described as an anarchist, but s/he is not necessarily evil. A character who is Chaotic Good is likely to consider justice more important than actual laws. A Neutral character again falls somewhere in the between, and is likely to either strive for some kind of balance between good and evil or always consider his/her own interests first.

See also: Character, AD&D.

Attributes (also referred to as Stats, Statistics or Characteristics): Refers to the natural abilities of a character, such as physical strength and intelligence, as opposed to learned skills. See Character.

Campaign: A campaign is a set of adventures that are somehow related. There may be less relevant adventures or side-tracks included but if there is an overall theme or plot that links some adventures, they can be considered to form a campaign. For example, the episodes 4 to 6 of the *Star Wars* series of movies could be considered as a campaign by the main characters with the goal being the destruction of the evil Empire. The destruction of the Death Star and the Battle of Hoth, for example, could be considered adventures within this campaign. Likewise, as an adventure can be compared to a novel, a campaign would be like a trilogy or some other series of such novels.

See also: Adventure.

Character: Every player has his/her own character (see PC), and the GM controls many non-player characters (see NPC). As far as game mechanics go, both are the same thing. The only difference is that PCs are controlled by the players and NPCs by the GM. There is, however, the same sort of difference as in other types of storytelling: the important characters are more individual and better developed than the less important ones. In this case the PCs are the main characters, and NPCs typically range from sidekicks and archvillains (often quite thoroughly developed) to stereotype bystanders and other peripheral characters who only appear once or twice in the story. Obviously the GM cannot be expected to develop the skills, attributes and history of every bystander. However, as Greg Porter says in *WarpWorld* (1991:5):

> It is very important to remember that "NPC's are people too". While many are nameless, faceless nobodies, there to be killed, or haggled with, or to serve you drinks in a bar, they are still more than one-dimensional cutouts with labels like "Good" or "Evil" stenciled on their foreheads. Interaction with NPC's is at the heart of many adventures, and the more like a "real" person an NPC is, the more likely interesting and unpredictable things are likely to happen.

In most games characters have attributes and skills. Attributes represent the natural characteristics of the character, which usually include: physical strength; dexterity, agility or reflexes; appearance; constitution or fitness; charisma or influence; intelligence; willpower

and perception or senses. Skills, on the other hand, are acquired characteristics such as an ability to read and write, to speak other languages, solve mathematical problems or drive a car. Both categories also include a (usually) numerical representation of how good or poor the character is in his/her particular abilities. Often there are also special advantages (such as being ambidextrous or having some good friends or contacts who can be called for help) or disadvantages (such as being deaf or color blind or having enemies) that a character may have.

There are two main methods of creating characters: random and purchase, but these are very often combined in some way. The random method involves rolling dice, at least for the attributes. I believe the most common system is that attributes are randomized and skills are purchased, but sometimes the character's occupation is determined randomly and the skills in turn are determined by the occupation. In some cases the character's occupation (or class, see entry on Character Class) is chosen, but that choice determines or at least limits the character's skills. If rigidly followed, a random system sometimes produces strange anomalies like extremely dumb but strong character in an academic profession or vice versa. On the other hand, many people prefer to use random attributes, because it can produce more interesting characters. In the purchase method a set amount of points is used to buy abilities. Usually this system is designed so that if the points are divided evenly among the different attributes, they are slightly above average. This means that in order to create a character that has, say, a high intelligence score, the player must assign respectively lower scores to some other abilities. This tends to produce purpose-designed characters that are especially well suited to their chosen occupation. However, the purchase system makes sure that all characters are created as equals, and the players do not need to be jealous of each other because some of them may have good luck in rolling dice for the characteristics and others do not. According to the Encyclopedia GEAS (<http://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/societies/geas/CYCLO/G/Generation.html>), "Many new games have gone for points systems, following on from GURPS, which has the largest known set of possible advantages, skills and disadvantages."

Of course, a good character is not just skills and abilities, s/he also has friends, goals, dreams, possessions, ambitions, fears, hopes and personality. To use the rather worn-out metaphor, the attributes and skills are only the skeleton of the character, and the other traits are needed to flesh him/her out.

In many games, it is recommended that players create characters that are different from themselves (for example, see Petersen and Willis 1992:9), though there are some that recommend starting with a character similar to yourself, or even a character that represents the player himself. The last approach is rare, and I have only seen one game that recommends it as "the most challenging character of them all" (Porter 1990:back cover).

An interesting issue about characters is how the players refer to them. Some players use "I" when they refer to their own characters, but others prefer to use "he", "she", "my

character" or the character's name. While I personally prefer to use "I", I understand the other approaches, as sometimes a deep conflict may arise between the character and the player, and the player would never do something his character would or vice versa. In these cases even the best roleplayers often either explain that "it's not me, it's the character" or sometimes act out of character. Some players may feel the need to emphasize the difference between themselves and their characters, especially when there is risk that other players might take them literally and be insulted, so they talk of their characters in third person.

See also: PC, NPC, GM, Character Class, Alignment and In-character.

Character Class: This is a concept that was originally used in *D&D*, but was quickly adopted to many other games. This usually has little to do with the character's social standing, but is more like a profession or occupation (some games use these terms instead of class). Class determines a character's skills, abilities, restrictions and general interests. For example, a character whose class is Warrior (or fighter, gladiator, soldier, legionnaire, mercenary or some such) usually can mainly develop his/her fighting skills, and can never learn magic. On the other hand, a Wizard (or mage, druid, mystic etc.) class character can mainly develop his/her magical skills, and not his/her fighting skills. Often wizard characters are also restricted in that they are not allowed to wear any armor (the explanation normally is that armor would interfere with the flow of magical energies, but the real-world reason is that this makes the character classes more balanced).

In *D&D* there were only a few such classes and the rigidity of the system soon led to either the development of many more classes (there are dozens in *RoleMaster* and *Heroes Unlimited*, for example) or the abandonment of the whole concept in favor of simple character archetypes and templates. These only describe what skills and abilities a given type of character is likely to have or should have, but are open to modification and place no restrictions on the characters.

The rigid class system is not entirely bad. It makes sure that when a character gains experience, s/he will become very good in his/her chosen profession. Also, since the characters are specialists who are not much good at things that do not belong to their professions, they (and the players) will have to cooperate to get anywhere in a normal adventure. They all have a role to play in the game (no pun intended) and they fill out each other's capabilities. On the other hand, they *are* rigid specialists, not well-rounded people who have "picked up a few skills here and there". So if the characters do not have a particular specialist with them to deal with a particular problem, there is not a lot they can do but to make new plans.

See also: Character, Magic, AD&D.

Collectible Card Game (also Trading Card Game): These have little to do with roleplaying but some of them are related to RPGs, so I think the term requires an explanation. The

original collectible cards dealt with baseball, football or hockey players, and as far as I know were only cards that could be collected. Then Wizards of the Coast began publishing *Magic the Gathering*, which took the idea further and included rules for playing games with the cards (which had nothing to do with sports heroes). Some cards are more common or rare than others, and the rare cards tend to be more powerful in the game than the more common ones, so they are much sought after by people who collect the cards and/or play these games. The cards are sold in decks (each with a random selection of cards), and the only way to get new cards is to buy more decks or trade with other collectors.

Magic the Gathering was an original game, but it became so immensely popular that many RPG publishers have published collectible card games dealing with the worlds of their RPGs, including, for example, *Mythos* (based on the *Call of Cthulhu*) by Chaosium and *Shadowrun* by FASA. Sometimes the reverse has happened, as Alderac Entertainment Group, for example, has published *Legend of the Five Rings* RPG, which is based on a collectible card game of the same name by Five Rings Publications.

Damage: See Hit-points. Damage is often described simply in terms of how many hit-points a character loses, but sometimes more imaginatively by phrases like "serious wound" or "the pirate's sword cannot cut through your mail, but the impact of the blow still breaks a rib" or some such. Even in the latter case, however, a numerical damage value is usually compared to a character's hit-points, size or stamina to see how big the wound would relatively is (the idea is that an amount of damage that would kill a human being would probably not be much more than a flesh wound to an elephant).

Dice: Dice (singular die) are used to add random elements to many games. Most "normal" games like *Monopoly*, and many RPGs as well, use only six-sided dice, but four, eight, ten, twelve and twenty-sided dice are also common in many RPGs (6 and 10 being by far the most common ones). The standard abbreviation is d6 for a six-sided die, d10 for a ten-sided one and so on. This is also often preceded by another number, which indicates how many dice are rolled: thus 3d6 means rolling three six-sided dice, with the results of each die-roll added together so that rolling, for example, 2, 3 and 4 yields a result of 9. Often there is also an additional modifier: 2d10+1 means rolling two 10-sided dice and adding one to the result.

In games that use a percentile system a d100 is used. This means rolling two 10-sided dice and considering one as the tens and other the digits, so that rolling 7 and 8 would result in 78 (or 87) and 00 usually counts as 100. 10-sided dice are actually marked from 0 to 9, 0 usually counting as a 10, but sometimes 0, depending on the game mechanics.

There are some games that do not use dice. *Amber* (1991) is the most famous "diceless" game, but I have no personal experience with it and no clear idea of how it works. Sometimes playing cards are used instead of dice. *Castle Falkenstein* uses ordinary playing cards, where each player is dealt a number of cards in the beginning of the game, and they

can decide which cards to use and when (obviously the better cards are reserved for important actions). *Prince Valiant* (1989) uses a system of coin tosses, where the player rolls a number of coins based on his/her character's abilities. Multiple Heads or Tails produce a higher or lower margin of success than only one.

See also: Skill Check, Margin of Success.

D&D: *Dungeons and Dragons*. See *AD&D*.

Experience Points: See Level. Experience is usually gained from using skills and living through adventures. In some games defeating various monsters is the primary way of gaining experience and the measure of the threat a given monster represents is how many Experience Points defeating it is worth.

FRP: Short for 'fantasy roleplaying'. This is basically the same thing as any other roleplaying game, but as the 'F' suggests, is sometimes used to mean a RPG that belongs to the fantasy genre. This is not always the case, however, and it is easiest to regard the terms FRP and RPG as synonymous. See RPG.

GM or Game Master: The GM is the person who in a sense runs the game, or is in charge. S/he designs the world, its inhabitants and what happens to them. The players then create characters who interact with this world. The GM also takes care of the laws of nature that apply to the world. This means that s/he decides what the player characters can do in the game, and whether they succeed in what they try to do. This usually means using dice and rules, but that depends on the game system that is used and the personal playing style of the GM and the players. Some people prefer to always refer to the rules presented in the rulebook, while others prefer to discuss things and talk their way out of trouble, using dice and rules only occasionally.

Many games use a different term for a GM, but they mean the same thing. Examples of such synonyms are DM (Dungeon Master), Keeper (or even Keeper of Arcane Lore), Referee or some variant of Storyteller. GM is the most common term and the one I grew up with so that is what I have used throughout this study.

See also: PC, NPC, Rules, Game World, Dice, System.

Game World: Game World is quite simply the world that the game is set in. Though ambitious GMs may create their own worlds, usually people use worlds that someone else has designed. Often this is an original world designed by some game company and published as a RPG, but there are also games that are set in the worlds of popular movies (such as *Star Wars*), television series (such as *Babylon 5*) or books (J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth being the most popular). The advantage of such popular worlds is that even new or beginning players

may be already familiar with them, or can be assigned some book of film as homework to easily and quickly become familiar with them. Sometimes more than one game company publish games that are set in the same world.

Even if a ready-made world is used, it is still only a general framework. The GM still has to do a lot of work designing more detailed locations, a lot of NPCs and plots for adventures. The world is just the background for these details, and – together with genre – determines what is possible in the game and what is not. For example, in a game set in Middle Earth, magic, orcs, elves and so on exist, whereas in a game set in the future space-travel may be possible and there may be aliens, but magic would be unlikely. On the other hand, even games set in the contemporary real-world can vary a great deal depending on the genre. If the genre calls for strict realism, there will be no magic, monsters or UFOs. If the genre is more like *The X Files*, some of these things may exist in the game's world.

The world is not the same thing as the rules of the game, though the rules describe the various abilities of the inhabitants of the world, the laws of nature that apply to the world, and how the world in general is supposed to work. Rules can be changed, though, and it is common for RPG players to like the world of one game and the rules of another. In some cases, there are conversion books available. For example, *GURPS* (by Steve Jackson Games) is a universal rule system that has literally dozens of supplements available that describe different worlds or themes. There are also conversion kits available for *GURPS* for the worlds of other games, such as the World of Darkness series.

Note that while I have used the term "world" here, the actual game world does not have to describe the entire universe or world. Quite often games focus on some area of a larger world, such as an island, one kingdom or even just one city. In this case there are usually supplements available that describe other areas of the larger world.

See also: System.

Hit-Points: In one form or another, this is a very common game mechanic. Hit-points measure how much physical punishment a given character can take. When a character is hit by a weapon, eats poisoned food, drowns or sticks his/her hand in a forge, s/he takes some amount of damage, which is usually subtracted from his/her hit-points. When a character's hit points are reduced to zero, s/he is dead, unconscious or incapacitated. This is the simplest way; in modern games some sort of relativistic scale such as taking a "light wound" or a "serious wound" instead of, say, 8 points of damage is often used. The reason for the latter system is that in some games, such as *AD&D*, an experienced character usually has a lot of hit-points and can withstand ridiculous amounts of physical damage. This is fine for simplistic combat-oriented games, but many players feel that it reduces complex living beings into homogeneous lumps of damage-absorbing material, and prefer a more realistic and deadly system. One positive side-effect of a more realistic system is that it makes combat a serious matter, and something to be avoided if the players want to keep their characters alive

and well, thereby making the game more about roleplaying than defeating various monsters and collecting treasure.

Other similar terms are Life Points, Stamina, Endurance, Body Points, Damage Capacity and Damage Points. Game mechanics vary, but they all measure how much damage a character can take before s/he is incapacitated or killed.

See also: Damage, Character, AD&D.

In-character: When a players speaks or acts as his/her character, s/he is said to speak or act in-character. Conversely, when s/he is speaking as him/herself and not as his/her character, s/he is said to speak out-of-character. There are also similar terms in-game and off-game which are used likewise. In-game means everything that is related to the game (such as speaking or acting in-character) and off-game everything that does not, such as when a player speaks out-of-character of something that is not related to the game. Note that it is possible to speak out-of-character but in-game, as when a player explains what his/her character is doing (such as "my character jumps through the window").

In-game: Everything that is related to the game. See in-character.

Initiative: A game term referring to the reaction time of a character. Initiative determines who acts first during a round, who second and so on. It is usually determined randomly, but is often affected by the intelligence or reflexes of the character and sometimes by a skill as well.

A gunfight in a western RPG would be a natural example. The two gunslingers first stare at each other for a while and then roll initiatives to see who draws his gun faster. In this case initiative would probably be largely determined by each gunslinger's reflexes and skill with the gun.

LARP: An acronym of Live-Action Role-Playing. According to Esko Vesala (see Hieta 1996:61) this is the American term (also commonly used in Finland); the British equivalent is LRP, while in Australia it is called Freeform. Apparently there are some national differences in how LARPs are played and their themes, but they are generally the same thing.

A LARP differs from a RPG in that whereas in RPGs the players usually sit around a table and discuss their characters' actions, only imagining what goes on in the game, in a LARP each player actually speaks and acts as his/her character. Many players feel that LARPs offer more and better roleplaying, though due to real-life limitations their spectrum of possible settings and plot devices is more limited.

Level: The concept of Levels is used in many games to give a quick generic idea of how experienced or powerful a given character is. This means that a first level character is a beginner with very little experience, and, for example, a 10th level character is much more

experienced and capable. In a game that has a level system, characters accumulate experience points, and once they have enough points, advance to the next level. There are usually different requirements for each profession available in the game, and each profession also gains different abilities or bonuses when they advance to the new level. For example, a simple warrior character may need much less experience points than a wizard character to gain a new level, and the warrior would very likely gain new weapon skills (or improve old ones) as his/her level increases, whereas a wizard character would gain new magical abilities. According to the Encyclopedia GEAS,

> The concept of levels can be traced to D&D, in which there was a fixed and inflexible system of rewarding players experience points as rewards for killing monsters, gaining treasure and finishing games. Later games, including AD&D relaxed the requirements slightly, but retained a level system. (<http://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/societies/geas/CYCLO/L/Level.html>)

Many modern games have abandoned the level system, and allow any character to develop any skills the player wishes (as long as reasonable, it would be unlikely that a character's riding skill, for example, would increase if the character had not even seen a horse for a long time). Experience points are still often collected, and the abilities are improved by using a purchase system (see PC on generating characters). Dream Pod 9's *Heavy Gear* is one example of a game that uses such a system. Sometimes the experience a character receives is specific to a certain skill. In *Ars Magica*, for example, a character may gain experience specifically in, for example, Magic Theory, and those experience points are not transferrable to any other skill. In some games experience points are not used at all, and a GM may at any point (usually after an exceptional failure or success with a given skill) grant a player character a chance to roll dice to see if his/her character's ability increases. For example, in *Hârn* and *RuneQuest*, which both use a percentile system, the player basically needs to roll above his/her current ability to improve it (i.e., if the character's given skill is 70 – meaning that s/he has a base chance of success of 70% – the player must roll more than 70 on a d100 to increase the skill from 70 to 71. That is slightly inaccurate for both games, but this is the general idea.).

See also: PC, GM, Character Class, Skill Check, Dice.

Magic: In many RPGs magic is a real power of affecting events, beings and objects through the will of the magician, not just tricks designed to deceive an audience (though that kind of magic naturally also exists in RGPs). The two types are sometimes differentiated by using a capital first letter or phrases like True Magic or an archaic seeming spelling like magick for the more powerful fictional variety. Here the word magic will refer to this RPG variety. A person who uses magic is usually referred to as a wizard or a mage (though there is a plethora of other terms as well, including sorcerer, warlock, conjurer, mentalist, druid, animist, illusionist, mystic, witch, shaman and so on. The different terms often mean that there are slight differences in what kind of magic each kind of magic-user can use and how, but these

are often game specific unless obvious or traditional: for example, an illusionist obviously specializes in creating illusions and a shaman may be good at dealing with spirits and ghosts).

There are two basic types of magic systems in RPGs: those that use spells (more common) and freeform. Spells are ready-made ways of using magic that always work in the same way. For example, one spell might create rain, another might instantly heal a wound, and a third one (this is a common one) might create a large ball of fire the wizard could use to burn his/her enemies. A magic-user may know several spells, but cannot improvise any new effects, so in this type of game wizards strive to know more and more spells. When a spell is used, it is said to be "cast", i.e., "I cast a Force Wall spell."

Freeform magic, on the other hand, is not limited by strictly defined spells. A wizard can use his/her knowledge of magic to create many different kinds of effects as needed. Spells often exist in this type of game also (and even the improvised magical effects are referred to as spells), but they are just ready templates that can be used more easily than improvised magic. A problem with freeform magic is that it is more difficult to use for the players and GM as well. With ready spells there is usually no problem in quickly casting them and checking the results, whereas in a freeform system the player must first decide what s/he wants to do and construct the spell, and then the GM must decide how difficult it is to achieve that result and whether the character is capable of casting the spell in the first place and so on. This is slow, but depending on the preferences of the players and the GM, may also be more enjoyable.

In both of the above types the power for the magic usually comes from the magic-user him/herself. In games that have "real" gods (i.e., they are real in the game's world), it is also common to have magic-users (such as priests) who draw the power from the deity they worship. Sometimes the magic-user simply channels or transfers some kind of energy from one place to another, so that in order to cast fire-spells at a distance, the wizard must have a source of heat nearby, or to heal wounds, the wizard must transfer life-energy from him/herself to the character s/he is healing. Another possibility is summoning magic which means that the wizard has to summon a magical being (such as a spirit, ghost, elemental or in some cases a demon, though this is often reserved for evil NPCs) and bargains or orders it to do something for him/her. Thus a shaman character might ask a fire elemental to light a fire in his/her hearth (and perhaps reward it with dry logs) or a water elemental to carry him/her across a river. In some games magic only works through long and difficult rituals or ceremonies, or the only magic is the kind that creates magical objects (such as flying carpets) or gives characters special powers (as in Greek mythology, which is also a common source of all sorts of magical creatures).

In any case, a common game mechanic for controlling how much magic a wizard can use are some sort of magic points (or spell points, or mana). Each wizard has some number of points, and each spell they cast costs a certain number of these points (more powerful spells

obviously costing more points and powerful wizards having more points at their disposal than beginners). The points are usually regained by resting, meditating or simply waiting.

Games that have magic systems tend to belong to either fantasy or horror genres, but there are some exceptions like *Heroes Unlimited* (where magic is one possible power a superhero may have). In horror games wizards are often evil NPCs to be stopped by the PC heroes, but in *Call of Cthulhu*, for example, the PCs sometimes have to learn a spell or two to defeat a horrible monster from another dimension. In fantasy games the standard is to use spells, and the major games that use freeform magic are *Mage: the Ascension* and *Ars Magica*.

Note that magic is usually differentiated from psi-powers or psionics, which sometimes appear in the science fiction genre. Psionics include such powers as telepathy, clairvoyance and tele- and pyrokinesis, which do have effects similar to magic. I suppose the distinction is that psionic powers are something the character is born with, whereas magic (while it often requires a special talent) is a learned skill.

Magic is also one of the reasons (perhaps the main reason) some religious groups have attacked RPGs (usually *D&D* and *AD&D*), claiming that RPGs try to teach such skills to players in real-life, and labeling RPGs diabolical, claiming that it leads to Satanism and suicide. Suffice it to say that such attacks are, of course, misguided and unnecessary.

Margin of Success: This is a term I have actually borrowed from *Heavy Gear*, but the same idea is used in other games as well. In short, it means that it is possible to gain a higher level of success (or failure) on a skill roll than a simple "success". For example, when throwing darts, a small margin of success would indicate that the character did hit the dart board, but did not score many points, whereas a high margin of success could mean that character hit the bullseye and gets more points.

Often the term "critical success" is used to indicate that the character succeeded exceptionally well. Likewise, a "critical failure" (often called a "fumble", sometimes also "botch") is also possible. On a fumble something unpleasant, embarrassing or sometimes even dangerous happens. These critical results are usually reserved for the lowest and highest possible die roll results when making a skill check.

See also: Skill Check.

Medieval Recreation: This is something I have no personal experience of, so I will borrow an explanation from the Encyclopedia GEAS:

> Medieval Recreation is an activity seperae [*sic*] from, but related to, roleplaying. It involves people dressing up as, and pretending to be, medieval or fantasy people. Some people do this only for the purposes of staging re-enactments of battles, while others extend the lifestyle to regular meetings in costumes, often held in the form of balls or feasts. (<http://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/societies/geas/CYCLO/M/Medieval_Recreation.html>)

According to Vesala (see Hieta 1996:60), this is an activity that resembles LARPs, but is not actual role-playing because the meetings have no particular plots and the people who take part have no particular goals in them.

Monster: Most RPGs feature monsters of some sort. The Encyclopedia GEAS (<http://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/societies/geas/CYCLO/M/Monster.html>) defines it as "any creature appearing in a game that exists primarily as a threat to the Player Characters". This is perhaps a little unfair, since the term is used of many creatures that are not actually much of a threat (unless the GM uses them that way, of course). For example, dragons are perhaps the most traditional monsters there are, but they are not really very threatening because in most games they just tend to sleep on top of huge piles of treasure in their lairs until a group of adventurers comes clamoring in and attacks them. Creatures who fight in self-defence hardly exist primarily as threats, since the PCs are a threat to them. Whatever the reason, monster is usually a non-human being which the PCs are bound to end up fighting with sooner or later.

There are some games that are based on the idea that what exactly is a monster depends greatly on one's viewpoint. Such are, for example, the World of Darkness (see below) games where the players themselves take the roles of some traditional monsters like vampires and werewolves.

Munchkin (also called a Power Gamer): A munchkin is a player who tries to create as powerful a character as s/he can, which usually means gathering the most powerful weapons, special abilities and spells that are available in the given RPG. A munchkin player also often knows the rules of the game by heart and uses them to his/her advantage, protesting when the GM tries to impose the spirit of the rules rather than their letter on him/her. Munchkins are often not very interested in actual roleplaying, they just want to "win" the game by attempting to create the most powerful character in the whole game universe.

Actually a small amount of character optimizing is normal for nearly all roleplayers (though many also enjoy playing characters who have some major disadvantages because of the challenges they present), and this is normally not a problem since the point of the game is to continue playing with the same character, and having a character who can survive several adventures is actually a good thing from this perspective.

See also: Winning.

Mundane: Opposite of magical or non-magical. In a world where magic exists (see magic), mundane refers to people who do not use magic and creatures and things that are not magical. In a world where magic does not exist, the term has no use.

NPC: Short for Non-Player Character. This means a character who is controlled by the GM, as opposed to a Player Character which is controlled by a player. In effect, everybody else in the game's world besides the Player Characters are NPCs, including animals and monsters.

See also: PC, GM, Character.

Out-of-character: When a player speaks as himself and not as his/her character. The opposite of in-character. See in-character for a further explanation.

Off-game: Not related to the game. The opposite of in-game. See in-character for a further explanation.

PC: Short for Player Character. Each player creates a character (or sometimes is given a ready one, but I think this is rare) s/he plays in the game. Normally each player only has one character, and that character is his/her personal character that other players normally may not use. During the game, the player decides what his/her character does or tries to do, and the GM decides whether the character succeeds in the attempt.

See also: Character, NPC, GM.

Races: Besides humans, the worlds of most RPGs contain other races ('race' is normally used, although in some cases 'species' would be more correct). *Myths & Magic* (1999:155) lists five criteria for defining a race. To begin with, the members of a race must resemble each other (although, as with humans, there may be a lot of variation in appearance), there must be more than one member in a race (a unique being is hardly a race by itself) and the race must have some means of procreation. The two most important criteria, however, are that the members of the race must be intelligent (although even trolls are generally considered to be a race) and have a culture, society or a shared set of beliefs, traditions, values and so on.

Science fiction games are generally more varied in their portrayal of aliens (although they are practically always compared to humans) so I will concentrate on fantasy races. Some of these might appear in other genres as well (even in science fiction). Horror has its typical monsters as well, but these are fairly often merely human variants (vampires, werewolves, zombies etc. are still basically humans).

The usual fantasy races are dwarves, elves, halflings (or hobbits), orcs, goblins, trolls, lizardmen and dragons. There are others, some very original, but these are the more cliché races. The names and details also vary ("orc" may be spelled "ork", and their size, color and degree of evilness varies from game to game), but mostly the descriptions of these races follow the lead of J.R.R. Tolkien. In other words, elves are tall, fair, slender and long-lived (or even immune to aging). Dwarves are short, strong, hardy and bearded, as well as greedy and warlike, but honorable. Halflings are short and dexterous, but not as strong as dwarves and more peaceful. Orcs are ugly, strong, cruel and warlike, as are goblins, who are only smaller

and more devious. Trolls are large and as dumb as they are strong. Lizardmen are humanoid lizards, usually strong, agile and warlike.

In games that have an alignment system elves, dwarves and hobbits are almost invariably good (dwarves may also be neutral), whereas orcs, goblins and trolls tend to be evil (although trolls may be too stupid to be considered anything but selfish) and humans can be anything. There are exceptions, of course.

Dragons are usually huge, winged reptiles who are intelligent and often (but not always) evil. Their abilities and alignment are often linked to their color. In *AD&D*, for example, red dragons breathe fire, green dragons are poisonous, black dragons spit acid and so on, and only metallic dragons (at least silver and gold) are good, whereas the others are, I believe, evil or at best neutral.

Roll-play: An often derogatory term (and a pun on role-play, of course) for the type of playing that is more concerned with skill checks and their results than actual roleplaying. Actually this is not quite fair. For example, a character often has a skill in haggling, public speaking or some such. When s/he tries to buy something at a market or make a speech, there is an option of simply rolling the relevant skill or having the player actually try to haggle with the merchant (played by the GM) or deliver the speech s/he would have his/her character make. Obviously the latter is more role-playing and the first more roll-playing, but all players are not good at public speaking, even if their characters may be, and they should be allowed to use their character's skill instead of their own. On the other hand, some players use this to their advantage by always insisting on rolling rather than acting and making sure that their character will practically always succeed in the rolls (see munchkin).

Round (also Turn): A unit of time used in RPGs. A round is usually defined as the length of time it takes to complete one simple action, such as getting up, opening a window, drawing a gun, hitting a monster with a sword or starting a car. Some more complex actions, like reloading a crossbow, may require more than one round to complete. Often the duration of a round varies according to the situation, so that when the characters are doing research in a library, a round may be something like 30 minutes, but when they are in a fight, it is about 10 seconds in most games.

The reason rounds are used is that the characters are assumed to act almost simultaneously in quick succession, but the players cannot describe what they want their characters to do at the same time. Therefore each player in turn describes what his/her character does and those actions are resolved one character at a time (even if the characters may be considered to act at the same time).

RPG: An acronym of Role-Playing Game. FRP is also occasionally used; the 'F' stands for fantasy, but does not always refer to the fantasy genre and it is easiest to regard FRP and RPG

as synonymous. The usual short explanation of what roleplaying is, is "collective storytelling". This means that the players and the Game Master together create a story in which their characters take part. Each of the players has his/her own character, but the GM plays several roles and acts as the referee or leader of the storytelling. S/he creates the setting for the story, its general plot, and decides what is possible in the story and what the characters of the players can do. (See chapter two, Introduction to Roleplaying Games for more information.)

See also: GM, PC, NPC, Character, Rules.

Rules: Since RPGs are games, they need some rules. The point of the rules is to make the game fair so that all characters are affected in the same way by a given sort of phenomenon. Some games have immensely complex rules systems, sometimes going so far as to be almost unplayable without a calculator and some knowledge of mathematics. Others have less and simpler rules, and emphasize that they are only guidelines and the GM always has the final word in interpreting them. Likewise, some people enjoy games that have a lot of rules that can cover many different situations, while others prefer to focus on developing the plot and the personalities of the characters and consider the use of rules as inconvenient breaks in the narrative. In any case, it is important that when the GM – with the aid of rules and dice – decides how a given situation is resolved, the players accept that ruling and adapt to it.

Some gamers (usually GMs) enjoy creating new rules just for the fun of it. There does not necessarily have to be any use for these rules, it is just a mental exercise in considering all factors that are likely to affect a given situation and what kinds of effects they will have, and the pleasure of having created a system that seems to realistically model reality. Different rule systems (see Skill Check) also provide mathematically inclined gamers endless fun in all sorts of probability calculations.

Skills: Refers to the learned or acquired abilities of a character, such as driving a car or reading and writing. Not the same thing as attributes, which are something the character was born with. See Character.

Skill Check (also Skill Test): The most common use of dice is to see if an action attempted by a character succeeds. There are almost as many different ways of doing this as there are games, but I will give an overview of some of the most common ones here. Often a given game company has a system of "house rules" which all of their games use in one form of another. As the name implies, a skill check means that the character needs a certain skill to perform an action (see Character). An attribute check also exists, in which case there is no relevant skill. An example of an attribute check might be using the character's strength to see if s/he can lift a weight or force open a locked door, or a perception check (though this is sometimes considered a skill) to see if s/he notices something. The latter kind of a roll is usually made in secret by the GM so that the player will not know there was something to

notice if his/her character fails the roll. Usually, however, the players make the rolls that concern their characters.

The most common type of system is perhaps a percentile one. Here a character's skills usually range from 1 to 100 (in some cases, such as in *Call of Cthulhu*, the maximum is 99, but in others, such as in *HârnMaster* or *RoleMaster*, the skill can actually exceed 100). Sometimes a different scale is used: In *TimeLords* and *WarpWorld*, and I believe in *AD&D* as well, it is 1 to 20, but the idea is the same. Usually the player needs to roll below his/her skill level on a d100 (or a d20 if the scale is 1 to 20, see Dice), so in theory a character whose skill is 65 will succeed 65% of the time when using that skill. There are often various modifiers to account for different factors and whether the attempted task is considered easy or difficult.

RoleMaster and *MERP* (*Middle Earth Role-Playing*) use a variation of the percentile system. Here the skill itself acts as a modifier to the d100 roll, so that the player adds together the result of his/her dice roll, the character's skill and various modifiers. If the total is above a given threshold (such as 100), the action succeeds.

In *Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0.* the player and GM first decide which of the character's attributes is best suited to the task (Intelligence is a good choice for solving a puzzle, Reflexes for trying to catch a ball). Then they see if the character has a skill that is suited to the task, assign modifiers and roll a d10. All of the above are then added together and compared to a difficulty threshold assigned by the GM.

In *Shadowrun* (uses 6-sided dice) and all of the World of Darkness games (which use 10-sided dice) multiple dice are rolled, and the result of each roll is compared to a difficulty threshold. The number of dice rolled depends on the character's skill level and in the WoD games also on the character's attributes (their levels are added together similarly to *Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0.*, see above). Those dice that exceed the threshold are successes, and the number of successes is regarded as overall the margin of success.

An interesting newer system is the Silhouette system developed by Dream Pod 9, and used in their games (such as *Heavy Gear* and *Jovian Chronicles*). In this system a number of dice equal to a character's skill level (1 to 5) is rolled, but only the best result is kept. For example, if a character with skill level 2 rolls 1 and 4, the result is 4. The character's attribute (from +3 to -3 with zero average) and modifiers are then added to this and the result is once again compared to a difficulty threshold.

Note that despite the importance of skill rolls in the rules sections of RPGs, they are not always necessary. Constantly rolling dice when performing routine actions would be time-consuming and boring. Usually skill rolls are made only when there is a major chance of failure, or when there is dramatic potential in whether the character succeeds or fails (such as when trying to parry an attack in a fight).

See also: Margin of Success, Dice, PC, Rules, Character.

System: Each RPG is usually a system, or may share a system with other games (see World of Darkness for an example of a shared system). RPGs normally present a world or a setting in which the game is set, rules for creating characters for that world, and more rules that describe what those characters can do and how the world functions (these are not always in the same book). However, it is common to hear players say that they like the system of a particular game, but not its world (or vice versa). A system, then, is equated with the rules. Some portion of the rules, however, often deals with the specific world the game is set in and its inhabitants, so a system does include a portion of the world as well. To complicate the matters slightly, there are RPG books that only describe a particular world or setting (because the players may already have a rule-system they use), and others that only present rules that are generic and flexible and can be used in almost any world (because the players may already have a setting for their game that they like). These are not necessarily incomplete systems, they just focus on different things. Encyclopedia GEAS defines system similarly:

> A system is a book, or set of books, defining a perticular [sic] setting or approach to a game. The system will include some means of defining characters by means of stats. and for adjudicating the success or failure of actions attempted by the charcters [sic] in the game. In most cases a system also describes a particular environment or setting in which adventures can be set. (<http://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/societies/geas/CYCLO/S/System.html>)

It goes on to explain that there are three main classes of systems: genre systems, generic systems and world specific systems. Genre systems are used for a particular style of play. For example, *D&D* was intended for straightforward adventures set in underground dungeons (or similar environments). Any game that focuses on humor or parody would likewise be a genre system, because it might be difficult to use the game's system for anything else.

Generic systems are similar to what I described earlier, they simply try to provide a system of rules that can be used in almost any world or situation. Covering all possible situations is, of course, quite impossible, so they focus on the most common ones, with more detailed rules for special situations available in separate supplements. The most famous example is *GURPS*, which has dozens of supplements available to provide special rules for everything from magic to science fiction, and world-supplements ranging from real-world settings like Egypt and Japan to conversion books of games by other game publishers. RPG books that describe only a setting can, in my opinion, also be regarded as belonging to generic systems. Some generic systems focus on a particular genre. One example is *RoleMaster*, which is a generic system that can be used in any fantasy or medieval setting.

World-specific systems are the largest group, since they are the standard format of RPGs, including both a world and a rule-system that describes that particular world. The world can be an original one that was developed specifically for the world in question, or it can be based on some book or film. An example of a game with an original world is *Heavy Gear*, while *Call of Cthulhu* is based on the writings of H.P. Lovecraft. See Game World for a more detailed explanation.

See also: Game World, Rules.

Turn: A unit of time in the game. See Round.

Undead: A supernatural creature that was once a living creature, but is now neither alive nor dead. Includes such beings as vampires, zombies, ghosts, spectres, wraiths and animated skeletons. Frankenstein's monster (who is actually not really a monster at all despite his gruesome origin) and golems are not included, because the first is alive and golems were never alive in the first place and are only a fantasy equivalent of robots.

These beings are obviously supernatural, but they are not necessarily magical. For example, zombies can be created by magic (voodoo, especially, is famous for zombies), toxic waste, apocalypse, watching too much television and other means. Vampires have also received numerous explanations in myths, novels, films and RPGs. Sometimes they are cursed by God or make a pact with the Devil, sometimes they are just too evil to die, sometimes they have a hereditary "vampiric gene" or some such, but often they are just unfortunate victims of earlier vampires.

Wargames: It is generally agreed (see, for example, Hieta 1996:17 and the entry of *AD&D*) that RPGs were developed from wargames. Wargames are games of tactics and strategy (similar to chess but less abstract), where the players move miniatures or simple counters representing military units on a map. There are often complex rules detailing how different units may be moved and how they interact and fight. The most common theme is re-fighting various historical battles, though some games have a larger scale and may portray, for example, the entire Eastern Front of the Second World War.

In any case, some players apparently grew tired of pure tactics and strategies and started to assign personality traits to their units, and devised rules for taking these into account in the game. Then they started to play with single soldiers instead of whole units, and moved from historical battlefields to fantasy worlds, where the soldiers turned into knights, rogues and wizards. (See also entry on *AD&D*.)

Today, RPGs and wargames are separate hobbies, though some players, of course, play both. Wargames have also diversified and now include both realistic games based on real-life wars and battles, and fantastic games of fantasy or science fiction genres. The latter type is dominated by *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* and *Warhammer 40,000* respectively, both by Games Workshop.

Winning: In RPGs, there is no such thing as "winning". First of all, this is because RPGs are supposed to be cooperative games where the players are on the same side, and not competing against each other. The GM plays the "other side" against which the PCs struggle, but this does not mean that the players compete with the GM either; they are, after all, trying to create a story together, not competing stories. Secondly, this is because they are continuous games that do not stop when one character gains an advantage over another. A character who wins

something in one situation may lose in the next and so on. If character A and character B fight and A kills B, s/he has won the battle (and B has lost), but the world goes on and game does not end there, so A has not won the game any more than a single chess piece has won the whole game of chess when it is used to take out another piece. Greg Porter compares roleplaying to writing chapters in a book and says (Porter, 1991:3):

> At the close of each adventure, another chapter ends, but the story never does. Even if your character dies, another will take its place, and a new story will emerge.

World of Darkness: The general setting of games published by White Wolf where the players get to play various supernatural creatures. Each game focuses on a specific type of creature and its interaction with the human world. The primary games in the series are *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991), *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* (1992), *Mage: The Ascension* (1993), *Wraith: The Oblivion* (1994), *Changeling: The Dreaming* (1995) and *Hunter: The Reckoning* (1999). (In the last three the players play ghosts, faeries and humans, respectively.) They all share the same basic system of rules (known as the Storyteller system), with variations to take the different powers of different monsters into account, and are very similar in presentation and features. The basic world of these games is referred to in them as Gothic-Punk, and is introduced in *Werewolf* as:

> The world of **Werewolf** is not our own, though it resembles ours in many ways. [...] Externally, little differs between our world and this World of Darkness – the established religious, social and political institutions are much like those of our own planet. The World of Darkness, however, is a *film noir* environment – the cities are labyrinthine and gloomy, the bureaucrats are corrupt and the important people have skeletons in their closets. It is a world of extremes [...]. (Rein-Hagen 1994:29. Original emphasis.)