

# Fluff Ain't Rules: absence, presence and haunting in game design

Jon Garrad | Manchester Metropolitan University | @propergoffic

## Abstract

Fluff means fiction, framing and flavour; it's the material around a game's actual rules, that illustrates and indicates but has no substantive impact on how the game is played.

Rules are crunch. They are - particularly if you're a serious player or a traditional ludologist - the important bit.

"If your game doesn't blend the two, it says one of two things: either you're not efficiently using your words, or your game isn't really about what it says it's about." — Olivia Hill

"Fluff" is often an absent presence within game design. It's clearly important to the aesthetic experience of playing the game, and the context - narrative or otherwise - that provides play with impetus, but it too often exists at some point of discretion from the actual rules that reify the game's intended or desired themes, affective experience and outcome.

This paper is a hauntological and ludological analysis of game systems - how the claims about a game's fictive and cultural context are frequently a spectre, missed and yearned after but not fully secured by the (relatively) concrete reality of its rules. What is not reified by a game's rules does not exist within the game - and what is reified by a game's rules is often not what the game claims itself to be.

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## Introduction

A spectre is haunting game studies — the spectre of ludonarrative dissonance.

The conflict, imagined or genuinely present, between the story a game is attempting to tell; or rather attempting to have you tell yourself; or even more accurately, attempting to tell you while presenting the illusion that you're telling yourself, while you tell yourself another story about your encounter with the first one...

I'll start again. The conflict between story, for whatever value of 'story' is convenient for the argument at hand, and gameplay; between airy concerns of context, theme and representation on the one hand, and the dignity of pure mechanics, player skill and agency on the other.

It's a very convenient dichotomy to set up, allowing volumes of ink to be spilled on the seeming incompatibility, allowing careers to be built and sides taken and a profitable discourse generated for a generation of ludologists and narratologists.

And as far as the academy is concerned, it's done. It should be; those responsible for drawing up the battlelines have buried their hatchets years ago. But out there, outside the gates of the ivory tower, gamer kultur at large is still talking about this; people making games are still haunted.

Ludonarrative dissonance is a particular problem in the game form I work with - role-playing games, in their tabletop and computer forms. I'd go so far as to say that no other game form has quite such a potential lacuna between its claimed values and codes, and those reified by the actual experience of play.

Today, I'm going to look at where this problem comes from, and how *We Who Make Games* can work to close the pitfall before we land ourselves in it. This is not an intervention into a dead and buried academic question so much as an exhumation for practical purposes: I only rob the grave so I can dissect and show the body. The lens through which I'm looking is functionally Gothic - a hauntological perspective which reads the intended themes, aesthetics and ethics of the RPG developer as Mark Fisher's "future that never arrived". But let's start by understanding the problem.

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## The Problem

"Fluff ain't rules."

Fluff means fiction, framing and flavour; it's the material around a game's actual rules, that illustrates and indicates but has no direct impact on how the game is played.

Rules are - particularly if you're a serious player or a traditional ludologist - the important bit. They're the "crunch" - the solid and substantial part.

The fact that "fluff" is called "fluff" seems relegatory - it's insubstantial, it's trivial, and it's the rules that matter. But only the brave attempts at a generic RPG system sell themselves as such. The majority of published RPGs attract because they are about something. It's a rare gamer who will play literally anything as long as it's Powered By The Apocalypse or uses the d20 system; for the majority, their choice of "what to play next" is driven by their taste in fiction from other media, and a personal preference regarding game system or engine comes in second.

Despite this, "fluff" is often an absent presence within game design. It's clearly important to the aesthetic experience of playing the game, and the context - narrative or otherwise - that provides play with impetus, but it too often exists at some point of discretion from the actual rules that reify the game's intended or desired themes, affective experience and outcome.

"Adding a few lines of description to a video game, or a background and artwork to an abstract board game, gives dramatic context and an added sense of depth, allowing the player to create an internal narrative as the game progresses. Chess is primarily an abstract game but has pieces with titles that help in their anthropomorphisation, and it is possible to create complete narratives based on chess games."

— James Wallis, 'Making Games That Make Stories', 2010

Chess is a game about the feudal system at war. It borrows the terminology of the feudal system to provide context for its abstract mechanics, and it is the work of moments to whip that context into a narrative of kings and knights and bishops sending their pawns out to die and clear the field. Implications of class warfare and everything. But you don't need to think about that to play chess.

You do need to think about it to play role-playing games, and action-adventure games, and first-person-shooter games with 'RPG elements'. It is not immediately clear why this should be so, since:

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The RPG category describes games in which players control individual characters in the game world and develop these characters' traits and abilities over the course of play. The acting or role-playing element isn't even essential to the application of the label today. Additionally, the storytelling involved in most electronic RPGs... is barely interactive, limited to a few decision points. The player controls the development of her character, but not how the story is told. Likewise, although the player is in control of a single character, selecting and advancing his traits and buying him equipment, she is not acting through the story as a feature of the gameplay.

— Will Hindmarch, 'Storytelling Games as a Creative Medium', 2010

It is this 'single character', I think, which differentiates the RPG. You do not 'play a property developer' in Monopoly - you game the functions of capital as expressed through property development. You do not 'play a colonist' in Settlers of Catan, or 'play a king' in chess. But once you, the player, are explicitly identified with and sited within a viewpoint character, things change. Once you engage with a game form that emulates genre fiction in its premise and context, or narrative cinema in its aesthetics and technique, things change. Hindmarch observes that the acting/roleplaying element - putting on funny voices and telling stories - isn't essential to the RPG as an activity, but it seems to follow on logically from the pretexts that are in place.

That following-on creates a loophole. A lacuna. A place in which it is possible for an RPG or a game with RPG elements (the development of traits and abilities over the course of play, the acquisition of equipment and so on), to fail its own premise.

"If your game is supposed to be a high-action romp with over-the-top heroics and clever swashbuckling, but every time you swing your weapon it takes five dice rolls and fifteen minutes of navigating tables and hit locations and looking over a grid map with a ruler and every mook takes seven hits to remove from the equation, then that's not what your game's actually about. Your game is probably about meticulous tactical bullshit."

— Olivia Hill, 'Only Bad Games Have Crunch And Fluff', 2019

And that's the problem. Your game is not about what you say it's about. Rebecca Borgstrom models two specific failure states for RPGs, based in her model of game rules as labour that generates structure for fun and satisfaction (her words, not mine) and very much apparent in a conversation about fluff.

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In the second failure mode, the structure in the game contradicts itself. The available data actually eliminates all the possible stories. This is most common when the rules demand one resolution and the players' expectations demand another.

— Rebecca Borgstrom, 'Structure and Meaning in Role-Playing Game Design', 2010

This is what Hill's talking about. The structure provided by the fluff is one of high octane swashbuckling fun, the structure provided by the rules is one of deliberate and detailed tactical simulation. Whichever one you take as definitive of the game experience, the other works against.

This happens again and again in RPG-land, around the table and on the screen. Skyrim presents you with a grand destiny, a crisis toward which you must hustle, returning dragons to be fought and a civil war to be decided by your involvement — but this must be eased by meandering incidental quests that rob the primary plot of all impetus and importance. The World of Darkness games lost themselves in lists of supernatural powers and meticulously differentiated firearms that drowned out their professed themes of personal horror and moral struggle in a wave of C4 and katanas.

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## Hauntology

Our old friend Jacques Derrida (1976) talks about presence as something secured, settled, anchored to a body, and writing as something innately deferred and absent, and that's the jumping-off point for a metaphysics of presence, a deconstruction of this as genuine and that as false and the two existing in dichotomy.

When Mark Fisher (2014) brings Derrida to bear on music, he talks about literary criticism's basis in texts and textuality blinding it to the realities of form and medium in their own right rather than as carriers for meaning. That's important in our consideration of the RPG. There are layers and layers of opposition and tension; gaming is a medium which haunts itself constantly.

We can take text as something secured, settled and anchored in its own right, and in so doing we can talk about a "body of work", the fictive concepts of a game setting as embodied in a rulebook or a disc or a download. And here, the actual experience of play is the deferred absence. The rulebook is not the game; the game is an unfolding text, co-created at the table, implicit within the words on the page but not apparent merely from reading them. The game itself does not exist until it is played.

We can take rules as an embodied thing. The actual, real experience of playing a game is mediated by the mechanics of play, what dice and tokens change hands and what needs to be looked up and noted down. And here, fluff is a deferred intention - it depicts what those rules are meant to create in the collective imaginations of players, and that is achieved or not achieved depending on the harmony or dissonance between that intention and the reifying process of making playable rules.

Or we can turn all of this on its head and say that what is secured and settled and anchored is the actual experience of gameplay - that which involves people who are known to us, whose existence is confirmed by their presence with us (or, in single player games, who are ourselves, and we can surely take our own existence for granted). Here, we are haunted by an absent other - by a developer who wrote these words, designed this system, and made these claims about what it was for and how it was meant to work.

But, as I keep telling people when they quaveringly ask for the "official" blessing for their homebrewed scenarios and their hacks of core rules, the developers aren't going to come round your house and tell you you're playing wrong. And yet the systems they provide are geared toward a particular vision - these people have design goals, they know what they want the game to feel like and what meanings they want people to take from it - and so their absence is a resounding presence in the rules themselves, which are — or should be — engineered toward those goals.

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This is before we even touch the topic of adaptations and CRPGs - computer role-playing-games. Some tentpole CRPGs of the Nineties and early Noughties — Baldur's Gate, Neverwinter Nights, Vampire: the Masquerade - Redemption and so on — were explicit adaptations of analog systems played with pencils and paper around a table (hence "tabletop" RPGs, TTRPGs). The computer put a graphical interface around those rules, performed the looking-up and calculating for us, even simulated die rolls so we could see its workings-out.

Yet the counter-trend was already emerging; eliminating the die roll altogether, as it was simply unnecessary in a medium where accuracy and speed of interactions with the hardware — the mechanical skill of the player — could be substituted for the random factor of tabletop games. Diablo doesn't show you the die rolls. Skyrim doesn't. Vampyr doesn't. But they are still haunted by the need to show you the numbers and the options you have to improve them, to present an elaborate system of exactly what happens when you click on that forehead in highly granular terms. The rules themselves have become absent - and yet very much present, since everything that takes place within the game occurs through a system of calculation which — we hope — corresponds to the explanation we see on our screen. In practice, as the creators of Skyrim's Unofficial Patch will tell you, this is often wishful thinking. The entire set of rules, the entire game system, and the invisible errors in its coding that give rise to game bugs; these effectively haunt the player embodied within its world.

As I hope you can see, these questions of absence, presence and embodiment are part of the RPG's architecture. And - as we return down to earth - we have to ask ourselves what's haunting what, who's haunting whom. Games have rules, and nothing in the game exists unless it's expressible within those rules - all else is haunting. But games are played, and the act of reading the rules does not create gameplay; the potentiality of play haunts the inert text of the game system, and that potential is guided by something similarly immanent in the form of "fluff", fictive material which indicates what gameplay is meant to look like.

The printed material of a TTRPG sets up terms for use within the game's fictive reality and within its rules. The characters in a CRPG tutorial often badger us to keep moving, do what we're told, look around here for some specific thing that will introduce us to some specific operation - something to click on that will make the automated game system do its thing. These prompts aren't substantive - they're emotive appeals to us to stay in the game's world and move further into it, operating on its terms and toward its goals. They're fluff.

Games with context - even something as simple as names for pieces or prompts to click - are haunted by that context. It lingers around the operation of the game's rules; it lashes out when those rules operate in a divergent direction; it troubles attempts to take rules into an entirely different mode or genre of play.

Ludonarrative dissonance is poltergeist activity.

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## Outroduction

I don't like to raise a question or trouble a concept without providing an answer or solution: some sort of practical takeaway. Today, that means exploring game design praxis directly, searching for a design philosophy and creative technique which can draw the lacuna closer in, bringing fluff and rules together and avoiding the fail-state Borgstrom describes.

In this paradigm a "good game" is one that does not contradict itself; there is minimal dissonance between what the game's developers claim it is about, and what the operation of the game's rules make it about in practice.

As a start, consider Olivia Hill's policy of "textual efficiency".

The words you choose matter. The more generic your game text, the less valuable it is. If your game terminology and phrasing doesn't say something about the world and characters, then you're missing an opportunity to communicate game and narrative expectations.

My rule of thumb is that I want every line of 'rules text' to do three things:

- Say something about the game rules
- Say something about the world or characters
- Say something about the expectations of play

— Olivia Hill, 'Only Bad Games Have "Crunch" and "Fluff"' (2019)

This is why Hill's game #iHunt has a hashtag in the title, calls equipment "Stuff" and currency "Cash" and adventures "Gigs". It's a game about the millennial experience, so its terms are irreverent and flippant, because that's how millennials soften the blows of late-stage capitalism. Cash is temporary, Gigs are things you do and move on from, Stuff isn't worth being attached to because you might have to run it down to Cash Converters next week.

This is why the World of Darkness games call a series of gameplay sessions a "chronicle" and not a "campaign" — the standard term inherited from the RPG's roots in wargaming. For that matter, they call their "adventures" "chapters", and they divide sessions into "scenes" rather than "encounters", run by a "Storyteller" and not a "Dungeon Master." The technical vocabulary of the game is intended to shift players into a more literary, narrative-driven mindset, and to think about the game as an unfolding story rather than a series of tactical incidents occurring in a narrow context.

However, such a direct approach is viable only if the game's text is read and respected on its own terms. This is less likely than you'd think.



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Players don't always read rulebooks. The traditional model of the tabletop RPG relies on a gamesmaster, half referee and half storyteller and, in my experience, often the person who's bought and read the rulebook and is now evangelising for the game, allowing the players to defer the labour of reading and parsing for themselves if they'll just give it a try.

Players often correlate their contents to the fiction they already know and the terminology they've already internalised. All currency in fantasy RPGs is in danger of becoming "gold", because the gold piece is the "standard" unit of currency in stock fantasy. All currency in cyberpunk or space opera RPGs risks being swept up into some nebulous sense of "credits"; again, a catch-all in the genre. Games which attempt to introduce too much of their own terminology risk alienation or ridicule. The terminology favoured by the World of Darkness has only caught on intermittently — plenty of players still refer to their "campaign" as run by their "Vampire DM". After all - to them, it's pointless semantics. The person running the game is the DM, because that's what the tentpole game calls them. Why can't these other games just call a spade a spade?

Borgstrom's failure model emphasises the role of player expectations in creating fail-states for RPGs. Those expectations are often embedded in the experience of playing the game, using its rules - if it takes four die rolls just to slap someone upside the head, the system is devoting a great deal of attention to granular resolution of violence, so that is what the game will be about. And no amount of vocabulary is going to change that. Fluff can certainly colour rules, but the rules must be adjusted too, embodying the fictive reality presented elsewhere in the game text and reifying it when the game state is made present through play.

#iHunt claims to be a game about the state of being millennial, living under the blows of late capitalism. Its mechanics need to simulate those blows. The adversities its players encounter need to be economic; its mechanical interactions need to simulate the experience of being on the wrong end of the capitalist machine, and they need to align with that directly — not as an afterthought to Yet Another RPG Combat System. To close the lacuna between fluff and rules, rules need to reify fluff — not just by providing a system for everything mentioned, but by eliminating systems that are about something else.

If game developers are to banish the spectre of ludonarrative dissonance, nothing less will do.

Thank you.

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## Q&A

*Q: Will there always be resistance to letting players explore the world freely? I'm thinking about playing Assassin's Creed and ignoring the mechanics, just wandering around Florence, and how that wandering was later mechanised by collectables and achievements...*

A: Or the Riddler trophies in the Arkham games? I'm in two minds about this. The part of me that runs tabletop games says "the game is about whatever the players make it about so if they want to wander around Florence and see the sights you damn well make the game about that, that's reactive storytelling and development." But I can see why there's this desire to codify and gamify behaviours and say "OK, people want to do this so let's put a mechanic there and use that interest for something" and how that arguably makes exploring a mechanical, completionist, hardcore-gamer thing to do rather than making your own fun and doing what you actually want to. It closes off some of that freedom. I think tabletop folk have it easier because they can adjust on the fly - digital games hard-code their rules more.

*Q: Might it be possible to consider fluff in terms of paratext? Fluff often appears in italics or box outs or reformatted pages, and that might be considered as a form of paratext which functions to organise play and the reading of rules.*

A: Absolutely! It's not the framework I've applied here but I think there's definitely something to it. It reminds me of something Olivia Hill and I discussed a while back about her thinking "don't get fluff in my crunch" was a stupid argument, and I pointed out that it's useful at table to have a very minimal, readable-at-a-glance writeup of how a rule works, because when you're looking stuff up you don't want to be parsing dense formats and working out which text is directly relevant. In that scenario the crunch, expressed in its purest form, is the paratext to a deeper synergy of rules and background, in the main body.

*Q: Is there a distinction necessary between tabletop and computer RPGs? It seems the brevity of this paper forced a conflation of the two forms. TTRPGs seem much better suited to the pursuit of narrative, as your discussion of terminology indicated. The mechanics of CRPGs are much better hidden and have very different strengths and weaknesses.*

A: Yes and no. I definitely skimmed over something important here for timing's sake. The mechanics of CRPGs are often designed along the same lines as a tabletop game, and often show their working with terms and numbers and calculations around either a simulated die roll or a mechanical, player-skill interaction. A lot of those terms and numbers and calculations are an inheritance from tabletop games, either because the CRPG in question is directly adapting a TTRPG property or because TTRPG properties have framed how the developers think about fantasy games and how those work. So I do think it's worth talking about them both at the same time. I'm working with a media archaeology method that I didn't really have time to describe in detail here, but I'd like to present on that another time and join the dots.

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Something like *Middle-Earth: Shadows of Whatever* is very up front about its mechanics, it wants you to notice and care about how many hits you've built up in a streak because that triggers combos and so on. The system functions automatically but it's not hiding from you at all and I'd argue it's more interesting than anything going on in the game's story, which is kind of what you were suggesting. But something like *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* hides its system entirely and goes all in on narrative, affect and mechanical skill, and I think it does so better than a lot of TTRPGs manage.

*Q: I feel at times you were discussing game mechanics over ludonarrative dissonance. For example, rolling a d20 might make immersion difficult but it doesn't necessarily contradict the story being told...*

A: It doesn't necessarily contradict the meaning, but it might well impede the telling of the story altogether. A clunky mechanic is a clunky mechanic no matter what - if it takes four die rolls to compute every blow struck in a combat, imagine how long that combat's going to take. Whatever's happening in the game's story disappears if you're always groping for tables and doing sums and comparing numbers every time you want to do anything. You're right in that it's a ludic dysfunction - the game not working elegantly for *itself*, never mind anything else - but I think that has an impact on the production and reception of story too. It's a problem that works on two levels and I have conflated them here, without quite realising. Nice catch.

*Q: What's so good about ludonarrative consonance anyway? I think it's likely a good thing, but you appear to promote narrative over gameplay and I think this is likely a matter of taste. It seemed to be an either/or scenario and my taste is for both - games with lots of score keeping, levelling up, dice rolling, AND a great story.*

A: I think this talks back to your previous observation that ludic dysfunction on a basic level of "is this mechanic elegant, can it be resolved easily during play" creates a different kind of ludonarrative dissonance from the kind I was overtly claiming to talk about here. I don't think that's a matter of taste - the ludicrous "resolve a quadratic equation when your character takes a slash" approach of something like FATAL is never going to be elegant for anyone who isn't a very accomplished mathematician. That's a facetious example, but go back to Hill's claim about needing five rolls and a look-up table to resolve every single blow in a combat, and everyone needs seven blows to drop... that's an amount of cognitive load at any table, on top of the misalignment between meticulous rules and the pace suggested by "swashbuckling."

At the bottom line I'd take this back to Rebecca Bergstrom and her perception of games as work that result in fun being had. What your definition of "fun" might be isn't relevant to her and it's not really relevant to me even if my personal taste crept in to how I framed and delivered the problem here, which it probably has. What matters is the amount of work you put in to having that fun, and how that work can end up being wasted. That might be inelegance in the rules, or it might be misalignment between rules and their context.

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