TABLETOP ROLE-PLAYING GAMES IN SINGAPORE

CASE STUDIES FOR EDUCATION AND

EMPOWERMENT

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Statement of Original Authorship

This thesis represents my own research work and I have duly acknowledged in the footnotes and bibliography the sources and information which I have consulted for this study. The total word count for this thesis is 20028 words.

Table of Contents

Chapter One

In these days with great systems working everywhere and we being part of that system, it may still be possible to use art as a means to create your own world... In that kind of exercise, there is a possibility of still creating, retaining, defending, protecting and even expanding a personal world. I really see that with the great systems everywhere and people becoming gadgets in these systems, there is actually an innate need for people to find themselves. I really think art is the possibility.

- Kuo Pao Kun[1]

<u>Thesis Background</u>

Over the course of a lifetime, an individual may take upon a variety of roles as he or she encounters different social situations. These various social roles and situations help individuals to form cultural frameworks, which can provide them with a plethora of both opportunities and restrictions. These structures of behaviours and ideas can assist a person to interpret and generate significance from his or her perceptions and experiences, and they can also colour the construction of his or her ideas of self and identity.

In more authoritarian and rigid societies, these frameworks may become stifling restraints, rather than helpful guides, for the individual person. The state in these societies usually possesses far more power than individual citizens, in terms of its ability to decide the types of social roles that people

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[1] Kuo, P.K., 2001. Protest, Provocation, Process: Cultural Activism in Singapore. Forum Transcript. The Necessary Stage, January 21, 2001. *Forum on Contemporary Art and Society,* 1 (2), p.110

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should take and its ability to determine which groups of people are best suited for the assumption of certain roles. In these societies, the state also usually tries to monitor and regulate the scenarios which people can encounter and access, and tries in this way to shape the kind of experiences - and thus the meanings they interpret and attach to these experiences - which people can gain in their lives.

The state's imposition of social control may not be necessarily carried out with sinister intentions in mind; the state may simply wish to establish social order, maintain social stability, and direct the resources and energies of the people towards achieving its ideas and visions of national development and progress.

However, for individuals who desire a greater degree of freedom and agency in their lives, these structures can become great sources of frustration; the state-imposed roles and frameworks can become prisons which prevent individuals from deciding upon their own identities and the meanings of their lives. As people feel more and more powerless and unable to determine or make sense of their lives and experiences, they may feel a constant and pervasive sense of disenfranchisement and unhappiness, and thus become less and less able to resist the demands and gravity of these social structures.

Thesis Overview

This thesis studies how young people can use table-top role-playing games (TRPGs) to express themselves and broaden their perspectives, and gain the opportunities to reflect and experiment with different ideas, against the

backdrop of a contemporary society where a technocratic, authoritarian state tries to regulate and control the public through the extensive use of censorship and social engineering programs.

I look at how these young people living in a bureaucratic and rigid society can use the cultural forms of TRPGs to assume new roles and experience social situations, which can be quite different from the ones ascribed and assigned to them by the state.

I also examine how these individuals focus and refine their creative and imaginative energies through their games, channelling these aptitudes into more concrete and coherent structures of play and performance. Everybody experiences moments of imagination and inspiration; most of us, at some time, have been gifted with sudden surges of bright ideas and revelatory insights. However, these ideas are ephemeral and transient by their very nature; without an outlet for these energies, the sparks of creativity and brilliance fades away. All too easily, inspiration dissipates into banality, and the boldest insights become trite truisms, if they are not tested and tempered in the world of our lived experiences.

I describe and discuss how TRPGs - which are about the creation and simulation of imagined worlds and experiences - provides an arena for the testing and honing of the imagination, and allow people to develop these abilities that can be useful for their lives.

TRPGs are games of make-believe, where small groups of players gather (usually around the eponymous tables) for several hours at a time; they assume the roles of fictional alter egos and imagine that they are in other fictional places and scenarios.

Through the actions taken by their fictional personas, the players are able to interact with and make changes to the ongoing story. They collaborate with each other to create and sustain ongoing narratives. They are also able to more directly and viscerally experience the events occurring in the story, as they imagine themselves in the positions of these fictional characters.

As no single player within a group can exert absolute control over the nature and events of these stories, and there is thus usually a strong element of mystery and unpredictability in these games. Players can thus experience a sort of virtual reality and engage in thought-experiments together, to explore matters of interest to them.

My thesis looks at some of the ways a few people choose to use these games to explore different possibilities and experiment with their identities. I examine how the players gain exposure to different perspectives and situations, and gain opportunities to observe, discuss, and reflect upon their own responses to these experiences.

I argue that in this manner, these people can potentially gain a greater and more nuanced understanding of themselves, and thus can become more

reflexive and self-aware individuals. I also argue that such activities of expression and imagination can also help individuals to assert and develop a stronger sense of agency in their lives.

Focus of Ethnographic Study

I provide ethnographic descriptions of the experiences of two different groups of people whom I played TRPGs with, at different times from 2007 to 2011. I will introduce these individuals and groups and describe how they were able, in their games, to create and assume new roles, and also experience and encounter new situations.

When I first began this study, I focused entirely on more committed players of TRPGs, who play very often and think of themselves as being dedicated TRPG hobbyists. However, in the later part of my research, I shifted my emphasis to cover a wider mix of people with different levels of interest and exposure to TRPGs. My study now also looks at the experiences of several individuals who are more casual players, who play these games only occasionally.

I have decided to study a more diverse range of individuals, as I wanted to look at what different people choose to do with their in-game opportunities to create new personas and explore new situations. I did not want to focus only on looking at the experiences of the more dedicated and 'die-hard' core of TRPG gamers; I realized did not want this study to only focus on the activities and experiences of a smaller, subcultural group.

Instead, I wanted to look at the more general ways in which young people could seek out a wider range of cultural possibilities in their lives, and use their games as tools and technologies to focus their creative and imaginative energies.

Social Context

I situate my research in the context of Singapore society today, where there are many social structures put into place by the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) state. The PAP state is a technocratic and bureaucratic political entity, which favours an extremely centralised and corporatist style of management and governance (Brown 1994; Brown 1997). It adopts a heavily interventionist approach to ruling Singapore; the PAP state tries to persuade and mobilise all sectors and members of society to follow its directions and vision of national development and progress.

The PAP is aided in these efforts to persuade and educate the population by its control and influence over the mainstream channels of media in the country and its ability to plan and implement social engineering programmes on a wide scale, in fields such as education, business, and the family (Seah 1973; Wilson 1978; Chia, Tan and Amina 1999; Wong and Yeoh 2003).

The highly trained and well-equipped bureaucracies of the Singapore civil service enable the PAP to execute these programmes effectively throughout the nation. The state is also traditionally unreceptive toward those ideas (and the people who discuss them) which detract or differ too much from its own,

and have often tried to discourage and suppress the circulation of these ideas (See 2011).

In recent years, in an attempt to liberalise and re-invent its image, the PAP has shifted away from a more overtly authoritarian system of governance to a more 'soft authoritarian' style (Ooi 2009); the state now employs less harsh and draconian ways to influence public opinion.

However, the state still enjoys the ability to co-opt and control the arts, academia, media, and other arenas of public expression, through its continued ownership of the media, rigid censorship laws, and influence over the funding for the arts and academic research (Tan 2007; Arts Engage 2010; Ooi 2011).

Against this backdrop of control and structure, I look at how 2 groups of TRPG players were able to create new and different ways of seeing themselves and their worlds in their games and stories. I explore how these individuals created and experimented with different roles and situations, and ask how one's abilities to reflect upon one's own identity, to empathise with other perspectives, and to imagine other kinds of worlds can be useful resources for the development of reflexivity and agency in this highly structured society.

Basic Concepts of TRPGs

What are TRPGs? These games of make-believe are usually played in small groups of around five to eight people. Most of the players in a group create

and assume the roles of fictional player-characters (PCs), while one of the players in the group assumes the role of the game-master (GM).

The group of players collaborate with each other to craft narratives, in which the PCs are usually the protagonists.[2] The GM describes a fictional game-world that the PCs are part of and are able to interact with, and also arranges for the PCs to encounter various occurrences and situations; he also provides them with a supporting cast of non-player characters (NPCs) - both friendly and hostile - to draw them deeper into the narrative.

For example, a GM may tell the PCs that a nearby building has caught fire; many people inside are crying out for help, and the fire-fighters are still far away from the scene. The GM then suddenly assumes the role of a NPC - he acts the part of an old lady who is stuck on the top floor of the building. The GM coughs and wails to depict how the old lady is being choked by the thick, black smoke, as she plaintively cries out for help from her window.

The GM then tells the PCs they see another person, and he assumes the form of this NPC - a shifty-looking man who is smiling suspiciously as he calmly leaves the blazing building - and he tells them this man discards an empty box of matches as he walks into a nearby alleyway...

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[2]   While creating and participating in a story can be appealing for many TRPG players, they are not the only reasons and motivations for people to play TRPGs. While some players may wish to express themselves and enjoy participating in a shared narrative, other players may favour a more cerebral and competitive approach - they treat their games as exercises in strategic planning and tactical execution (much like an expanded game of chess). Yet other players may simply seek social contact and want to maintain their feelings of amity and kinship with one another, through their interactions in these games. As individuals are complex beings, different or multiple factors may attract or motivate players differently at different times.

The players may have their characters respond to this scenario in any way they can imagine; more callous or cowardly characters may ignore the old lady's cries, while braver or brasher PCs may rush to the building to attempt to rescue her, and curious PCs may wish to follow and investigate the mysterious man who is walking away from the fire.

In this way, as the characters interact and respond to the situations in the game-world, new plots may arise due to the PCs' actions and interventions. Of course, the PCs can also be the ones who propel and drive the narrative; their players can tell the GM what their characters will be trying to accomplish and do, and so the GM can get a better idea of the kinds of experiences they wish to have, and the kinds of stories they wish to create and participate in.

In any case, once the players have declared and committed their characters to undertake a certain course of action, the GM can provide his input to this information and plan the repercussions to their characters' actions, thus enriching and developing the stories.

This process repeats itself over and over again, as the game continues. Thus, the ensuing narratives can become quite unpredictable for everybody; this helps to introduce a sense of excitement and dramatic tension, which can be very enjoyable and engaging for the players. The group's' interactions are thus paramount to this storytelling process; the players provide each other with a flow of fresh creative input, to sustain the storytelling process.[3]

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[3] As you can probably imagine, the interactions in these games can potentially give rise to a lot of conflict in the group, as the players may all have different ideas of what is possible or plausible. Do the brave PCs manage to save the old woman from the fire, or does the

TRPGs first became popular in the United States in 1974, as 2 young men, Gary Gygax and David Arneson, created a game, *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*) as a modification of the strategy war-games which they usually played; instead of controlling an entire army, each player controlled and assumed the role of only one individual character. The players would band their characters together for strength and safety in numbers, and the GM would create fictional worlds inspired by mythology and folklore for them to explore. On their journeys, they would face and strive against all kinds of adversaries and challenges, and become progressively more powerful as the games go on.

D&D became wildly successful in the United States, and quickly spread to other countries within a few short years; its commercial success inspired the creation of many other TRPGs, and cemented the place of these games in contemporary popular culture (Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin 2007).

I have chosen to study 2 other TRPGs - *Unknown Armies (UA)* and *Hunter: the Reckoning (HtR)* which, unlike *D&D* with its fantastic otherworldly locales, are placed in a contemporary, post-industrial setting. In these games, players do not assume the roles of powerful alter egos with mighty abilities to overcome their challenges and enemies; instead, they play the roles of normal people caught up in situations of rapidly escalating horror and action.

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inferno mercilessly consume all of them? While the players may generate many elements of contingency in the course of playing together, they also have to resolve these uncertainties in order to determine what exactly happens in the story. This is where the rules of the game, and the responsibilities of the GM, come in; different TRPGs have different systems of rules, which the players can consult and interpret to make better estimations of what the PCs and NPCs can (or cannot) do. The players in a group also entrust the GM with a great degree of power and responsibility; the GM has to be the referee, editor, and director, who tries to make sure the games remain engaging and fun for all the players, and he also has to consult the games' rules and make the final decisions as to whether the PCs and NPCs' intended actions are successful or not.

Ethnographic Contribution

I hope my thesis will help provide more information about TRPGs and the people who play them; due to their somewhat invisible and transient nature, TRPGs have traditionally been a hard area for researchers into games and media to study (Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin, 2009).

My research builds upon the work of Neo (2000) and Choy (2004), who also studied groups of TRPG players in Singapore; we adopt different approaches and perspectives for studying this phenomena. Neo studied TRPGs as an external observer, while Choy examined the games that he played in; my own research focuses on the games where I was the GM. Also, Neo and Choy both focus their studies on the subcultural experiences of groups of TRPG players, while I have tried to look at a wider range of people, some of whom have never played TRPGs before the games I played with them.

As the GM, I was a participant and co-creator of these games with my friends, which allowed me to observe the other players' actions and responses; our subsequent conversations and interviews also helped me to gain a better understanding of my friends' feelings and points of view. I was involved in the process of pooling our various sources of knowledge and ideas together to create our shared worlds of make-believe.

Neo (2000) uses Bourdieu's ideas of 'habitus' to discuss the activities and behaviour of a few groups of TRPG players in Singapore. He observes how the members of these groups tend to share similar tastes and draw from the

same cultural and social universes to create their games and stories. Choy (2004) adopts Goffman's frame analysis approach to study TRPGs, and he compares TRPGs with the forum theatre devised by playwright Augusto Boal. Choy discusses how TRPGs are in some ways similar to forum theatre, which playwright Augusto Boal developed as part of his efforts to create a 'Theater of the Oppressed' to help wider audiences to theatre-goers to gain a greater sense of appreciation, empathy, and empowerment (Boal 1993). Choy's research concludes that TRPGs, with their emphasis on the fantastic, magical, and outlandish, are not really well suited for addressing and exploring real-life social issues.

I build upon both Neo's and Choy's works with my own study, which explore different kinds of games, different kinds of players and social dynamics, and different kinds of experiences. I hope this study will complement existing research on similar issues and matters about games, stories, and contemporary Singapore.

Literature Review

In writing this thesis, I have found the work of others who have written about role-playing games and performance (both in and out of the Singapore context) to be very helpful. Fine's seminal study (Fine 1983) of groups of TRPG players in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s, applies Goffman's ideas of frame analysis (Goffman 1974) to study the organisation and interactions of these groups; Fine coined the term 'shared fantasy' to describe TRPG players' world-building activities. Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin

(2007, 2009) have compiled many valuable insights and discussions into the dynamics of collaborative creativity involved in TRPGs.

Hughes provides a more optimistic study of TRPGs; he discusses how 'Malori', a TRPG player in Australia, uses her games to construct symbols of personal significance to assist her in her life. 'Malori' suffered from severe depression, and she did not find conventional psychiatric treatments helpful for her condition, but she was able to use her gaming experiences to gain the confidence, visualisation, and social skills to confront and help her overcome her illness (Hughes 1988). Laderman's work follows in a similar vein; while she does not study TRPGs, her ethnography on Malay shamanistic performances in Perak looks at the therapeutic and empowering effects of performance upon their participants (Laderman 1993).

With regards to the application of games and stories to improve learning, Gee (2003), Koster (2004) and Selfe and Hawisher (2007) discuss how today's games can be useful for learning. They study how the challenging nature of many video games can motivate their players to learn and master new sets of skills, such as mathematics, language, and pattern recognition, and also look at the ways that players can use these games to develop new 'literacies' to interpret the many types of information in today's world.

Finally, my research has been informed and inspired by some recent case studies about how people can use the cultural resources and technologies at their disposal to educate and empower themselves. Hull and Katz (2006) look

at how students from poor backgrounds in Oakland, San Francisco, can use the stories they create as tools to help motivate them to learn; they adopt Bruner's work on agency and narrative expression (1996) to examine how these students use their moments of self-expression to effect positive transformations in their lives.

Methodological Concerns

I employ the participant-observation approach to study how my friends and I created and played TRPGs together. My friends have granted me their permission to observe and write about them, and some of them also granted me the permission to use their names. For those who did not wish to be named, I have provided them with pseudonyms in this thesis, which are indicated with parentheses. Prior to beginning this research project, I was already acquainted with the field, and my informants are my close friends.

This arrangement has both its benefits and its drawbacks; on one hand, as an insider, I easily understand concepts about TRPGs, and I could also converse with my informants about their activities and lives more readily. I also did not have to worry about lacking access to ethnographic material, when the gatekeepers to my research are my good friends. As we have known each other for the past one and a half decades and still maintain regular contact, I can easily confer and consult with them about my observations and interpretations of their actions. My friends grant me a great degree of trust, and are often willing and ready to discuss more personal matters with me.

On the other hand, I have also found myself blind-sided quite frequently by my own perspectives as a long-time TRPG player. I had my own biases and prejudices about what kind of games were "good" and what kinds of games were "bad". Different GMs and players have different ways of playing their games, and they gain and refine their own idiosyncratic sets of practices and skills over years of practice; players can thus become very protective of their own works and styles, and I am no exception.

When I studied how others played TRPGs, the more conscious I became of what I saw as 'shortcomings' in their styles, and I began to see my own preferences as being the 'right' and 'best' way to play. When I noticed these tendencies, I tried to arrest them by revising what I have written, and tried to observe what I was studying with a less biased eye.

In the process, I went too far in addressing my own weaknesses that I lost confidence in my own ability to play these games, let alone write about them. This process became crippling; it seemed impossible to write about my friends without writing about myself, as I was the GM in these games I was studying.

Thus, I began to write more and more about myself, which spurred me to wonder if I had suddenly made myself the subject of my own paper, in an auto-ethnographic turn-around. I found Roth's cautions and calls for an ethical 'auto/ethnographic' approach to be quite useful for extricating myself from this quagmire of solipsism (Roth 2005).

Roth reminds would-be auto/ethnographers that 'Self' is a meaningless concept without the notion of the 'Other'. He claims the ethnographic enterprise is primarily about understanding the lives of people, not just one person, and thus distinguishes the process of looking into one-self for the sake of indulging one's ego, from the process of looking into one-self to gain insight into others who share similar experiences.

Thus inspired, I realized my own experiences did not necessarily define the limits of everybody else's possible experiences, and felt more ready to use my observations to build bridges of common understanding with other TRPG players. In this knowledge, I have found some peace; and in this peace, I have found that I could write with less fear.

Chapter Organisation

I have separated the rest of my thesis into 2 other chapters. In the second chapter, I share and recount my observations and experiences as a GM of 2 different games which I organised and played with 2 different groups. I provide thick descriptions of how these events took place, and describe the players' experiences and actions in these games.

In the third chapter, I provide an analysis of my observations and experiences, and discuss how the players in these games were progressively able to take more assertive roles in shaping the stories. I also look at how these players perceived and treated their experiences in these fictional worlds as having a great deal of significance and realism. I relate my findings and interpretations

to existing debates and discussions on games and performances, and conclude my thesis by sharing some thoughts on how individuals can use their abilities of imagination and expression to become more agentive and reflexive individuals - and in doing so, enrich and empower themselves.

Chapter Two

Ethnographic Fieldwork: My Observations and Experiences as a GM

What, in fact, is gained and what lost when human beings make sense of the world by telling stories about it - by using the narrative mode for construing reality?

- Jerome Bruner[4]

<u>**Chapter Overview**</u>

In this chapter, I describe some of my observations and experiences as a GM of 2 different TRPG sessions, and study the range of possible experiences which different individuals can encounter when the play TRPGs. I draw upon the information which I gathered from observing the actions and experiences of the players, and also use the interviews and conversations I conducted with them after the games.

I also draw upon my own experiences in these games, from my perspective as the GM. In TRPG lingo, I 'ran' these games; I organised and did much of the logistical work involved in setting up these game sessions. I was also the referee of the games and tried to ensure the games proceeded smoothly, and remained fair and engaging for the other players. Lastly, I was the main story-teller of the group; I had to take the initiative to provide the other players with a fictional premise, and had to prepare the general directions in which these stories could develop.

In light of all these duties and responsibilities, I feel it is important to

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[4]   Bruner, J. 1996, *The Culture of Education*, Harvard University Press, p. 129

remember that the GM is also a player in these games. I find my experiences as a GM quite engaging and enjoyable. Although I did not play a single consistent role in the way which the other players did, I was able to play many smaller roles, as I provided the other players with a supporting cast of allies and antagonists to interact with and respond to. I also enjoy the process of observing how my friends would transform and shape the emerging stories in the games, and I like to challenge my own improvisational abilities as I have to keep up with their creative efforts. Lastly, I find that I usually become quite fond of my fellow players' characters, and often find it easy to empathize and identify with the feelings of my friends and their characters.

My reasons for picking these game sessions for study

Of all the games which I have played in, observed, and taken notes of during my 4 years of research, I have chosen to focus on these 2 particular sessions for 3 main reasons, which are significant and useful for my analysis and interpretations in my next chapter.

Firstly, these games both shared the same fictional setting; their stories took place in contemporary Singapore - or rather, a re-imagining of contemporary Singapore with supernatural elements. This fictional setting made it easier for me to conjure and evoke images in the other players' imaginations; I could make references to real-world places and events which the players were familiar with, through their own lived experiences. Thus, I could lend a stronger feel of realism to the fictional events in my games.

Secondly, these games were both 'one-shots'; they were played and concluded over the course of a single session which spanned several hours (as opposed to 'campaigns', which are many episodic sessions, each also lasting several hours, connected sequentially over a long period of time).

I have chosen to study these one-shots instead of a campaign, even though many TRPG players perceive campaigns as being the 'default' or 'best' form that a game should take; there are more opportunities in a long TRPG campaign for players to fully develop and explore their characters and create their stories.

However, TRPG campaigns are very demanding in terms of time and commitment; only the most dedicated and experienced of players tend to set time aside to play campaigns on a regular basis. It is thus harder to find new players in campaigns, and they are usually overshadowed by the more experienced players.

I have instead chosen to look at one-shots, so that I can observe the experiences not just of the more seasoned players, but also of the less experienced players. I do not wish to focus my study too narrowly only on the experienced players, as that would change the focus of my study too drastically from studying the experiences and accomplishments of different kinds of individuals in TRPGs, to the study of the subculture of TRPG hobbyists.

Studying these one-shots thus allowed me to gather a wider range of player data; these one-shots were played by mixed groups of players, who all had different levels of interest and familiarity with TRPGs. Some players in these groups played TRPGs on a regular basis, some were very new to these games, and some of them had played TRPGs before at some point in the past, but had stopped playing them for various reasons.

Thirdly, I had provided most of the players of these two game sessions with a list of characters which I had created specifically for each game, and I had asked them to pick a character to play. This differs from the norms of what most TRPG groups are used in long-term campaigns; TRPG players usually enjoy the creative process involved in designing and developing their own alter egos for their campaigns, and usually invest a lot of their own personalities and emotions into portraying their characters.

I had chosen this course of action for two very practical reasons; the newer, less experienced TRPG players did not know how to create their own characters. By providing these players with a list of pre-generated characters to choose from, I could quickly proceed with the game session, instead of spending time on the lengthy process of character creation. As each one-shot took place over only a single session, and not every player could stay throughout the game, this time factor was a very real concern to us.

With these time constraints in mind, my knowledge of these characters whom I have designed also helped me to speed up my responses and

improvisations as the GM in the game more quickly and smoothly, and it helped me to improve the tempo and flow of the collaborative story-telling process.

Although I was not playing these characters, and could not control or dictate their actions (that is the province of the other players), I had designed them, and thus I could try to understand these characters motivations and ideas and prepare more suitable story developments for them.

Of course, when the other players assumed the roles of these characters, they made major changes to the characters and introduced their own perspectives, interpretations, and dynamics, which allows them to take the stories of these characters into many new directions which I could not control or predict entirely.

General Background of the Games

I shall now proceed with my ethnographic descriptions of the experiences of the players in these 2 game sessions. I shall also briefly describe the different TRPG systems I used for each game, and will explain the stories which emerged from these sessions.

Due to space constraints, I will try to provide only the details of the stories which are most relevant and useful, and will try to give the reader enough information to follow the main plot, so that it is easier to grasp the significance of the players' experiences in the games.

Case Study 1: Missing Halves (Unknown Armies)

Background

In December 2006, some of my university friends from the History and Political Science departments from the National University of Singapore presented me with a birthday present; the gift was a TRPG game-book, *Unknown Armies (UA),* a book which I had earlier expressed some interest in. The game's designers had billed it as a game about magic and mysticism in a post-modern setting. I was happy to receive this gift, and spent some time trying to read and understand the rules and aesthetics of the game.

In March 2007, during the term break (we were all undergraduates then), I decided to run a short session, and I invited my friends who had bought me this book to give it a try.

The Players and their Prior Experiences with TRPGs

These friends who had bought me the *UA* book - Daryl, 'Andy', 'Duncan', 'Bjorn', and 'Leon' - are not regular role-players; they do not play TRPGs often. Their only prior exposure to TRPGs was through me; I had introduced TRPGs to them in 2005, and had prepared and ran a sporadic series of games for them.

A few players seemed more interested in these games (Daryl, 'Andy', 'Leon'), more so than others ('Duncan', 'Bjorn'). 'Leon', Daryl, and 'Andy' were quite engaged by the stories that we created together in these games; they were very curious and excited to find out what would happen next. On the other

hand, 'Bjorn' and 'Duncan' seemed more reserved and less spontaneous.

'Duncan' and 'Leon' had informed me in advance that they would not most likely be unable to play this game, as they had other plans for the day. 'Duncan' had also told me he had to go home earlier than he had expected to attend to some family matters, and so he could not stay for the whole duration of the game session. As it was hard for me to run the game with just 2 other players ('Andy' and Daryl), I invited Zaki, another friend of mine, to the game to make up the numbers. Also, as Zaki was a more experienced role-player, I brought him along to help me answer other players' queries about the game.

I shall now briefly describe the personalities and backgrounds of the final cast of players present for this game.

'Duncan'

'Duncan' (not his real name) was then a 25-year-old undergraduate student who had just finished his Honours year in the History department of the National University of Singapore. 'Duncan' is a stoic and responsible person, who is often very quiet and shy, but he becomes quite easy-going and relaxed around his close friends. He also has a very laconic and acerbic sense of humour. In his free time, 'Duncan' enjoys playing video games, watching Hollywood action movies and Japanese animation *(anime)*.

Daryl

Daryl was then also a 25 years old undergraduate who had just finished his

Honours year in the Political Science department of the National University of Singapore. Daryl enjoys reading about philosophy and theology, and he is quite serious and earnest about his academic pursuits. He takes Latin and Greek classes so that he can read classical philosophical and religious texts in their original, untranslated editions. He is also an avid fan of *anime*, likes to play games of strategy and skill, and enjoys music.

'Andy'

'Andy' (not his real name), also 25 years of age, was 'Duncan's' fellow History Honours cohort-mate. 'Andy' is a quick-witted and well-read person; he enjoys reading and learning about economics, history, and politics. He also enjoys watching *anime*, and also reads American comic books and Japanese *manga* comic books. He plays many different kinds of video games, and he is a very fast learner; he is very quick at learning and mastering new kinds of games. He is also quite analytical and tends to consider problems from many different angles before he commits to a course of action.

Zaki

Zaki was 20 years old then; he was serving his National Service (the mandatory period of military service which all young men in Singapore had to serve) as a mechanic. I had played many games with Zaki before this occasion, we meet regularly, to this day, to play TRPGs together. Zaki is a quiet and thoughtful individual, with a good memory and ability to quickly grasp and understand the rules of new games. He likes to read American comic books and speculative fiction, and also enjoys writing short stories.

Before this game, Zaki had not met the other players; I invited him to play and help me guide the other players, in case they felt lost in the game.

The Events of the Game Session

We arranged for the game to begin around 2pm in the afternoon during our March term break. We arranged to meet in the university, at one of the study tables which frequented. I had planned for the game to last for around 7 to 8 hours, and wanted it to end around 9 or 10 pm so that everybody could get home before midnight. When I arrived at the appointed place, I explained the premise of the game to the players who were already present - Zaki, Daryl, and 'Duncan'. When 'Andy' arrived a short while later, I then gave him a short briefing.

I had created a basic storyline, which could be relatively accessible to new players. I knew that my friends enjoyed ghost stories and horror movies, and thus decided to create a ghost story for my game. To prepare for this game, I read many scary stories and urban legends (frightening myself quite often in the process), to gain the inspiration and feel the proper mood for the game.

I also created six different player-characters, and had prepared and printed out a short write-up for each of them. I made a mix of character types for my friends to choose from; it was easier for me to make these PCs as I already knew my friends' personalities and interests.

Thus I was able to design characters who were more likely to capture the interest of my friends. (For example, I knew my friends were unlikely to play

female characters, so I focused on creating more male PCs instead.)

The six PCs I created were:

1) a lovelorn, volatile painter from Scotland, who was possibly delusional;

2) a charming American businessman, who cheats on his wife compulsively;

3) a corrupt, apparently righteous Singaporean Chinese narcotics detective;

4) a Singaporean Malay ex-convict, who had gone to prison for his friend;

5) a Singaporean Indian athlete in early retirement due to bad sports injuries;

6) a Singaporean Eurasian minor television celebrity seeking global fame.

I introduced these PCs to my friends, and asked them to pick a character each; they would then be assume these character' roles, and explore and develop the unfolding story through those perspectives.

'Duncan' picked the corrupt Singaporean policeman; he grinned cynically at me and said, *"Got gun, got money, got reputation, who don't want?"* Daryl chose to play the unstable Scottish artist; he grinned at me and said, *"Wah Shao. Too much lor. I very predictable is it? You know me very well right, purposely create such a character, surely you knew that I would pick this guy."* I protested that I did not know he would have picked this character, but I confessed that I had thought he would have liked such a character - I knew that he liked stories with emotionally volatile characters.

'Andy' considered and looked at the list for a while, and then he told me, with a wide grin, that he would like to play the philandering and silver-tongued

American businessman, because that sounds like a fun person to play. In the few games I had ran for 'Andy' before this, he had discovered that he enjoyed playing characters with more gregarious and outgoing qualities. 'Andy' asked me to tell him a little more about this character's domestic situation. I explained that this character had a happy marriage at home, but he just couldn't seem to help himself from cheating on his wife, and he was so good at talking and lying that he could usually get out of any trouble he puts himself in. 'Andy' then put on a suave smile, and told me, *"Hmmm. What a bastard. I guess I'll play him then."*

Zaki also considered the list of characters for a while, and then he told me he'll like to play the Singaporean Malay ex-convict. I then briefly explained the premise of the game - the PCs were all in the vicinity of a recently renovated hotel, the Changi Hotel, in Changi Village. This is a real hotel and area in Singapore; there are many bars and pubs, popular with both locals and travellers due to its proximity to Singapore's Changi Airport.

I then presented a print-out of a brochure and map of the hotel (which I had obtained from the hotel's website) to my friends, which gave them a pleasant surprise; Daryl remarked *'Wow, so this really exists.'* I smiled - that had been my intention, to use this prop to evoke a stronger sense of realism in the players - and told my friends that their characters did not know each other personally, and they were all engaged in their own affairs.

That was when the game really began. I started with 'Duncan'; I explained to him that his corrupt narcotics policeman character was supposed to meet

several drug smugglers in the lobby of the Changi Hotel to negotiate a deal; he had caught them earlier, but let them go, and in exchange, they would give him a share of their illicit business profits. I then assumed the roles of these shady drug dealers to interact with 'Duncan'; 'Duncan' portrayed his character as a bit of a swaggering and somewhat cowardly person, who was quite vicious and greedy, and he was threatening the drug dealers that he would arrest them if they did not give him a bigger share of their profits.

After approximately 15 minutes of role-playing, 'Duncan' was able to establish the basics of his character's personality. I told 'Duncan' that the drug dealers wanted to take a smoke, and so they left the lobby of the hotel to go out for a cigarette and confer among themselves. 'Duncan' agreed, and I then stopped his scene for a while; I switched the focus of the game over to Zaki. I told Zaki that his character had only recently come out from jail, and was working for a rag-and-bone man and junk collector in Changi Village. I also told him his character spent a lot of time with his fellow bikers, who frequented the Changi Village area.

Zaki said that he would try to provide the younger bikers with a good role model, so that they would keep out of trouble and not have to go to prison like he did. I then assumed the roles of several younger bikers, who were dismissive of this advice given by Zaki's character; these young men were foolish, hot-headed, and thought themselves to be invincible. Also after 15 minutes of role-playing with Zaki, I told him that one of the young bikers had started to run and was shouting curses in an aggressive manner towards the

Changi Hotel. Zaki said his character would follow the younger man, and try to prevent him from doing anything stupid. The young biker ran into the hotel lobby, shouting at a man whom Zaki's character did not recognise.

I then pretend to shout angrily in the direction of 'Duncan', *'Hey! You dirty cop!'*; the players then understood that the young biker was angry at that character. 'Duncan' blinked at me for a split second, and then he adopted the demeanour of his character again, and he provoked me, as the young biker, to attack him and threatened me with the legal consequences of striking a police officer. Zaki's character caught up, and Zaki spoke with me, trying to calm the younger biker, and apologized profusely to 'Duncan''s character. I then changed scenes again, switching over to Daryl this time.

I explained to Daryl that his character, the lovelorn artist, was sitting in the bar of the hotel, nursing a pint of beer, and I told him that his character was travelling in Asia for a series of art exhibitions. Singapore was merely one of his stop-over points; it was not a place where he was staying for long.

Daryl's character was still pining over a lost love from several years ago, a girl whom he had met on the road while they were both backpacking; they had a whirlwind romance which ended nearly as quickly as it started, and they had never kept in touch. I told Daryl that his character now travelled the world, conducting his art business in a lackadaisical manner, with a faint hope that he would meet the girl somehow again. Daryl said, *'So sad!'* and then, *'Perfect! I understand this guy now.'*

Daryl's character was at the bar, obsessively keeping a lookout for the girl of his dreams, even though he knew there was no rational reason for her to be there. He had been observing the exchange between 'Duncan' and Zaki's characters with a disinterested, mildly amused manner. I then told Daryl that as his character was drinking, he saw a large, cracked egg at the bar counter. Daryl wanted to take a closer look at the egg, and so I told him it looked as if the liquid contents of the egg had been removed from the shell, and there appeared to be something else inside.

Daryl told me his character would take the egg and peer inside; I told him he found a tiny plastic toy rifle, one that would be used by a toy soldier. 'Andy' interjected at this point, and said, *'Now that's damn creepy.'* Daryl smiled, a little nervously, and then said he would like to take the toy rifle out, and play with it for a while.

I then turned very quickly to 'Andy', which startled him momentarily. I then smiled and told him, *'Now it's your turn.'* 'Andy' quipped, *'Great. You all get to start with all the normal parts, normal things, and now when the strange stuff just happens, it's my turn.'* 'Duncan' said, *'Eh shut up and stop complaining - these kinds of things in life will only happen to you. Only you, understand?'*

The group joked and bantered with each other in this vein for a while, and after a while, I started telling 'Andy' what his PC's starting situation was. I explained that his character was a successful sales director for a large American corporation, who goes on frequent business trips. During these

trips, he would cheat on his wife with women he met in bars and pubs. I then told 'Andy' that his PC was also at the bar in the Changi Hotel, and that his eye had been drawn to an attractive European lady who was struggling to carry many parcels and shopping bags into the hotel lobby.

'Andy' declared, with a flourish, that he would move forward to help the lady with her burdensome bags; he smiled and said, *'Hey, maybe it's time to get lucky.'* I then told him the lady was very grateful for his assistance, and at that moment, I told him he saw the lady's young son, a boy of around 6 or 7 years, who had just entered the hotel, trailing behind his mother. Upon realizing the boy's presence, 'Andy' made a false-sounding sigh, and affected a mock-tragic voice; he turned to us and said, *'Maybe there's still a chance.'*

The lady and her son entered the lift, and 'Andy' said his PC would, out of habit, look at the floor they stopped at, so that his lascivious character would be able to figure out the location of their room. I told him that in the bustle and tumble, the lady and her son had dropped and left one of their shopping bags behind; it was filled with the toys a young boy would like - toy robots, toy soldiers, toy guns, etc.

The tension in the air increased a little, as the players (not the characters) made the connection of the toys between Daryl's character's experiences and 'Andy''s character's experiences; the players could sense something significant in the plot was about to be revealed. 'Andy' then declared his character would go into the lift, to return the lady her shopping bag. I then

turned to Daryl and said to him, *'This is the part where you actually find the egg; your part we played just now actually only took place now, after this part.'* That only served to increase my friends' anticipation.

Highlights and Outcome of the Evening

I shall stop this detailed recounting of the story's events for now; I should have provided enough details to demonstrate how the improvisational and collaborative storytelling process works in a TRPG. Instead, I shall now adopt a more general look at some of the more interesting points of the game session.

I will describe some of the more significant things which my friends did during the game, as well as describe how they appeared to feel during these points of the game. I will also briefly describe the main plot of the story which unfolded over the course of the game, so as to provide some context for my friends' actions and feelings. I apologise if the story appears extremely bland and lifeless as it is retold here; the story had a greater impact when it was being created and performed for the first time.

My Plans for the Plot

I had prepared the plot to be about a ghost trapped in the hotel basement. I had read in a newspaper report that it was not uncommon in some parts of Asia for haunted hotels to have stairways and corridors leading into walls and dead ends. These unusual architectural designs were introduced to confuse the ghosts and prevent them from disturbing the other areas of the hotel.

I had been inspired by the recent renovations of the Changi Hotel; the Changi area is notorious in Singapore for being haunted, as the Japanese soldiers had slaughtered many people there during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore during the Second World War. I wondered to myself - what if there was a ghost inside the hotel, that was trapped there mystically by some specially prepared architecture - and what if these old, apparently sense designs had been removed as part of the recent renovations?

That led me to think - what kind of ghost was this, then? Why was it trapped there? After some musing, I decided that the ghost was the restless spirit of a hermaphroditic Chinese Taoist priest and medium; I think I was inspired by the fact that Changi is also the frequent hangout of many transgender women. Many of these transgender individuals cater to Singaporeans as well as the American sailors stopping over at the naval base nearby. While transgender individuals and hermaphrodites aren't quite the same, I made a tangential connection between the two, as they both broke established boundaries.

I decided that the hermaphroditic medium had found a way to achieve immortality, some time in the 1960s; I had read that in some Chinese shamanistic traditions, hermaphrodites were rumoured to possess great supernatural power. I wanted this hermaphrodite to be a semi-sympathetic figure, who had been discriminated against on the basis of gender and sex. I thus arranged that in the past, a rival, all-male group of Chinese Taoist priests and shamans, who felt jealous and threatened, had killed the hermaphroditic medium in the basement of the hotel. The Taoist priests then used mystical

rituals to bind the deceased shaman's spirit to the hotel through, as they did not want the spirit to escape and seek vengeance against them.

How the Players interacted with the Plot

This is where the players came into the picture. When Andy said his character entered the lift, strange things began to happen to all the characters in the hotel, and they found themselves unable to leave the physical premises of the hotel. Doors would become mysteriously locked, windows would become jammed and barred, staircases would wind on seemingly forever, etc. A group of heavily armed fanatics started pursuing the characters around the hotel, trying to kill them and several other people (who were NPCs) in the hotel.

In the midst of this chaos, the PCs met each other and starting trying to figure out what was happening, and banded together for a better chance at survival; I had anticipated they would probably do such a thing, and this helped me to advance the next phase of the story. The PCs tried to figure out why they were being targeted by these assailants, and tried to deduce what were the points they had in common.

'Andy' and Zaki (the more analytical players in the group) had asked me what their characters' birthdays were, and had then deduced that these birthdays all ran in some sort of sequence. The PCs then decided to ransack the concierge of the hotel for the ledger and guest register books, so that they could look for more patterns linking the people who had been killed that night.

By this time, it was about 6 pm in the evening, and 'Duncan' had to leave to attend to some family matters by this point of time, and so he could not continue playing his character.

Before 'Duncan' left, he asked me if his character could have a heroic final scene, a sort of brave and glorious final stand in which the corrupt policeman could try to redeem his sins. I thought that was all right, and thus 'Duncan' launched his character at the assailants and fought them valiantly to buy enough time for the other characters to make their escape to a more secure location in the hotel.

'Duncan' seemed satisfied, and he left; his character's death had created a stronger sense of tension and danger for the remaining 3 players, who redoubled their efforts at trying to find some answers to their characters' predicament. They were able to use the ledger books and guest registers to figure out that the victims had birthdays which ran in a running order with their own birthdays. Somebody's birthday was on the 1st of January, 1965, another person's birthday was on 2nd of February, 1966, and so on; the youngest person was Zaki's character, who was born on 12th December, 1976.

The PCs were also able to arm themselves with a variety of improvised weapons and tools (such as fire extinguishers, broken legs of tables and chairs, heavy ashtrays) which they had scavenged from around the hotel, so that they could better defend themselves against their assailants. The PCs' desperation to survive led them to commit acts of savagery and brutality

against their assailants, and they were able to capture and interrogate some of these people for answers.

This allowed the players to learn who their mysterious assailants were; most of them were young men who had been taking drugs in the abandoned (and supposedly very haunted) Changi Hospital nearby. I described these young men as seeming some connections to the contemporary Satanist subcultures; they wore black t-shirts and sported tattoos with anti-Christian imagery.

I assumed the role of one of these young men, and revealed to the PCs that their assailants had been taking drugs in the derelict hospital for the past few months; in their narcotic-induced haze, some of them decided, half in jest, to carry out rituals to pay homage to the devil. They were shocked when some kind of spirit had responded to them in the darkness, and claimed that it was the very 'devil' which they were looking for. This 'devil' had demonstrated its supernatural powers to cajole and cow the young men into working for it for the past few months; it had then given them instructions to visit the hotel on this very night, and capture a very specific list of 12 people. If these people proved too difficult to capture, they would be slain instead.

I impressed upon the PCs that these young men were not very sophisticated, and their speech was slurred and unsteady; they stank of alcohol and the fumes of drugs. I wanted to show that these people were not the masterminds of the PCs' woes, but were simply being used by something more sinister and malevolent. The PCs discussed these revelations among themselves, and

they decided they would try to look for the other people who were being targeted by these cultists, and try to escape together.

As the PCs explored the hotel, I interspersed many scary scenes for them to encounter, in different parts of the hotel. I had shamelessly stolen many of my scary ideas from stories I had read from newspapers, books, and the Internet, and had also provided some scenes I had mined from my own nightmares. At first, the players were mildly scared, in a pleasant sort of manner. We took a break from the game for dinner at 9pm, and continued playing again at 10pm. At this point, there were fewer people on the campus, it became easier for us to immerse ourselves into the story, and let our imaginations take flight.

Due to the lateness of the hour, and the sudden sense of isolation, the players' sense of dread changed into a stronger feeling of horror and anxiety. This tension was broken up by moments of comic relief; for example, 'Andy' told me he had to go to the toilet, and Daryl had asked him to wait for a while, as as he also needed to go to the toilet and was afraid of going alone. This led to sheepish laughter all around the table, which helped to relieve the tension; this helped me to maintain a better tempo for the game, as well, because it prevented the game from becoming too menacing and foreboding, and allowed us to rest our faculties of imagination and concentration. As the game went on into the wee hours of the morning, the mood of the game became even more intimate and personal; it also began to feel more serious and realistic, as the PCs began to disagree with each other and started diverging more in their opinions.

For example, Zaki's character did not really want to fight to rescue the other targets; Zaki was playing his character as a somewhat guilt-stricken, born-again Muslim, who was scared of meeting ghosts and devils; he simply wanted to survive the night and move on with his life.

'Andy's' character, on the other hand, felt very motivated to rescue the others, because the beautiful lady whom he had met in his introductory scene was amongst those captured by the cultists. It was also possible that 'Andy' wanted to depict his character as being more than just a selfish and sybaritic person; perhaps he wanted his character to have an inner core of decency and courage. Daryl's character kept to himself for most of the night; he seemed to be lost in his own world, and he rarely spoke with the other characters - Daryl's character did not seem to like the other characters very much.

As the PCs managed to successfully rescue some people and investigated more deeply, they discovered their parts in the strange events of the evening. The PCs and the other targets of the cultists were actually the living 'chains' which bound the ghost of the hermaphroditic shaman to its twilight existence. These people were all, in some ways, missing parts of themselves, and they both complemented and contradicted each other.

The American businessman played by 'Andy' had an apparently happy life at home with a loving wife, yet he willingly sabotaged himself with his extra-marital affairs. On the other hand, Daryl's Scottish artist pined and yearned

after a lost love, who may not even remember him. 'Duncan's' corrupt policeman had gained accolade after accolade, despite his criminal acts and illict gains, while the ex-convict played by Zaki was innocent of his charges, but had gone to jail so that he could protect his friend's future.

I explained to the players that these characters were all suffering in their lives from a major unresolved paradox of some sort, and that they were all incomplete in some way. The mediums who had bound the hermaphrodite's spirit into the hotel had used their spells to connect the pain and contradictions of these people's lives with the ghost's existence, so that the spirit would be kept in a constant state of emotional and mental turmoil, and could not become free. I also revealed more details to the PCs about why exactly they and these other people had been chosen by the PCs.

However, the renovation of the hotel had removed the mystical talismans and architecture which crippled the spirit; thus the spirit became more able to assert its will, and it was able to persuade the group of Satanists to serve it by capturing and killing the PCs and the other people who were keeping it in a state of constant pain and confusion.

When the players gained this information, they were quite at a loss at what to do. Daryl asked, somewhat rhetorically, *'So all the pain in my life - so all this suffering - is for nothing more than to keep some ghost in pain as well? So I was born just for this reason?'* Nobody answered him; we all considered his question silently for a while.

I then decided to call for a short break, so that we could get some drinks and refreshments, and so that everybody could think for a while about what they wanted to do. At this point of time, Daryl asked to speak with me privately for a while. He asked, '*Shao, is it okay if I do something that you may not want me to...*' I cut him off at that point, and said to him, *'Daryl, you don't have to ask this question. This is supposed to be a role-playing game; feel free to do what you want, and I will try to keep up with you and think of a way to respond.'* Daryl smiled thoughtfully, and went off to get his drink from the vending machine nearby.

The game resumed shortly thereafter. The PCs started making their way to the basement of the hotel, which was where the captives had been placed, near the ghost's chamber. Apparently, the fanatics were supposed to kill and sacrifice these captives, which would aid the ghost in its rebirth. The players became more nervous; 'Duncan's' character started preparing for the worst-case scenarios and started distributing the weapons which they had managed to procure among the different characters. Zaki played his character as being extremely jittery and worried; he was following 'Duncan's' PC's instructions because he did not know what else to do. Daryl's PC started becoming more receptive and less hostile to the others, and he started volunteering suggestions about what they could do to rescue the other people.

When the PCs finally approached the chamber of the ghost, Daryl's character suddenly decided to betray the other PCs. Daryl's PC grabbed away some of the PCs' weapons, and ran into the room, right into the grasp of the spirit; the

spirit promptly devoured him. At this point of time, Daryl exclaimed, *'Ka-saaaaan!'* (the Japanese word for 'mother') as his character leapt towards the spirit. We were all genuinely surprised and a little shocked, not only at the use of the Japanese term, but also at Daryl's sudden action.

'Andy' and I both watch a lot of *anime*; we suddenly realised why Daryl had chosen to use that term; there was then an *anime* movie which had been very popular (*Final Fantasy 7*), and one of the major antagonists in that movie had also made the same exclamation at the end of the movie - he had been fighting to protect his mother. The ghost, in some sense, was also the PCs' parent, as this spirit was the reason for much of the suffering in their lives.

There were some tears in Daryl's eyes - he wasn't exactly crying, but he was sniffling a little. That experience seemed somewhat cathartic and significant for him; he then explained, in a rather hasty and disjointed manner, as to why his character took that course of action.

'Andy' was a bit stunned, while Zaki nodded appreciatively, and he said to Daryl, *'Hey, it's cool, what you just did. You don't have to explain to us, it's cool.'* 'Andy' then recovered his composure; Daryl asked 'Andy' if this was okay with him, because 'Andy' had been planning so hard to try to rescue everyone, and Daryl had just thrown a major setback in those plans. 'Andy' blinked and said, *'It's okay, I really just didn't expect you to do that. It's cool. But uh, now, how do we save the survivors?'*

At the end, it turned out all right. 'Andy' and Zaki managed to save almost all the remaining survivors, and they managed to escape from the ghost. It wasn't too clear whether the ghost managed to break free or not - though I hinted that it had - and I ended the game session on that note. As we packed up and got ready to leave - it was around 3 am at this point of time - the players thanked me and we talked about the events of the game for a short while, and then we made our way home.

Case Study 2: McDeliverance (Hunter the Reckoning)

Background

I ran another one-shot for a mixed group of friends, acquaintances and strangers on the 19th of June, 2010. This game session coincided with two events; firstly, there was an internal 'Free RPG Day'; on this day, game publishers and game bookstores around the world would give out free role-playing game products, and many game bookstores would also invite GMs to run games for members of the public. Secondly, there had been a bad oil spill which resulted from a collision between two ships off the East Coast of Singapore. Many birds and other wildlife creatures on the East Coast of Singapore had been adversely affected, and some of my friends from animal and environmental welfare groups were involved in cleaning up the shore and rescuing these animals.

In response to these two matters, I wanted to do two things; firstly, I was inspired by the 'Free RPG Day' event, and wanted to let people who had never played TRPGs before to try out a game as well. I thus began to

organise a sort of TRPG exhibition, and hired a large gallery space which belonged to a friend of mine; I envisioned a room with several tables and GMs, where friends, acquaintances, and strangers could come to play and observe different kinds of TRPGs. I would be the one of these GMs, and people would be welcome to try and join my game.

When I was thinking about the subject matter and story for my game, I became inspired by a conversation I had with one of my friends working to rescue the animals from the oil slick. As I heard her describe the oil slick on the water's surface to me, I had a sudden thought that the oil slick would be a perfect hiding place for a vampire; in Eastern European folklore (and contemporary Hollywood popular culture), vampires feared the sun and needed shelter from its bright rays.

That led me to think - why would a vampire be underwater, then? As a vampire was a kind of corpse, wouldn't it bloat up and float to the surface, anyway? I followed and developed that particular train of thought, and eventually emerged with a basic sort of storyline I could use for my game.

I wanted to incorporate the events of this oil spill into my game; I wanted to help my friends who were involved in the rescue operations on the coast to raise some funds and awareness of the matter. I thus decided I would charge a token sum to players of my game on that day, and I would then send these proceeds to my friends working on the beach.

I also planned ask my players to donate more on their own accord, if they enjoyed the game. I am aware of the irony involved in this situation; I was planning to charge people money for an event that was linked in some way to a 'Free RPG Day'.

The Organisation of the Game

I contacted a few of my friends who had experience being GMs, and asked them if they would like to join me in this project. I also invited many of my friends whom I had played TRPGs with at some point of time to come and play games at this event, and I also asked them to invite their friends who may be interested in TRPGs to come by as well. Lastly, I set up an invitation on Facebook, which was open to members of the public; I invited people to approach me and arrange for a game.

It was all very fun and exciting to set up, but as the date got closer, logistical problems loomed. My friends whom I had arranged with earlier to show up as GMs started backing out; this was understandable as it can be very daunting to think of good plots and design game sessions on such short notice, especially to cater to the preferences of strangers and new players.

This caused me quite a lot of stress, as I found myself with more players than GMs. I did not want to have to turn away any new prospective players at the door to an event which was supposed to help them gain some exposure to these games. Yet, on the other hand, I did not want to cancel the event, despite the many logistical problems which were quickly presenting

themselves. It was quite a dilemma, and in the end, I just decided to carry on and hope for the best.

On the day of the event (a Sunday), there were three GMs who were supposed to be in attendance (including myself). There were around 20 players who had signed up; the GM to player ratio was quite uneven, and I was worried the other 2 GMs would suddenly pull out of the event.

That eventuality did come to pass; I had arranged for the event to begin at 1 in the afternoon, but when the time arrived, the other two GMs did not show up and could not be contacted by phone; one of them called me later to apologize and told me he had gotten ill as he had been drinking far too much alcohol the previous night, while the other GM just never showed up (it turned out he had overslept).

However, of the 20 players who had registered their interest with me, only 10 showed up. Only 8 out of this 10 people who came to the event wanted to play; the remaining 2 simply wanted to watch and observe the game. This came to me as a great relief, because I could handle 8 players more easily.

The Players and their Prior Experiences with TRPGs

These 8 players were Aziz, 'Duncan', 'Carrie', Edmund, Josh, Ken, 'Warren', and 'Lim'; 'Duncan' is the same person in the previous case study. Out of these 8, Aziz, Edmund, Josh, and Ken were my friends whom I played TRPGs with on a regular basis; they were proficient and experienced with the

techniques and ideas of role-playing, and they were also familiar with the style of the games I liked to run as the GM. I did not have to spend too much time to explain the premise and the rules of the game to them, and so I was glad to have them around, as I felt it made my work that day easier.

Both 'Warren' and 'Lim' had some prior experience with role-playing games, but I had never personally played games with them before. 'Duncan' had not played another TRPG session since the last game which I had ran for him, in the previous case study. 'Carrie' was totally new to TRPGs; she had never played these games before, but was interested in trying them out. She was also a bit self-conscious about being the only lady who was playing in the game; there were several other ladies who had indicated their interest in the game, but they were not present.

As for the 2 individuals who had come by to observe the game, they were a young man and a young woman, and appeared to be a couple. I did not get a chance to speak with them, and cannot remember their names. They stayed for a while, asked some questions, and waited for the game to start; I got the impression that they had not played TRPGs before, but had heard of them. Before the game started, they bumped into some people outside the gallery who appeared to be their friends, and they did not return to join us.

Finally, the game was also observed by my friend Jennifer, who had rented the art gallery space to me. She was doing some of her paperwork as the session was taking place, but she was also listening and watching us as we

played. She became our audience, of sorts, and contributed her emotional energy and attention to the game as it occurred.

I shall now briefly describe the personalities and backgrounds of the players of this game, before moving onto describing the events of the game session.

Aziz

Aziz, a gentle and soft-spoken Malay-Muslim man in his mid-20s, was a very quiet and reflective individual who worked as a counter check-in officer for a major airline at Singapore's airport. Aziz is an experienced player of TRPGs; we have played TRPGs together for over 10 years, and I have run many games for him during this time. Aziz enjoys watching films and *anime*, reading comics, fantasy novels, and books on philosophy and Islamic theology. He is also a very pious and devout Muslim, who prays regularly at the mosque everyday, and he frequently attends classes and seminars on Islamic theology. Aziz is quite reflective and imaginative, and is also quite talented as an artist; he writes poems and draws quite beautiful pictures and comics in his spare time. In our games together, Aziz tends to play curious and spiritual characters; Aziz played his characters as striving to be fair and just to others, while also striving to improve and discover more about himself.

'Duncan'

Since the last time we met, 'Duncan' had become employed as a History and English teacher in a secondary school. His busy working schedule made it

hard for us to meet on a regular basis; I was very surprised to see him at this game, for he had not told me that he would be coming for the game. He had actually heard about this event from our other friends, and had decided to come by and take a look for a while, as he had some free time.

'Carrie'

'Carrie' (not her real name), a Chinese lady in her late 20s, was also a school-teacher (by a strange coincidence, at the time of this game, she had just left the same school where 'Duncan' was teaching). 'Carrie' enjoys playing computer and video games, and is also very interested in art and music. We had become acquainted through a few mutual friends several years ago; our group of friends then used to play computer games together regularly. She had then found out about our interests in TRPGs, and showed some curiosity about them. I had invited her and her husband to this game, in order to let them try TRPGs for themselves; 'Carrie' came by to take a look, but her husband was not free to join us.

'Warren'

'Warren' (not his real name), a Chinese man in his late 20s, was also a friend whom I had met in university. He had grown up in different places around the world, and had played TRPGs when has a teenager studying in the United States, where these games are more commonly played. Since his return to Singapore, 'Warren' has not been playing games on a regular basis, as he did not have many friends who shared this interest. 'Warren' is a very confident and assertive person, who practices martial arts and trains intensively on a

regular basis. After graduating from the philosophy department, he started working as an industrial journalist. We had found out about each other's interest in TRPGs during our university days, but we had not actually played together until this event.

Edmund

Edmund, a Chinese man in his early 30s, is an old friend of mine. Edmund is a brawny and tall man; at that point in time, he had worked as a soldier in the Singapore army for over a decade, and was then preparing to end his military employment and look for another line of work. Edmund is a very experienced TRPG player; I have been playing TRPGs with Edmund regularly for around 13 years. During this time, Edmund has consistently demonstrated a great flair for dramatic improvisation and immense energy when he plays his characters; Edmund tends to play very assertive and flamboyant characters. While he can sometimes be shy around strangers, he tends to become quite lively when he plays TRPGs. I was thus counting on Edmund to help me during this game; as there were many new players around, who may not know what to do in the game, I was hoping Edmund's gregarious personality and infectious enthusiasm would provide the game with more energy and make everybody more relaxed and ready to collaborate creatively with me and the other players.

Josh

Josh is also an old friend of mine. Josh was a lanky and pale man in his late 20s, whom I had been playing TRPGs with for around 13 years. We used to

be very good friends, but we had drifted apart a little when we both started working in different jobs. Josh was then working in a public relations firm as a publicist and events management executive; his work days tend to be very long and busy, and thus we had not been playing TRPGs together for a while.

Josh has the uncanny ability to grasp which things are 'cool', a trait which serves him well both in his job and also in our games; he can create very vivid imagery through his characters' performances. Josh is also quite aesthetically gifted; like Aziz, Josh also draws and writes quite well. Josh tends to play characters who are very 'cool'; it is hard for me to express this aesthetic quality precisely through this written medium, but his characters are often very entertaining to play with and observe, and he usually imbues his characters with a dynamism and trademark flair. I was thus hoping that Josh would also help me guide the less experienced players to ease into the game.

Ken

Ken is a friend whom I had met while playing games with Aziz and his friends; we have also been friends for around the last 10 years. At the point of this game, Ken was in his early 30s. Ken comes from a Chinese upper middle-class family, and tries to balance his own desires for freedom with the expectations of his more traditional family members. Instead of working for the moderately successful and prestigious company which his relatives, Ken had opted to find work on his own, and found a job as a network technician in a small information technology company. Ken is quite introverted and quiet, and seems to enjoy playing characters with a similarly quiet sort of dignity and

calm. When we played our games together over the course of our friendship, I observed that some players with more extroverted and forceful personalities often mistook Ken's quiet demeanour for weakness, and tried to push his character around to suit their own characters' goals. Ken thus usually prefers to play in groups where people are less controlling and domineering.

'Lim'

'Lim' (not his real name) is a Chinese man in his mid-30s. He is an acquaintance I had met from playing a couple of TRPG sessions with another friend of mine, who had been the GM for that game, and 'Lim' was a player from that group. We had only met a few times before this game, and so we did not know each other very well; we were not close on a personal level. I was quite surprised to see him alone at the event; he had also not indicated to me that he would be coming for the game, and he told me that he had heard about this event, and had dropped by to take a look. I welcomed 'Lim' to join the game, and hoped that he would enjoy himself.

The Events of the Game Session

The game took place at around 1 pm in the afternoon, on a bright and Sunny Sunday. We played in a large room which was normally used as an art gallery space; this building was in the 'Little India' ethnic quarter of Singapore, which was frequented by migrant workers from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. There were quite a few times when these migrant workers stopped outside our room and peered through the glass door, curious at what we were doing.

My friend Jennifer was the proprietor of this gallery; together with her husband, they also ran a cafe and cultural space next door. During the game, guests from the cafe would sometimes walk by our room and take a look at what we were doing; sometimes they would stay for a while, and then leave once they had sated their curiosity. As the 9 of us gathered around two long glass tables we had put together; I prepared to deliver the premise of the game. I told them I had entitled this game *'McDeliverance'*, a play on the phrase 'McDelivery' used by the McDonalds chain of fast food restaurants for its home delivery service, as well as the religious term 'deliverance', implying a sort of salvation and liberation.

The game system I used was *Hunter: the Reckoning (HtR)*, a horror game set in the contemporary world, and it is about normal people with mundane backgrounds, who find themselves suddenly aware of the existence of monsters such as vampires and demons. These supernatural creatures hid themselves from humanity, and used their powers to manipulate and prey upon people. The players' characters are thrust into a position of having to make important decisions about what to do with their newfound knowledge about these monstrous beings; as the name of the game implies, most choose to 'hunt' these monsters for different reasons - some hunt to punish and avenge, some hunt to defend and redeem, while others hunt to understand the monsters.

There are some similarities between the settings and themes of *Hunter: the Reckoing* and *Unknown Armies*; both games are about sinister reinterpretations and dark mirrors of our contemporary world. Like I had done

in my earlier *UA* game, I supplied my players with an exposition and common fictional premise, that had links to the real world we lived in.

I told the players that they were all playing characters who were in a McDonalds' restaurant along the East Coast of Singapore; most of my players had been to the restaurant which I was referring to, so it was easy for them to picture the scene. I told them their characters were all patrons of the restaurant, who were there for different reasons at midnight. A few days before the game, when the attendance for the game had become more stable, I had contacted the players whom I knew would be attending, and had discussed with them the sorts of characters they would like to play.

Some of them were more forthright and volunteered many ideas for their characters; for example, 'Warren' said he would like to play a somewhat self-obsessed and egotistical financial banker, and joked that this character was inspired by some of the people whom he had met in his line of work as a journalist. Aziz said he would like to play a genial and warm person, an elderly Malay-Muslim taxi driver who had returned from a pilgrimage to Mecca, and led a simple life with his wife, children, and grand-children.

Other players were not so sure or too busy to consider what they would like to play, and they told me they would think about their characters closer to the day of the game. 'Carrie' asked what kind of character would be useful to the group in the game, as she was more used to computer game groups, in which the players are working together in a team to overcome challenges. I

explained to her that TRPGs are less directly competitive than computer games, and so she did not have to play a character who possessed useful abilities. I told her she could play anybody she wanted; she wasn't sure who she wanted to be, though. I realise now, in retrospect, how confusing the idea of slipping into another persona must have seemed to a new player like her.

After our discussion, I helped her to make a character to fit her requests; I designed a jaded and anti-social office worker, who disliked people and preferred the company of animals, and who had good musical skills and aspired to be a musician.

Edmund, Josh and Ken were then all too busy with their jobs to think of characters, and they told me they were all right with playing any sort of character I provided them on the day of the game. As I was designing a few generic characters for the new players of the game, I did not mind making characters for them anyway. I made characters which I thought my friends could relate more closely.

For Edmund, I made a recently retired soldier in his 50s; for Josh, I made a recent graduate who had found work as a management executive for McDonalds'. As for Ken, I made an under-paid, over-worked engineer working for an internet service provider. For my unexpected guests, 'Lim' and 'Duncan', I asked them what they wanted to play, and consulted my list of characters whom I had prepared for such an impromptu occasion. 'Duncan' grinned at me, and said, *"Eh Shao. Got policeman again or not?"*

I laughed and said, *"Sure! In fact there is a character here whom you may like to play. Intense, over-achieving young man from a good school and rich family, now in NS (National Service) as a police detective because of his good grades. This boy has anger management issues, he's super competitive and gets jealous and envious really easily. His girlfriend of many years has become more distant recently, now that he is in NS and can't meet her so often; he is jealous of her friends and thinks she is cheating on him, so he is stalking her and observing her movements. You want to play this guy?"*

'Duncan' responded, *"Of course. Set. You see, these kind of young people these days? The things we teachers have to deal with. Barbarians, these people. But more importantly, this guy - does he have a gun? I know that your game sure have ghost later and all kinds of weird shit, and guns will not even work on them, but still, sense of comfort la, you know. Does this guy have a gun?"*

I grinned; this exchange was quite entertaining. I then told 'Duncan' this guy did indeed possess a firearm; he had sneaked his service revolver out of the armory, and was keeping it with him as he was following his girlfriend around the beach. I was inspired by the memory of a similar incident in Singapore, where a young infantryman had smuggled his assault rifle out of his military base into a shopping centre to intimidate a romantic rival. 'Duncan' laughed as his eyes flashed in recognition, and said, *'Ah so he's like that guy!'*

That left me with 'Lim' to provide a character for. There was a character - a

young girl who likes working with animals and was studying to be a veterinary nurse - whom I had prepared for another friend, 'Marian'; 'Marian' was unable to attend the game that day, and so this character was not being used. I rattled off the list of possible characters 'Lim' could pick from, and when I got to the character of this young girl, 'Lim' said he would play that character. I was surprised as I had not expected him to pick this character to play, and so now our game could proceed in earnest, since the players all had a character.

It was around 3pm, by the time everybody had arrived, assembled, and received the briefing for their characters. I began the game by dedicating around 10 to 15 minutes to focus on each character around the table, and explored their reasons and motivations for being in the McDonalds' restaurant at this time.

We established that 'Lim's' character was studying for her exams in the restaurant, as it was open 24 hours a day, and was popular with students as a study area. 'Lim's' PC was sitting near 'Carrie's' PC, who was in the restaurant with her laptop and a big guard dog (to discourage strangers from making small talk, as she was anti-social); 'Carrie's' character was doing some editing and post-production work on her musical projects, and had come to the restaurant to enjoy the anonymity it offered. 'Lim's' character tried to befriend the guard dog, which annoyed 'Carrie's' character, and that encounter allowed the 2 players to interact with each other.

'Duncan's' character was, as we had discussed earlier, stalking his girlfriend;

she had just gone with a group of her friends (among them was a guy whom 'Duncan's' PC was especially jealous and feeling insecure of) into the bowling alley near the McDonald's restaurant (which also exists in real life). 'Duncan' was generally role-playing his character as a surly and disagreeable sort of fellow, who kept casting furtive, irritated looks at the other characters. Josh's character was the manager of this restaurant; he was working the graveyard shift and attending to many different operational matters.

Edmund's character and 'Warren's' character had both been jogging late at night, along the beach, and were stopping by the McDonald's to cool down and get some isotonic drinks. Ken's character, the frazzled and tired bureaucrat, had just finished work, and was stopping over in the restaurant for a long-overdue dinner.

Finally, Aziz's character had come by to the bowling alley as well, because his grandson - a rebellious and troubled youth - had run away from home again; the boy and his friends like to hang out in the bowling alley, and so the elderly cabbie had come to his grandson's usual haunt to persuade him to go home.

Establishing and exploring these scenes for all 8 characters in the game took us around an hour and a half. I had prepared the seeds of some of these scenes before the game, and had to quickly improvise others to help me draw my players deeper into the imagined world we were making.

By this time, my players had become more familiar with their characters, and

through the scenes that were played out, the players could also understand each other's characters more clearly. Thus, they became more able to improvise with each other and relate to the simulated reality of the game.

I then decided the players would be ready for the next phase of the game; they needed me to provide them with external stimuli that they could pick up from and respond to. I shall not spend too much time on all the details of the game; in summary, there was a monster attack on the McDonalds' restaurant and the nearby bowling alley.

These monsters were animal zombies - rotting, animated corpses as popularly depicted by Hollywood - and these animal corpses were covered with a thick film of black crude oil; in order to create a more vivid image of these monsters, I stood up and made a lot of jerky, shambling motions, and also uttered many groaning, roaring, clicking, and clacking animal noises, which startled some players and scared some others.

As you can imagine, this caused a major panic in the McDonalds' restaurant, where the PCs were. They all responded differently to this new scenario, depending on their different personalities. For example, Aziz played his cabbie as wanting to find and protect his errant grandson amidst this chaos, while 'Duncan' played his jealous, angry young man as wanting to go to the bowling alley to look for his girlfriend. (Shortly after that, 'Duncan' received a personal call and had to rush off; he quipped to me, *"This always happens in zombie movies. The guy with the gun is the first to die. And this always happens to*

me too in your games. So why do I always choose to play the police guy with the gun? Never learn.") 'Carrie' looked to me and said, *'This is scary. I'm not going to dare to go to McDonalds' again alone at night!'*

After some time, the PCs banded together and tried to defend themselves, and they tried to work together to investigate and find out where these monsters were coming from. The characters also discovered they had each gained a minor supernatural power of some sort; this power seem to have developed in their contact with the zombies. The powers differed from person to person, and seemed to fit the individual character's personality. For example, Ken's character, the frustrated civil servant, gained the ability to empathetically sense the regrets and worries of others, while 'Warren's' self-absorbed and narcissistic banker gained an increased degree of physical strength. Aziz's devout, grandfatherly taxi driver gained the ability to calm and ease other people's fears and pain, while 'Carrie's' anti-social musician gained the ability to hear and see distant conversations.

These powers are the central premise of *HtR*; in the setting of this game, a mysterious force has been revealing the presence of the monsters hidden among humanity to normal people, and this entity is also granting people these powers to use against the monsters as they wish.

Some people use their powers to hunt the monsters to protect other people, while some people seek to use their powers to redeem and save the monsters from their state. As these 'hunters' become more powerful, they run the risk of

becoming consumed and corrupted by their own growing power, and become like monsters themselves.

There were mixed reactions among the characters to this situation. Some of the characters were more doubtful, and were not sure if they had really had seen these monsters and had these powers, or if they had just become delusional from the panic of the situation. Other characters exulted in their newfound powers, and appeared quite excited to test the limits of their new abilities, and actively wanted to seek out the monsters.

Some other characters felt that they had been given a responsibility to protect the other people in the vicinity with these new powers, and wanted to go out to help other people. These differences led to a lot of discussion around the table, as the characters shared their ideas.

There was some conflict between characters with very different goals and personalities, but these disagreements were set aside by the characters, in order to pursue the more pressing common goal of survival. The characters thus banded together for safety in numbers and for increased effectiveness.

The PCs managed to use their mundane abilities and resources, as well as their new powers to gather more clues about the monster attacks. They were able to infer that the zombies must have some connection with the recent oil slick, and so they worked together to pursue that lead. For example, Josh's McDonalds' manager knew the surrounding area around the restaurant quite

well, and could provide the other characters with knowledge of many short-cuts. Edmund's retired soldier had experience with organising people and improving their morale, while Ken's bureaucrat was able to access the government databases to gather real-time information about the oil slick on the beach.

Through their investigations, the characters discovered that there was a vampire hidden under the oil slick; this vampire had been a stowaway on one of the ships when the collision occurred (I reasoned a vampire would prefer travelling by ship rather than by plane, especially for long distance journeys; planes were exposed to far too much sunlight for the average vampire to feel comfortable).

The vampire was badly injured in the collision between the ships; in fact, it was close to destruction as most of its body had been badly mauled, and it needed lots of blood to rebuild and restore itself. It was thus hiding under the oil slick, which protected it from the rays of the sun, and was using its magical powers to transform the surrounding aquatic creatures into zombies, and sent them out to gather the bloody sustenance it needed from people on the coast.

After some ingenious planning and cooperation, the players managed to destroy the vampire, and delivered the people from the threat of the vampire. I ended the game at this point of time; it was around 930 pm, and we were all quite hungry and tired.

As some of the players who smoked trooped outside the room with their cigarettes, I stood up, stretched, and shrugged; as the adrenaline of running the game faded away, I felt a sudden surge of exhaustion wash over me.

Jennifer gave me a concerned look and asked me, *"You must be tired! How do you remember what to do for everyone? Did you memorise all these lines and scenes before the game?"* I told her that I had not memorised everything; I said I had some rough ideas about what the characters may do, I had some clearer ideas about the kinds of situations I would present to the players, and I knew vaguely what the structure and the flow of the events would be like, but I had not planned for everything to happen in this way.

When the players gathered around the table to pack up and get ready to leave, I asked them if they had found the game enjoyable, and they said they had a lot of fun and thanked me for the game. 'Warren' and Ken, in particular, had a very good time playing together. 'Carrie' thanked me for giving her a chance to try out TRPGs. She added that it was quite an interesting experience, as I managed to tie the game with issues about the real world. She also told me she enjoyed the feeling of freedom in becoming somebody different from herself, and also enjoyed the feeling of mystery in the story.

Before the players left, I solicited for donations from my friends this game; I had earlier told them that the proceeds from this game would go towards helping the animals affected by the oil slick. I managed to collected around $200 in total, and Jennifer helped me to pass this money to our friends

working with ACRES (Animal Concerns and Research Singapore), a non-governmental animal welfare organisation which was coordinating and spearheading the efforts to rescue the animals on the beach. With that, I ended the game, and went home.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described the experiences of the players in 2 different one-shots, and demonstrated how the players acted in these game sessions. I have shown some examples of the improvisational process involved in the simulation and sustaining of the imaginary realities of these games, and I have also shown some of the techniques players can use to make these other worlds seem more realistic and engaging.

I have also looked at how different players with different levels of exposure to TRPGs and different personalities have interacted with and responded to these imaginary worlds and simulated situations.

In my next chapter, I will analyse and interpret these scenarios and occurrences, and discuss the different things that the players can do in these games; I will discuss how players can accomplish and realise a range of possibilities in their games, and relate these matters back to the discussion on Singaporean society and culture.

Chapter Three

Before the game begins there is a large space of possible stories defined by the initial premise. During the process of gaming the players progressively reduce the space of possible stories down to a single story - one set of things 'happened', while all other sets did not.

- Rebecca Borgstrom

Each word led me on to another word,

Each deed to another deed.

- Stanza 142, The Hávamál

<u>Chapter Overview</u>

I now present my ethnographic analysis of the experiences of the players in the 2 game sessions I have described in the previous chapter, and ask how these experiences can be helpful for our understanding of contemporary Singapore society.

I shall examine the collaborative story-telling process of the players, and examine how they were able to respond to the structures of the stories I had placed in their games, and were able to transform these structures and generate new stories through their characters' actions.

I also reflect on how the participants of these game sessions gained experiences which felt real to them, even though they were conscious and aware of the imaginary, simulated, and ultimately illusionary nature of these

experiences, and discuss how the players' creative collaborations and improvisations made their experiences of these games more engaging.

I then conclude my thesis by relating these matters back to the study of Singapore society. What benefits can be derived from pretending to become other people, and pretending to be present in other situations? I argue that these experiences of imagination can help individuals to develop their their faculties of empathy for other people's perspectives, and also reflect upon their own identities and ideas.

I also argue that it is important to recognise and respond to the mutability of the situations we experience in our everyday lives; we construct our lived realities through our perceptions and perspectives. Perhaps one may better develop and actualise a sense of personal agency by learning to de-construct and play with the structures which permeate and influence our lives; these conditions may have the power to shape us, but we are also the characters who can change these conditions and create new ones.

I believe this is relevant in the context of Singapore society today, where individuals often feel powerless and irrelevant when faced with the edifice of the state and its bureaucratic structures.

The Collaborative Story-making Process

Both game sessions shared a similar pattern in the organisation and flow of events. I started out at the beginning of these games with a very central role,

and as the games continued, my role became much less prominent, while the players became more active and important in shaping the direction and setting the pace of the emerging stories.

At the beginning I was the main story-teller, and my friends were the audiences and story-listeners; these roles became reversed as the game sessions proceeded on. I had to let go of my own ideas of the plot, in order for the players to develop their own stories

I think there is something important that can be learned from this design process of using and switching between preparing pre-planned structures and allowing for dynamic changes. The players begin the game by listening to me; as the GM, I describe and set the scene, I explain the circumstances, and I perform, entertain, and charm the other players with my creativity, virtuosity, wit, and flair to make the story come alive.

Before these games began, I was the architect and planner of these games and stories. I had thought of, prepared, and assembled some of the elements and the structures of nascent stories we could tell in the future. At this point, I knew some things about the different characters (both the PCs and the NPCs) and their motivations, and I also knew some things about the story's background and setting.

As the GM, I had predicted some of the different ways in which these elements could combine and interact with each other, and I had also predicted

to some extent how the structure of the story could change over the course of play.

However, in trying to predict these fluid factors, I was not trying to control and impose a shape upon the story; I was not trying to fix a way in which these stories must necessarily emerge over the course of play. It is important to not over-plan as a GM; it is neither very possible nor very productive to try to totally predict and account for all of the players' actions.

After all, TRPGs are games of collaborative story-making. If we remove the collaborative aspect between the different players in these games, we would be left instead with just one player (the GM) dictating his or her own idea of a story to the rest of the group, who plays out the roles exactly as he or she has devised and scripted them.

There would then be very little room for individuals to change and take ownership of their roles through their interpretations and improvisations. Thus, I established the elements and structures of the stories simply to allow us to have something to focus on, a set of information which the other players could work with, and expected them to challenge and change these structures over the course of play.

I had to take the lead initially and supply the other players with information during the first phase; they looked to me to provide them with the structure and the directions of the story, listened to my expositions of the fictional

premises and situations, and tried to work with what I had put in place. But those inputs of mine can only go so far; all it does is to set and communicate the scene to the rest of the group.

Before the players could begin role-playing in earnest, they first experienced a stage of role-taking. I told the players about the different characters which they could play, and after they had picked the characters, I let them make changes and adjustments in the ways which they saw fit. At this early stage, I focused on each player for a short while to help them gain a better understanding of their individual characters.

Even though I had created and designed most of these characters on a conceptual level, the characters were not yet fleshed out; they were still just numbers and words on pieces of paper. Just like how the entire story of a drama cannot be understood or appreciated through the simple act of reading the script, similarly, a character concept cannot become a character without the emergent aspects of actual performance and play.

Only the players had the power to animate and breathe life into these imaginary characters; thus, I had planned small, short scenes for each individual player to have the chances to explore and define their characters more precisely.

As the players became more familiar with both the characters they were playing and their fictional circumstances, they moved from a stage of role-

taking to the next stage of role-making; they began to take ownership of these characters and scenarios, as they became more confident of their abilities to act within these imaginary worlds we were creating together.

These games became very enjoyable and engaging when everybody in the group participated in the storytelling process; there was great pleasure in being able to discover and shape the story together. The fluid and intimate nature of these shared imaginative allowed a lot of energy and enthusiasm to be brought to our table.

As the other players became more comfortable and confident with expressing and developing their own ideas, I began to take a more secondary and consultative role; they asked me different questions to gather information about how the world responds to their actions and plans.

As the GM, I established and maintained a feedback loop of information; I answered the players' questions of 'What happens now?' and presented them with my own questions of 'What do you do now?' I consider and calibrate the changes they make, and the game-worlds change with their inputs.

The players respond to these changes again by introducing yet more changes of their own, and so the dance of possibilities is sustained. As this collaborative creative process repeats itself, the saga keeps on growing.[5]

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[5] Monte Cook, a veteran TRPG designer, succinctly describes this process as: 'Simply put, one can reduce a role-playing game to a session of questions and answers, with the players doing the asking and the game master doing the answering. The players ask, in essence, "What do we experience?", and the game master tells them. The players then provide a response, but it comes down to another question: "Do we succeed?" And the game master answers.' (Cook, M. 'The Game Master and the Role-Playing Game

Authored States of Consciousness

As the players become more assertive and confident, they change the structures I have put in place, and they can interpret and make the meanings of the stories for themselves. TRPG players create these stories in their heads; like the readers of books, they are effectively 'blind' in their games, and depend heavily on each other's descriptions and performances as their basis to visualise and gain information about the fictional reality of the game-world.

As the players become more relaxed and spontaneous, and feel more ready to imagine and express themselves, this illusionary game-world begins to feel more alive and real. The scenes unfold in their minds' eyes, and they feel more personally involved in these make-believe worlds. They have a stake in what can happen in these game-worlds; due to this increased level of personal involvement and creative participation, the experience of playing TRPGs feels very different from other kinds of game-playing and story-telling.

When somebody plays a computer game, reads a novel, or watches a film, there is one final version of the game or story which the producers, writers, directors, programmers and editors have already created and defined for public consumption. The meanings of these games and stories cannot be easily changed by the consumers; these consumers may interpret them different from how the authors intended, but they are not able to directly influence the creative process.

Campaign' in *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives,* MIT Press 2009, p.99)

This is not the case in TRPGs, where the meanings are emergent from the process of play, not inherent in the product of the game. Players are both the audiences and the performers of the stories they create together. While there is generally one overall story being told - the story which is emerging, which everyone in the group is listening to and telling - each individual player is free to imagine the exact details in his own way, and takes away different nuances of meaning from his own experiences.

As no single player – not even the GM - has absolute control or knowledge of the plot, nobody in the group can be totally sure what will happen next in the flow of the narrative; every player has opportunities for initiating and sustaining a series of creative changes.

Moments of Meaningful Contingency

Malaby (2007) approaches games as artifacts which people can use to generate experiences of contrived and meaningful contingency. He draws attention to the contingent (i.e. non-necessary and unpredictable) aspect of games as being their main defining factor, and he cautions against the exceptionalist bias which most earlier scholars on games assume in their approaches to games.

In these frameworks, games are defined by the traits of being fun or enjoyable (Huizinga 1955), as well as being unproductive and being of no consequence in the real world (Callilois 1961).

Malaby, following a point made by the psychologist William James, observes that we do not define the success or failure of religious rituals by their ability or failure to evoke transcendental qualities in their participants, and suggests that we adopt a similar perspective on games. Just as rituals can elicit a variety of experiences, so can games; there are games which are neither fun nor enjoyable, and there are games which are played for very high stakes.

Malaby cites the examples of professional players of games (such as video game testers and professional gamblers) who play games as their work; they plan to earn money, and once their work-days have ended, they continue playing the same games, but this time for their own enjoyment instead.

Hence, Malaby argues that the element of contingency is what scholars of games should focus upon in their study; for him, fun and enjoyment are cultural accomplishments that are made and attached to the games by their players; they are not inherently designed into the games.

Different people may see the same game in different ways, and take very different experiences away from it; the boundaries between game and reality can be thin or thick, depending on the needs and wishes of the players.

In my work, I have attempted to show these processes of unpredictability which are inherent in the playing of TRPGs, and the constant negotiations within these games. Because of their unpredictable qualities, the game can become very engaging for the players, and they can begin to feel real – just

like real life. These experiences of contingency allow us freedom from the structures in place around us, that we are part of – and allow us to explore and think about other possibilities and perspectives.

Liminoid Moments of Performance and Reflection

In his study of pre-industrial societies in the 20th century, Victor Turner used the term 'liminal' to describe the state of transition and flux in which individuals find themselves, as they straddle and move between two different phases of life (Turner 1974). Turner was interested in the cultural opportunities and resources which the individuals and societies could gain through their liminal experiences of festivals, performances, and games – where the rules of reality changed and the social order was transformed temporarily. He studied how these societies used these liminal experiences to imagine, perform, and reflect upon themselves, as well as the different paths they could have taken and become.

In his later studies on industrialised and post-modern societies, Turner coined a variation on this term, the 'liminoid' – which is a state of flux similar to the liminal, with an important distinction; the liminal usually occurred as part of a public festival or ritual, which was used and recognised by the entire pre-industrial society, while the liminoid primarily occurred as smaller events which were shared by smaller groups of people within a post-industrial society to accomplish similar purposes. Due to the more fragmented nature of post-industrial societies, these groups come into existence and disappear with greater speed, and are not usually shared by the larger society as a whole.

I argue our games are an example of such a liminoid process; when we enter our shared fictional worlds, we gain the opportunities to imagine situations where we can make certain decisions and take certain courses of action.

We can safely explore the likely repercussions of the decisions and actions we have chosen in these fictive conditions, with fewer negative consequences in the larger world beyond the game; at the same time, our imaginations can make these make-believe situations feel extremely vivid and realistic. These imagined spaces allow us to say, in allegory and metaphor, things which we may not be able to say (or may not even consciously know we want to say) in the real world.

Similar to how participants of performances can viscerally experience and feel situations which they consciously know to be fictional and false (Schechner 2004), TRPG players can gain access to a panoply of emotionally significant experiences, which can encourage, inspire, or otherwise provoke responses of reflection and contemplation, and help them to learn in an experiential manner.

For example, Daryl's cathartic experiences in the *UA* game allowed him to express his emotions of grief about relationships which he did not consciously remember. These imaginary worlds can thus potentially help to provide players with some of the cultural resources and life chances which they can use to express, re-define, understand and reflect upon themselves.

Conclusion: Engines of Possibility and Agency?

In Singapore society, there are many structures which are designed to influence and direct human behaviour towards the ends which the state deems as being productive and meaningful. These systems shape and control the scope of people's actions and movements; they provide a source of both security and stability for some people, while simultaneously providing constraints and restrictions for others.

What can these gaming experiences offer this latter group of people, in this social context? I suggest that people can use these games as tools to help us create and generate new ideas of different roles and situations for ourselves, so that we can shake off the ossifying effect of the structures around us.

In TRPGs, the players know that the situations for their characters are artificial, in the sense that they are designed and constructed by the GM; their players, in the form of their characters, seek out different ways to do things and actualise different possibilities in the games, and influence the stories as they are being created.

I argue that it is possible to develop a stronger sense of agency and self-empowerment through reframing, reflecting upon, and gaining a new understanding of these structures and circumstances around us. In the course of our everyday lives, we encounter structures and experience circumstances which are constructed not by a GM, but instead by powerful groups and

organisations such as the state. There is a strong tendency among Singaporeans to raise complaints about the inefficiency of the state in certain matters. While these criticisms and complaints are carried out in a spirit of resistance against these encroaching structures, these responses often help to reify these very structures, for they demand the state to improve its ability to carry out more actions and implement more initiatives, and thus intervene more strongly in people's lives.

I propose that we can instead try to understand the conditions and circumstances we live in, and that we can try to discover what we can do to change them in the ways which suit our needs and purposes. We do not have to assume that there is a grand narrative which has already been written and decided for us, in which we will play our requisite roles quietly and without incident. Instead, we can look to create our own stories, which we want to tell with our lives.

Perhaps these games can be of use towards those agentive goals; they allow us to create simulated realities which can transform and respond to our actions, just like real life, and thus we can learn and reflect from our experiences in these otherworlds. However, these simulated realities can also become very seductive and entrapping; they can convince and persuade us to leave one structure for another, to leave one iron cage for another gilded one.

In this day and age where games are big business, and business is linked to political interests, it can be very easy to become lost in the search for perfect

artifacts and systems, and lose sight of the important processes that people can use to create meaning and significance in their lives. Perhaps the play between these structures is the important thing; the element of human action and invention, or reaction and reflection. Artifacts and systems are simply tools which human beings construct and use for their own purposes; I do not think there ever will be a perfect and foolproof method for s to achieve freedom or agency.

In this thesis, I have shown some ways in which other worlds can be created with words and imagination. My methods involve the mixing of things drawn from real life, the things which people know and can identify from their own lived experiences and everyday lives, with situations which people may not have encountered before. In this way, I hope to blur the boundaries between worlds of possibility and invite people to take the opportunities to gain new experiences for them to try and reflect upon, and broaden their emotional and mental horizons.

But these ways which I have used and studied are not the only ones; there are many more which people have made, and can continue to make.

In conclusion, I hope that more worlds can be created by others in their own ways to suit their own needs. By harnessing our everyday experiences of creativity and imagination, perhaps we can find the means to inspire ourselves to freedom from the feelings of passivity, apathy, and lassitude which seem so widespread and omnipresent today.

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