Symposium

Dungeons & Dragons: The gamers are revolting!

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[0.1]   *Abstract*—The negative response by players to corporate changes to the rule systems governing *Dungeons & Dragons* suggests that tabletop RPGs have more in common with fan fiction than with computer games.

1. Introduction

[1.1]   An industrial rebellion is afoot in the role-playing game (RPG) scene. Traditionally, a tabletop RPG provides its players with a firm rules system within which they can construct their stories, but recent corporate changes to the fourth edition of the oldest and most popular system—*Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D)—have spawned a negative response so strong that players have actually begun to alter the game system against the wishes of its owners. Further, they have begun to publish these changes. In this essay, I will attempt to detail the development of this fan-created rebellion.

[1.2]   By situating RPGs in the context of other fan activities, I also hope to show that tabletop RPGs have far more in common with fan fiction and other traditions of fannish creativity than the computer games they are so often associated with in the media. I suggest that game systems are for RPGs what show canon is for creative media fans. Where gamers play with and against the rules of their specific system, fic writers, fan artists, and vidders write, draw, and vid with and against the canon of their respective source texts. Considering that analogy, I believe that the rebellion occurring in the RPG industry may prove interesting in the context of wider fandom and its own negotiation of corporate ownership issues.

[1.3]   I am a part of media fandom. For me, in my capacity as an online fan, that largely means LiveJournal and discussion forums focused on science fiction and

fantasy sagas told on larger and smaller screens and occasionally in print. I write stories, reviews, and critical pieces; I appropriate those visual images directly and try to bend them into new things with new sounds. I participate in a largely female creative economy based around a series of texts that we cannot directly affect in most cases, and that thus provide a static center point for our communities.

[1.4]   I also play tabletop RPGs, more specifically D&D. Many people believe D&D to be a game of little depth, all about slaying goblins and grabbing loot. And while it had its roots in battle gaming and that remains a popular aspect of play, I can also honestly say that some of the most incredible, impossible, brilliant plot twists and character arcs I've ever witnessed have occurred at a gaming table. We've dealt with race, gender, sexuality, ethics, and religion, and the stories are *ours.* It's a profoundly joyful experience to feel in collaborative control of the stories that matter most to you.

2. Rule books and creativity

[2.1]   The tradition of improvisational theater is an old one, but RPGs in their current format date to the early 1970s. They grew out of war gaming, when the players began to introduce more personalized character elements. While variations exist, a tabletop RPG generally involves a group of players and a single games master (or dungeon master or story teller, often abbreviated to GM, DM, ST, and so on). The players each control a single character represented by a series of statistics, while the GM describes the environment, controls nonplayer characters, introduces new plot elements, and arbitrates how the world responds to the players' actions. Most interactions are represented through dice rolls, which are modified by the players' statistics to represent strengths and weaknesses within the characters. The GM is usually responsible for the underlying plot, and the players are responsible for their characters' behavior and can, and frequently will, head off in directions the GM never anticipated.

[2.2]   The story is a collaborative development on the part of the GM and players, independent of the underlying game structures, except insofar as they add a random element to the resolution of a player's chosen action. However, these mechanical systems affect the flavor of a game, thereby affecting the choices made by players and ultimately the narrative of the game itself. While theoretically any game can be played with any system, a system that offers complex rules for resolving combat while almost ignoring social interactions will influence the game in the direction of combat, while a system that offers a wider palette of social skills for a character will encourage more socially adept characters. The choice of system is often considered integral to the flavor of the game, and game designers are aware of this and try to match the system with the style of gaming their company wants to promote. By the late 1980s and early

1990s, games such as *Ars Magica* and *Vampire: The Masquerade* began to emphasize characterization and story above the war gaming aspect of the combat-heavy hobby. Randomly determined statistics for characters became less popular, replaced by point-buy systems that allow the player to customize the character's strengths and weaknesses, as well as systems of buying positive character traits or taking on negative character traits for more points to spend on statistics.

[2.3]   These game systems are probably the closest thing the RPG scene has to what the fan fiction and vidding community calls canon. While house rules exist, most gaming groups essentially use the published rules system, and the rules system creates a common point of reference between groups, much as the canon of a TV show creates a common point of reference within the fandom of the TV show. In both fandoms, the fan is engaged in a negotiation with canon while attempting to bend it to the narratives that interest the fan. Most of the online RPG scene is heavily skewed toward rules discussion rather than the events of personal games, which will not necessarily hold much interest for members of a different gaming group. An inappropriate rules system will make it more difficult to tell certain kinds of stories, just as the canon of a police procedural might make it more difficult to tell a supernatural horror story.

3. Changing the systems

[3.1]   The 1990s saw a decline in role playing's commercial success. Competing with new card games such as *Magic: The Gathering* and with the advent of computer RPGs —which required neither a GM to invent a plot nor an entire group of people able to meet for several hours at a time—was not easy. Eventually, the company that owned *Dungeons & Dragons* was in such severe financial difficulty it was sold to Wizards of the Coast, which was in turn bought by Hasbro. As they struggled to compete against the increasing popularity and social acceptance of computer games, card games, and (ironically) war games such as *Warhammer,* Wizards of the Coast did something radical. They relaunched *Dungeons & Dragons* in 2000 with a brand-new mechanical system and an open license. With easy and minor modifications, anyone was allowed to use this system to publish their own RPG.

[3.2]   Freed from the necessity of inventing their own mathematically sound system, and able to use the best-known and most popular mechanical system on the market, so-called third-party publishers sprang into existence at an astounding rate. The convergence of the open license and the burgeoning print-on-demand industry meant that people could, and did, launch game companies from their basements. A lot died out, some became very successful, and a previously ailing brand skyrocketed to superstar status within the RPG industry.

[3.3]   But it didn't last long. Perhaps threatened by the upsurge in competition, Hasbro and Wizards of the Coast attempted to recall the open license and revoke the rights of third-party publishers, and supporters of the open license were fired en masse. When they found that the license could not be revoked, they began work on a new edition of D&D that would not fall under the open license. They banked on the brand name's popularity forcing the industry to comply with their new standard and created an almost unusably restrictive "game system license" allowing minimal third-party support for their new edition.

[3.4]   Attempting to continue the industry's growth beyond a supportable level, Hasbro and Wizards of the Coast courted war gamers and online gamers, changing the nature of the game. Conceptually, the most recent (fourth) edition resembles online games such as *World of Warcraft* much more strongly than previously. A player's role in the party is now controlled much more strictly than it was in previous editions. Noncombat mechanics and spells have been marginalized or removed entirely, and there was a move away from a generic fantasy world to a more specific setting limiting the types of cultures one may use. One of the most financially successful ventures tied to *Dungeons & Dragons* is the launch of the miniatures line for optional use in diagramming in-game battles. The new edition of D&D now requires the use of miniatures, turning it into a partial war game.

[3.5]   These changes directly affect the style of play and the stories told in a RPG. Even if this was not Wizards' express intention, their attempts to stifle competition, kill the previous edition, and homogenize third-party support in order to elevate the new edition had the net effect of pressuring their customers into a very specific, combat-based style of play. It is perhaps comparable to the vidding community's situation, where a leading editing suite has tried to create a monopoly while simultaneously removing support for any audio or video clips not bought from its own restrictive catalog composed entirely of action movies and pop music.

4. Open-source rebellion

[4.1]   Many publishers were at first forced to fall into line with Wizards of the Coast's new edition because of the economic power of the *Dungeons & Dragons* brand. But Wizards' attempts to exercise control over its sprawling morass of independent publishers were so restrictive that following them began to look as financially untenable as continuing to publish source books for a dead game under the open license.

[4.2]   With dwindling options, Paizo Publishing—previously publisher of the official D&D magazines—made its own radical decision. On March 18, 2008, Paizo announced

that it would be creating its own open-license game, *Pathfinder,* which it hoped other games companies would support under the open license. Effectively, Paizo decided to release "*Dungeons & Dragons:* The Paizo Remaster." The game will be in open play testing (the largest project of its type) until August 2009, when the final hardback rule book will be released. The beta version was released as a free download or as a paperback print edition sold for the cost of printing it. Although it was available for free, the paperback beta sold far beyond anyone's expectations—it sold out in the first 3 months of its release. The free download is still available.

[4.3]   Another reasonably well-known company—KenzerCo, which is responsible for the popular RPG-based comic *Knights of the Dinner Table*—have begun publishing support material for the fourth edition without committing to the game system license. They do not use any copyrighted words or phrases and instead reduce most aspects of the game rules to mechanical formulas, which cannot be copyrighted, following a precedent set by a game system known as OSRIC (Old School Reference and Index Compilation), which is a copyright-free version of early D&D games systems (before the open-license relaunch). This marks a change from industrial rebellion to an outright fight against corporate copyright—an attempt to force an open sourcing of the system against the will of the copyright holder. It has been several months, and of this writing, no legal action has been taken.

[4.4]   There is no question that with its powerful brand and widespread marketing, the fourth edition will remain a top seller, but it seems possible that instead of forcing a new industry-wide standard, Wizards have splintered their once monolithic influence and created their own competition.

[4.5]   The publishers' rebellion in the RPG industry is also a fan rebellion. The third-party publishers are often very small, and even the ones that are large enough to employ full-time staff often had their roots as basement projects and weekend jobs that were born out of love of the game rather than a guaranteed way to make money. The third-party publishers are often run by fans, for fans, and they listen to the fans. They have to, because they have such a tiny market.

5. RPGs and fan fiction

[5.1]   Tabletop RPGs usually get grouped with other computer games, whether they be massively multiplayer online RPGs or even first-person shooter games. Anyone who's ever listened to the storytelling that accompanies a gaming session, however, realizes that the narrative impulse is much closer to that exhibited in fan fiction. Rather than following the large but ultimately limited set of parameters of a computer program, tabletop RPGs are only limited by the imagination of their players.

[5.2]   The chief difference I see between RPGs and online fans' storytelling is that the RPG industry relies on fan creativity. RPG fans do not have canonical unchanging texts around which to base our communities; we have canonical unchanging game systems. These games traditionally have a strong focus on characterization and narrative development, but the deemphasis of these issues, and the attempts to exert increasingly strict corporate control over the type of games that can be played, have led to a fascinating picture of fan power, economic protest against the concept of corporate ownership, and protests against the idea of controlling the methods through which we creatively express ourselves. If we view fan fiction as an attempt to wrest away some form of creative control over beloved characters and a way of providing ongoing development that a fan may perceive as lacking in the show's canon, then the motivations in both situations strike me as remarkably similar. But the wider legal context of these activities is not, and this has led to a fairly unique situation.

[5.3]   Because canon is divorced from narrative in the RPG industry, and because the gamers are invested in stories that belong to them and are simply using others' systems to express those stories, gamers are in the unique position of being able to jump ship if they are dissatisfied. It's not an option that is available to most fans. If a television show stops delivering the kinds of stories a fan is interested in, that fan can certainly jump ship and start watching a new show, but that fan won't find the previous show's characters or the world of the previous show on the new show. Jumping ship requires saying good-bye.

[5.4]   Even though I see RPGs under the same umbrella of fan activity as fan fiction and vidding, I do wonder whether the large differences in their relationship with canon and the law make comparisons impossible. Certainly I have trouble imagining an open-sourced canon existing for a television show, if only because a definitive narrative that fandom can watch and discuss together seems like an integral part of the appeal. Organizationally, I think fandom's collaborative nature closely resembles the collaborative storytelling of a gaming group, even if the end result is a series of interrelated yet individual fan works instead of a single group-told story.

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6. Conclusion

[6.1]   But if I am less literal in my search for comparisons, I think that mainstream fandom may already be waging its own radical war against corporate control. The emerging arguments of fair use and academic relevance (many in this very journal); the increasing social acceptance of fan fiction and music videos; the sea change at the networks to program *for* the Internet literate, to provide streaming episodes and Webisodes and online comics, and to encourage the existence of fandom, are all

evidence that it is possible to fight for greater control over the way we receive and interact with our stories of choice.

[6.2]   RPG fandom is not the only one waging an anticorporate war, even if it is the only one that got handed a large supply of open-sourced bullets.

7. Further reading

Editions of *Dungeons & Dragons* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Editions_of_Dungeons_%26_Dragons)—A detailed account of *Dungeons & Dragons*'s history, including a list of changes between editions.

EnWorld Forum (http://www.enworld.org/forum/4173113-post99.html, http://www.enworld.org/forum/4172689-post39.html, http://www.enworld.org/forum/4172942-post51.html)—Posts on the EnWorld Forums from D&D brand manager Scott Rouse, former public relations employee Linae Foster, and Necromancer Games owner Clark Peterson, detailing Wizard's prevention of companies supporting D&D's fourth edition and open-license games simultaneously.

Gen Con 2007 in a Nutshell (http://games.slashdot.org/article.pl?sid=07/08/22/1847207)—Article about Gen Con 2007, where D&D's fourth edition was announced, including the author's perception of the anger surrounding its release and a reassurance that Wizards would continue to support the Open Game License, which later proved false.

Open game definitions: Frequently asked questions, version 2.0 (http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=d20/oglfaq/20040123d)—Official open-license FAQ.