

# Reevaluating RPGs: A Response to Robert Sullivan’s “Role-Playing Games as Art”

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Since modern roleplaying games (RPGs) appeared in the mid-1970s, gamers have tended to assume that RPGs are capable of attaining the status of art. Robert Sullivan’s recent paper “Role-Playing Games as Art” makes an explicit case for this assumption. I argue otherwise – but not because RPGs are less sophisticated than other media. On the contrary, they are more sophisticated than the things we dub art, and considering them as art restricts critical inquiry into RPGs.

My argument proceeds counter-inductively. It draws ideas from anthropology, literary criticism, media studies, philosophy of science, and game studies to make a case for re-examining the dominant artistic assumption. Instead of elevating RPGs as a form of culture, that assumption may instead hinder deeper understanding of these games.

First, I describe the artistic assumption, its historical persistence, and its implications for gamers and critics. I then turn to Sullivan’s argument that RPGs’ artistic dimension arises from the games’ printed materials. From there, I look to play’s pre-cultural roots and argue that other media’s artistic characteristics arise from play. Sullivan’s criteria of art (derived from Camille Paglia) condenses into a set of play characteristics comparable to the defining features of festivity and revelry. These features align with RPGs while defying qualification as art.

Finally, I present the case that RPGs are more sophisticated than art in the latter’s historically recognized forms. RPGs instead constitute a form of complex communication, the scope of which exceeds other media’s relatively narrow boundaries. The challenge for RPG scholars and theorists is not justifying or interpreting RPGs as art, but instead developing more adequate critical frameworks for understanding RPGs themselves.

## The Assumption of Art

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Sullivan's main concern is legitimizing RPGs within academic discourse by establishing them as "the new mode in the larger concept of art" (34). This goal makes inherent assumptions about culture, art, and roleplaying games. These assumptions are not original to Sullivan; they have been present since RPG players turned to interpreting and analyzing the games they play. In *The Elusive Shift*, Jon Peterson quotes many early players/designers/theorists – in context, they are simultaneously all three – who claim games are an artform. Among them are Ed Simbalist, who argues games are a narrative art akin to literature (Peterson 197); Dave Hargrave, who considers RPGs a performance art similar to improvisational theatre (207); Scott Bauer, who also likens roleplaying to film or theatre performance (239); and others are also discussed in passing.

Robin D. Laws' seminal essay on RPG criticism wears this notion on its sleeve and in its title: "The Hidden Art." In "I Have No Words, But I Must Design," Greg Costikyan characterizes games as their own distinct artform. John H. Kim, in "A Brief History of Fashion in RPG Design," explicitly examines the subject as an "artistic history" and periodizes its movements. Doctor Rotwang explicitly argues for games as art, albeit using a relatively lean definition of art as "a thing of beauty" that serves to "move" the audience. Other supporting instances abound in the history of RPG discourse, but I will not belabor the point here.

Even if all gamers do not subscribe to this viewpoint, there is a very visible and sizeable population who implicitly accepts and upholds the assumption that RPGs can achieve the status of art. This community's authority to establish and maintain that interpretation must be the first object of scrutiny.

## The Influence of the Interpretive Community

The following summary is based on Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* (Sections I-V) and Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Introduction and Chapters 13-15). Kuhn and Fish devote their attention to scientific research and literary scholarship, respectively, but their observations and frameworks align closely, and they together present a model for examining any body of knowledge and its adherents.

Sullivan and all other RPG critics, scholars, and designers inevitably work within the framework and mindset of the academic and popular discourse surrounding RPGs. This interpretive framework implicitly informs (if not outright

dictates) the way the community perceives and understands RPGs. The major components are the paradigm, the interpretive community itself, and the objects they interpret.

Kuhn describes paradigms as bodies of knowledge and inherent assumptions. The paradigm informs the interpretive community, and it also defines the objects that the community scrutinizes and the characteristics those objects are perceived to possess. These perceived characteristics are the material of their attention and study, but as much as they inform interpretation, they simultaneously limit it as well; they can only be talked about because they have already been identified as something to talk about. Rather than constituting objective facts, the perceived characteristics implicitly define what that community can say about what it studies.

One of Fish's experiments (which he describes in Chapter 14) demonstrates how interpretive models call their objects into being rather than studying objective, stable phenomena that exist independently of their observers. At the end of a class session devoted to linguistics, Fish drew a box around a list of scholars' names, labeled it a poem, and instructed his next class to read it as such – and they did so very successfully. The words were not initially written with poetic intent, but because Fish presented the text as creative rather than informational, his students immediately began to interpret it within those boundaries. But if Fish hadn't presented it as something appropriate for interpretation, the students would never have perceived it as literature. This demonstrates how the interpretive paradigm defines and characterizes objects of interpretation rather than simply being applied to objective, raw materials.

Fish's example is a useful illustration, but it doesn't fully illuminate interpretive assumptions' epistemological consequences. To better understand their repercussions, we can turn to another instance in Kuhn's domain: light's wave-particle duality. While working on *Optics*, Newton failed to reconcile this paradoxical dual nature. He chose to suppress the wave characteristics and instead focus on light as corpuscles (particles). The success of Newton's theory effectively marginalized the competing interpretation, thereby foreclosing on inquiry that would resurface with the advent of quantum mechanics and new interpretations of the nature and behavior of particles and energy.

These examples illustrate how modes of inquiry and interpretation establish the characteristics studied, and how they also determine the ends of those inquiries. Interpreting RPGs as art inherently sets goals and therefore limits how gamers, scholars, critics, and theorists think about RPGs. RPGs are worthy of close, serious

attention. However, applying a different set of interpretive assumptions may yield more beneficial and productive (or, at the very least, alternative) results.

### The Imposition of External Standards

Sullivan proceeds from general assumptions that material culture – paintings, texts, architecture, etc. – fall on a spectrum of value, at the high end of which sits art; and if a medium or form – in this case, RPGs – meets criteria for being called art, then its study acquires scholarly legitimacy. In Kuhn’s terms, Sullivan’s paper is a rallying cry for normal science: exploring gaps in the paradigm to improve its descriptive and predictive accuracy. In this case, the paradigm assumes all media tend toward art. As a result, the methods and assumptions that inform and guide art criticism and interpretation must be adequate for the scrutiny of RPGs.

In *Cybertext*, Espen Aarseth argues vehemently against this supposition. For Aarseth, RPGs are “oral cybertext” (98) – an interactive medium that is ergodic, requiring “nontrivial effort” by the reader/player “to traverse the text” (1). This extra, ergodic effort differentiates cybertexts from traditional texts and other non-interactive media. In his first chapter, Aarseth recounts how literary critics initially tried to interpret cybertexts using theories and frameworks developed for the study of non-ergodic texts. He concludes:

Even if important insights can be gained from the study of extraliterary phenomena with the instruments of literary theory (cautiously used), it does not follow that these phenomena are literature and should be judged with literary criteria or that the field of literature should be expanded to include them. In my view, there is nothing to be gained from this sort of theoretical imperialism. (15-6)

Aarseth is concerned primarily with digital cybertexts, but his warning also applies to the analog realm. Subjecting RPGs to external standards and values limits our capacity to investigate and understand the games themselves as games. By their very nature, RPGs overrun and exceed those theoretical, evaluative boundaries.

In “I Know What I Like!” (a direct response to Laws’ “The Hidden Art”), Brian Duguid similarly warns against adopting a vocabulary external to RPGs. Taking a Marxist stance, he argues that RPG players are simultaneously both consumers and creators. RPGs embrace participants’ play rather than mandating their passive consumption, and classifying RPGs as art alienates players from their own creative work.

Aarseth and Duguid both argue that we need a different interpretive approach to discuss and better understand RPGs themselves. Before broaching new interpretive models, we have to understand why those different approaches are called for.

### The False Analogy of Comics and RPGs

To pave the way for discussing RPGs as an artform, Sullivan cites the emergence of comics scholarship and its reception in academia. Comics are, in the simplest terms, the unity of visual and verbal art, both of which – as visual arts and literature – were already recognized by universities, intellectuals, and the public at large. Despite this precedent, scholars faced significant professional and popular resistance when they began talking about comics in an academic setting.

My mentor, the late Donald Ault, contributed significantly to advancing comics scholarship while at Berkley in the 1970s and later at Vanderbilt and the University of Florida;<sup>1</sup> see his essay “In the Trenches, Taking the Heat: Confessions of a Comics Scholar” for a detailed account. Don did not found comics scholarship, but he fought to conduct undergraduate courses and graduate seminars about comics, thereby legitimizing comics studies within US academic institutions – the interpretive community that dictates art’s legitimacy – by establishing comics’ “‘literary’ aspects” (Ault).

However, RPG books’ graphic and literary merits should not be the foundation for evaluating the sophistication and value of RPGs themselves. Sullivan’s analogy with comics exemplifies a peculiar confusion in the RPG community: that “RPGs are understandable as a singular art, through a convergence of graphic design, visual art, and writing designed to encourage improvisational performance” (34). He goes on to emphasize how the “overlap between art and RPG exists in the form of these representations and writings” (38), thereby situating artistic merit in the material book. Later in his essay, Sullivan asserts that “the purpose of D&D is use: to be a played game” (44). But dice, books, and the other documents and materials used to play RPGs are not the game itself any more than a ball, lined turf, and jerseys constitute a game of football. They are the tools used to play the game.

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<sup>1</sup> Don’s comics scholarship program at UF spawned the game studies group there, which he fostered and advocated for even though he didn’t participate actively in the research and scholarship.

RPGs' material culture can, of course, be considered artistic. Documents can demonstrate sophisticated and creative use of design principles, and the writing can possess a literary quality in the sense of being emotionally and intellectually evocative. Even if we do not currently assign artistic merit to these images and texts, they may someday be granted the status of art even though they were originally intended for a purpose other than aesthetic appreciation and contemplation. As E.H. Gombrich reminds us, "most of the paintings and statues which are now lined up along the walls of our museums and galleries were not meant to be displayed as Art. They were made for a definite occasion and a definite purpose" (32).

Classical Greek amphora, for instance, sit under glass in museums where patrons can appreciate visual designs depicting daily activities and mythic stories. But thousands of years ago, these objects were valued for more than their aesthetic appeal; they were used as vessels for storage and transportation.

In the Western tradition, art has often been the province of the wealthy, and as such, it has served the practical purpose of communicating status and opulence. A painting did not necessarily have to directly represent this through its subject matter; it expressed wealth simply through the fact of being a painting, a rarified and costly decoration. During much of that tradition, religious institutions held great material wealth, and so they became the source of much art. Christian visual art in the Middle Ages provided aesthetic adornment within churches, but it also served the practical purpose of conveying religious tales and lessons to an illiterate population. Morality plays served the same function through performance and verbal narrative, but they have since passed into the jurisdiction of literature and theatre history classes. In these latter cases, art's aesthetic value was crucial for capturing and holding its audience's attention. But its purpose went beyond gaining a viewer's attention; once it had done so, the creative work could fulfill its true practical purpose (like instilling respect or prescribing morality).

Sullivan's argument for RPGs as art depends on the reification (and even fetishization) of the material objects at the expense of accounting for their intended purpose, which – as Sullivan points out – is to be used. There is a fundamental confusion about what exactly is being qualified as "art" in Sullivan's argument, and that confusion persists in the larger critical discourse. Are we talking about the materials? Or the *use* of those materials to play the game? Clearly, the physical objects can possess artistic merit, but as Gombrich suggests, considering them as

art restricts or removes their use value, and RPGs exist only in the use of those materials. RPGs are play.

### *Mörk Borg*: An RPG Art/Rulebook

If *D&D* is art by Sullivan's standards, then *Mörk Borg* is a masterpiece.

The vast majority of RPG books, *D&D* included, are written and arranged as instruction manuals. The texts present the technical procedures for using the game systems' mechanics (typically rolling dice and interpreting the results), and they frequently also provide preliminary explanations of what RPGs are and how they are played, guidance on running games and playing characters, and other aspects of the hobby. The books' various apparatuses – tables of contents, numbered chapters, page headings, tables, indices, and appendices – are all designed to make the books easy for players to reference and use during play.

*Mörk Borg* dispenses with most of these textual features. It has no table of contents (though it does have excellent indices) or page headings to help navigate the book's various sections. It does not have an introduction. It does not explain what an RPG is. But despite these omissions, the book is infinitely more user friendly than the rulebooks for more elaborate games like *D&D*.

Writer and game designer Pelle Nilsson leads his reader into the game with evocative, visceral descriptions of its medieval-apocalyptic setting and lore. After that, he delves into the rules and mechanics, all of which are condensed into a single reference sheet at the back of the book (contra standard RPG practice of filling one or more volumes). Nilsson chooses not to hold the reader's hand and explain everything to them; he instead confronts them with the game's concept and atmosphere, motivating them to further explore the rules and begin playing.

Every step of the way, Nilsson's prose is accompanied by artwork and graphic design by Johan Nohr. Nohr previously served as graphic designer for other RPG rulebooks including *Symbaroum*, *Oktoberlandet*, and *Barkhäxan* (also with Nilsson), all of which more or less follow standard industry practices: a small number of unintrusive typefaces arranged in blocks of text that are juxtaposed with discrete illustrations.

In *Mörk Borg*, Nohr rebels against these standards. The artwork consists of some public domain images alongside Nohr's own original compositions in a variety of styles, and instead of segregating the images and text, the visuals underly and intermingle with the spreads' verbal components. Words sprawl across pages,

refusing to be constrained by uniform grids or even normalized typographic conventions. The book contains over 100 different typefaces, and their presentation uses novel tactics (like drastic shifts in family and size) that recall the typographic experiments of early modern poet-artists like Francisco Marinetti and Ilia Zdanevich.

Nohr's layouts and design choices do not neutrally convey the prose and juxtapose it with pictures. He brings the two into close connection through their shared visual expressiveness, which reinforces *Mörk Borg*'s tone and setting. The sheer visual diversity helps the reader navigate just as well as formal chapter breaks and headings could, but with far greater appeal and engagement. The physical book itself also features a host of novel design choices like black light reactive pigments, a printed marking ribbon, reflective foil, and debossed text on the spine that glows in the dark.

All of these verbal, visual, and material choices cleave to the aesthetics of punk and heavy metal music subcultures, reinforcing *Mörk Borg*'s overtly transgressive nature. It challenges preconceptions of what RPG rulebooks can be: functional technical documents, yes, but also richly creative art pieces. But none of this speaks to the actual experience of playing *Mörk Borg*. Nilsson and Nohr set the tone for play, shape the reader's perception of the anticipated experience, and inform their actions as players. From those actions, a narrative will emerge, but even the most literary plot and character arcs will result from player agency and creativity within the game's constraints. The game and the play experience are informed by the rule/artbook but are not identical to the book's art, graphic design, or prose.

The materials are not the game, and so this raises the question: is the act of playing RPGs an artistic form? Theatrical forms of play are already recognized as such, and Daniel Mackay's *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* places RPGs in this lineage of creative performance. However, Mackay's argument ultimately situates RPGs' aesthetic value in the inert, crystallized memory of the narrative that players retroactively construct. This, like Sullivan's argument, isolates artistic merit from play itself.

While similar forms like improvisational theatre certainly display the same sort of macro-level uncertainty that characterizes RPGs (at least from a player perspective), RPGs are an activity meant to entertain and gratify the players rather than an audience. They are not meant to be seen from the outside but experienced from within. And the experience of play does not consistently (or even necessarily) conform to the artistic standards of literature, film, or theatre; pacing and narrative



focus rarely, if ever, meet our expectations of well-wrought plots found in sophisticated examples of storytelling. But despite its non-conformity to those standards, play and art still share certain characteristics. This similarity prompts a re-evaluation of the fundamental question: is the act of play itself a form of art? Or does this concern divert us from another, more fundamental question: is art a form of play?

## Play as the Foundation of Culture

Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* is an important inquiry into play that does not subordinate it to external values (for example, psychological interpretations of play and its utility for the organism). To examine play itself, Huizinga identifies its fundamental characteristics, and his definition continues to be a valuable and influential one. He writes:

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to [...] stress their difference from the common world. (13)

Huizinga makes six key points worth emphasizing here: 1) Play is freely engaged; it can't be mandated or coerced. 2) Play is disconnected from ordinary life; mundane concerns do not apply within the field of play. 3) Play is intrinsically compelling and satisfying; it is not fundamentally connected to or motivated by any external goal or objective. 4) Play observes definite limits in space and time; it only happens in a certain place and duration. 5) Play operates according to special rules; these govern players' actions but do not apply to the external world, the rules of which likewise do not necessarily impose on play. 6) Play tends to establish a community that persists beyond the place, time, and activity of play; players develop cohesive bonds and a sense of being "apart together" (Huizinga 12).

These characteristics overlap those Sullivan derives from Paglia, which he uses to evaluate RPGs as art. To qualify as art, the object of interpretation must be "spellbinding" (Sullivan 41) (point 3 above); "sacrificial" (41) and having "nothing to do with morality" (42) (point 2 above); provide a "transformative

place” (43) (points 4 and 5 above); serve as ““a ritualistic reordering of reality”” (42) in order to ““tame aspects of reality, life, and nature”” (43) (point 5 above); and be ““aggressive and compulsive”” and ““scandalous”” (42) (points 2 and 3 again).<sup>2</sup>

Huizinga explains these similarities by arguing play is pre-cultural but does not end when culture begins; instead, it influences and shapes all manifestations of culture including artistic creation, to which Huizinga devotes two chapters. So rather than confirming games as art, we can instead qualify art as forms of play, and the artist’s creative work manifests the play impulse in culture. The verbal and visual products – what we consider the art itself – are the static residue of that artist’s play within their chosen medium.

We can evaluate the artistic and literary merits of RPG books’ visual and verbal components, but this perspective forecloses on games’ participatory nature. Games, like acts of artistic creation, are ergodic; they require effort and conscious decision-making, not a one-sided reception of words and images. We can consider the merits of an RPG book’s graphic design and narrative structure (in the case of pre-written adventures or quests), but as Sullivan points out, the book is not meant to be read but to be used, and in the act of using the book (playing the game), the nature of the object fundamentally changes. When we talk about the quality of writing or images, we’re evaluating static, non-interactive forms, and we necessarily ignore the crucial play dynamic that drives RPGs.

In *Man, Play and Games*, Roger Caillois takes Huizinga’s project even further by describing how social interactions in play and games serve as templates for “serious” interactions outside the game’s boundaries, further emphasizing how society and culture solidify from and preserve play impulses. In addition to establishing games’ fundamental role in shaping culture and civilization, Caillois also contributes another important attribute that is especially relevant to consideration of RPGs: uncertainty. Games are experiences “the course of which

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<sup>2</sup> The mandate that art “involves sexuality” (Sullivan 43) is a necessary component of Paglia’s critical project but need not be for others – particularly for those that seek to consider play without recourse to external concerns. Sullivan elides this criteria by citing *D&D*’s sexual naivety, which is superficially correct; however, the history and culture of the game are heavily biased toward heteronormative masculine ideals, although this isn’t universal and is becoming increasingly balanced by greater representation in gaming communities.

cannot be determined, nor the result attained beforehand, and some latitude for innovations being left to the player's initiative" (Caillois 9).<sup>3</sup>

In RPGs, this uncertainty frequently stems from the game's randomization mechanics (dice, cards, etc.) as well as group decision-making, which prevent play from becoming a string of arbitrary events. Uncertainty at the micro- and macro-levels introduce conflict and obstacles that players must overcome – unlike a novel's reader or a play or film's audience, who simply observe conflicts' inception, development, and resolution. Gamers must instead resolve these conflicts themselves. This constitutes RPGs' improvisational element that Sullivan describes, and this variability is a fundamental feature that sets RPGs apart from the non-ergodic arts.

### Revelry as an Analogy of Play

Huizinga consistently draws attention to play's intimate relationship with festivity and revelry. This resemblance derives in no small part from festivity's own ties with religious ritual, itself a highly orderly form of representation (one of Huizinga's fundamental play categories, the other being competition). He and Caillois alike make much of play's direct relationship to religion and ritual, both of which order cultures and inform the art they produce.

To better understand this connection, we can turn to Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, a study of carnival culture's influence on the works of François Rabelais, whom Huizinga dubs "the play-spirit incarnate" (181). In Bakhtin's introduction, he addresses the shape and scope of medieval carnival culture, which he describes as "a second world and a second life outside of officialdom" (11). This world embraces all people but rejects the rules of their normal world, opting instead for "laws of its own freedom" (7), temporarily liberating participants "from the prevailing truth and from the established order" by suspending "all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (10).

Compare Huizinga's definition of play above to these points and to Bakhtin's summary description of the carnival-grotesque form's function in the literary tradition:

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<sup>3</sup> Costikyan, cited above, concisely and engagingly summarizes Huizinga's and Caillois's ideas in the context of tabletop gaming.

to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. The carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things. (34)

Bakhtin associates festivity with a “strong element of play” (7), and with good reason: he and Huizinga are self-evidently addressing the same cultural impulse. So the question of qualifying games – as an active engagement, not a set of materials – as an artform can be clarified by asking if carnival culture is also an artform.

The material artifacts of festivals like Mardi Gras certainly possess artistic qualities and merits. Again, the materials are not the activity any more than a map is the territory it depicts, or a critical essay is the poem it interprets. Bakhtin himself denies carnival, with its “strong element of play,” the status of art: “[carnival] does not, generally speaking, belong to the sphere of art. It belongs to the borderline between art and life” (7). Bakhtin’s answer sets a concrete precedent and analogy for rejecting play as an artform. Instead, it points us toward a different interpretation of RPGs: as an analogous form, similar but distinct, the study of which requires a different set of methods and values.

### Play as Complex Communication

In *Gaming: The Future’s Language*, Richard D. Duke characterizes games as a complex form of communication. Duke is primarily concerned with games that serve a practical educational purpose within an institution or organization. Simulations used in grade schools are one example. For instance, when learning about personal finance, a student is assigned a profession, salary, family, and expenses; within the simulation, they make a budget, purchase necessities, pay debts, and build savings. Through the game, they gain personal, practical knowledge of money management and finance. Another example is Model United Nations programs, which focus on governance, international conflict, and other political concerns.

Activities like these allow players to explore and better comprehend the large-scale systems that constitute the world around us. Games present abstracted versions of those systems, enabling individuals to construct their own holistic

understanding of large-scale situations that may otherwise be incomprehensible. Duke argues that games therefore are a means of curing fundamental problems plaguing our society, all of which have arisen due to the inadequacy of sequential communication (images, writing, film, and hypermedia) for conveying actionable knowledge about complex problems.

Traditional media all deploy relatively simple modes of communication. The first is the monologue, a single person communicating to an audience of one or more. The next is dialogue, in which two individuals communicate with one another. The third is the sequential dialogue, wherein one speaker communicates with a number of isolated interlocutors who do not directly interact amongst themselves. All of these modes rely on linear sequence and relatively passive reception of a message.

Games, on the other hand, Duke calls “multilogue”: a pattern of interaction that draws lines of simultaneous communication amongst multiple participants (rather than anchoring exchanges to a central speaker or source). This networked structure permits the free play of interaction, investigation, and the adoption of novel perspectives and approaches to problem solving. Games are therefore able to convey complex content and build holistic knowledge more intelligibly and effectively than linear modes of communication. Multilogues facilitate a heuristic understanding that is future oriented, flexible, and better able to comprehend and solve emerging problems. Traditional modes of communication, in contrast, emphasize memorization of information to be recalled and used regardless of how well suited it is to a particular conflict or situation.

RPGs are a means of mutual engagement, and players are able – through the game’s vocabulary and mechanics – to discuss and resolve a problem in which they all have some interest. Players of *Dungeons & Dragons* may be interested in the problem of fighting orcs and taking their treasure – a competitive, mechanics-oriented problem. A game of *Fiasco*, on the other hand, orients around “powerful ambition and poor impulse control” (Morningstar) – a more psychological and social problem. But in all cases, a conflict that demands a satisfying resolution motivates communication amongst players, just as Duke describes.

In *The Elusive Shift*, Peterson describes how early RPGs explicitly situate themselves as existing and functioning in the act of communication. Of D&D, he writes: “At the most basic level, players participate in the game of *D&D* by talking to the referee. In lieu of any overview of its operation, *D&D* tries to teach by example, through a sample transcript of a dungeon adventure that records a spoken

exchange” (38). The book’s second chapter, “How to Play,” details how other early RPGs likewise emphasize play’s foundation in verbal exchange. From RPGs’ inception, the notion that these games exist in and as communication has been a fundamental (if not always explicitly recognized) assumption.

Duke organizes the broad categories of communication on a continuum of complexity. At one end sits primitive communication consisting of informal vocalizations and gestures as well as simple, formal communication like semaphore. Next is advanced communication, which includes spoken, written, technical, and artistic forms. Finally, integrated communication exists in multi-media forms and “future’s language,” of which gaming and simulation are primary manifestations.

In Duke’s taxonomy, games are more sophisticated than art just as art is more sophisticated than hand signals.<sup>4</sup> As Huizinga explains, play itself – the defining activity of games as ergodic activities – precedes these cultural forms, and play crystallizes into artforms defined by certain limiting conditions. All of these – images, spoken language, writing, and other media – can be integrated into games, which maintain play’s active and interactive nature. However, a given game’s value or function isn’t isolable in any one of the game’s materials. The game itself is a complex system that exceeds the sum of its integrated parts and materials even as it permeates and imbues them with greater significance than they would possess apart from one another.

### RPGs as Communication: D&D contra Fiasco

RPGs as a form of communication can be better illustrated by stripping away one of the games’ common (but not universal) features: emphasis on dice and arithmetic. There is currently a strong trend in the small press and indie RPG space toward rules-light and minimalist systems. These games resist using rules and mathematics to meticulously simulate reality within the game; instead, they tend to rely more on character roleplaying and personal creativity to drive engagement and entertainment.

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<sup>4</sup> Duke consistently places “art” in quotations when referring to the craft and quality of games and simulation. In Chapter 5, “The Game Design Process,” and in Appendix A, “Specifications for Game Design,” Duke uses the term *art* in the sense of skilled craft – the “art” of creating an effective, efficient game in the same sense that a furniture maker has mastered the “art” of designing a comfortable, aesthetically pleasing chair.

This shift creates two significant effects. First, restrictions embodied in the games' rules are pared away, and so player agency increases. Second, this trend works against the assumption that random numbers and arithmetic are primary tools for resolving conflicts and challenges; in many cases, no straightforward formal solution applies. This places a greater emphasis on description and creative problem solving, both of which rely on critical thought and expressive language instead of comparing numbers.

The best examples are games that have minimal mechanics. They require few die rolls or calculations, and without the formal clutter, RPGs' character as a mode of communication comes into sharper focus. In many RPGs, one player runs the game; they're called the dungeon master (DM), game master (GM), or some variation thereof. This type of game is very centralized, hierarchical, and asymmetrical; it is usually organized and run by the GM, who arbitrates the rules, describes settings and situations, and portrays ancillary characters. The GM represents the world and its inhabitants for the other players, and the players describe their own characters' actions to the GM.

Games that forego GMs are more decentralized and tend to grant greater, more equitable agency to all players. One of the premier examples is *Fiasco*, which is designed to facilitate a conflict- and character-driven plot. It stands in sharp contrast to D&D and many other RPGs due to its extremely minimal mechanics and its distinctly different play experience.

GM-centric games like D&D hinge on a self-evidently lopsided balance of power, but objective numerical values and die rolls keep the game fair for all players. Consequently, characters are explicitly defined numerically: a fighter with 20 strength and 8 wisdom is incredibly strong but relatively dim, while a wizard with 18 intelligence and 4 charisma is very smart but not proficient in social situations.

Because it defines characters through numbers, D&D mechanically creates challenge and conflict by setting numerical difficulties for tasks. Players complete these tasks by rolling dice and calculating actions' outcomes based on their attributes, skills, and other quantitative values. The rulebooks provide specific procedures for attacking monsters, climbing walls, picking locks, swimming through turbulent waters, disarming traps, wrestling giants, and all of the other deeds that define fantasy heroes.

Climbing a tower to save a captive is an action-driven conflict, and in D&D, it would be established and resolved largely through the game's mathematical

mechanics. But swindling your stepbrother out of his inheritance by blackmailing his wife is a character-driven conflict, and in *Fiasco*, that conflict is established and resolved through conversation amongst players, not by rolling dice and comparing numbers. Characters in *Fiasco* are defined by desires and relationships. Gameplay consists of leveraging those relationships to achieve the character's goals while thwarting or subverting other characters. A set of elements designed to establish and escalate a conflict enables a plot to emerge through player choices and interactions.

In *Fiasco*, these interactions play out over a set number of scenes. Each scene is primarily devoted to interactions between two spotlighted characters. Players who aren't active participants in a particular scene can award a die to determine whether a character wins or loses that scene's conflict. The dice are only rolled three times during the game: to establish narrative elements, to create a major mid-game plot twist, and to determine characters' fates after the overarching conflict resolves. In the absence of die rolls and calculations, *Fiasco* players spend the vast supermajority of their time sitting and talking to one another, whether speaking in character, describing their actions, or contributing details to a scene. Even the act of distributing dice is a form of communication: it signals a decision about which character gains the upper hand in a particular interpersonal conflict.

As a result of being more verbally than mathematically based, *Fiasco* bears stronger, immediate resemblance to improvisational theatre, which is likewise driven by prompts and player creativity. In both cases, the experience is shaped entirely by players communicating verbally and physically with one another. Together, they explore a complex problem, develop a unique narrative, and – for better or worse – devise a solution through their mutual interactions.

## RPGs as the Solution for the Problems of RPG Scholarship

In "The Hidden Art," Laws admits that RPG criticism faces a serious obstacle: "interactive gaming is in its very essence highly resistant to critical analysis" due to the fact that "all participants are creators" (95). Moreover, directly observing RPGs as complex communication inevitably alters the nature of that communication; "to watch a session [...] will change its very nature," making inquiry into RPGs the "Schrödinger's cat of art criticism" (Laws 96). Likewise, Duke concludes his own discussion of observing gameplay on a similar note: "Observers in a game are invariably negative forces" (108).



In lieu of imposing external standards and practices, the most productive route to RPG criticism and theory is from the inside out. This is the approach taken by invested scholars publishing in journals like *Analog Game Studies* and *The International Journal of Roleplaying* as well as those informally discussing RPGs at conferences, in zines, and on forums and social media.

Peterson, in *The Elusive Shift*, describes the early critical consideration and theorization of RPGs, which was integral to playing the games; *D&D* initially gave players some rules and a sample of play, and different fan bases (wargamers and collaborative storytellers) took gameplay in distinctly different directions: highly competitive and mechanics-oriented, and highly cooperative and narratively oriented, respectively. The early debates over the “correct” way to roleplay culminated in Glenn Blacow’s typology of play styles, which set the tone for ensuing discussion.

In the 1990s, digital communities took up the same problem and began devising alternative solutions. Here, the conversation began first by describing player types before evolving into debates about in-game decision-making that produced the threefold model summarized by John Kim. That model in turn gave rise to other schemas concerned with how players pursue goals (Ron Edwards’s GNS) and the desires that inform those goals (Scarlet Jester’s GEN).

Although these models differ in their specifics, they (and others in the same genealogy) agree that different games accommodate different player preferences. According to these abstract frameworks, whether a game achieves a status analogous to art is a matter of preference. Those preferences themselves involve assumptions and interpretations no less covert or consequential than the notion that games can be art. And falling back on matters of taste doesn’t bring anyone any closer to more adequate critical and theoretical understandings of RPGs.

Because games are complex, the problem of modeling them is likewise complex. But Duke presents games as ways of solving complex problems by modeling their dynamics. So perhaps critical discussions of RPGs can most effectively advance by modeling RPG theory itself in an RPG. This concept is implicitly prompted by Fish and Kuhn, who use games and play as analogies for discussing the dynamics of interpretive communities. In his discussion of Kuhn’s notion of incommensurability, Paul Feyerabend (whose call for counter-inductive investigation motivates my own argument) does likewise. But given Feyerabend’s anarchist epistemological project in *Against Method* and his personal history as a

performer (which informed his philosophical career), his gesture toward play is probably more intentional and serious than Kuhn's and Fish's.

James P. Carse, in *Finite and Infinite Games*, provides a useful roadmap for designers by sketching the ways a vast array of social and cultural activities can be understood as games. These games are played by people who have simply strayed too far into seriousness and forgotten that they're freely engaging in closed activities that they can opt out of. Scientific and literary theoretical concerns are already framed as games by Kuhn and Fish, and from Carse's point of view, RPG theory is also already a game – practitioners simply need to un-forget that this is the case.

## In-Conclusion

RPG discourse currently labors under values not its own. It attempts to subordinate RPGs to a paradigm that fails to account for games' fundamental differences from other modes and forms of culture. In accepting this imposition, we apply external standards and attempt to legitimize RPGs within the current interpretive paradigm, and we do so at the cost of more adequately understanding RPGs themselves.

To ask if RPGs can be art is, from Huizinga's perspective, analogous to asking if a wolf pup will grow up to be a golden retriever. From Duke's perspective, the problem is analogous to evaluating art exclusively using frameworks and terms meant for describing non-linguistic vocalizations and physical gestures.

RPGs simultaneously preserve and emphasize pre-cultural (and pre-art) play impulses while also elevating play to a level of sophistication and complexity that exceeds art's boundaries. On both sides, RPGs fall outside the realm of art and the criticism thereof. The situation borders on paradox, and understanding it means grappling with its inherent complexity. To do so, we must meet that complexity head-on through investigation that appears possible only through the medium of games themselves. In sum, the interpretive community engaging RPG theory and criticism – perhaps even more so than any other – must, in its own efforts, match the playful creativity that defines the games they scrutinize and discuss.

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