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On the Roll of the Editor

A Response to Barnabas G. Smith

In Barnabas G. Smith's review of *Music in the Role-Playing Game*, Smith suggests that our book serves in part as a response to Roger Moseley's "*cri de coeur*" concerning the importance of storytelling in video games. Indeed, as we noted in the prologue, storytelling was a central defining feature that emerged from our contributors' wonderful essays, many of which took on a surprisingly autobiographical tone (4). For this reason, it seems fitting to present this response in the form of another story—even a story within a story, or a story *about* a story.

I have lately become obsessed with real-play *Dungeons and Dragons* podcasts. Doubtless this revelation provokes no puzzlement for any reader of this journal, but my reasons might be less immediately apparent. My interest stems not from hearing how the players have min-maxed their stats, or the specific mechanics of the RPG system, or the ways in which the Dungeon Master (DM) has constructed specific battle encounters. Rather, I find these podcasts captivating because at their heart, they are marvelous loci of emergent, improvised, collaborative storytelling. It simply would not be possible for the DM to fully plan out the narrative in advance, because the roll of the dice plays such a significant role in how the stories unfold. No matter how tightly the DM tries to construct a narrative or how carefully they foreshadow a plot point, there is no guarantee that the players or the dice will cooperate. Chekhov's gun may be hanging on the wall, but it could still jam if the player rolls a natural 1 in the last act.

Here are two of my favorite examples, from the hilarious podcast *Dungeons and Daddies*. In one case, half of the party plans to sabotage a musical performance that jeopardizes the safety of the other half. After the party plants the character with the lowest performance skill as the band's lead singer, the DM directs the player to roll a performance check. She rolls a natural 20—a critical success. The recording collapses into hysterics, as the DM recounts of an audience moved to tears by the sublime beauty of the performance. The rest of the party then hightails it out of the concert hall, steals the party's vehicle, and skips town. I don't know what the

DM had originally planned, but there's no way that whatever it was could have been as captivating.[1]

In another case, while looking for their lost sons, the party finds themselves serving as gladiators for the amusement of the mysterious Lord of Chaos. The players notice that the Lord of Chaos seems to avert his gaze from a nearby pit of carnal delights. Suspecting that he is a prude, the party decides to remove their clothes and battle naked. Suddenly a player remarks that the DM looks angry. He says, "You're about to find out why." The players learn that they have inadvertently obsoleted the complicated mechanics that the DM had planned for the encounter when the Lord of Chaos throws off his robe, revealing two familiar figures, one standing on the other's shoulder, who unhappily complain . . . "Daaaaad!"[2]

These magical moments depend on a DM's skillful ability to strike a balance between, on the one hand, constructing thoughtful stories, and on the other, agile flexibility in embracing the unexpected. A DM may have crafted a brilliant, well-wrought narrative, but if they "railroad" the party through it, they risk depriving the players of their agency and the sense that their decisions matter. By contrast, A DM with only the loosest narrative plan can create a dynamic, living story that allows the players to feel like co-creators building a vibrant world, but here risks creating an eclectic mess or a narratively bland open-world sandbox.

Where was I? Oh, right, the book. So the conceit should be clear enough: the editors are the DM and the contributors the party. Will and I had some choices to make in how we called for contributions. We could have, for example, established a relatively firm table of contents and asked our authors to contribute specific essays that would mesh with our pre-planned vision for the book—in other words, we could have railroaded the volume. If we had taken that approach, I expect that the book would have contained an even, tempered balance of methodological approaches and game types. We likely, for example, would have featured an equal number of JRPGs and Western RPGs, as well as an even distribution of titles across the decades of video games' young history.

Smith's observation that the book's purview is "dizzyingly" and "[unapologetically] broad" stands as evidence that we did not take that strategy. Instead, we opted to create an open-world, sandbox-style book where we let our contributors run free. Doing so risked publishing an unfocused hodge-podge of unrelated, if individually excellent, essays. But what we gained was the possibility for magic. Though Smith described Burke's contribution as an "odd one out," he also notes that it "clearly belongs in the 'metaphor' section of this volume." In a sense, though, I think each of the contributions is a bit of an odd one out that nonetheless clearly belongs: Gibbons on the relationship between video games and early cinema; Cook on the comedic deflating of common fantasy RPG tropes;

1. Matthew Arnold, Anthony Burch, Will Campos, Beth May, and Freddie Wong, "Episode 9 – Punk Is Dad," *Dungeons & Daddies* (podcast), May 21, 2019, accessed June 25, 2020, https://dungeonsanddaddies.com/blogs/news/ep-9-punk-is-dad/.

2. Matthew Arnold, Anthony Burch, Will Campos, Beth May, and Freddie Wong, "Episode 3 – The Lord of Chaos," *Dungeons & Daddies* (podcast), February 26, 2019, accessed June 25, 2020, https://dungeonsanddaddies.com/blogs/news/ep-3-another-blog/.

Summers's "naïve aesthetic"; Plank on exoticist musical tropes; Grasso's competing, parallel temporalities; Thompson's "opera playbill"; Kamp's account of "ludomusical dissonance" sparked from a surprising musical stinger in *Diablo III*; Naxer's pedagogical study; Galloway's ethnographic account; Kamp and Sweeney's study of the digital reconfiguration of the nineteenth-century landscape; and my own positioning of the perpetually mutable nature of the MMORPG as a modern example of the surprisingly mutable nature of art writ large. I'm biased, but when I made an arcana check to detect magic on this book, I still feel like I rolled a 20. ◾