

Haunted Worlds: Narrative, Ritual, and Carnival in Gothic Role-Playing Games

Lynn Gelfand

I devoured books of mythology and books of painting; I got something from those which I didn't get from school--a sense that I was delivered into a world where *ideas* had physical form." He slips one of his favorite volumes, *The Book of Hours*, from the shelf, opening it to a detailed illuminated painting of medieval French country life invaded by three haloed angels. "I get a thrill from that. It's what art does best-- remind me that we're living in a world which is full of metaphor...the status quo is a lie, because look, there are angels sitting in the corner, and one of them has a werewolf on its knee."

Clive Barker, in an interview with Douglas Winter (Jones 25).

Introduction

Worlds within worlds. Multiple frames of reference. Subversion. Inversion. Diverse perspectives juxtaposed like the facets of a jewel. Such qualities, alluded to in Barker's above description of a medieval illuminated manuscript, could well apply to role-playing games, both in terms of the content of the games and in terms of the opinion regarding the worth of such games. Branded by some as devil worship, lauded by others as an imaginative art form, and dismissed by still others as a childish past-time, role-playing games seem to defy neat categorization.

What is a role-playing game? In his book *Heroic Worlds*, Lawrence Schick defines role-playing games as "quantified interactive storytelling" (Schick 10). Such games are "quantified" because character abilities and action resolutions are "defined by numbers or quantities" that are "manipulated following certain rules" (10); "interactive" because "[p]layer decision-making drives the story forward" (10); and "storytelling" because the object of the game is to tell a story "with a group for an author, a story that grows organically and is acted out, is *experienced* by its creators" (11). While many board games contain the suggestion of a story in their structure (for example, the symbolic armies of chess or the implied journey of chutes and ladders), such games cannot be considered *storytelling* games because "plot is subordinate to score or position" (10). In *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*, Gary Fine notes that a role-playing game "combines the expressive freedom of fantasy with the structure characteristic of games. It is neither as rule-governed as games...nor as free-floating as fantasy" (Fine 3).

Role-playing games grew out of miniature war gaming. War games simulated historical battles by moving formations of cardboard counters or metal figurines across mapped landscapes laid out on tabletops (Schick 16). Game movement was determined according to set rules and a player's ability to maneuver his "troops" to his strategic advantage within the game's set rules (Fine 8-9). Players identified not with individual characters but with a particular army or a nation (Fine 8). However, in the early 1970s, several

war gaming players began to devise games set in fantasy worlds where monsters roamed, magic worked, and players could adopt heroic character personas (Schick 18). These innovations enabled players to participate in a kind of structured communal fiction more akin to Robert E. Howard's "Conan" stories and J.R.R Tolkien's *Lord of the Ring* than to a historical re-creation of Napoleonic warfare.

My own experiences with role-playing games were brief if entertaining. Back in the early 1980s, I used to play *Dungeons and Dragons* with other college freshman and sophomores. *Dungeons and Dragons* was a role-playing game that was first published in 1974 by a company called Tactical Studies Rules, but is better known simply as TSR (TSR has since been bought out by Wizards of the Coast). *Dungeons and Dragons* was set in an imaginary feudalistic world populated by characters drawn from medieval romance, fantasy literature, folklore, and mythology. The rules regarding the story's environment, the characters within the environment, and the actions of the characters were set forth in "modules"-- books that structured the various environments, characters, and actions that could occur within a particular game world. Stories were composed on the spot as players, acting within the roles of their chosen characters, reacted to situations generated by a gamemaster, a sort of meta-storyteller, who controlled the game based on the rules of the gaming module as well as his or her own personal creativity. Maps were drawn to illustrate the characters' locations spatially within this fantasy realm and dice were thrown and tallied in conjunction with a character's power statistics to determine the outcome of battles with various monsters.

It was, basically, an opportunity to get together with friends and talk, joke, snack, and create an enjoyable-- if usually routine-- story: meetings in village taverns, dark forests to be negotiated, and labyrinth-based dungeons containing vast amounts of treasure; all surrounded by dangerous traps, evil characters, and deadly beasts designed to keep the heroic players from their goal. However, by the time I became an upperclassman, I had lost interest in role-playing; time to move on from roguish thieves, wise mages, nasty trolls, and cute elves to more serious concerns.

It wasn't until several years later that role-playing caught my attention again. A friend of mine was deeply involved in gaming and happened to have with him a large, soft-cover book with the words *Vampire: The Masquerade* on the cover. Intrigued by the title, I opened it. It was a role-playing book written by Mark Rein, Graeme Davis, Tom Dowd, Lisa Stevens, and Stewart Wieck. It was published by a company called White Wolf. Dark, brooding, and rather chilling, it dealt with the concept of a society of vampires existing in our own world in secret.

The framing style of this conceptual world combined punk with Gothic, cutting-edge technology with antiquarian sensibilities, and darkly romantic ambiance with urban decay. It postulated a secret world within our world, operating with its own history, politics, logic, and laws, a part of-- yet apart from-- our familiar world. A spectrum of moral possibilities were open to the vampiric characters of the players, from good to evil to every shade in-between. However, the ethical timbre chosen by the player would be merely one facet in a complex, perpetually shifting moral structure. The characters in the game dwelt in a realm of moral, sexual, and political twilight, where good, however strong, would always be menaced; where blood and eroticism mingled; and where secret conspiracies expanded from vast networks whose origins were unimaginable. No cute elves here.

Later, a companion book to *Vampire: The Masquerade* came out called *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*. This module dealt with a secret society of werewolves. Werewolves were depicted as protectors of the wilderness,

predators defending the few remaining virgin ecological spaces against urbane vampires who manipulated urban expansion in order to increase their "feeding" store, thus threatening the tribal werewolves' habitats. Yet, as in the vampiric module, werewolf character players could choose from a constellation of moral possibilities, with good and evil often found disturbingly twined together.

I was frankly impressed with the way both books in the White Wolf system took imaginary figures, already powerfully resonant, and set them in a nexus of equally multi-valent symbolic and political associations, thus amplifying the effect of these numinous figures by reflecting and refracting their status as focal points for converging yet contrary codes.

First Interview with David

David Veilleux and I are sitting in a cafeteria. We have been friends for nearly a year. We are both graduate students at Indiana University. I am a doctoral student in Folklore. I am working on a paper for a fieldwork class and David has agreed to be my "informant" regarding gothically-oriented role-playing games. Why are people drawn to such horror-laden games? How does role-playing differ from traditional storytelling?

David is in his early thirties, a French-Canadian studying music. He is married. Cheerful, gentle, and polite, he is quietly intense and professional regarding his career in classical music. He has been involved in a Gothic role-playing game called *Ravenloft* for several years. He began role-playing in high school. Though he enjoys playing characters in games, he has focused on acting as a gamemaster for the last three years, the person who creates and guides the narrative in which the players act out their characters' parts. He is an articulate and thoughtful speaker, with the slightest trace of a soft French accent beneath his words.

"Why do you play Gothic role-playing games? What draws you to it?" I ask him.

"Well, first of all, it's an escape," he says. "It's fun, exciting. Second, there is mystery to it. Uncertainty. Anything can happen. For example, this salt shaker," he picks up the salt shaker, "can look quite ordinary; but in a game, that can be deceptive. You might pick it up, and suddenly it may start talking to you. It may be helpful or it may be dangerous. Is it part of a trap? Is it a spell? Is it madness on your part? You never know. There is a lot of emotion involved, a lot of personal involvement and intensity which draws you into a story."

I ask him if he sees Gothic role-playing as the modern equivalent of storytelling by the hearth. "Not really," he says. "Role-playing deals with the ephemeral, creating something *living*, something in the *now* that is really not repeatable. It's building an experience."

"So... it's a repetition of unrepeatable moments that make up a game?" I ask.

"Yes," he says, "When a story line ends, you might have good memories of it, you might talk with others about it later, but essentially, you go onto the next story."

"Sounds kind of Zen," I say.

David laughs for a second. "I guess it is," he says.

Later that day David lends me the boxed set of the *Ravenloft* game for me to look at.

The Narrative Dimension In Gothic Role-Playing: The Gothic World View And The Psychology Of The Uncanny

Sitting in my room, I examine the box that David gave me. Made of thick cardboard, a large picture dominates its cover. A dark figure in a black cape with a high collar is depicted in the middle of what appears to be a cemetery, with a forest of barren, dark trees situated further back. The cloudy background, tinged with tones of blue and grey, suggests twilight, yet a hazy sun blazes directly overhead. Ghostly pale women float in the air around the mysterious male figure in the center. Directly behind him on a towering pedestal is an androgynous stone angel, kneeling on one knee, its face in its hands as if grief stricken. The look on the mysterious figure's face is serene. Above this scene, framed by red scrollwork, are Gothic letters, drawn as if chiseled from stone, reading "*Ravenloft*." The box is cheesy and strangely fascinating at the same time.

Ravenloft is a role-playing game from TSR, the same company that produced the *Dungeons and Dragons* games. TSR's *Ravenloft* game is distinctly different from White Wolf's *Vampire: The Masquerade* game. While both games center on the motif of the vampire, White Wolf's *Masquerade* emphasizes oppressively dark tales set in a contemporary world of urban decay and decadence, where good and evil are often hard to distinguish from one another and where players role-play at *being* vampires, often angst-ridden characters torn between their fading humanity and the power of their blood-lust. TSR's *Ravenloft* stories, on the other hand, are set in a quasi-medieval fantasy realm where good and evil are relatively clear and where players role-play mortal characters who *fight* against vampires.

Inside David's *Ravenloft* box are books, maps, and character sheets: the skeleton upon which players will create the flesh of a Gothic narrative through interactive role-playing. The large, soft-cover books in the *Ravenloft* boxed set, *Realm of Terror* and *Domains and Denizens*, are accompanied by various maps and sheets for character statistics, some blank and some filled. The books, both written by Bruce Nesmith and Andrea Hayday, detail the structure of this imaginary world, including its history, its topography and other physical characteristics, the types of characters for players to create, the various powers associated with such characters, and statistics for dice roles. In addition, the two books feature explications of the nature of Gothic literature embedded in their instructional guidelines and artwork illustrating dark and gloomy castles, desolate landscapes, black clouds racing across the moon, and a host of macabre figures such as ghosts, werewolves, and various monstrosities. They are like recipe books: how to cook up a Gothic universe.

Realm of Terror opens with a quote from Milton's *Paradise Lost* that sets the tone of defiance within despair:

What hath the field be lost?
All is not lost; Th' unconquerable Will,
And courage never to submit or yield...
(*Realm* 6)

According to *Realm of Terror*, the name Ravenloft refers to a castle in an imaginary domain called Barovia. The land is ruled by Strahd von Zarovich, a vampiric count who centuries ago had made a pact with Death in order to gain the love of his younger brother's lovely bride, a pact that resulted in her death and his taste for... well, very dark red "wine." The players are mortal characters who happen to find themselves in this realm, often by accident, and who must battle against this evil lord to retain their lives and souls.

The two *Ravenloft* books work in conjunction with each other. *Realm of*

Terror gives a general overview of the gothic genre, the world of Barovia, the characters that populate this imaginary world, and the rules of the game, while *Domains and Denizens* provides more interior categories and technical details on the above features. *Realm of Terror* especially spends a good deal of time in instructing how to build Gothic ambiance:

Early literature of [the Gothic] genre is replete with stories of mystery, fear, and desire; of vulnerable heroines imprisoned in a fortress, their purity and sanity assaulted by the evil lord of the manor.
(*Realm6*)

Modern horror routinely slices, dices, and disembowels its victims to create a sense of fear....Gothic horror, by contrast, relies on subtler techniques. It teases and taunts its victims with terrors shrouded in mist.
(*Realm6*)

In the Gothic tale, evil is something sinister and unknown. A dark mystery lies beneath the horror, and the protagonists are compelled to unravel it....With each step beyond their comfortable, day-lit world, they discover that reality is more twisted than they could possible have understood...
(*Realm 6*)

A sense of quivering vulnerability and diffuse dread coupled with darkly lyrical sensuality, a fascination with the medieval and the antiquarian, and foreboding puzzles containing horrifying resolutions: these are the hallmarks of Gothic literature and a Gothic world view.

But what exactly is "Gothic" and how did it evolve? In *The Female Thermometer*, Terry Castle explores this question in detail. The fountainhead of Gothic literature lies in its power to evoke the uncanny; a creeping horror that arises from certain persons, things, and places (Castle 7). Castle equates the psychological state of the uncanny with optical illusions or retinal "ghosts" that seem to float up in space after one stares too long at a word or line of type (Castle 3). The uncanny subvert[s] the distinction between the real and the phantasmatic-- plunging us instantly and vertiginously, into the hag-ridden realm of the unconscious. (Castle 5)

Castle traces the origin of Gothic uncanniness to the eighteenth century's "confident rejection of transcendental explanations, compulsive quest for systematic knowledge, and self-conscious valorization of 'reason' over 'superstition'" (Castle 10). Despite its much vaunted rationalism, the Enlightenment, Castle notes, was an age that contained Cagliostro as well as Voltaire, and Mesmer as well as Hume. The Enlightenment's rejection of the supernatural led to an estrangement between rational "reality" and things which did not fit into this logical framework. Aspects of the repressed, unclassifiable self eventually leaked out from the borders of the hidden personality into "reality," producing a fascination with eerie obsessions, weird fantasies, and strange motifs: doppelgangers, dancing dolls and automata, waxwork figures, detached body parts, and spectral images.

...the very psychic and cultural transformations that led to the subsequent glorification of the period as an age of reason or enlightenment-- the aggressively rationalist imperatives of the epoch-- also produced, like a kind of toxic side effect, a new human experience of strangeness, anxiety, bafflement, and intellectual impasse.
(Castle 8)

The historic internalization of the rationalist paradigm produced the uncanny. Like the metamorphosis of ancient gods into Christian demons, older, atavistic modes of thinking do not die. They continue to haunt us in a different shape, following the Freudian law that the repressed will come back in a more grotesque form.

...the more we seek enlightenment, the more alienating our world becomes; the more we seek to free ourselves, Houdini-like, from the coils of superstition, mystery, and magic, the more tightly, paradoxically, the uncanny holds us in its grip
(Castle 15)

Nesmith and Hayday note the same phenomenon in their game modules. The convergence of contrary frames of reference takes place on both the external and internal level. On the external, environmental level, the landscape and the physical structures within that landscape reveal their Gothic origins in the uncanny merger between the animate and the inanimate, and the uneasy fusion between nature and culture.

The woods are wild, rambling, and dense....Within these wild, desolate places lie the physical structures...castle, mansion, or tower...massive and gloomy, with vaulted ceilings, sweeping staircases, and endless hallways. Like vines whose sinewy arms are slowly strangling the garden, the Gothic setting suggests a sinister animation...
(*Realm9*)

Vines *cannot* be conscious entities; that is not natural. And we *know* stone buildings, those solid monuments of culture, cannot be animate. And yet, there is an uneasy feeling...

The internal, moral level also unites contrary frames of reference. The fixed coordinates by which we guide our ethical decisions become lost in the catoptric theater of Gothic morality. Nesmith and Hayday write:

Purely supernatural plots are driven by the anti-heroes themselves: dark, fallen figures who are no longer human. Yet some part of them is attractive, perhaps more *human* than "decent" society, and therein lies the horror. Byron, Keats, Shelley-- some of the giants of the Romantic period...believed that the character of Satan in John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* was the real champion of humanity....Because they [Gothic anti-heroes] so closely resemble humans... they are terrifying in a way Freddy Kreuger could never be....Though Dracula is devoid of virtue, he still has emotions and desires that are tragically familiar.... Mary Shelley's...creature has been rejected by his creator from the moment he first opened his prosthetic eyes.... [Mary Shelley's] monster protests: " I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed....[M]isery made me a friend..."
(*Realm 8*)

Villain and victim, hero and scoundrel, evil and good; the lines separating these categories appear crystal clear on the surface. Yet beneath this surface, the axes by which we judge these categories seem to shift ever so slightly, until we are no longer quite as adamantly sure which is which...

The *Ravenloft* books epitomize Gothic literature in an abstract and condensed form. Yet, paradoxically, these books become the matrix for a concrete and expansive universe that can encompass as many Gothic tales as there are stories within people to tell. When combinations of such people get together to tell them interactively, the potential number of Gothic tales grows exponentially.

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Lynn Gelfand

Second Interview With David

We are sitting in David's apartment. The room is sunny, filled with the aromatic scent of the green plants that are scattered about the room in well-tended pots. Bach is playing in the background-- a little Gothic mood music that is at odds with the sun ny day and cheerful room. David fills my mug with freshly brewed coffee. I glance at my notes. Going through the *Ravenloft* books produced a constellation of fresh questions. How do the narrative and game aspects of role-playing interact? What effect does genre (i.e. gothic/horror rather than epic/fantasy) have on the game? What significant features mark this kind of play?

"So, how would you define role-playing for someone who knows nothing about it?" I ask. "What is its essence? Does it have an essence?"

"Hmm." David thinks for a moment. "Well, it's a game where the principle is entering a character's skin and living that character for a while instead of being yourself. And it's a game, so you can do anything that is fun with that character. You are in an imaginary world and what happens happens. You try to stick to that character, keepi ng your own ideas out. You try to live as that character would."

"How does *Ravenloft* differ from *D and D* [*Dungeons and Dragons*]?" I ask.

"Well, there is a notion of lurking evil in *Ravenloft*, of imminent doom at every second of the game. You can't sleep quietly because your bed might eat you." He smiles as I laugh. "Or it might turn into blood and you sink in it, or anything like that. It's horror. Nothing you see is what it seems. Or it can be, but you never know. That's the point. You walk into a place that you've been before and see a pillar that you know. But now it's just a few inches off. It's not where it should be. There's this creepy feeling. Things seem animated with a life of their own. But you're never sure. Fear comes from the unknown. That's important. *Ravenloft* is based on a distorted world. You are always afraid. You never know. The gamemast er keeps you on your toes, keeps the players guessing."

"People always ask me 'Why do you like that stuff? Its horror. Why do you want to be scared?' I don't really have an answer for them, why I like it. You tell me," I laugh and shake my head, aware that I am putting a question to him that I usua lly hate, "why do *you* like it?"

"I think one of the most powerful things we experience in life are emotions. And one of the most powerful emotions is being scared. Fear. Playing the game, you get a mixture of fears-- if you really get into it-- and the chance to lose yourself because it's role-playing. You are not being yourself, you are being someone else, so you can let go, and you have fun because you are with good friends. So you have many, many different emotions that come into play."

"It's cathartic?"

"It can be, if everyone gets into it," he says.

The phone rings. He answers it and breaks into French, sounding delighted. It is his mother from Quebec. He excuses himself and talks for a while in French while I sit back drinking coffee and listen to the music. I don't recognize this piece now playing. Is it still Bach? I know it is baroque. It seems to be dominated by two strands: a light, almost playful set of notes played quickly, and a slower, more resonant set of tones beneath. Both strands run parallel to each other for a while, then break apart, intertwine, and break apart again.

After about ten minutes, David hangs up the phone and smiles at me. "Sorry," he says.

"No problem," I answer. "So, how would you define a gamemaster, someone who runs the game? What is their role? What are they supposed to do?"

"Well, they need to create-- well, the players come up with the characters, and then they throw themselves at the mercy of the gamemaster. As a player, you let down all your defenses and say 'Scare me.' It's great. You can be scared, yet nothing will really happen to you. How many times in life can you say 'I'm going to let myself be scared?' The gamemaster has to provide a setting, and details and details, and of course monsters. He provides incentive for the characters to go there and there. Make them think certain things which may or may not be true. And find a way to scare them. To make them *live* something. To make them have fun also. As a player, you don't have the responsibility of preparation that a gamemaster has.

"You have to make the players *want* to come into a certain adventure or quest," he continues. "You have to hook them. Then once they're hooked, you have to somehow make it personal for the characters. For example, if I say this guy comes and offers you money to go here, who cares? But if I say your daughter has been taken away by this ancient fiend, someone whose description seems to fit the identity of someone you know from the past, an archrival; then you make it personal, then they feel involved in what they are doing. The more they are involved, the stronger will be their emotions.

"You can't do this in one night," he goes on, "It takes time. The story has to evolve over time for the players to care about their characters. For example, if two months ago in the game you saw someone touch some beautiful flowers that caused his skin to melt to the bone, his bones nearly disintegrated, and the guy bled to his death in front of you, well then, every time you see flowers, if you care about your character, you're going to freak out a bit. And if you see your friend, a character who wasn't there and doesn't know about your experience, going towards some flowers, well... you are going to react."

"How does the role of gamemaster differ from that of a player?" I ask.

"Basically, as a gamemaster, you've created the setting, you know where everything is, you know where you want to take the characters. You also have to play the characters that the players meet, such as an old woman they meet on the road who steers them in the proper direction and has information that they need. You have to play that non-player character personality convincingly. The player has to act one character; the gamemaster dozens.

"You try to create this setting," he continues, "Of course there's a plan, you want to take them from here to there and meet this person or that, but you

have to remember that players have a will of their own; they do what they want in the end. So you try to make everything you want interesting to them. They need to feel that they want to go there. You have to manipulate all the time. You have to make them feel involved and then cope with whatever they do. You need to have loose plans. You have ideas, but have to know how to react to what the characters choose to do. You constantly have to readjust. If you want them to go through a door and they blow up a wall instead and go through on the other side, you have to improvise."

"What would you do in that situation?" I ask.

"Well, it depends. If I see you're about to blow up the wall, I might tell you that you can hear a noise coming from down the hall. You, of course, stop and listen. You hear a STOMP THUD STOMP THUD coming at you very fast. The only place for you is to go through that door; you don't have time to blow it up. You are going to open that door."

"So... what was behind me?" I ask.

David grins. "You never know. It could have been a hoard of pink elephants. Or an army of demonic minions. Or it could have been an illusion. Maybe *something* in the room behind the door saw what you were going to do and made you think something was coming after you."

"Ohhh... so you can never trust your own senses."

David grins wider. "You just never know."

"Hmmm. Ok. So, how much do dice and character statistics figure into what you do as a gamemaster?"

"Well... you try to keep dice rolling to a minimum."

"Really?" I respond, surprised. I think of the time I spent tallying up dice rolls when I played *Dungeons and Dragons*, adding here, subtracting there, figuring in character strength points, percentile statistics, situational, and so forth.

"Yes," he says, "when you are dice rolling, you are in the present, you are not being in the character. But every time the character fights, you need to roll dice. It's not like when you were a kid and you say 'Bang! Bang! I got you,' 'No you missed me.' Here you have dice to tell you 'This is what happened.'"

"How does it work?"

"Well, for example, if you have an intelligence of 11 points [1 point = imbecile: 8 points = average: 18 points = supergenius] and you have to decipher a message, you need to roll a twenty-sided dice and come up with a number below your intelligence; if the roll results in a number higher than your intelligence points, you won't be able to decipher the message. Or let's say you are a fighter, very strong. You have a strength of 13 points. You're attacked by a giant spider who injects you with its venom. The spider is powerful and has inflicted 5 points of damage with its venom, which you subtract from your strength. You roll the dice; any number under your current strength means you will live; any number higher and you won't survive."

"How do people decide what their character's powers will be?"

"You have different attributes: strength, intelligence, wisdom, endurance, dexterity, and charisma. 18 points is the maximum you can have in any given attribute. You are given a set number of points, say 50, to divide

between these attributes. How you divide them is your choice. If you are a fighter, you want to be strong. If you are a musician, you want to be intelligent. If you are a priest, you want to be wise. If you are a thief, you want to have a lot of dexterity. If you are a bard, you want to have a lot of charisma. This is actually more fun than being superhuman. You really have to cope with situations. You have to think about them and be smart about them. p> "But this is *Ravenloft*," David continues, "not *D and D*. It's based on horror, so nothing is clear cut. No matter how intelligent you are, you don't know if that puzzle, once solved, may release an evil spell-- things might end up not as yo u intended. The players have to live something; they are part of a story. You, the gamemaster, create the story, and the players influence it as they go. They are the heroes of the story."

"What things are used to create a mood?"

"Well, the strongest emotions are created by contrast, in music or in anything. Let's say you are in a garden. Birds are singing. There is a gentle breeze. It's quiet, except for the birds' singing. It smells beautiful. Then you hear this scream out of nowhere. Suddenly the dark cloud that you saw on the far horizon is directly over your head, but it couldn't have gotten here so soon. The breeze becomes a cold, forceful wind. A tree behind you grabs one of your legs with its claw-like branch. Th e earth breaks apart and rotting corpses struggle out of the dirt. So, you just went, in a short period of time, from total comfort to total discomfort. This is where you live the intensity of the story.

"Different kinds of music, from festive to creepy, can be used to create a mood," he continues, "Dim lights and candles. Some players dress up to strengthen the mood." He gets up and changes the music. It is now slow and very ominous, very dark. The strings seem to tremble and the bass lowers threateningly. "Picture yourself at the entrance to a cave," he says. "You enter and are slowly going downhill. Drops of putrid water fall from the ceiling. The smell is horrible, a rotting smell. The floor is slimy. It is dark. Do you light a torch?" he asks me suddenly.

I'm surprised for a second. Then I think. If I light a torch, I become visible to whatever might be in the cave. But then again, I have to see where I am going. I say "Yes, I light a torch."

"You notice drawings on the wall, horrible drawings of people being dismembered. And in every drawing, you see the same thing; a monster with dark wings and big claws. It has a humanoid shape, with two arms and two legs. But its face is dark in every p icture; its features cannot be seen. You also see blood on the walls."

"Real blood?" I ask.

"Do you want to go check?" he asks.

"Yes," I say.

"So you go there and look at it. It looks like blood. In fact, now that you are close, you see all the paintings have been done in blood."

I can feel myself being mesmerized by the story, drawn into the gruesome mystery.

"A character doesn't know what is going to happen from moment to moment," David says, switching me back to the present. "You *discovered* it was blood. I tell you just enough so that your imagination creates the worst thing possible."

"I construct the world along with you," I say.

"Of course. But then I have to bring reality to you and make it more horrible than what you could have thought. Who did those paintings? I have to deliver them to you in all their frightfulness. But my tone of voice, the music I choose-- all of that becomes a part of the story. You live the story."

"It was effective," I say. "It especially came alive when you asked me if I wanted to light a torch. I had to decide at that moment 'Do I?' And then when I asked if it was real blood, and you said 'Do you want to go over and check?' I could feel myself walking over there and I became very aware of the darkness outside the torch light."

"That is the point. You are in there. You are doing stuff. You are *living* it."

Ritual and Carnavalesque Dimensions in Gothic Role-Playing: Games, Liminality, and Masquerade

While transcribing my notes from my interviews with David, I was struck by how important the concept of actually experiencing yourself as another character is, as well as the ephemeral "nowness" that is a part of role-playing games. Again and again significant phrases came up, such as "entering a character's skin," the "chance to lose yourself" or "let go," and the importance of "living" a story. The play-form David laid out in the interviews takes place in a conceptual space where improvised performance and theatrical fantasy fuse with narrative frames and game structure, creating a world within a world-- a fantastic world related to, yet apart from, this "real" one, governed by its own laws and logic. This description aligns itself not only with narrative, but extends itself into the domain of ritual and festival: games (*role-playing*) and masquerades (*role-playing*).

In his book, *Man, Play, and Games*, Roger Caillois notes that there are four basic categories that games fall into: *agon* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (simulation), and *ilinx* (vertigo) (Caillois vii). While *alea* and *mimicry* are the most obvious categories in role-playing, *agon* too exists, though in a modified form: the players struggle against the dark situations and dangerous characters that the gamemaster creates rather than directly competing against the gamemaster. But most significant in regards to role-playing's "world within a world" status is Caillois's assertion that the activity of play itself constitutes an "enclosed" world, related to but separate from the real world (Caillois 6), following a structure very much like that of ritual.

Like ritual, games are usually marked by an underlying code: artificial order within a chaotic world. Spatially, rituals and games are set apart from the "real" world. Like the space for hopscotch, the board for chess, the table top for cards, the arena, the stadium, or the ring, role-playing exists beyond the boundaries of real space, governed by interior, fixed laws that do not apply beyond its borders. In addition, games, like rituals, are temporally segregated, delimited by a frame which defines a specific beginning and ending for its interior context. But perhaps most significant is play's "meaninglessness"; its only value, like ritual, is intrinsic, the value participants give to it (Caillois 6-7). Whether spontaneous and freedom-oriented (*paidia*) or calculated and rule-oriented (*ludic*), Caillois asserts that play and reality "take place in different domains" (Caillois 64).

This notion of a world separated from the governing structural codes of the real world is echoed in Victor Turner's book, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*. Turner sees a dialectical interplay between society's structural codes and its "liminal" or anti-structural points, where potential, alternative models of reality may be generated and the tacit codes of society highlighted, inverted, or even destroyed (Turner 14). Such a liminal point Bakhtin would term "carnavalesque," for Bakhtin saw carnival as a highly

provocative festival presenting an alternative view of "reality" and thus embodying a means of liberating escape from the status quo (Castle 103).

Castle notes that the eighteenth century's practice of the masquerade grew out of carnival, which in turn was based upon popular religious rituals and seasonal folk festivals in the medieval and Renaissance periods, and often involved the donning of costumes (Castle 84). The archaic carnival celebrated the fluidity of metaphysics, the atavistic belief in

the underlying unity of opposites and the "organic" wholeness of experience. Folk spectacle emphasized union over separation, changing over "finished" forms...With the development of modern notions of the subject, however--what Bakhtin calls the "completed atomized being" of rationalism--this popular metaphysics was superseded.

(Castle 116-117)

Yet, this conceptual mode did not die out; it merely took on a new form. Castle remarks that despite its emphasis on rationalism and rigid boundaries (or rather *because* of it), the eighteenth century's urban culture offered a "rich domain for sartorial play and self-estrangement" (Castle 84). Like carnival, masquerades create opportunities for chaos in an orderly world.

Samuel Johnson asserted that the rich and powerful "live in a perpetual masquerade, in which all about them wear borrowed characters" (Castle 82). Yet the world of artifice, self-alienation, and fantasy was not regulated to the rich of the eighteenth century. The "Midnight Masquerade," originating in England in the second decade of the eighteenth century and lasting into its eighth decade, modeled on carnivals and fetes of the Continent, was a large-scale urban commercial venture that cut across historical lines of rank and privilege (Castle 84). Castle notes its paradoxical place in society:

[I]t was an emblem of luxury and excess...[yet] it promoted a potentially inflammatory sense of social equality by allowing the "lower orders" to consort with their betters. (Castle 104)

Persons otherwise rigidly segregated by class and sex could come together as transformed personas layered behind secrecy within a "hallucinatory," multi-faceted setting.

The masked assembly...[a] nocturnal affair, held in brilliantly illuminated rooms...was open to anyone who could afford the price of ticket and costume.... Thanks to the general anonymity of the scene, collective behavior was unrestrained: eating, drinking, dancing, and gaming were enjoyed to excess. Costumes were often spectacular and phantasmagoricThe fantastic multiplicity and incongruity of the visual spectacle were to a large degree replicated in the disparate composition of the masquerade crowd itself, which drew on both sexes and on all ranks... (Castle 103)

Castle refers to the masquerade as "shape-shifting", "parodying and charming away the hieratic fixities" of culture (82-83). Both secrecy and display were evoked by the masquerade. As Fielding observed, to "masque the face" is "to unmasque the mind" (Castle 83). One huffy critic of the masquerade noted that

The being in disguise takes away the usual checks and restraints of modesty; and consequently the beaux do not blush to talk wantonly, nor the belles to listen. (Castle 87)

Metamorphosis and fluidity are the keynotes of the masquerade. The eighteenth century masquerade was a saturnalian assault upon rigid taxonomies and fixed hierarchies. Costumes themselves provided symbolic lexicons of shape-shifting fantasy.

Besides the classic black mask and domino, popular masquerade disguises included foreign or exotic "fancy dress," transvestite costumes, ecclesiastical parodies (of nuns and priests), picturesque occupational costumes (of shepherds, milkmaids, and the like), as well as costumes representing animals, supernatural beings, and literary, historical, and allegorical personages. (Castle 103)

Gothic role-playing encompasses ritual and carnival; the world of game, both chaotic *paidic* and ritualistic *ludic*; and the "carnavalesque" world of masquerade. In Gothic role-playing, play is delimited as a separate sphere from the ordinary world, a materially unproductive yet deeply absorbing activity that only has meaning for those who choose to participate in it at some level. Caillois notes the intimate connection between playing a part and playing a game: the word "illusion" comes from the Latin *in lusio*, which means "beginning a game" (Caillois 19).

In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray observes that the fear of a narrative's power to create a world that is "more real than reality" is an old one indeed. Cervantes illustrated the potential danger that lay in "immersive" mediums such as books on high romance and fantasy in his 1605 novel *Don Quixote* (Murray 97-98). The "siren power of the narrative," Murray writes, "is what made Plato distrust the poets as a threat to the Republic" (98).

Perhaps Plato, with his vision of single-tracked totalitarian control, had good reason to worry about poets and spinners of fables. One gaming player refers to role-playing games as "an exercise in looking at different realities--not being stuck in a single reality" (Rushkoff 195).

Another role-player states that "[t]he whole idea of gaming is to play different patterns....I like playing the game where I live in a benevolent universe, where everything that happens to me is a lesson to help enlighten me further. I find that a productive game. But there are other games....[O]ne can play predator; I live in a benevolent universe and I'm the *other* team" (Rushkoff 198). Fine describes these different realities as "frames of experience" (Fine 181-183). When role-playing, a player is able to experiment with multiple frames of experience that are not normally available, realities that are not confined to status quo categorizations or prefabricated boxes of perceptual interpretations. Is this dangerous?

Role-playing games appear to be no more dangerous than any other kind of narrative or game. Traditional myths and epics such as the *Iliad*, the *Song of Roland*, the *Nibelungenlied* seem to extol the virtues of bravery, wisdom, and kindness, yet they can be (and have been) used to support the glamorization of warfare, elitist notions of "naturally" pre-ordained heroes, and dictatorships that rule "for the good of the people". Competitive games such as chess and go pit players against other players and re-enact the principles of war in a deceptively elegant manner, while games like Monopoly seem to actively encourage values such as ruthless greed and an eat-or-be-eaten ethic. However, unlike traditional narratives and traditional games, the role-playing game is a communal activity that is nonlinear and structurally open; there is no set path to follow and everyone must work together to successfully construct a satisfying experience. The role-playing game world is an infinitely complex system to explore, to experience, to *create*. Like carnival, role-playing games offer the chance to escape from mundane, commonly accepted reality--the chance to *play* with reality.

This notion of exploring different--and potentially disturbing--realities lays also at the heart of the Gothic genre. In *Exhibited by Candlelight*, editors Davidson, Stevenson, and Tinkler-Villani refer to the Gothic genre as "a form of literary outlawry" which depicts "alienation from a male, middle-class, urban literary elite." In place of the mathematical regularity and rational

balance favored by the neoclassicists, Gothic authors drew on "the alternative creative tradition of ballads, oral culture, fairy-stories, [and] primitive peasant superstition" (4).

Another often noted hallmark of the Gothic genre is its focus on death and decay. Yet beneath this surface exists a subtler undercurrent: the importance of life and vitality. Rather than live a life of detached abstraction and mechanical experience, the Gothic genre is filled with the terrors and joys of sensation, of intense feeling, of the experience of *living*. As David states, "one of the most powerful things we experience in life are emotions. And one of the most powerful emotions is being scared.... As a player, you let down all your defenses and say 'Scare me.' It's great. You can be scared, yet nothing will really happen to you. How many times in life can you say 'I'm going to let myself be scared?'" Fear is a powerful emotion; powerful emotions remind people that they are alive. Gothic role-playing games allow players to experience this *aliveness* in a safe environment.

Such a safe environment also allows people the luxury of exploring unconventional perspectives and the chance to examine one's own internal gears. What archetypal conventions dominate the culture in which we dwell? What would you do if....? In an interview with a reporter from National Public Radio, modern horror writer Clive Barker observed:

I get a lot of people who say, "You're obviously an intelligent guy. Why do you write horror fiction?" And I say..."I write horror fiction because I think horror fiction can do a lot of intelligent things and important things....Whatever happens, their lives [the lives of horror fiction characters] are fundamentally changed. They can never be the same again. And in a world in which we are sold a kind of blissful banality...finding out the devils and angels that haunt it is actually far more important (Jones 41).

For many, Gothic role-playing games are simply pleasant escapist fare; the chance to lose oneself in a stimulating narrative and play an exciting character. For some, there exists the danger of getting lost in the narrative world, like Don Quixote mistaking fantasy for reality. And yet for others, Gothic role-playing games offer the chance to explore the "devils and angels" that "haunt" both our world and our psyche, and to create alternative visions of reality from the matrix of possibilities.

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