Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing

Dennis Waskul
Minnesota State University, Mankato

Matt Lust
Southern Utah University

In fantasy role-playing games, participants collectively create and play fantasy personas in an imaginary universe by using a vast system of rules that function as guidelines for make-believe action and interaction. Consequently, role-playing games obligate participants to occupy a liminal role located in the boundaries of persona, player, and person. This study, based on approximately ninety hours of participant observation and forty interviews with thirty role-players, explores how role-players actively negotiate these symbolic boundaries: how role-players carve out distinct spheres of meaning between themselves, their fantasy personas, and status as players of these games. It also illustrates how these distinctions fail. Boundaries erupt and role-players prove unable to compartmentalize themselves so discretely. Through the lens of these games, we can examine simplified and exaggerated dynamics and entertain the possibility that we are all players located at the liminal margins between the people we believe ourselves to be and the personas we perform in situated social encounters.

Roles may not only be played *but also* played at, *as when children, stage actors, and other kinds of cutups mimic a role for the avowed purpose of make-believe; here, surely, doing is not being. But this is easy to deal with. A movie star who plays at being a doctor is not in the role of doctor but in the role of actor; and this latter role, we are told, he is likely to take quite seriously. The work of his role is to portray a doctor, but the work is only incidental; his actual role is no more make-believe than that of a real doctor—merely better paid. . . . These desperate performers are caught exactly between illusion and reality, and must lead one audience to accept the role portrait as real, even while assuring another audience that the actor in no way is convincing himself.*

—Erving Goffman, *Encounters*

Direct all correspondence to Dennis Waskul, Minnesota State University, Mankato, Department of Sociology and Corrections, Armstrong Hall 113, Mankato, MN 56001; *e-mail*: dwaskul@hotmail.com.

This study examines roles, role-playing, and personhood in the context of popular role-playing games. Role-playing games constitute a unique environment in which fantasy, imagination, and reality intersect and oblige participants to occupy the role of a "PC," gaming lingo for "player-character"—a marginal hyphenated role that is situated in the liminal boundaries of more than one frame of reality. "Games," as Goffman (1961:27) wrote, "are world-building activities." Fine (1983:7) further suggests: "By simplifying and exaggerating, games tell us about what is 'real.'" Taking cues from Goffman and Fine, we seek to understand how participants in role-playing games negotiate the precarious boundaries between reality, imagination, and fantasy. We will conclude with commentary on what these simplified and exaggerated "world-building activities" reveal about how we all manage these kinds of distinctions in more normative experiences of everyday life.

THE ROLE-PLAYING GAME: PERSONA, PLAYER, AND PERSON—FANTASY, IMAGINATION, AND REALITY

In the early 1970s Dave Arneson and E. Gary Gygax—both members of Castles and Crusades Society, an informal Minneapolis–St. Paul gaming organization—became dissatisfied with the standard fare of medieval battle games. Sometime between 1970 and 1971 Arneson organized a unique game, the "Blackmoor Dungeon Campaign," structured by principles we now deem fantasy role-play.[1] After corresponding with Gygax and additional play-testing, *Dungeons & Dragons* was first published in 1974 by Gygax's company, TSR Hobbies, Inc. By 1979 *Dungeons & Dragons* was selling seven thousand copies a month and declared by *Fortune* magazine the hottest game in the United States (Fine 1983; Smith 1980). In a few short years, *Dungeons & Dragons* bore a new genus of games and popularized an innovative method of playing games.

Three decades later *Dungeons & Dragons* has been revised in new editions—most notably *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (post-1989)—with expanded rules, elaborated gaming environments, and enough exquisite detail to satisfy the most enthusiastic gamers. No other fantasy role-playing game has been as commercially successful, and none has been quite as popular(ized). The commercial success of *Dungeons & Dragons* has spawned competition; however, "D & D" (as gamers affectionately call it) remains a standard in what is now a crowded industry of fantasy role-playing games. While the historical popularity of *Dungeons & Dragons* cannot be denied, the purpose of our research is to understand the significance of the unique ways these role-playing games configure fantasy, imagination, and reality as participants necessarily negotiate between persona, player, and person.

The Persona, Player, and Person: Role-Playing and Fantasy Adventure

Fantasy gaming is a social world, luxurious in imagination and filled with mysterious delights. This is a world of distant keeps, regal castles, glistening starships, fierce hippogriffs, rainbow dragons, and fiery jewels. It is also a world of dank dungeons, villainous necromancers, green slime, and omnipresent death. It is a world of dreams and nightmares; yet unlike these constructions of our sleeping mind, these worlds are not experienced in a state of reverie or unconsciousness. These worlds are experienced collectively—they are shared fantasies. This shared component raises issues not present in private fantasies.

—Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy*

It is impossible to count the number of hours both authors have spent as dwarf, elf, thief, magic user, or fighter. Over many years we developed untold numbers of fantastic heroes who defeated legions of extraordinary beasts, pried wondrous treasures from innumerable dead foes, and earned mammoth sums of gold as payment for our explorations of perilous fantasy worlds where good and evil are in a constant state of literal warfare. We delighted in these imaginative games, shared adventures with friends and acquaintances along the way, and, at least to some extent, still indulge these delicious flights of fancy.

The first author spent much of his adolescent years playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, continuing these games intermittently during his undergraduate college career. After a decade-long hiatus, he joined a role-playing group as a participant observer for the purposes of this research. The second author has been role-playing since 1998 and is involved in a broader range of contemporary games, including *Mekton Zeta*, *Dragon Quest*, *Big Eyes Small Mouth*, *Spy Craft*, and *Epic*. We collected the vast majority of data for this study from groups playing *Dungeons & Dragons*. Between October 2002 and January 2003 we participated in approximately ninety hours of fantasy role-play gaming sessions. We actively maintained field notes, but the primary source of data was forty open-ended qualitative interviews with thirty gamers. Although games were sometimes held in private locations, the principal setting was a local gaming store where we conducted fifteen- to twenty-five-minute interviews before or after game sessions. Data were recorded by hand, verified for accuracy by interviewees, and later analyzed for general patterns, trends, and themes.

Dungeons & Dragons is a dice-based role-playing game structured by guidelines specified in "core rulebooks" (as are all other games included in this study). Participants use dice to generate random numbers that correspond to the traits and abilities of a fantasy persona. Once created, these fantasy personas are imaginatively role-played. Yet the consequences and outcomes of make-believe role-play are always subject to indeterminate probabilities that are also mediated by the roll of dice. Dice rolling maintains an element of tension and uncertainty, a key characteristic of play (Huizinga 1950:47), assuring that "[t]here is always the question: 'will it come off?'" Players use a variety of dice (four, six, eight, ten, twelve, and twenty-sided) and

core rulebooks specify which dice should be rolled in what conditions and how to interpret the result of the roll. By using rules, dice rolls, and a hearty imagination players collectively generate "a habitable universe for those who can follow it, a plane of being, a cast of characters with a seemingly unlimited number of different situations and acts through which to realize their natures and destinies" (Goffman 1974:5).

Dices are important in most role-playing games as they are the principal means of simulating chance and probability. However, in the final analysis role-playing is more like games of mimicry than either chance or competition (see Caillois [1958] 2001). Role-playing games are largely about fantasy: action occurs in make-believe scenarios aptly described by Goffman (1974:46, 48) as an engrossable "realm."[2] These fantastic "realms" of fantasy role-play are not only generated from rulebooks and dice rolls but also by a "dungeon master," "referee," or "gamemaster." The gamemaster occupies the most important role in fantasy role-playing games—one that is often described by players as "God-like." Gamemasters create the worlds, plots, and scripts that generate a make-believe setting for game play. If player-characters are told they are in a city located on an oasis in a vast desert, or that they encounter a mysterious man who invites them to meet with the high priestess of the temple of Venus, it is the gamemaster who not only creates these landscapes and situations but also plays the role of the mysterious man, the priestess, and any other "non-player-character" that participants encounter. Similarly, if player-characters encounter hostile creatures, the gamemaster determines what kind of hostile creatures they are, how they are armed, their combat, and any other actions they might take.[3] In this way, role-playing games are akin to improvisational theater: fantasy action collectively sustains the dramatic narrative of a coauthored Goffmanian realm that is imaginatively fashioned by gamemasters and players through the use of dice and gaming rules.

Clearly, fantasy role-playing games are leisure activities that involve a unique form of play. "The game" is not competitive, has no time limits, is not scored, and has no definitions of winning or losing. Unlike card games, board games, games of chance, or organized sports, the point of fantasy role-playing games is neither merely to play well nor to "win." Instead, the goals of the game are survival and character development: participants create and play fantasy personas that, if kept "alive," increase and advance skills and abilities over the course of many often-lengthy gaming sessions. These personas fall into quasi-occupational classes (for example, barbarians, assassins, or wizards) who have expertise in specialized skills and abilities (such as spell-casting, pickpocketing, or the handling of medieval weapons). Personas often belong to fantasy races—humanoid beings that have their own special "racial" traits (such as elves, dwarfs, half-orcs, and halflings). Most important, participants *play* fantasy personas: they bestow symbolic personas that are fashioned in the liminal boundaries between interaction with other players during the course of the game and fantasy action in a world of dragons, goblins, valiant swordsmen, sagely wizards, and epic medieval warfare. Although the thematic setting varies from one game system to the next, this liminal condition is generic to all fantasy role-playing games and obligates participants to actively negotiate distinctions between persona, player, and person.[4]

In role-playing games each participant is the fantasy persona he or she plays—a brutal barbarian, a mystical illusionist, a sly gnome. "For the game to work as an aesthetic experience players must be willing to 'bracket' their 'natural' selves and enact a fantasy self. They must lose themselves to the game" (Fine 1983:4). Role-playing games are "not 'ordinary' or 'real' life. It is rather a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own" (Huizinga 1950:8). However, since fantasy personas are played—not merely generated by rules and dice—make-believe remains influenced by the same symbolic processes that mediate nonfantasy public personas. In other words, role-playing games are played with others who come to know fantasy personas (their own and others) on the basis of a collective history of real *and* fictitious action and interaction.

A participant in role-playing games is also a player; the gamer who plays the imaginary persona. As a player, each participant must know and understand the rules of the game that function as organizational guidelines for action and interaction. Players must know which dice to roll in what situation, which rulebook to consult in what circumstance, and how to manipulate a vast system of practical gaming knowledge that specifies what a fantasy persona can and cannot do, when, where, and how. Successful and satisfying games involve players who not only role-play but also possess proficiency in the complex rules. A participant in these games must not only play the role of a fantasy persona, but the player as well.

Finally, and perhaps most ironically remote in these gaming sessions, each "player-character" is also a person. Participants in fantasy role-playing games are not only personas and players; they may also be called students, employees, adolescents, adults, spouses, parents, and a wide variety of other statuses they occupy and roles they play in everyday life. As Fine (1983) has detailed, sometimes these other self-investments can interfere with role-playing games and vice versa. However, for the most part, role-playing games are fantasy adventures (Simmel [1911] 1971) or activity enclaves (Cohen and Taylor 1992). They are hobbies—a form of recreational leisure—a distinct sphere of activity that is segregated from the normal strictures of life; activities most people engage when not preoccupied with routine involvements that otherwise describe mundane life. Consequently, these kinds of activities are "outside and above the necessities and seriousness of everyday life" (Huizinga 1950:26). Like most hobbies or leisure activities, fantasy role-playing "is essentially a separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of life, and generally is engaged in with precise limits of time and place" (Caillois [1958] 2001:6).

Role-playing games can be described, explained, and understood as an activity that exists in the unique interstices between persona, player, and person. How do participants in fantasy role-playing games negotiate these liminal symbolic boundaries? To what extent do these decidedly playful negotiations illuminate the ways we all actively fashion the precarious distinctions between person and public persona? Since all people necessarily juggle a multiplicity of roles—sometimes shifting from one to the next with remarkable fluidity—are not we all players of fantasy role-playing games?

Roles, Play, and Role-Playing: Reality, Imagination, and Fantasy

The mental sphere from which the drama springs
knows no distinction between play and seriousness.
—Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*

All people play and play with roles: we take up, define, and negotiate a wide array of social roles that, though often structured in meaningful and consistent ways, are enacted uniquely from one person to the next. People play roles, and roles play a significant part in defining self. Just as we actively and fluidly construct the roles we play, those roles also define and structure self in broad social, cultural, and temporal frameworks of meaning. Of course, George Herbert Mead (1934) clearly perceived the dual and pivotal character of social roles; they are central to his understanding of the fundamental relationships among mind, self, and society.

Mead also understood the significance of play and games to both acquiring a self and developing the capacities for selfhood. Self is accomplished in a process of "taking the role of the other" with increasing degrees of sophistication that are mastered in sometimes literal and other times metaphorical play and gaming activities (Mead 1934). Children literally play imaginary roles and in the process develop the capacity to see themselves as others might—to see themselves as both object and subject—the quintessential quality of self. While often less obvious and less literal, the same dynamics occur in experiences that extend well beyond childhood. An adult acquires a new self through a process akin to the play and games of children: imaginary roles are evoked, and these sentiments (Cooley [1902] 1964) provide a structure of meaning for playing at a self that has not yet merged with the person (Turner 1978) but will, over time, be mastered in increasing increments of sophistication.

From this perspective, play and games are distinct forms of role-playing activity that present a distilled lens for better understanding the relationships among fantasy, imagination, and reality. This is partly what Mead implied in his discussion of play and game[5] and certainly what Goffman meant when he wrote:

> It is only around a small table that one can show coolness in poker or the capacity to be bluffed out of a pair of aces; but, similarly, it is only on the road that the roles of motorist and pedestrian take on full meaning, and it is only among persons avowedly joined in a state of talk that we can learn something of the meaning of half-concealed inattentiveness or relative frequency of times each individual talks. (1961:27)

In this way, the presumably distinct categories of fantasy, imagination, and reality can be shown as a subtle continuum of finely graded experience. More precisely, all social reality can be understood as emergent from the interstices of these interrelated provinces of meaning. "Conceptions are thus born as acts of the imagination" (Huizinga 1950:136).

The interrelatedness of fantasy, imagination, and reality prove central to interactionist articulations of social reality. A fundamental tenet of symbolic interaction is that human beings do not experience reality directly but through symbols, language,

social structure, and situated variables of social interaction. Mead's "rejection of the realists' position which asserts that what exists inside and outside the mind is isomorphic" (Maines, Sugrue, and Katovich 1983:164) is one of the most important organizing themes of symbolic interaction: "there is a world which subsists, but does not necessarily exist" (Mead 1936:336). Thus "the world of illusion should be included in the structure of society. People create illusions and then induce others to impute meaning to them and act in accordance with those meanings" (Maines, Sugrue, and Katovich 1983:170). Consequently, fantasy, imagination, and reality are notoriously porous: experience, knowledge, and understanding routinely slip from one to another.

In the lived experience of everyday life—just as in play and games—fantasy, imagination, and reality are not so easily compartmentalized but necessarily blend and blur to such an extent they are often difficult to convincingly separate into mutually distinct categories. Contemporary interactionist literature is filled with examples of this blending and blurring. For example, borrowing significantly from Cooley's looking-glass self ([1902] 1964), Hertz (2002) details how families created by anonymous sperm donors actively construct imaginary fathers from the most minuscule scraps of information. Mothers, and eventually children, craft stories about these "ghost fathers," and, in the process, "the anonymous donor takes on a persona of his own—a person who may be more fiction than fact" (Hertz 2002:6). Built on solid interactionist foundations, Hertz's analysis hinges on a powerful insight: fatherhood is an idea that exists independent of a father, and the idea of fatherhood is just as important, if not more so, than fathers themselves. The absence of an "actual" father makes the looking-glass of fatherhood all the more apparent.

Hertz concludes her analysis by identifying how and why these ghost fathers affirm and inform important dynamics of contemporary postmodern families. There is, however, a much more provocative and much less "post" implication: "actual" copresent fathers may be just as ghostly as the fathers of children conceived by anonymous sperm donors. In all cases, therefore, fatherhood is defined in a process that includes the fictions of looking-glass idealism. Given Hertz's analysis, it is easy to see how the symbolic role of father is not only distinct from men themselves but perhaps more important to the processes of pinning down a self. In noting the same dynamic for motherhood, Carse suggests this characteristic defines all social roles:

> It is in the nature of acting, Shaw said, that we are not to see this woman as Ophelia, but Ophelia as this woman. . . . To some extent the actress does not see herself performing but feels her performed emotion and actually says her memorized lines—and yet the very fact that they are performed means that the words and feelings belong to the role and not to the actress. . . . So it is with all roles. Only freely can one step into the role of mother. Persons who assume this role, however, must suspend their freedom with a proper seriousness in order to act as the role requires. A mother's words, actions, and feelings belong to the role and not to the person—although some persons may veil themselves so assiduously that they make their performance believable even to themselves, overlooking any distinction between a mother's feelings and their own. (1986:15–16)

The conclusion is clear: to some extent we are all participants in fantasy role-playing games. Father, mother, professor, student, sociologist—even symbolic interactionist—all words to fashion symbolic self-claims in reference to social roles and statuses; uniquely situated provinces of meaning that, as Hertz (2002:3) described, are often "more ghost like than real." We must be cautious and not push this conclusion too far. As Goffman (1974:2) wisely wrote, "social life is dubious enough and ludicrous enough without having to wish it further into unreality." We merely suggest that paramount reality is not distinct from fantasy and imagination, which are among its most interesting and fluid dimensions.[6]

In role-playing games participants are uniquely situated in the loose boundaries of the person-player-persona trinity. It should be clear by now that the distinctions and permeable boundaries between person, player, and persona roughly adhere to the more general trinity of reality, imagination, and fantasy. Participants in fantasy role-playing games literally and consciously play with this trinity of social reality; the significance of this research is that those same porous distinctions and active negotiations also occur in everyday life. Thus the question that guides this research is both simple and complex: how do people negotiate these explicitly playful and decidedly fantasy games? Clearly, answers to this question may implicate normative experiences of everyday life that are often more serious, sometimes more real, and occasionally less ludic.

PRECARIOUS BOUNDARIES AND FANTASY ROLE-PLAY

Because fantasy role-playing is structured by the rules of a complex game, we begin our analysis by discussing the general nature of these games. Our intent is to provide enough detail to clarify game-play while also identifying unique characteristics salient to how gamers create and play fantasy personas. The balance of our analysis focuses on how participants in role-playing games negotiate person-player-persona symbolic boundaries and the extent role-players are able to maintain these distinctions.

Fantasy Role-Playing Games and Gamesmanship

In role-playing games, players use a complex system of rules to craft fantasy personas in a fantastic universe of make-believe.[7] In practice, however, these rules are less regulatory and more a set of conventions and guidelines that provide a structure for exquisite detail. In other words, players use "rules" as gaming resources rather than gaming limitations, and most experienced role-players understand that "there are no rules that require us to obey the rules" (Carse 1986:10). "One of the cardinal 'metarules' of FRP [fantasy role-playing] gaming is that there are no 'rules'; the rulebooks are only guidelines" (Fine 1983:115). Rather than being bound by rules, role-playing games are structured by conventions that loosely define basic persona traits and qualities of a make-believe world that participants play *at* and game *with*—which is exactly what David claimed:

> Role-playing is enjoyable because I'm no longer bound by the rules so to speak. In role-playing games I can be a wizard, a fighter, a cleric while being a dwarf, human, elf, or half-orc. Because we don't live in the world that we role-play we are able to bend the rules to fit how we want to play. But, in reality, you can't bend the rules. You can't hover, or throw fireballs, or take a hit from a giant or an ogre—but in role-playing games you can. That's what makes them fun.

Participants create fantasy personas from basic attributes generated by random dice rolls that players interpret by assigning their personas varying levels of strength, intelligence, wisdom, dexterity, constitution, and charisma—allowing them to create imaginary personal characteristics that are best suited for the kind of fantasy persona they would like to play. A player who intends to develop a wizard or illusionist needs a persona with great intelligence and wisdom, thieves and assassins need dexterity and charisma. As James remarked:

> I usually construct characters according to how I hope to play them. If I think I'm going to play a strong fighter I'm going to give him a lot of strength and constitution points but not a lot of intelligence or wisdom. These aren't important to a fighter.

Once created, participants role-play the words and actions of their persona. Akin to discursive impromptu acting, for the most part role-playing is unlimited, constrained only by an unspecified yet shared sense of naive realism. Fantasy personas may say and do whatever they please, so long as other players and the gamemaster agree that such actions are "reasonable." For example, if a player-character is told that he[8] notices a bright shiny ring at the bottom of a pool of water, he merely needs to announce that he will dive into the pool, swim to the bottom, and retrieve the ring. The same player-character could not walk on imaginary water (without magical aid, which is possible in these games) but can go for a swim at any time. The latter action is perfectly "reasonable"; it adheres to a basic sense of naive realism and is thus considered appropriate role-playing.

However, the game becomes much more complicated. Like real life, actions have consequences, and most "significant actions" (such as combat moves, spell casting, the use of specialized skills) depend on conditions that do not always guarantee success. Dice rolls largely determine these variable outcomes and consequences. For example, the player-character who dove into a pool to retrieve a glimmering ring may have failed to announce that he will remove his armor before jumping into the pool—an oversight that could have serious consequences. Although none of us knows with absolute certainty, naive realism suggests that it is difficult to swim while suited in battle armor. Thus the gamemaster will instruct the player to roll dice to determine if the fantasy persona will recover from his blunder or sink to the bottom of the pool. Even if the player remembers to remove his armor, he may swim to the bottom, grab the ring, and suddenly discover that it is a decoy placed by some mischievous agent of evil: the ring is a trap that has been unwittingly sprung by his touch. Once again, the player will be instructed to roll dice to determine if he is able to escape the trap or will be ensnared in a watery grave. These kinds of circum-

stances, their parameters, the rules for rolling which dice in what situation, and how to interpret the outcome are detailed in core rulebooks.

For all practical purposes, this is how the game is played. Players describe what their fantasy personas say and do. In the case of significant actions the roll of dice determines the outcome, which then compels further actions contingent on the results of an ongoing chain of imaginary action, outcome, and reaction. Combat situations—which comprise a large part of these games—work in much the same way. For example, if a player-character encounters an unarmored drunk at a local tavern who proceeds to berate him with an unrelenting stream of insults, the player may decide that his fantasy persona's honor has been offended and announce he will stand up, walk over to the drunk, and slap him across his irreverent face. As in real life, we can choose these kinds of actions any time, but actions and intentions are not one and the same. The fantasy persona may intend to slap the drunk across his face, but his actions are merely an attempt; his slap may hit or miss. Thus the player rolls dice to determine if his fantasy slap "hits." Because the man is drunk and unarmored, he is an easy target; the player may, for example, need to roll a five or higher on a twenty-sided dice (an 80 percent chance) to guarantee success. If the same fantasy persona attempted to slap a palace guard—who is well protected, trained, and prepared to deal with these kinds of shenanigans—the odds of "hitting" substantially decrease; the player may need to roll eighteen or higher on a twenty-sided dice (a 10 percent chance of success). If a player-character successfully "hits," another dice roll determines how much "damage" is delivered. A slap produces little damage (say, for example, the roll of a four-sided dice), a short sword will do more (the roll of a six-sided dice), and a dwarven waraxe is even deadlier (the roll of a ten-sided dice). These imaginary people (or beasts) may attack in turn, and opponents roll dice (actually rolled by the gamemaster) that determine if they "hit" and, if so, how much "damage" results. The number needed to "hit" is determined by many factors, including the kind of armor skills and level of the opponent, and "damage" is determined by the type of weapon used modified by the strength of the attacker.

Fantasy personas and opponents have a certain number of "hit points" (also generated by random dice rolls that accumulate as the character advances). The more "hit points" a persona accumulates, the more "damage" he or she can sustain. In combat, damage is subtracted from hit points; and when hit points reach zero he, she, or it falls "unconscious" and is declared "dead" at negative ten. The basic objective of these games is to keep fantasy personas alive through numerous encounters like these, and doing so requires intelligence, skill, knowledge of gaming rules, and creative problem solving. At the very least, players must become adept at gleaning the right clues in order to reasonably size up potential opponents; a level one player-character will be utterly destroyed by a level ten opponent. A key to successful gaming is learning how to make these critical judgments as player-characters navigate the dangerous and typically violent worlds of fantasy adventure.

Our description of game-play is woefully simplified and does considerable injustice to the actual complexities of the game. A more likely scenario is one where the

unarmored drunk at the tavern turns out to be a high-level mage who, in spite of his drunkenness and foul mouth, is neither to be trifled with nor is he inclined to kindly turn his cheek. When a player-character becomes ensnared in a trap, he is rarely declared instantly "dead"; these circumstances only cause the other player-characters to spring to action and try to rescue their unwittingly helpless companion. In other words, "the game" is an ongoing coauthored narrative that players fashion out of the enormous possibilities for dramatic imaginary actions, consequences, and reactions that are mediated by probabilities determined by the roll of dice. *That* is what the game is all about: teamwork, cooperation, and survival are the organizing themes.

Although simplified, this brief description adequately highlights two critical characteristics of game-play. The first is that role-play is in the form of discursive impromptu acting: players describe what their fantasy personas say and do in the various situations they encounter and how they respond to the myriad ongoing consequences that result from those actions. Second, game-play involves rules and guidelines for dealing with chance, probability, and random outcomes—all of which are mediated by the roll of dice. In this way, infinite possibilities for imagined action intersect with finite yet indeterminate probabilities and random chance. Finite guidelines generate a structure for infinite play, "an open-ended game that any number can play forever" (Goffman 1974:6). Thus no two players can play the same fantasy persona in identical fashion, nor is it possible for two identical situations to result in precisely the same outcome. For this reason, the game is exceptionally "life-like"[9] "more like life, and less like games" (Fine 1983:8). As Trent and Justin told us:

> I enjoy rolling the dice because I like the fact that I can't control everything. . . . Chance is so important because it is the only way to really simulate reality in the game setting. I mean life doesn't really happen according to how we really want it to, so chance helps to keep things pretty real.

> Just like in life quite often the unexpected can really change things that you never expected to change, and change them in ways that you never could have expected. This is what makes role-playing such a really wonderful time—you never know what's going to happen next.

All a player can know are the rules of the game, which detail probabilities for the various actions characters might perform. The development of a fantasy persona depends on how the player handles the outcomes of these probabilities, which always entail uncertainty and chance. The realm of fantasy role-play—much like a Schutzian *Lebenswelt* or "life world"—"is something that we have to modify by our actions or that modifies our actions" (Schutz 1973:209). Consequently, the fantasy personas of role-playing games are not unlike people in everyday life—chiefly influenced not by the basic traits they start out with but by the choices they make, the outcome of those decisions, chance, and the ongoing dialectical relationship between consequences and personal adjustments. This fluid dynamic is precisely what Steve and Mark indicate:

> When you roll a character its just paper, but what happens shapes what the character ends up being.

> I usually just play the character how he's rolled and after a few hours I'll start evolving according to how he's been going. I adjust to how he's been reacting to others and how others have been adjusting to him.

Like everyday life, fantasy personas in role-playing games emerge from the innumerable possibilities that culminate over a history of choices, decisions, and consequences that are patterned and structured, yet also unavoidably unpredictable and indeterminate. Mike made this point:

> Simply because you roll up a character and put his or her stats down on paper doesn't mean he or she has any kind of personality yet. You have to play the character in order to develop a character's *real* personality. (Emphasis added)

The Persona, Player, and Person: Negotiating Borders and Boundaries

[A good role-player is] someone who plays in character and doesn't let player knowledge interfere with character knowledge—doesn't let what happens in the game interfere with playing the game on a player level. He plays the game in the game and doesn't bring personal problems into the game. It's no fun when someone does that because it plays the game out of characteristics.

—Dan, *Dungeons & Dragons* player

Because role-playing games are situated in more than one frame of reality, the activity involves more role-play than most participants recognize. While role-players tend to think of role-playing as something restricted to the moments when they play a fantasy persona, it is clear that the general dynamics of role-playing involve much more. In fantasy role-playing games, participants must actively establish symbolic boundaries between player, persona, and person and assume the right role in the right condition—a circumstance that evokes border-work.

While the concept of border-work is most often used to examine the dynamics of *inter*personal relations (tactics that establish and maintain distinctions and boundaries between people), in many circumstances it also involves important *intra*personal boundaries. By "intrapersonal boundaries," we are loosely referring to "the organization of experience—something that an individual actor can take into his mind—and not the organization of society" (Goffman 1974:13). However, distinctions between inter- and intrapersonal border-work are purely conceptual. In practice, inter- and intrapersonal border-work are quite permeable. When interpersonal border-work demarcates symbolic territories of truly different situations, these boundaries may also evoke intrapersonal forms of border-work that are necessary for the truly different selves required of those situations. This is precisely the situation of fantasy role-playing games: inter- and intrapersonal boundary work become necessary because while some circumstances require participants to be in persona, others require a player who must control the non-game-related aspects of his person to prevent them from interfering with game-play.

Of the three, the non-game-related aspects of the person are the most potentially disruptive. This is not surprising, since these are role-playing *games*. By design and intent, participants are expected to be players or the personas they are playing. Or, as William told us, "You're not yourself, you're playing someone new. . . . That's the whole thing about role-playing; you're not there to play yourself, you're there to play someone else." It is understandable why the nongame aspects of the person are irrelevant, distracting, and extraneous. James echoed this idea when he said that a good role-player is "someone who doesn't let personal feelings interfere with the game. I leave work at work and home at home—same principle in gaming." Indeed, many participants in this study used the same analogy of "leaving work at work" as part of their definition of a "good" role-player or a "good" gaming session. Thus participants in role-playing games may fluidly move between player and persona, but other aspects of personhood are more carefully contained.

For the most part, players bracket their persons with relative ease; it is implicit in the social structure of the gaming sessions themselves. As we wrote in the field notes from one of our first gaming sessions, role-players are often a motley crew of dissimilar people who are otherwise separated by significant social, cultural, and institutional barriers:

> It is an unlikely mix of people who have somehow come together to play this game . . . a university professor, a few university students, a few high school students, and others whom I could not place. Ages seem to range somewhere between an approximate sixteen to early thirties. The Dungeon Master shows up still wearing his McDonald's work uniform, a couple players are wearing unremarkable T-shirts and jeans, one player sports a derby hat and long black trench coat, while another wears shaggy hair (partially colored and partially braided), overly baggy clothes and hemp jewelry. . . . On the surface they appear to have nothing in common, aside from the fact that they all carry *Dungeons & Dragons* paraphernalia (books, gaming dice, character sheets, and miniature figurines).

By all indications, the only commonality among these people is their interest in *Dungeons & Dragons*. Yet, instead of hindering social interaction and group formation, these differences proved instrumental—even crucial—if for no other reason than players come to know one another in the course of game-play, leaving little else to otherwise bind them in what becomes an unambiguously utilitarian relationship. As we further noted:

> At no point did anyone discuss issues of relevance to their work, family, school, or anything else that pertains to their life outside of this game. Indeed, in spite of the fact that there were new players present, no introductions were made, real names were not shared, and nothing was mentioned about players as people. . . . Since informal "get to know you" chitchat seems to be either unimportant or irrelevant, I decided not to ask. But even more, normal conversation based on interactive cues seems strangely uncouth. It does not seem appropriate to actually ask the Dungeon Master if he does, in fact, work at McDonald's. It doesn't even seem appropriate to introduce myself to these players, nor does it seem unusual that they have not introduced themselves to me. Instead, players introduce themselves as the *character* they play during the course of gaming. I only know these

> people by the character they are playing and they only know me as Cantrall—a rather standoffish fighter who, although brutish in appearance, reliable in combat, and generally cooperative, does not get involved in the "party politics."[10]

Not only do players come to know each other during the course of game-play, but also, like the "friendly poker game" (Zurcher 1983:138), during role-playing sessions, "it was understood that there were to be no 'outside' interruptions. There were no radios or televisions playing, no wives serving beverages, no children looking over shoulders." In fact, for one of the role-playing groups included in this study, it was necessary to repeatedly move the location of gaming sessions for no other reason than the struggle to find a setting free of these distractions—a context insulated from "outside" interruptions that not only interfere with gaming but might also evoke roles superfluous to the game. As Huizinga (1950:21) noted, "The play-mood is *labile* in its very nature. At any moment 'ordinary life' may reassert its rights . . . which interrupts the game . . . by a collapse of the play spirit, a sobering, a disenchantment" (original emphasis).

To guard against these potential interruptions, role-playing sessions are ephemeral situations encased not only by a "spatial separation from ordinary life" (Huizinga 1950:19) but also by symbolic boundaries that "declare as irrelevant [the] norms and roles that society at large deems mandatory in favor of idiosyncratic group norms and roles" (Zurcher 1983:154). However, in role-playing games the bracketed irrelevance of the person is much more exaggerated than what Zurcher observed in the friendly poker game. While it is, for example, rare for new players to introduce themselves to others, it is common for participants to come to know each other only as the fantasy persona they play—a dynamic also noted in Fine's study of fantasy role-playing games:

> As a new player I was struck by how little I learned about the private lives of others—even others to whom I felt close. One didn't talk about occupations, marital status, residence, or ethnic heritage. In some cases it was months before I learned a player's surname. Others confirmed this observation, and suggested that it represented a need to establish a distance from one's real self. (1983:55)

This bracketing of personhood fosters a kind of "focused gathering" that Goffman (1961b:17–18) describes as providing a "heightened and mutual relevance of acts; an eye to eye ecological huddle" that is conducive to the experience of a gratifying "we rationale." Or, as Schutz ([1932] 1967:164) might describe it, this kind of focused gathering represents *umwelt* built of a pure yet also ephemeral we-relationship "in which the partners are aware of each other and sympathetically participate in each other's lives for however short a time." As these role-players illustrate, an essential component of these focused gatherings is "rules of irrelevance" (Goffman 1961b:26); a "set of rules which tells us what should not be given relevance" while also clearly identifying "what we are to treat as real." On the basis of these implicit rules, role-playing games occur within an "interaction membrane" (Goffman 1961b:65) that—like friendly poker games—"strengthen idiosyncratic norms and the cohesion and 'separateness' by declaring irrelevant certain characteristics of the participants or setting that may have considerable saliency in the world 'outside'" (Zurcher 1983:148).

The bracketing of person from both player and persona is implicit in the activity itself. Although these dynamics have surprised some sociologists of everyday life (see Fine 1983:55), they are not unusual. Whether playing a game (such as poker or *Dungeons & Dragons*) or more serious roles within institutions or occupations, part of what is implied in playing a role is that we are not playing others. The fact that non-game-related aspects of a person are effectively bracketed or otherwise ignored in role-playing games should not be any more surprising than the fact that marital roles are often suspended when people are at work, work roles are often suspended when people are at home, and so on. It is conventional to routinely encounter people whom we know only as occupants of certain statuses, and these kinds of encounters are quite normative. As the participants in this study told us repeatedly, the same principle—"leave work at work"—applies equally to role-playing games.

Even so, role-playing games become much more complicated because this activity necessarily involves a participant who actively occupies two distinct simultaneous roles within the same activity; he is the fantasy persona he plays *and* the player who enacts the persona. "There are two performances occurring in a role-playing game: a collectively imagined theater of characters and events shared among the players and the gamemaster, and the set of actual audio visual event that transpire among the players and the gamemaster" (Mackay 2001:89–90). Although this fine distinction may seem purely academic, in practice the difference proves salient among fantasy role-playing gamers. As James reported: "I try to separate myself from my character. When something happens . . . instantly you as a player will react. [But] you [the player] need to be careful how you [the character] react and distinguish between the two."

Note the words James uses to describe the distinction between player and persona, and also that it is necessary to clarify what James means by adding more specific information in brackets. In everyday life words like *you* and *me* are sufficiently precise indicators of self. When "you" ask "me" a question it is clear who is inquiring of whom, and it would be unusual for "me" to wonder which "you" is asking the question or which "me" ought to respond. However, in fantasy role-playing these words can be ambiguous in a peculiar way. Because participants are simultaneously both players and the fantasy personas they play, there exists a multiplicity of "you's" and "me's." It is not always clear which "you" or what "me" is being evoked. Even the authors of the *Dungeons & Dragons Players Handbook* (Cook, Tweet, and Williams 2000:6) recognize this ambiguity and seek to distinguish player from persona:

> The action of a *Dungeons & Dragons* game takes place in the imaginations of players. Like actors in a movie, players sometimes speak as if they were their characters or as if their fellow players were their characters. These rules even adopt that casual approach, using "you" to refer to and to mean "your character." In reality, however, you are no more your character than you are the king when you play chess. Likewise, the world implied by these rules is an imaginary one.

This precarious distinction between player and persona is crucial to role-playing games. "The *character* identity is separate from the *player* identity. In this, fantasy gaming is distinct from other games" (Fine 1983:186; original emphasis). As Dave

stated, "I separate myself from my character. Some of the things I may consider logical my character may not. Sometimes they do coincide. But I can't play me and my character [at the same time]." Peter adds: "I try to think within the game as much [like] my character as I can because there are certain things [that], as a player, I wouldn't do—but my character would do. I have to be careful in distinguishing between the two or the game probably wouldn't be fun."

While on the surface Peter's statement appears to reiterate the ways that role-players bracket non-game-related aspects of personhood during the course of game-play, the situation is knottier: role-players must distinguish between the knowledge they have as a *player* and the knowledge they presume their fantasy *persona* has. Distinguishing between "player-knowledge" and "persona-knowledge" is necessary in order to, as Chris said, "play their character *as* their character." In fact, this especially perceptive role-player went so far as to define this quality as "metagaming." Chris defines a lack of metagaming as circumstances where "you use player-knowledge instead of character-knowledge," thus resulting in "bad role-playing . . . that will ruin the game." He provides an example:

> A player may know the hit points of an ogre because you as a player just read
> the *Monster's Manual* and are transferring that knowledge to your character. . . .
> [T]he Dungeon Master plans a game based on what the characters know. So it
> can ruin the game. If a character doesn't know a monster has invulnerability
> against fire he might just bring fire-based weapons instead of something else. But
> if he does know that strength he will prepare against it.

This poses a dilemma for role-players: "It is a difficult moral decision for a player not to use a solution to a problem because his character would not have thought of it" (Fine 1983:211). Yet the participants in this study consistently cited this moral dilemma as the key to good role-play. In the words of one role-player, Rodney, when players do not separate player-knowledge from persona-knowledge—when they do not "metagame" appropriately—"it turns the game into dice rolling instead of role-playing." Isaac described a situation in which failure to segregate player- from persona-knowledge spoiled an otherwise good time:

> Once when we were fighting an army of goblins—well maybe an army is overex-
> aggerated, but anyway—because one of the players knew the average hit points
> of a goblin and knew the average damage of his fireball spell, he knew exactly
> how many times he would have to cast the spell. While it could be seen that the
> player would know this, it seems that the player took the role-playing out and
> turned it into a numbers game—which, in my opinion, takes the fun out of the
> game!

Rodney adds: "[A] minimum/maximum penchant can leave the character as a statistic rather than a character. I like to embrace the class within the system and try to find an aspect of that class I want to focus on and develop my character out of that." Charlie summed it up neatly: "Role-playing is by definition playing the role of another person. To play that person you have to keep their knowledge, values, and motivations in mind, and react accordingly."

Porous Borders and Erupting Boundaries

I think that player-knowledge and character-knowledge should be kept very separate, but it's impossible no matter how hard I try. And, it's really important that I keep them separate because a game can be ruined by too much player-knowledge seeping in.

—Trent, *Dungeons & Dragons* player

Although the analogy used in the *Dungeons & Dragons Players Handbook*, that "you are no more your character than you are the king when you play chess," holds conceptually, in practice it fails wretchedly. Role-playing games are not board games; they differ in important ways that are best described by Fine:

> In board games, such as backgammon, dice determine the outcome of sequential action, but in fantasy games, unlike in backgammon, the dice generate actions that *could* occur in the real world. A roll of six in backgammon means that the player's piece gets to advance six spaces on the board; that same six in fantasy gaming means that a player's character successfully bashes an opponent. While both of these actions are unreal, they are unreal in different ways. In backgammon, the pieces do move six spaces—a physical movement of a material object—but the spaces have no inherent meaning. No physical movement occurs in fantasy gaming, since the actions of characters are internally represented; however, within the framework of the game the bash is a real one, and the character who is bashed is really injured. The world of fantasy gaming and the rules that structure that world do not have physical effects, but the consequences are close simulations of natural interaction. The action is a direct stimulation of a hypothetical world rather than, as in backgammon, an indirect simulation enacted in a physical world. (1983:184; original emphasis)

Because role-playing games necessarily involve impromptu discursive acting in circumstances that are mediated by rules of probability and chance, they create a unique set of social-psychological conditions that further distinguish them from games like chess or backgammon. Although the game is purely fantasy, players must act, interact, and react by imagining how they would handle the same circumstances if they were their fantasy persona and the situations they encounter were genuine— by definition, that is what is implied by a *role-playing* game. As William stated, "I try to be the character as much as possible. But in absence of a reference point for the character's thoughts, it'd be my own thoughts and reactions that come into play." Dan reiterated this point: "As I play the character I think what I would do in this situation." In this way, the neat distinctions between person, player, and persona erode into utterly permeable and interlocking moments of experience. As Goffman (1974:47; original emphasis) notes, "Fanciful words can speak about make-believe places, but these words can only be spoken *in* the real world." Or, as Fine (1983:183) explains, "by playing fantasy games, participants implicitly agree to 'bracket' the world outside the game. Yet ultimately all events are grounded in the physical world." Thus rigid distinctions between fantasy, imagination, and reality—between person, player, and persona—prove untenable. Instead, role-playing games neces-

sarily involve, to borrow from Mead (1934), "taking the role of the other." In this case, however, the "other" is not someone else at all; the "other" is a fantasy character who is in fact the player and person himself. As several players told us, this peculiar dynamic does not escape the attention of role-playing gamers:

> You can't say that your PC [player-character] will never be an extension of yourself because you are playing your character. If you think your character is supposed to act that way or this way it's still just your perception because no one else can take that same character and play it totally the same. . . . You can never think like the character because the character is you. Whatever the character thinks is coming from you so it is inherently a mixture. I could play a direct opposite from me—for example, a female evil priestess—and play it well in character and still the actions would be coming from me. . . . No matter what you do it is tied with you. It's kind of difficult to separate sometimes.

> The reactions that my character takes I think or agree with, but the actions and actual role-playing are my character.

> In terms of character development I've never really regulated it. Some Dungeon Masters require one or two pages of character history. [However,] between creation and personality development, I try to find my characters in the playing of them and I try to think to myself when making a decision, So if I do this now, is this what I will always do, sometimes do, never do again? How will the actions I am about to take [apply to my character], does it fit with what I've done in the past?

Even more, participants in role-playing games often find it difficult to play a fantasy persona that is *purely* fictional. Justin told us, "I'm not very good at making characters radically different than me. . . . Role-playing games are a fantasy projection of myself—me having adventures I wouldn't normally have." In fact, many role-players claimed that effective play presumes gamers who identify with and otherwise apprehend the fantasy persona as an extension of themselves. "If a player doesn't care about his character then the game is meaningless" (Fine 1983:185). Peter not only told us, "I find it funner to play characters I understand," but also went on to describe other consequences of playing a persona that he does not identify with. He illustrated this idea by telling about a session when he played a paladin but found it difficult because "law and order are beyond me to understand." Further describing the situation, Peter said, "When we started he wasn't like me, but as time went on he became more and more like me. He began as a defender of justice but ended up a guy with a guilt complex." In short, he told us about how he created a do-gooder fantasy persona but found it difficult to actually defend goodness and justice in the course of the game. Because he ended up role-playing in ways that were out of moral alignment for his persona "he" felt guilty. The irony is that fantasy personas are purely fictional and thus cannot "feel" any more guilt than the player who plays them. Does the persona have a "guilt complex," or is Peter merely guilty about how he has played him? Clearly, the answer is an ambiguous both but neither. His persona has a "guilt complex" *and* the player feels guilty about how he has played him—the guilt is real and exists in two simultaneous frames of reality.

As this evocative situation illustrates, participants in role-playing games are located at intersections between person, player, and persona in a manner that fundamentally blurs the distinctions between them. Isaac gave us an additional anecdote that illustrates the sometimes curious ironies of role-playing:

> In Charlie's *Spycraft* campaign I play a face man character which requires that I develop multiple personas to use at various times. What I usually do is choose a name like Jeremiah Bell, for example. Then I create a personality, well, more of a persona for this name from asking myself as a player but also as a character, Is he rich? Is he poor? Is he smart? Is he backwoods? These are all questions that I as a player and as a character have to answer to develop my character fully.

In this case we have a player who plays a "face man"—a fictional persona who is made up of other fictional personas. Yet even in this complicated situation of receding layers of fantasy, the role-player cannot create fictions of pure fiction. Instead, Isaac draws on his knowledge both as a player and as a person to assist in the process of creating the personas of his persona. As these examples illustrate, at a conceptual level role-players may be able to draw fine distinctions between persona, player, and person, but at a pragmatic level, these distinctions ultimately erode. In the end, as Steve said, "I try to make everyone a little different. I don't want to play a clone of the same character every time, though I do have personality traits that creep in anyway."

CONCLUSION

> *Life, identity, and meaning are all understood as consisting of nothing more than language games, exercises in role-playing. Social reality is experienced through the performance of life, the performance of the everyday. The only difference between the entertainment form known as the role-playing game and the role-playing game of real life is that, for some reason, a great deal of seriousness and levity is handed to each person in tandem with the role they choose or are given.*
> —Daniel Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*

Participants in this study actively and playfully construct categorically unreal fictitious personas in the process of playing a fantasy game. Fantasy role-playing games also obligate participants to construct symbolic boundaries between person, player, and persona. Yet, in practice, these conceptual distinctions failed; boundaries inevitably implode as person, player, and persona blend and blur into an experience that necessarily involves all three. In the end, even the most sophisticated role-players found themselves in just the opposite situation—players who play a multiplicity of roles they cannot so easily compartmentalize. In this respect, fantasy role-playing games are not unlike experiences of everyday life, nor are fantasy role-players necessarily unique: "In taking on a role, the individual does not take on a personal, biographical identity—a part or a character—but merely a bit of social categorization, that is, social identity, and only through this a bit of his personal one" (Goffman 1974:286).

Thus, on the one hand, role-playing games are whimsically distinct: it is reasonable to assume that only a minority of people can claim experience at playing the role of a dwarven barbarian. On the other hand, role-playing games are all too familiar: it is equally reasonable to assume that most people understand precisely what it means to occasionally play other kinds of roles—often of occupational or institutional origin. In a similar sense, all is a ruse, charade, or game. In part, Goffman's insights originate from his acute awareness of how everyday life can be deconstructed by these dynamics. Consistently locating people in the liminal threshold between illusion and reality, Goffman (1961b:84–152) has left a legacy that is fully cognizant of the fact that "doing is not being." Individuals may "embrace" a role and "disappear completely into the virtual self available in the situation, to be fully seen in terms of the image, and to confirm expressively one's acceptance of it" (Goffman 1961b:106). Or, at another extreme, individuals may "distance" themselves from a role by creating "a wedge between the individual and his role, between doing and being" (Goffman 1961b:108). Here, like elsewhere in his work, the hallmark of Goffman's modus operandi is to situate people in the margins between "playing" and "playing at" (1961b:99). For this reason, although he may never have used these terms in this way, he may have been the first to recognize and fully explore the precarious distinctions between persona, player, and person in everyday life. Indeed, at the risk of redundancy, at times we all find ourselves as participants in fantasy role-playing games.

Carse's (1986:177) brilliant analysis of society and culture through the lens of finite and infinite games contains a fascinating parallel to Goffman. Both provide a penetrating analysis of everyday life largely built of a single premise: roles are often decidedly *theatrical*—patterned, scripted, situated, and performed before an audience in accordance to social norms. Roles are also necessarily *dramatic*—performed by people who creatively play in a manner that persistently introduce elements of indeterminacy and chance. Thus the structure of theater and the creative indeterminacy of drama represent twin processes that, not by accident, mirror Mead's (1934) classic distinction between the "I" and the "me." One takes on a role theatrically ("me"), one enacts that role dramatically ("I")—neither necessarily subsumes the other, nor is the whole of one's self found in one or the other. Instead, we, like participants in fantasy role-playing games, find ourselves playing in the "cracks":

> Without something to belong to, we have no stable self, and yet total commitment and attachment to any social unit implies a kind of selflessness. Our sense of being a person can come from being drawn into a wider social unit; our sense of selfhood can arise through the little ways in which we resist the pull. Our status is backed by the solid buildings of the world, while our sense of personal identity resides in the cracks. (Goffman 1961a:320)

Carse (1986:177) concludes his analysis with a chapter that contains a single sentence: "There is but one infinite game." This is the same conclusion that role-players in this study have expressed. In spite of the heroic ways by which they distinguish between fantasy and reality, persona and person, player and persona, person and player, participants in role-playing games inevitably find themselves a part of "but

one infinite game." Finite boundaries and neatly crafted conceptual provinces of meaning ultimately blend and blur to such an extent that nothing remains except a player whose gaming activities include much more than the rolling of dice. In the final analysis, it is doubtful that any of us can honestly claim otherwise. We all find ourselves players located at the liminal margins between the people we believe we are and the personas we play in various situated social encounters; between what we believe we are and what we aspire to become; between what we believe we are and what we believe others believe we are.

Have we gone too far with our implications? After all, the personas of role-playing games belong, positively, to the realm of fantasy. Unlike everyday life, role-players "adopt roles with which they strive to identify, but they do not fall victim to the illusion that they *are* those roles" (Mackay 2001:156; original emphasis). In spite of certain similarities, participants in role-playing games are also quite different from theater actors: the role-player does not share bodies with the persona they play. While they do share minds, "the player's body is never seen *as* the character's body" (Mackay 2001:88). Clearly, role-playing games neither represent nor imitate but *simulate*, in which case perhaps we have not gone too far after all.

The role-playing game is a simulation that is not "of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard 1994:1). If the contemporary cultural landscape is awash with the hyperreal, as some have suggested, then perhaps the fictions of role-playing games represent something more than another example of the kind of blending and blurring of fantasy, imagination, and reality that have long stimulated the interest of symbolic interaction. In fantasy role-play, the blending and blurring of fantasy, imagination, and reality is more than a conceptual, analytical, or methodological strategy prevalent among theoretical perspectives with certain pragmatic roots; it is, instead, an *experiential condition* endemic to a game with certain cultural roots. As Holstein and Gubrium (2000:71) have suggested, in the hyperreal Disneyland of contemporary culture, the self is "as much narratively constituted as actually lived"; "self and its associated vocabulary are a living language game." Much like fantasy role-playing games, in everyday life, "[w]ho we are ultimately taken to be as individuals derives as much from the way we story ourselves, the textual material available for storytelling, and the ways in which stories are 'read' and 'heard,' as from who and what we might ostensibly be in our own rights. These, of course, are the intertextual contours of the self we live by" (Holstein and Gubrium 2000:84, 205). In fantasy role-playing games, participants literally construct a purely "narrative self"; the fact that these games are fantasy does not obliterate the ways in which this process is akin to the same dynamics in everyday life.

NOTES

1. Fantasy role-playing games are defined best by Mackay (2001:4–5; original emphasis): "[It is] an *episodic* and *participatory* story-creation *system* that includes a set of quantified *rules* that assist a group of *players* and a *gamemaster* in determining how their fictional *characters'* spon-

taneous interactions are resolved. These performed interactions between the players' and the gamemaster's characters take place during individual *sessions* that, together, form *episodes* or adventures in the lives of the fictional characters. . . . [T]he episodes become part of a single grand story that I call the role-playing game *narrative.*"

2. Dice rolls are used to simulate chance and probability. In this way role-playing games are similar to games of *alea*—one of four main classifications of games identified by Caillois ([1958] 2001). However, role-playing games are the antithesis of roulette or other true games of *alea* in which "[t]he player is entirely passive; he does not deploy his resources, skill, muscles, or intelligence" (Caillois [1958] 2001:17). Likewise, role-playing games, like card games, involve elements of *agon*—the use of "knowledge and reasoning that constitute the player's defense, permitting him to play a better game" (Caillois [1958] 2001:18). Yet neither *alea* nor *agon* is adequate; role-playing games also involve significant *mimicry*, a "deploying [of] actions or submitting to one's fate in an imaginary milieu [and] becoming an illusionary character oneself, and of so behaving" (Caillois [1958] 2001:19). At best, one must concede that role-playing games are a complex synthesis of these classic forms of play, if not something else altogether.

3. It is not quite accurate to call gamemasters "God-like"; in gaming situations that involve deities the gamemaster plays these gods as well. Gamemasters are above the gods: they create, organize, and operate these fantasy worlds *and* mediate the supernatural forces that dictate them. Within the frame of the game, it is not unfair to endow gamemasters with supreme status:

   > While players have control over their characters' actions, the gamemaster has control over the results of those actions. Life and death are in the gamemaster's hands. Furthermore, how the characters perform in relation to the story (with its plot twists, villains, and so forth), which most gamemasters script out before the session, will determine the rewards that the gamemaster distributes to the characters. The pattern is the same one that Foucault observed[;] . . . the gamemaster is always present in a panoptic position, which inscribes itself onto the performing consciousness of the player. The gamemaster, in fact, is in an even more enviable position than the guard who watches the prisoners from the tower in utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham's 1787 blueprints for the Panopticon. . . . The game master is usually in a privileged position of observation in relation to the players. . . . This receptive capacity allows the gamemaster to survey each character, the group of characters, and the players. . . . Without a doubt the gamemaster holds the most power. (Mackay 2001:94–97).

4. The distinction between person, player, and persona adheres to what Fine (1983:194, 205) describes as the "three basic frames" that operate in fantasy gaming. As Fine wrote, each of these frames "has a world of knowledge associated with it—the world of commonsense knowledge grounded in one's primary framework, the world of game rules grounded in the game structure, and the knowledge of the fantasy world." Fine's investigation is solidly supported by his use and extension of Goffman's (1974) *Frame Analysis.* Goffman (1974:129) also clearly differentiates person, player, and persona: "The difference between actual and scripted becomes confused with the difference between personal identity and specialized function, or (on stage) the difference between part and capacity. I shall use the term 'role' as an equivalent to specialized capacity or function, understanding this to occur both in offstage, real life and in its staged version; the term 'person' will refer to the subject of a biography, the term 'part' or 'character' to a staged version thereof."

5. Others have also noted how Mead's framework necessarily entails richly layered, interrelated, and thoroughly inseparable elements of fantasy, imagination, and reality. Stone (1970) provides one of the clearest articulations of these relationships in his discussion of "fantastic socialization." He identifies two kinds of socialization that can be found in Mead's "play." The first is widely noted by sociologists: genuine "anticipatory socialization." Here realistic roles are acted according to expectations that one would reasonably expect to be adopted or encountered later in life. The second, "fantastic socialization," is often overlooked: here, one entertains roles that can seldom if ever be expected or adopted. Stone provides the example of children playing cowboy or Indian. We may add to this a long list of superheroes, dead historical figures, media-produced characters, and others who clearly occupy a central role in the "fantastic socialization" of all of us.

6. Other contemporary interactionist studies have also emphasized these dynamics. Recent studies of cybersex (Waskul 2002; Waskul, Douglass, and Edgley 2000) have explored how participants evoke an often fantastical "virtual body" for the paradoxical purposes of having sex in a disembodied communication environment. Although sometimes amusingly fictional, these virtual bodies still function as a kind of discursive looking-glass in which selfhood is reflected. In a recent study of Russian Jewish immigrants, Rapoport, Lomsky-Feder, and Heider (2002) document how immigrants' recollections of past experiences of anti-Semitism inform their process of entering a new society and identity construction. Rapoport et al. illustrate how recollections are fashioned into a "memory kit" (p. 176) where "the present draws on the past selectively and the past is not literally constructed" (p. 180). Immigrants actively construct these memory kits to such an extent that the "past" loses its concreteness and instead becomes a reservoir of private and collective memories containing an array of multipurpose resources for interpretation: "the memory kit that the immigrants carry with them consists of versatile ready-to-use narratives that render them free to maneuver between different interpretations of anti-Semitism" (p. 182).

7. In *Dungeons & Dragons* there are three core rulebooks (and a massive supply of other publications) that specify guidelines for character classes, fantasy humanoid races, medieval weapons and armor, magical spells, skills, abilities, movement, mythical monsters, and supernatural forces that include powerful competing gods (to list a few major categories). From these guidelines players craft characters within shared fantasies (Fine 1983): a vast cosmos of collectively constructed imaginary actions, interactions, reactions, and the myriad consequences that result from fantasy events.

8. We use male pronouns in this study because all the participants in our study are men. Fine (1983) discusses this gender bias in fantasy role-playing games—a bias that, in our completely unrepresentative and very localized sample, appears to remain unchanged in the two decades since Fine's ethnography was originally published. We admit the possibility that gender has influenced the dynamics explored in our research.

9. As Goffman (1974: 23) notes, "With the possible exception of pure fantasy or thought, whatever an agent seeks to do will be continuously conditioned by natural constraints, and that effective doing will require the exploitation, not the neglect, of this condition. . . . [T]he assumption is, then, that although natural events occur without intelligent intervention, intelligent doings cannot be accomplished effectively without entrance into the natural order." From this perspective, role-playing games also become "life-like" because the actions of player-characters are always subject to the outcome of random dice rolls that mock these "natural constraints."

10. All participants knew we were conducting a study of fantasy role-playing games. However, some participants apparently disregarded the fact that the first author is a professor at the local university and, since he does not look much different from a student, the occupational role seemed easy to forget or ignore. We did not conceal our intentions or identity, but without formal introductions the situation was sometimes ambiguous. During gaming sessions, we were players; other players did not seem to care about these kinds of insignificant and distracting details. The full extent of the irrelevance of these occupational roles was illustrated after over a of month game-play. The gamemaster made a casual remark about the first author being a professor at the university. Somewhat surprised, a younger player asked what the first author teaches. When he responded, "Sociology," the player merely said, "Cool. I think I'll take that next year when I'm at the university." The subject of our occupation never came up before or again. It simply did not matter.

REFERENCES

Baudrillard, Jean. 1983. "What Are You Doing after the Orgy?" *Traverse*, 29 October, pp. 1–7.
Caillois, Roger. [1958] 2001. *Man, Play and Games*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Carse, James. 1986. *Finite and Infinite Games*. New York: Macmillan.

Cohen, Stanley and Laurie Taylor. 1992. *Escape Attempts: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Everyday Life.* 2d ed. New York: Routledge.

Cook, Monte, Jonathan Tweet, and Skip Williams. 2000. *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook: Core Rulebook I.* Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast, Inc.

Cooley, Charles Horton. [1902] 1964. *Human Nature and Social Order.* New York: Scribner's.

Fine, Gary Allen. 1983. *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Goffman, Erving. 1961a. *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor.

———. 1961b. *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction.* Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill.

———. 1974. *Frame Analysis.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hertz, Rosanna. 2002. "The Father as an Idea: A Challenge to Kinship Boundaries by Single Mothers." *Symbolic Interaction* 25(1):1–31.

Holstein, James and Jaber Gubrium. 2000. *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World.* Cambridge, MA: Oxford University Press.

Huizinga, Johan. 1950. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Mackay, Daniel. 2001. *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

Maines, David, Noreen Sugrue, and Michael Katovich. 1983. "The Sociological Import of G. H. Mead's Theory of the Past." *American Sociological Review* 48(2):161–73.

Mead, George Herbert. 1934. *Mind, Self, and Society.* Edited by C. Morris. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———. 1936. *Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rapoport, Tamar, Edna Lomsky-Feder, and Angelika Heider. 2002. "Recollection and Relocation in Immigration: Russian-Jewish Immigrants 'Normalize' Their Anti-Semitic Experiences." *Symbolic Interaction* 25(2):175–98.

Schutz, Alfred. [1932] 1967. *The Phenomenology of the Social World.* Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

———. 1973. *Collected Papers I: The Problem of Social Reality.* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Simmel, Georg. [1911] 1971. "The Adventurer." Pp. 187–98 in *Georg Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms*, edited by D. Levine. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Smith, Geoffrey. 1980. "Dungeons and Dollars." *Fortune*, September 15, pp. 137–42.

Stone, Gregory. 1970. "Appearance and the Self." Pp. 394–414 in *Social Psychology through Symbolic Interaction*, edited by G. Stone and H. Farberman. Waltham, MA: Xerox College Publishing.

Turner, Ralph. 1978. "The Role and the Person." *American Journal of Sociology* 84:1–23.

Waskul, Dennis. 2002. "Naked Self: Being a Body in Televideo Cybersex." *Symbolic Interaction* 25(2):199–227.

Waskul, Dennis, Mark Douglass, and Charles Edgley. 2000. "Cybersex: Outercourse and the Enselfment of the Body." *Symbolic Interaction* 23(4):375–97.

Zurcher, Louis. 1983. *Social Roles: Conformity Conflict and Creativity.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.