

Actual Play at the Forge: A Rhetorical Approach

Popular abstract: This paper takes a rhetorical perspective to examine an “actual play” (AP) discussion thread from indie-rpgs.com, popularly known as “the Forge,” an influential and controversial online forum for tabletop role-playing game (TRPG) design that was active primarily during the first decade of the 21st century. It describes the thread as constituting a skilled discursive performance applying the Forge’s “Big Model” to a dialogical phenomenology of play that enabled interlocutors to diagnose game-related sources of frustration, unhappiness or dissatisfaction and offer potential solutions grounded in the aesthetic preferences of players. It suggests that this perspective can usefully augment more typical frame-based approaches to describing the “analog” game experience by emphasizing the lived experience of tabletop role-players in the space of the game.

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This paper examines a discussion thread at the Forge, the tabletop RPG design discussion site that operated between 2001 and 2012 (White 2015). The Forge was noted for developing an influential picture of RPG play known as the “Big Model,” which asserted that satisfyingly “coherent” TRPG play depended on the extent to which a group’s gameplay resonated with each individual player’s preferences among three “Creative Agenda” (CA). Also known as GNS (for Gamism, Narrativism, and Simulationism, which served as labels for the different aesthetic agendas), a player’s CA preferences were said to shape individual judgments about what counted as good or fun play (Edwards 2004). Despite a reputation for being a haven for abstract RPG theory talk, much of the conversation at the Forge was oriented toward unpacking “actual play”: the social interactions and communicative experiences at the table that produced the fiction of the game.

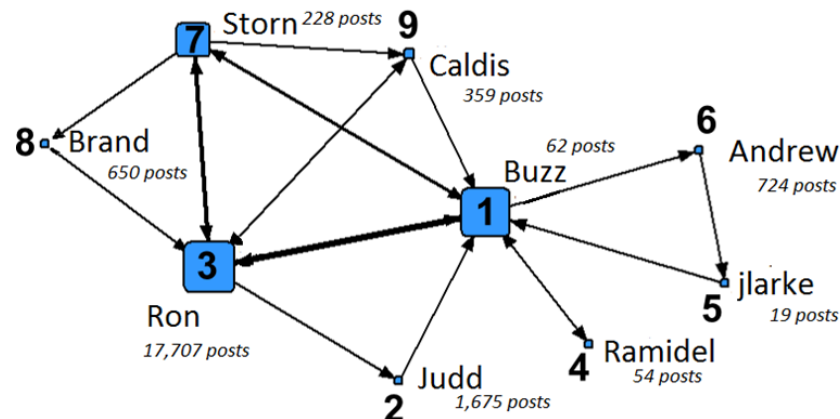
The analytic approach employed in this examination is *rhetorical*; that is, interested in the persuasive force of discourse in the face of uncertainty, and concerned with the dialogical choices available to interlocutors under particular circumstances, given their ostensible intentions and the available means of persuasion (White 2008). Methodologically, rhetoric focuses on the purposive text as the site of inquiry and applies interpretive methods—the judgment of the analyst, in other words—as its fundamental mode of operation (Gross and Keith 1996). In this case, a rhetorical critique will (1) provide an orientation to the text (in this case a single *thread* or online conversation selected for its exemplification of a typical Forge speech genre, the attempt to diagnose the causes of unsatisfying “dysfunctional” play in terms of the Big Model) in order to identify the interlocutors, their

roles, and apparent intentions, (2) reconstruct the arguments offered by interlocutors, and (3) assess what those arguments suggest about the interlocutors and the perspectives they bring to the encounter.

While space limitations prevent the presentation of a fully fleshed out reconstruction of the thread, it can be summarized here. The discussion began on April 18, 2006, when a new poster calling himself “Buzz” posted a message to the Actual Play forum asking for help “in order to get a better idea how to assess a given system from a Big Model/GNS perspective, hopefully with an aim toward application of theory in my own play” (Delsing 2006). The thread ultimately involved 9 participants who made a total of 66 posts between April 18 and May 14, 2006; those 66 posts comprised 53 turns (i.e., counting sequential posts by the same poster as a single turn). Of the nine people posting in the thread, three (Buzz, Ron, and Storn) account for 89% of the posts (87% of turns). Five of the other six make only one post each; the last (Caldis) makes two. The adjacency relationships among posters in terms of who posts before and after whom can be used to diagram the proximity of each poster to each other (see Figure 1).

Some explanation of Figure 1 maybe helpful. The size of the node representing each poster corresponds to the total number of turns taken by that individual; with Ron (that is, Ron Edwards, the co-founder and moderator of the site) taking the most (18 turns), Buzz next (17), and Storn third (11). Similarly, the thickness of the line between each pair of nodes indicates the average frequency with which the posters in each pair precede and follow each other. Each participant’s total number of posts at the Forge during its lifetime is noted in order to provide a

Figure 1: Patterns of interaction in Forge thread exemplar. Nodes are participants; arrows connect participants who precede and follow each other in sequence.



sense of their overall level of activity on the site. By this measure, too, Ron is very active, with over ten times as many posts as the next most active Forge poster participating in the thread (Judd).

The graph-theoretic visualization of the thread in Figure 1 is intended merely to orient us to the conversation taking place within it, showing that the bulk of the thread is occupied by a three-way discussion between Buzz, Ron, and Storn. It seems likely at this point that Ron is leading the discussion (given the authority implicit in his overwhelmingly high total post count and his status within the Forge community), with Buzz in the role of primary interlocutor. Storn's role is not yet clear; he enters late and seems to go back and forth with Ron, and with Buzz to a lesser extent. Given that he is well-known in gaming circles as an artist who draws superheroes, the structure of his participation implies that he is making suggestions or offering advice.

After some prefatory welcome messages in response to Buzz's first post, Ron tells Buzz that he has "about an hour of lecture" on a topic in which the latter is interested, the application of the Big Model to a superhero game called *Champions*, but that it would be more productive for Buzz to describe at least one of his actual play experiences, in order to "create the context in which we can not only make all sorts of Creative Agenda things clear as day, but also help get across" points related to understanding *Champions* in terms of Forge theory. Even though Ron rejects an earlier poster's framing of the Actual Play forum as an atheoretical space, he immediately positions himself not as lecturer on theory but as a potential co-participant with Buzz in a theoretically informed dialogue organized around actual play experiences.

In response to Ron, Buzz begins to describe a biweekly game in which he has been a player for about 3½ years. Immediately, his dissatisfaction with the game is

made clear. Buzz notes that "outside of combat or issue dealing directly with powers, there's not much of any die-rolling." This meant that Buzz's high-intelligence super-scientist character, who had been designed with the understanding that in-game puzzles or problems that might be amenable to intellectual or scientific solutions would be able to be addressed by the *character* using abilities listed on the character sheet, was at a disadvantage.

"What I'm seeing in your description," Ron finally tells Buzz, "is a classic example, Drift-heavy Champions style, of incoherent play." In this case, "Drift-heavy" refers to the extent to which a GM alters the rules-as-written in order to satisfy his or her sense of how the game should work, and "incoherent play" refers to the particular sort of aimlessness associated with games in which it is not clear how players are to find enjoyment, satisfaction, or reward with the game. Ron adds, "Long experience leads me to think that you, right this minute, are at the cusp of realizing that somehow . . . everything seems to be becoming . . . repetitive." Notice how the theoretical language is deployed in the service of offering a candidate account of how the experience of play *feels* to the interlocutor, asking Buzz to reflect phenomenologically on his own thought process or experience of the world as an experience (see White 2014 for a discussion of the phenomenology of role-playing).

Ron goes on to challenge Buzz on an element of his description of his group's play, asking, "Are you really having a blast with each [moment of] spotlight [on your character]? You qualified it, when you said so." This motif of challenge recurs a number of times over the thread, with Ron in role of Socratic chief interlocutor identifying internal contradictions or pious hypocrisies employed by his conversational partner. For example, later in the thread Ron

challenges Buzz's characterization of the group. "So they're all good-natured and communicative, are they?" he says. "Is that why your [high intelligence] character with all those deductive and perceptual skills was ignored as such? Your solution to that situation was to rewrite the character without the skills. Is that 'communication'?"

In this earlier instance, Buzz acknowledges the truth of Ron's challenge, and accepts the diagnosis of the source of his dissatisfaction with the game as related to its incoherence. Ron asks Buzz, "Do you want to delve into what your group is doing *right now* in Big Model terms? Or do you want to talk about what you'd like to see, or get from play, and discuss that?"

It is at this point, two days and 18 hours after the beginning of the thread, that Storn enters the conversation, responding to Buzz's complaint about his high-intelligence character's skills being sidelined in play with a recommendation to use a "hero point" mechanism involving the expenditure of a limited resource to represent dealing with in-game obstacles or difficulties. Storn's contribution suggests that he is an experienced *Champions* player and that he is drawing upon that experience to offer a solution to Buzz's problem; the implication is that he is trying to cut to the heart of the issue and obviate the need for pointless further discussion.

However, Ron cautions Storn that while his enthusiasm is welcome, he should avoid assuming that the way that he plays *Champions* is automatically the "right way" to play the game. Storn ultimately defers to Ron; for his part, Ron thanks Storn for clarifying and observes that "our perceptions of [Buzz's] group differ a little," which influences their judgments about appropriate courses of action. The effect is to establish Storn as Ron's peer and colleague in the inquiry about the *Champions*-related play preferences of Buzz and his group, in that Ron acknowledges Storn's expertise but seeks to guide or channel it in the service of the didactic purpose of the thread. In doing so, Ron's persona is that of the cautious diagnostician not yet ready to issue a prescription. It is actually a rather skillful de-escalation of a potentially conflictual exchange.

Meanwhile, in talking to Buzz about his play preferences, Ron asks Buzz to engage in honest self-reflection and presentation. He then draws out from Buzz's description of a satisfying play experience the features of the game that seem to be what Buzz is looking for but not getting (character empowerment, player engagement, actions with consequences, adequate spotlight time, and satisfying long-term play). Buzz acknowledges his back-pedaling, admits

that he is in fact dissatisfied, and wonders what can be done about it. "How can I approach [*Champions*] in a way that incorporates what we've been talking about and what I've learned from the Forge?"

In reply, Ron links out to another Forge thread that argued that trying to subtly alter the Creative Agenda of a group by "sneaking up" on a new play style was almost certainly bound to fail. Other posters in the thread confirm this seemingly well-established assertion. In response, Buzz says, "I feel like I'm still waiting for practical advice with specific regard to [*Champions*]." Ron replies, "I thought of a good way to do it concretely." He directs Buzz to "make up a character" for a superheroic game using the *Champions* rules, explaining that then he'll show him how to prepare as a GM for a character-driven game. He invites Storn to do the same.

At this point, the conversation moves into its final main phase. Over the course of the next few days, Storn and Buzz post their respective creations. Ron criticizes them in game-mechanical terms, but also evaluates them conceptually, pointing to ways in which the characters can be tightened up thematically and tied to one another in interesting ways. This weaving together of character backstories allows the GM to focus the game on player agency rather than GM plot, Ron suggests. The remainder of the thread involves Ron reinforcing the points he was making about story-focused play while Storn and Buzz offer defenses of particular approaches they took in designing their sample characters for the thread. The thread wraps up with Buzz and Storn indicating their satisfaction with its outcome and Ron declaring the thread closed.

This reconstruction of a Forge actual play thread shows the work of the Forge being done, and highlights the theory-informed dialogic method that underlies that work. The Big Model is supposed to be deployed reflexively, it seems--that is, in an effort to make sense of one's own play style, game preferences, and experiences of play. One talks about one's own play, in other words, in order to interrogate the choices one is making at the table and in the fiction and understand what's going on in one's own head as the game is proceeding. Thus, the discourse of "actual play" at the Forge amounts to a kind of phenomenological dialogue, requiring a skilled discursive performance in order to engage in a theoretically informed metacommunicative practice.

This stands in contrast with other modes of recounting actual play. Certainly, it goes beyond the offer to "tell you about my character" of the unconscious *D&Der* (see, e.g., Barrowcliffe 2008). But it

also focuses attention on something different than is emphasized in other traditions of play. For example, the Nordic larp scene concerns itself with comprehensive photographic and procedural documentation as the most desirable mode of recording actual play (Pettersson 2009; Stenros and Montola 2010). And while those Scandinavian accounts do pay attention to the psychological effects of play on the player, they are much less concerned than AP in the Forge tradition is with the metacommunicative intentionality of the account--with, in other words, how the player's orientation to play shapes the experience of the game.

Furthermore, the Forge tradition of AP discussion as phenomenological dialogue has the potential to augment the Goffman-derived frame-analytic approach to the scholarly examination of play that has become almost the default method in the very small literature of tabletop role-playing, understanding phenomenology in the Husserlian sense of consciousness directed at itself rather than its surroundings (Smith and McIntyre 1982). That is, the dialogic interrogation of a player's intentionality in play, even retrospectively, can add robustness to ethnographic accounts of play experience. Too much can be made of this, to be sure, but as a methodological adjunct to more traditional interview methods it may hold some promise.

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BIO

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