

Indie Gaming Meets the Nordic Scene: A Dramatistic Analysis

Abstract: This paper examines video recordings of a panel presentation by game designers Ron Edwards of the United States and Tobias Wrigstad of Sweden at an Italian gaming convention in May 2010. The paper uses a dramatistic perspective to explore the discursive dynamics of their encounter, which represented contact between role-playing game designers from different traditions that were driven by similar imperatives and goals. It establishes the context of their encounter, summarizes the video recordings that document it, and uses the “dramatistic pentad” developed by rhetorician Kenneth Burke as a tool for reading the multiple levels of narrative and interaction that emerge as each speaker presents their perspective on the development of the different communities of play for whom they speak. It identifies an important dynamic within their speech as being how orientations toward differentiation or toward integration manifest in different ways. Ultimately, the encounter between Ron Edwards and Tobias Wrigstad provides access to different ways of thinking about the relationships between role-playing communities over time and in space: as instances of differentiation or as parts of a larger dialogue.

Keywords: rhetoric, freeform, jeepform, tabletop, role-playing games, indie games, TRPG, the Forge, discourse analysis, Kenneth Burke, dramatistic pentad

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most striking aspects of the tabletop role-playing game (TRPG) hobby during the first decade of the twenty-first century was the emergence of a TRPG “indie scene.” This scene self-consciously positioned itself as an alternative to the existing conventions of design, publication, and play as they had developed through the last quarter of the 1900s, drawing inspiration from similar “indie” efforts in comics, music, film, and digital games (White et al. 2018, 78). As Appelcline (2014) notes, online TRPG discussion sites that were associated with this scene allowed participants to come together and talk about “new ways to design games, to produce them, and to publish them” (130).

And while like D&D itself, “indie games” had their origins in a Middle American context—that is, as the product of a predominantly White cis male English-speaking middle-class hobby culture (cf. Fine 1983 as well as Peterson 2012 for a description of the early TRPG hobby)—the online nature of the scene’s constitution meant that it could potentially both attract international participation—beyond the United States, that is—and make connections to other self-conscious communities of play within the broader role-playing hobby.

However, the precise contours of these Internet-enabled cross-cultural communication flows are not well-explored, despite the on-going efforts of Nordic and North American live action role-playing (larp) communities to apprise themselves of the activities of other larp groups outside their borders (e.g. Vorobyeva 2015 and Algayres 2017, respectively). A recent survey of TRPG history (White et al. 2018) centers on North American developments, although it does acknowledge the existence of “strong local traditions of TRPGs” in countries such as “Canada, the UK, France, Germany, Italy, the Nordic countries, Brazil, and Japan, among others” and offer hopes for “a more integrated future” as the Internet enables more and more international connections (83).

This article thus seeks to examine an episode of cross-cultural encounter within the TRPG hobby in order to deepen our understanding of the dynamics of such encounters. Specifically, it examines a videotaped discussion between an American indie TRPG designer and a Swedish

freeform¹ designer, both of whom were invited guests at an Italian gaming convention in 2010. It adopts a rhetorical perspective in order to make sense of each man's contribution to the discussion as an attempt to offer to each other and the audience a discursively constructed image of the RPG community, its history, and its prospects. The extent to which those offers were acknowledged and then either taken up or contested can be taken as an outline of the horizons of a discourse centered on indie TRPGs.

To that end, this paper "reads" the videotaped panel discussion through the lens of rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke's *dramatistic pentad*, which offers a method of rhetorical analysis that focuses on understanding discursive performance as enacted via a "grammar of motives" (Burke 1969). In other words, by paying attention to both the act of speaking and what is said as comprising *drama*—as performing or relating narratives—one is afforded an index of speakers' understandings of their own intentions and the constitution of the world around them. In line with Burke's ideas, this method thus takes the performativity as well as the content of the speech as points of access to the worldview or perspective that informs the speaker's utterances.

Ultimately, the resulting analysis provides a point of entry to understanding the indie TRPG scene as a kind of *participatory culture* (Jenkins 1992).

2. DIBATTITO CON GLI OSPITI INTERNAZIONALI (DEBATE WITH INTERNATIONAL GUESTS)

2.1 The Pentad and the Panel

Twentieth-century rhetorical scholar and philosopher of language Kenneth Burke's *dramatism* is a mode of rhetorical criticism in which identification, rather than persuasion, is seen as the key function enacted by speech (Burke 1969). In other words, instead of a neo-Aristotelian emphasis on showing how rhetors make a case via appeals to reason, the audience's emotions, or their own credibility, the Burkean approach asks how speakers engage via language as symbolic action in the construction of a world-view in which they ask their listeners to participate or with which they ask them to identify, using language as "a tool with which subjectivities (and agency) are constituted and reconstituted" (Fox 2002, 368). In doing so, Burke anticipates later efforts to develop dialogic models of rhetoric, such as *invitational rhetoric* (Foss & Griffin 1995), that similarly de-center persuasion as a central motive for rhetorical engagement.

In Burke's dramatistic model, a speaker in offering their worldview provides access to an understanding of the causal or motivating principles that explain how or why things occur, who is responsible, and what features of the environment or those acting within it are consequential. Burke identifies five such elements—scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose—and refers to them collectively as the *pentad*. "These are terms," notes Nelson (1983) "to be applied to different aspects of a [speech] event only after close examination. . . . For instance, in one case a speech may constitute the act and a television camera may serve as an agency used carry that speech to millions of individuals. Yet in another circumstance the speech itself may be viewed as the agency through which a particular plea is made" (63).

In other words, a speaker by speaking narrates, performs, or enacts the elements of the pentad and their interrelationships at multiple levels. First, a speaker's utterance presents that

1 **Editor's Note:** In the Nordic countries, freeform refers to a type of tabletop/larp hybrid that involves some degree of physical enactment but is held in neutral spaces such as classrooms with minimal costuming or set design.

view of the world that the speaker invites listeners to share or partake of in some way, either in recognition of its consubstantiality with their own experience or in acknowledgement of its legitimacy as a perspective that could be appropriately or justifiably held by some other. At one level, then, dramatisitic analysis reconstructs the speaker's utterance as a model of their world.

Second, the speaker's utterance can itself be taken as a moment of dramatisitic action, enacted within the specific context of its utterance as scene. In other words, the larger discourse within which a given utterance takes place enacts a scenic function that serves as the context of all speech acts within it.

To be sure, accounts of a given speech act created through the lens of dramatisitic analysis "tend to feature or stress the pentadic element which seems most important," usually on philosophical or ideological grounds (Nelson 1983, 64) It is therefore important methodologically, in creating a dramatisitic account, to pay attention to the extent to which that account emerges from the speech-act itself, and how much is an interpretive reconstruction of the speech-act and its context through the "terministic screen" (Burke 1966, 45) of the analyst's own language. Rather than imposing a new interpretive scheme upon the words of another, the dramatisitic analyst seeks to discover the underlying logic of the speaker's account of the world and its context. In doing so, the assumptions and ideological commitments embedded in the speaker's account, and from which it proceeds, are made more clearly visible and available for examination in discourse.

Thus, to the extent that the rhetorical reconstruction of a speech-act via dramatisitic analysis has value, it lies in its ability to encourage "critical and substantial reflection about the situated relations of discourse to reason, character, and community in human action" (Fleming 1998, 184, quoted in Rountree and Rountree 2015, 351).

2.2 The Elements of the Pentad

Burke identifies five elements that typically shape discursive utterances. (1) The *scene* is the setting invoked by the speaker. It is understood as a "container" within which the other elements of the pentad operate, and can include any sort of background relating to time or place, such as *society, the environment, or modern times*. (2) The *act* is the activity, action, or behavior that is of central concern to the speaker. Any verb counts, says Burke, as long it has "connotations of consciousness or purpose." Acts are willed or volitional, not mere motion. "Profession, vocation, policy, strategy, tactics are all concepts of action," he says (Burke 1969, 14). "*Tao* and *yoga* are similar words for act," he adds (15). (3) The *agent* is the actor who is performing the act with conscious or deliberate intention. Agents have motives; things merely act. "If one walks determinedly against a bitter wind, for instance, he feels very definitely that this wind is an *act* against which he is acting, but he does not necessarily feel that the wind is a *person*" (Burke 1969, 119). (4) The *agency* is the tool or instrument that enables the agent to act. An emphasis on agency is philosophically pragmatic, being concerned with the means available to a given end. (5) The *purpose* is the reason, rationale, or end toward which the agent is presumed to act. The teleological character of an emphasis on purpose lends itself toward philosophical mysticism, i.e., "those forms of speculative and religious thought which profess to attain an immediate apprehension of the divine essence or ultimate ground of existence" (Burke 1969, 287).

Given that there are five elements, there are thus ten pairwise combinations of elements (scene-act, scene-agent, scene-agency, and so forth, all the way to agency-purpose). Burke

calls these combinations *ratios*. In any given utterance, certain ratios will be more prominent than others, as they come to the forefront as explanations for what has occurred—and thus as points of contestation or critique. “The ratios may often be interpreted as principles of selectivity rather than as thoroughly causal relationships,” Burke (1969, 18) says, as when the times are more suited for the daring than for the cautious (a scene-agent ratio). Sometimes different ratios are linked, e.g., the agent, in acting according to her nature (agent-act) produces changes in the situation (scene-act) and thus make the world more congenial to herself (scene-agent). Sometimes they offer ironic contrast: “One may place ‘fools’ in ‘wise situations’ [scene-agent] so that in their acts they are ‘wiser than they know’ [act-agent]” (Burke 1969, 18).

2.3 The Panel in the Pentad

2.3.1 A Speaker’s Ethos as a Mode of Intellectual Engagement

As a preliminary move in the analysis, and as an example of the application of the pentad, the context of Edwards and Wrigstad’s *dibattito* can be established in pentadic terms, as Table 1 illustrates. At this level, the *agent-agency ratio*—that is, the relationship between the speakers and the source of their credibility or authority—presents itself as a central interpretive question. What, in other words, establishes these two international guests as authoritative speakers?

Table 1: Burkean Pentad of InterNosCon 2010 Panel

| Element | Description |
|----------|--|
| Scene | InterNosCon 2010, an Italian gaming convention focusing on story-centered “indie games” of the sort emerging from the North American TRPG scene in the 2000s |
| Act | Speaking on a panel in front of a small, engaged audience of Italian gamers |
| Agent(s) | Ron Edwards and Tobias Wrigstad, international guests of honor at the convention |
| Agency | Their experiences of play and philosophies of design |
| Purpose | To discuss, not debate, important aspects of role-playing games |

The centrality of the agent-agency ratio is made clearest at the moment where, in Part 12, Edwards pushes back against Wrigstad’s complaint that Edwards has appended “for you,” to some opinion that Wrigstad has vouchsafed. Calling attention to the way that the scene privileges them as speakers, he uses that to problematize the authority they are granted except insofar it emerges as a product of their particular experience, saying:

If Tobias and I were sitting around in these same chairs with no particular arrangement among the chairs, and we were all talking together, then I don’t think me interjecting, ‘For you,’ would be necessary at all. But the fact remains that . . . we are sitting up here at a special table, the camera is trained upon the fronts of our heads and the backs of your heads . . . and this backed by economics: I did not pay to come here, you did.

These features create imbalances that can affect the perceptions of authoritative talk. So it is my sensitivity to that issue, and it may be an oversensitivity, that leads me to want to focus on that story [of] where-I-come-from aspect of what we've said. (Narrattiva Video, Part 10)

In Edwards' view, who they are and how they came to be that way matters. They represent different communities of play, North American "indie games" of the sort produced by participants at the Forge on the one hand, and the freeform larp/tabletop hybrid games promulgated by the group known as Vi åker jeep, or jeepform, on the other. Edwards is able to mention games that he knows his audience will be familiar with (Jared Sorensen's *Inspectres* 2003 and Jake Norwood's *The Riddle of Steel* 2002) and is familiar with those mentioned by the audience (Eero Tuovinen's *Solar System* 2008). Wrigstad is less familiar with those games, and is more willing than is Edwards to be critical of particular touchstones of TRPG play ("The World of Darkness sucks balls," he asserts; Edwards is willing to allow that some play groups may find something of value or interest in White Wolf's World of Darkness game setting).

The agent-agency ratio is also at stake in the little bit of online commentary on the videos that exists. In one of Moreno Roncucci's announcement threads, I happened to comment on the first four videos by saying, "I think it's interesting how the encounter between the two men is less a confrontation than a juxtaposition of two different trajectories through the recent history of role-playing. Ron advances a vision of an increasingly pluralistic role-playing meta-culture in which silenced voices are once more unfettered, lost tribes are brought into the fold, and an on-going conversation permits experimentation and mature judgment. Isn't this ultimately what the Forge is supposed to be all about? Similarly, Tobias talks about a movement toward designs that are compact, narrowly focused, and thematically resonant. If that's not a description of jeepform, I don't know what it is" (White 2010).

One forum poster named Matthijs reacted to my contemporaneous summary by saying with heavy sarcasm, "So what you're saying is here we have [two] white guys (i.e., privileged dominant males from western societies), telling us that history so far has naturally and inevitably led us to the pinnacle of gaming evolution, which they represent? ;) [winking smile emoticon] All we need now is for one of them to say that we now know everything there is to know" (Holter 2010). In the face of dismissive replies to this post, another poster defended Matthijs, "Ok, Ron apologists, we get it, no one should dare point out that his being a white male (an extreme version from what I can tell) colors his opinions and how he presents them (like by presenting them as facts instead of, you know, opinions) . . . Ron does say things of value, but a lot of times his opinions are colored strongly by the fact that he's a straight white male (as are his games and theories for that matter). Basically, his words should be taken with a grain of salt, and pointing that out isn't trolling" (Hearns 2010). The fact that this poster accuses Edwards of exactly the thing he attempts to distance himself from in the panel speaks to the resonance of this agent-agency ratio in this speech act.

The event-level agent-agency ratio can be understood more fully only by moving down into the individual rhetorical performances of Edwards and Wrigstad. Although not a debate *per se*, the panel offers a contrast between the two positions that emerge from the different perspectives offered by the interlocutors as they enact their identities in front of the audience of Italian indie gamers. At the level of performance, the self-presentation of each speaker as a speaker—what ancient rhetoricians would call their *ethos*—is an obvious concern. It is by means of this sort of performance that the speakers attempt to construct personae for themselves in interaction with each other, the translator, and the audience.

In examining each man's interactive performance of self, we begin with a concern for agency in Burke's terms, since the means by which each speaker seeks to engage with the audience and with each other is an important element of a speaker's ethos. To characterize the agency of each speaker, I will draw upon philosopher Steve Fuller's model of *interdisciplinary interpenetration* (Fuller 1993), in which he attempts to describe the ways that scientific communicators interact across disciplinary boundaries. The framework he develops, however, is analogous to the case in Ravenna, in which adherents of different intellectual positions address each other in order to establish the points of contact and points of differentiation between those positions.

Fuller creates a typology of interdisciplinary interpenetration by characterizing the communication dynamics at work between disciplines, or more precisely, from one disciplinary center towards another. That characterization rests on two sets of distinctions, the first a difference in communication style that Fuller calls either Sophistic, or oriented toward persuasion, on the one hand, or Socratic, or oriented toward dialectic, on the other. In the former, a speaker finds it important or necessary to emphasize the common ground between her and her audience, to minimize the differences between their positions. In the latter, a speaker opposes "spurious consensus" (Fuller 1993, 61), emphasizing points of disagreement between himself and his audience. The persuasive speaker, Fuller implies, engages in arguments "only as part of a general plan to motivate action," while the dialectician argues "so as to reach agreement on a proposition" (Fuller 1993, 60). In classical rhetorical terms, what Fuller calls persuasion is *deliberative* while dialectic is *forensic*, or truth-seeking. However, for our purposes the important feature of this distinction is that persuasion is difference-minimizing, while dialectic is difference-amplifying.

The second dimension, Fuller says, "concerns the direction of cognitive transference. . . Does a discipline engage in persuasion or dialectic in order to import ideas from another discipline (I), or to export ideas to that discipline (E)?" (Fuller 1993, 61). He goes on to explain that "the distinction corresponds to the two principle functions of metaphor . . . respectively, to test ideas in one domain against those in another ('negative' analogy), and to apply ideas from one domain to another ('positive' analogy)" (Fuller 1993, 61). The interaction of these two dimensions produces four contingencies, as shown in Table 2, which Fuller (1993) calls "interpenetrative possibilities" (61), but which are equally appropriately understood to be modes of intellectual engagement.

Table 2: The Interaction of Communication Strategy and Intellectual Function (after Fuller 1993, 64)

| Communication Strategy | Intellectual Function | |
|---|--|---|
| | <i>Negative Analogy (Evaluation)</i> | <i>Positive Analogy (Application)</i> |
| <i>Persuasion (Difference-Minimizing)</i> | Incorporation | Sublimation |
| <i>Dialectic (Difference-Amplifying)</i> | Excavation | Reflexion |

The modes of intellectual engagement (see Table 3) thus emerge as ideal types describing how a speaker occupying a particular intellectual position, or speaking for a particular discourse community, may make claims about relevant ideas in relation to that position. And while Fuller uses these modes to characterize discursive formations related to the interaction of scientific fields and specialties, they are arguably applicable in any situation in which particular agents (in Burke's sense) are associated with particular sets of ideas, and discourse about the relationships among those ideas takes place.

Incorporation (P-) involves a speaker who straightforwardly adopts ideas identified as being from elsewhere to address some problem the speaker faces and usually imagines is shared by the listener. For example, the *Quick Primer for Old School Gaming* (Finch 2008) describes four "zen moments" that are taken as lessons emerging from reflecting upon the way that *Dungeons & Dragons* was played prior to the 1980s that can make fantasy role-playing gaming more fun.

Sublimation (P+) is essentially a claim that differences between interlocutors are "natural extensions of one another's position" (Fuller 1993, 63). For example, in an online discussion thread about designing RPG character skills, a poster offers a schema that comprises eight different categories of character action (e.g., attack, defend, move, etc.) that "could be of some use when it comes to balancing character skills/powers/items/special abilities" since "whenever a GM makes a player roll the dice or a mechanic is called up to solve things, it's about one of these options" (WarriorMonk 2018).

Table 3: Modes of Intellectual Engagement (after Fuller 1993)

| Label | Mode | Description |
|-------|---------------|---|
| P- | Incorporation | Difference-minimizing evaluation. Showing how ideas originating from outside are relevant to problems in the speaker's intellectual domain. |
| P+ | Sublimation | Difference-minimizing application. Showing how ideas from the speaker's intellectual domain are relevant to problems outside it. |
| D- | Excavation | Difference-maximizing evaluation. Showing how ideas originating from outside the speaker's intellectual domain are problematic within it. |
| D+ | Reflexion | Difference-maximizing application. Showing how ideas from the speaker's intellectual domain are problematic but seeking nonetheless to retrieve, retain, or otherwise extract intellectual content from them. |

Excavation (D-) is error correction, as when larpwright Mike Pohjola's (2003) "Turku Manifesto" argues that gamist and dramatist styles are inferior to simulationist and eläytyjisti (character immersion-centered) styles of live-action role-playing.

Reflexion (D+) is "both *reflexive* and *reflective*," according to Fuller (1993, 62), implying

a kind of self-regarding introspection that interrogates the conceptual foundations of an intellectual project. Torner's (2016) *Analog Game Studies* piece on uncertainty in role-playing games includes a reflexive moment, identifying his concern for transparency in RPG design as the context within which his remarks on uncertainty should be taken (142). More to the point, Torner and his colleagues offer analog game studies (and *Analog Game Studies*) as a reconstitution of game studies, a "hack" that is "not so much a 2.0 as a 0.5" (Torner, Trammell, and Waldron 2016, 3) that shows "how the field's marginalia have been important and central to the dialogue of games in the 21st century all along" (5).

3. RON EDWARDS IN THE PENDAD

3.1 Ethos: Discourse in Irenics

In using Fuller's ideas to characterize the agency of the international guests of honor at the InterNosCon 2010 panel, it quite quickly becomes apparent that Edwards engages in the panel via the mode of sublimation. His communication style is highly accommodating, and his approach is irenic—aimed, that is to say, at peace or reconciliation.

Numerous examples exist. Early on in the panel, he attempts to reframe Wrigstad's objection to his point about the multiplicity of design efforts in early *D&D* as agreement about the value of dialogue in producing design, though Wrigstad doesn't wholly accept that characterization. As it proceeds, Edwards continues to try to identify points of consensus, as when he attributes the claim that the "current design culture has recovered and celebrates the origins of role-playing" to both Wrigstad and himself. Additionally, he is dismissive of the notion that there is conflict between tabletop RPGs and other sorts of games, such as MMORPGs and CCGs. He is very interested in seeing the North American "indie" TRPG scene and the jeepform movement both as proceeding from similar impulses in reaction to the same orthodoxy about RPG play and design, both derived "primarily from the connections among us as people," and interested in "producing . . . genuine theme" that speaks to those playing the game. Even when Wrigstad says that it's important to "focus on our differences," Edwards is willing to concede that "reflection is absolutely crucial."

Table 4 thus shows how the other aspects of the pentad can be assigned when sublimation is taken as the rhetoric of agency in Edwards' performance on the panel.

Table 4: Burkean Pentad of Ethos of Ron Edwards

| Element | Description |
|---------|--|
| Scene | A panel at InterNosCon 2010 |
| Act | "Already agreeing" with Tobias Wrigstad and an audience of Italian indie gamers |
| Agent | Ron Edwards, proponent of the claim that "system does matter" |
| Agency | Rhetorical mode of <i>sublimation</i> , in which jeepform and the "indie scene" are argued to be related manifestations of a singular reaction to conventions of 1990s TRPG play |
| Purpose | To advocate for the most inclusive and diverse possible conception of what role-playing is or could be. |

The concept that lets him minimize the differences between Wrigstad and himself, as he attempts to point out on several occasions during the panel, is the idea that “System Does Matter” (Edwards 1999), which he had proposed over ten years earlier in counterpoint to the then-prevailing wisdom that TRPG rulesets were less important than the skill of the Game Master (GM) in running the game. Edwards can expect that his audience of Italian indie gamers will be aware of this, and aware as well of the online discussion site for indie TRPG design, publication, and play called the Forge that hosted conversations elaborating the implications of this claim. However, even when drawing upon this source of authority, Edwards is willing to accommodate Wrigstad’s reluctance to accede to the claim that system does matter. “Now perhaps the use of the word ‘system’ has its own legacies in different places that makes it difficult to use,” Edwards tells Wrigstad. “I am not wedded to the term, I only use it in that construction because I am rebelling against the idea that the techniques do not matter because the [game master] is just going to give you the story anyway” (Narrattiva Video, part 10). Thus, even though it would be reasonable to posit that “System Does Matter” could be taken as Edwards’ agency at the speaker level, such an interpretive move would draw attention away from the sublimating mode of intellectual engagement within which the idea that System Does Matter is deployed.

Burke (1969) views this sort of slipperiness at the operational level as offering a salubrious interpretive flexibility. “Since the five key terms can be considered as ‘principles,’ and since the margins of overlap among them permit a thinker to consider the genius of one term as ‘substantially’ participant in the genius of another,” he says, “the ambiguity of the substantial makes it possible to use terms as points of departure” (53). Or, as Nelson (1983) puts it, “Sometimes the components interact so intimately that they actually overlap” (64). In this case, the effect of interpretively “forcing” System Does Matter away from agency and closer to Edwards-as-agent highlights what Burke might call their consubstantiality: it calls our attention to the way that Edwards identifies himself with the claim that system matters, and the subsequent discussions at the Forge and elsewhere elaborating that proposition.

It also directs our attention to Edwards’ purpose as agent in this pentadic configuration. What, in other words, are the consequences of believing that System Does Matter? The answer is larded through his talk during the panel, and has something to do with a broadened range of possibilities for TRPG play that is fully apprehended by an ecumenical discourse community. For example, as the panel began, he referred to a restoration of the creative ferment in TRPG culture during the 1970s, and attributed it to the dialogue facilitated by the Internet and indie publishing as a movement (Narrattiva Video, Part 1). He found it laudable that a game group might be able to weave together an “indie” game system and a 1990s-era game setting to produce a play experience they would find rewarding, without having to engage in gamer identity politics over how to “do it right” (Narrattiva Video, Part 2). He appreciated that “we are avoiding a [subcultural] identity politics problem with jeep versus tabletop” without having “to call one the advanced way and one the retrograde way” (Narrattiva Video, Part 10). And, near the end of the panel, he even called for a looser understanding of what it means to engage in game design:

We could be talking about designing and playing better role-playing games. We could be talking about breaking that and making a different thing, rather than absolutely defining the distinction between those two ideas. I’d rather not do that. I think that there is a productive dynamic between saying I am making a

better role-playing game and saying, no, I am making something different. Rather than knowing which one you are doing, perhaps it is better to recognize that there may be a difference between the two but—but it is a dynamic relationship over time with many different games. Someone could have been trying to make a better role-playing game, and what they did opens up the door to something completely different, or someone could have said, “Oh, no, I am completely different, I am not making a role-playing game,” and what they do inspires someone to make a better role-playing game. We don’t know. We don’t know. Just let that be dynamic. Let that—relax about that. (Narrattiva Video, part 11)

3.2 Logos: Edwards Agonistes

The agent-purpose ratio that emerges at the level of the speaker’s ethos for Edwards connects his ideal of System Does Matter with a teleological vision of TRPG community in diversity. There is some irony in this that makes itself apparent when moving from this ethical level characterizing the speech-act to the narrative that constitutes the *logos* of Edwards’s talk. That is, despite his commitment to comity on the panel, Edwards reveals that he has often been subject to vituperative feedback for claims he advances, and that the response to the implications of System Does Matter—particularly those regarding the existence of different aesthetic priorities in TRPG play—was among the most severe.

Some of you may associate me with controversy on the Internet for one or another supposedly heinous thing I have said or written at one time or another—everyone suddenly put on their neutral faces. Everyone suddenly went, “Oh, no, I would never think that about you, Ron.” I see you. I don’t care because when I proposed that in role-playing as a hobby we actually see profound differences in priority, astonishingly profound differences in priority that made all the diversity of sports just one thing, and that the presence of these different priorities at the table—or excuse me I should say, the presence of the different priorities among the group—is an extraordinary source of incoherence and dysfunction, the reaction to that I got ten years ago was astonishing. I was the devil. The devil. This was the worst thing anyone in role-playing had ever heard. I was divisive. I hated the hobby, obviously. I was breaking up not only groups but my group, this person would say. “You—my group! You are trying to break it up! How can you do this? You’re evil!” This was terrible. (Narrattiva Video, Part 11)

Edwards offers this story not to endorse it; he wants his listeners to recognize that the motivations ascribed to him by others during the period he describes were inane implausible. Table 5 recapitulates this narrative thus far.

If Edwards can show that the fear that motivated the claims of his accusers was baseless, then their accusations lose their force. Thus, he must disconnect the act of accusation from its ostensible purpose and show it to be rather a product of something else, in this case the scene-act ratio—in other words, the motivating force that stems from the material influence of an agent’s circumstances (see Burke 1969, 3-7). Specifically, Edwards invokes the notion of “geek social fallacies” that produce dysfunction in “the constellation of allied hobbies and subcultures collectively known as geekdom” (Suileabhain-Wilson 2003), of which the TRPG

community is one. Edwards puts it this way:

But to sit down and say anybody and everybody, any game any time, let's just do it, we all know what good role-playing is, we're all gamers together so we must want to do it all for the same reasons—it is a legacy of the subculture. It is rooted in geek subculture, that to identify personal differences in why we want to do this, and to group up for a particular game with a particular group of people because we agree on one way to do it, on one particular priority—geek subculture says that is rejecting and bullying other people. Rejecting them, you must hate them, you must not want to play with them. So a great deal of what has happened with Forge discussion, and I suspect has been happening in jeep, is to reject the sense of victimization, the sense of certain social fallacies which characterize geek subculture. (Narrativa Video, Part 11)

Table 5: Burkean Pentad of Ron Edwards's Narrative about the Reaction to System Does Matter

| Element | Description |
|---------|--|
| Scene | The "geek culture" of TRPGs |
| Act | Accusing Ron Edwards (me) of divisive devilry |
| Agent | Opponents of "System Does Matter" |
| Agency | Internet discussion |
| Purpose | To save their gaming group from feared dissolution |

In general, these fallacies are assumptions about the operation of friendship that are said to be common within "geek culture," a term that may be taken as referring to "'communities of practice' . . . oriented to certain media forms and genres" (Woo 2018, 15) such as superhero comic books, science fiction and fantasy literature and films, and games like *Magic: The Gathering* and *Dungeons & Dragons*. They are said to cause conflicts within geek social circles when taken to an extreme degree, amounting to excesses of tolerance for offensive behavior, conflict avoidance, expectations of group loyalty, and lack of social selectivity.

Table 6: Burkean Pentad of Ron Edwards' Counter-Narrative

| Element | Description |
|---------|--|
| Scene | Role-playing discourse in the late 1990s and early 2000s |
| Act | Advancing the controversial notion that different creative priorities exist in TRPG play |
| Agent | Ron Edwards (I) |
| Agency | Internet discussion |
| Purpose | To promote the rejection of "geek social fallacies" as applied to TRPG groups |

Thus, Edwards can expect his audience to accept that the fear of having a role-playing group break up once its members acknowledge that they may have different play preferences is an unreasonable fear emerging from “geekish” misconceptions about social dynamics.

This provides an opening for Edwards to suggest a countervailing narrative that is both more plausible and more congenial to the Italian indie gamers of which the audience comprises, as Table 6 summarizes.

4. TOBIAS WRIGSTAD IN THE PENDAD

4.1 Ethos: The Panelist as Pugilist

Wrigstad, for his part, comes right out and says that he thinks it’s important to focus on differences because such a focus forces people to identify the reasons for their beliefs. In presenting himself to an audience that is relatively—but not entirely—unfamiliar with the gaming tradition he represents, he emphasizes the critical evaluation of certain TRPG tropes by members of the Swedish freeform scene, and the similar critical response to the conventions of Swedish freeform that produced the jeepform movement. Wrigstad thus clearly employs *excavation* as his mode of intellectual engagement. Table 7 summarizes this ethos.

Table 7: Burkean Pentad of Ethos of Tobias Wrigstad

| Element | Description |
|---------|---|
| Scene | A panel at InterNosCon 2010, an Italian indie gaming convention |
| Act | “Battling, or agreeing with, Ron Edwards” |
| Agent | Tobias Wrigstad, Swedish freeform gamer and “jeepwright” |
| Agency | Rhetorical mode of <i>excavation</i> in which “rules, tables, dice, dragons, and New York” are rejected as unsatisfying |
| Purpose | To advocate for focused game design of the sort practiced by Vi åker jeep |

To a great extent, Wrigstad relies on his difference from his audience as the source of his credibility. He speaks from, and for, a community of play that is different from that of his audience, and he is a far less well-known figure to his audience. His ability to be critical of gaming tropes upon which he must expect that his audience still relies depends to some extent upon what White (2008) calls “xenomancy”: that is, “how we offer ourselves and interpret others as strangers” (22) in dialogue with others involves “an interplay of threat and resource in interaction” (7).

4.2 Logos: We Come By Jeep

Moving down from the ethical level of self-presentation to the “logo-narrative” level of world representation (see Table 8), Wrigstad’s story of the emergence of jeepform retains its focus. Interestingly, where Edwards presented a personal narrative, Wrigstad presents a communal one, showing how jeepform was a product of the Swedish and to a lesser extent Danish

freeform scenes that came out of Scandinavian convention play in the late 1990s and early 2000s in which, first, “rules, tables, dice, dragons, and New York” (Narrativa Video, Part 7) were abandoned as unsatisfying conventions of tabletop gaming, and then, later, the similar abandonment of larp conventions such as props and costumes as well as a certain linearity of scenario design. And while he does talk about satisfying play as having something to do with staying in the moment, ultimately Wrigstad emphasizes the psychological aspects of play as a key feature of jeepform design. “We realized,” he says, “that a really, really big part of what a game is, is what’s happening between the players as opposed to what’s happening between the characters.” That is a great thing to understand, he adds, “because then you start making games that are trying to reach the players through the characters” (Narrativa Video, Part 8). This “metaplay” of what happens between the players is as important as the “actual play” of what happens between the characters, he concludes (Narrativa Video, Part 9).

Table 8: Burkean Pentad of Tobias Wrigstad’s Narrative of Jeepform

| Element | Description |
|---------|--|
| Scene | The Swedish convention scene in the 1990s and 2000s |
| Act | Creating “jeepform” as a style of play |
| Agent | Jeepform gamewrights, like Tobias Wrigstad (We) |
| Agency | Abandoning unsatisfying conventions of tabletop and larp play |
| Purpose | To create games that facilitate something happening to and between the players |

5. CONCLUSION

In this interpretive examination of a moment of dialogic encounter between figures associated with different TRPG communities of play, an important insight that emerges is how themes of differentiation and integration manifest in different ways at different levels of speech. This motif emerges in contrasting ways when Edwards and Wrigstad are compared. For example, they differ interestingly in the agency through which they constitute their ethos, with Edwards adopting the integrative mode of *sublimation* and Wrigstad adopting the differentiating one of *excavation*. On the other hand, Edwards offers a narrative in which his association with the claim “System Does Matter” sets him apart from the geek subculture that resists this claim while Wrigstad presents jeepform as a communal evolution stemming from shared desires about the kinds of games the community wanted to play.

This analysis also provides some sense of the way that otherwise localized hobbyist scenes such as “indie” TRPGs and jeepform games are able to connect across international borders via reference to specific cultural products—games, in this case—as positive or negative touchstones of identity and affiliation: the indie TRPG *Inspectres* versus *Vampire: The Masquerade*, for example.

Ultimately, the value of Kenneth Burke’s dramaturgic pentad lies in its heuristic ability to focus attention on different levels of narrative and interaction in order to attend more closely to what is being offered in discourse with others. And the encounter between Ron Edwards and Tobias Wrigstad provides access to different ways of thinking about the relationships

between role-playing communities over time and in space: as instances of differentiation or as parts of a larger dialogue.

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