Five Strands of Fictionality
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Role-playing games developed in the last thirty years primarily in the United States and Britain. In such games, a group of players (at least three but as much as dozen) take on the roles of fictional characters in some alternate universe. They generate basic statistics that represent the acquired skills and physical attributes of these characters. One of these players will serve as the referee and design this universe, creating settings to explore and opponents to confront. Players will usually join these characters into a single group to overcome these conflicts, occasionally using dice to decide the outcome of events—whether a character wins or loses a fight, succeeds or fails at a difficult physical task, and so on. In the end, characters who negotiate these challenges successfully usually receive rewards of some sort—valuable objects, increased abilities, or information that unravels mysteries. Players carry over their characters from one playing session to the next, and the next situation they encounter may continue the action of earlier sessions, or may introduce entirely new events and opponents. Although many players enjoy the game for the challenge of “winning” and developing powerful characters,
others see in the game an extended form of acting performance in which they develop characters whose actions are psychologically realistic.

Even from this brief summary, it is clear that role-playing games are fundamentally narrative in nature and that they depend on a very particular understanding of fictionality. Role-playing games are played within a storytelling environment, whose dynamics are primarily narratological: players construct characters, anticipate events and the plot lines they imply, and respond to settings for exploration and adventure. Players as well as referees work to imagine possible actions and to construct storylines. What strikes me as especially interesting is that role-playing games go further than the works of the previous chapter in locating fictionality beyond literary institutions. Indeed, role-playing games are at the extreme of the spectrum opposite of John Barth’s myth, since they make virtually no reference to literary institutions for their reception and do not appeal to traditional literary values to justify their fictionality.

In this chapter, I am particularly interested in how role-playing games construct narrative worlds as a way to understand their particular definition of fictionality. We find that these games—and I will focus primarily on the original Dungeons and Dragons game itself and its first-generation revisions—define the game world as a collection of objects that allow players to mix characters and situations drawn from a variety of science fiction and fantasy novels. What seems especially important is that these games have a very different relationship to the literary institutions that I have been discussing thus far in this project. Even in the previous chapter, where science fiction writing occupies a somewhat marginal position in relation to mainstream literary study, we still saw an appeal to this writing framed as a form of (culturally significant) literature. Indeed, my whole focus in that chapter was on the way that science fiction emerged as a form of writing interesting to academic critics. In contrast, role-playing games define themselves by appealing to popular genres and by adopting a relationship to these texts that can seem scandalously irreverent. In this chapter, I would like to explain this understanding of fictionality as a response to contemporary market culture. I will go further and apply these conclusions to possible world theory used to describe fictional worlds in literature. Role-playing games and this particular way of understanding fictional worlds have remarkably similar genealogies. Both come to prominence in the early 1970s and reach their full articulation by the end of that decade by transforming models developed in the previous century. Both, I will argue, can be seen as a response to questions about what we can and should do with fictional texts. In this sense, the birth of role-playing games reflects the development of another form of fictionality—one
based not on myth, archive, lying or style, but on assembling a world from diverse textual sources.

A World Made of Objects

Role-playing games evolved out of battle simulations that use miniature figures to represent groups of soldiers moved around some kind of playing board battlefield. Role-playing games depart from battle simulations primarily in terms of scale. Where earlier simulations used miniature soldiers or artillery pieces to represent whole army battalions, role-playing games focus on the actions of individual characters.1 The transitional text in this regard is the 1971 rulebook *Chainmail*, which was the basis for *Dungeons and Dragons* and role-playing games that followed. The majority of the *Chainmail* booklet concerns the large-scale movement and combat of medieval armies, with play built around the strategies for organizing groups of soldiers. Rules are given, for example, to describe the rate of movement of different types of soldiers across different kinds of terrain, the various formations these soldiers can adopt, the number of rows of archers and cannons permitted to fire without danger of hitting soldiers in front of them, and so on. Individual figures moved around a scale battlefield are taken to represent a group of soldiers of the same type. Subsequent editions of the *Chainmail* rules, however, complicate this model. After discussing group combat, *Chainmail* introduces another set of rules for man-to-man combat: “Instead of using one figure to represent numerous men, a single figure represents a single man.”2 A few pages later a third set of rule variations is offered as a “fantasy supplement,” applying these combat rules to fantastic creatures (dragons, ogres, elves) and abnormally powerful heroes.

This shift in the *Chainmail* rule booklet from armies to individuals shows that the tactics handled in one way at the level of a large-scale battle must be transformed as the scale is lowered and focus is placed on individual combatants in role-playing games. In the original *Chainmail* rules, military units are generic: every group of archers, for example, is the same. As long as they are still alive on the battlefield and have not lost their morale and fled, they

1. This is obviously an abbreviated history. One treatment that is frequently used by critics writing about role-playing games is Lawrence Schick’s *Heroic Worlds: A History and Guide to Role-Playing Games* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1991), which provides a good, short overview of this history and evolution of these games.
behave like any other archery unit. Likewise, combat has only a few possible outcomes: units live or die, kill or miss. Such a blunt combat method is possible when a large number of troops are being used by players; when, however, the scale is reduced and players control a single combatant, having an encounter decided immediately and so finally removes nearly all tactics from the game. As a result, the fundamental innovation of the successor to *Chain-mail, Dungeons and Dragons*, is the concept of the “hit-point”—a certain number of injuries that a particular player can sustain before dying. Thus, combat tactics are retained at the level of the individual character, since now players can decide when to engage or withdraw from combat based on how many injuries their characters and their opponents have sustained. Thus, the role of chance in the game has been narrowly circumscribed. The concept of the hit-point has become so ubiquitous within contemporary game design for allowing a certain kind of tactical manipulation that it is the basis even of trading-card games like *Pokémon*—games with no direct basis in large troop tactics and little connection to role-playing games.

The development of role-playing games, then, depends on finding a way to endow individual characters with statistical qualities that allow tactical manipulation. For the purposes of my interest in role-playing games, this is the essential quality of these games. As I noted at the outset, the statistics that individual role-playing games use to define characters vary from game to game but usually represent a combination of acquired skills, possessions, and physical and mental attributes. The original *Dungeons and Dragons* rules, for example, take into account the type of weapons and armor worn by a character, his or her level of training, as well as physical strength and dexterity. Subsequent games usually introduce some variations on these terms but rarely depart from them wholesale. These games rarely count as tactically significant many of the qualities that we think of as most significant in the real world: race, class, and gender. Indeed, many games encourage players

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3. This is, of course, not the only element of role-playing games that might be of interest to narratologists, nor the only way that we might frame the emergence of these games within contemporary culture. Daniel Mackay in *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001) and Kurt Lancaster in *Warlocks and Warpdrive: Contemporary Fantasy Entertainments with Interactive and Virtual Environments* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999), for example, focus on the nature of performance during the role-playing game session. Mackay in particular develops a phenomenological theory of the difference spheres for player performances (60), and the way these are defined culturally, formally, socially, and aesthetically.

4. Race does have a place within these early games, but this is race conceived in this fantastic landscape by such broad categories as human, dwarf, or elf. Such a definition treats race more as a synonym for species rather than as a matter of the subtle physical and cultural differences that we associate with race. Later versions of *Dungeons and Dragons* do introduce
to make up their own social background as a way of getting into character without necessarily recording this information as one of the central game statistics.\textsuperscript{5} Although some later games like the Anne Rice–based \textit{Vampire: The Masquerade} take class and social structures more seriously, \textit{Dungeons and Dragons} uses as its starting point an essentially middle-class model for subjectivity and ability.\textsuperscript{6} In this latter game, characters succeed or fail based on inherent qualities, learned skills, and personal choices. When the conditions of success are defined in this way, whatever explicit social structure may exist within the world is largely a veneer superimposed on individual bodies endowed with certain abilities and potentials that determine their true power in the game.

This brief description should suggest that these games define the world as a structure not of events but of objects.\textsuperscript{7} Once players have defined the objects in the world and assigned them statistical qualities, what particular players might choose to do with those objects is quite open-ended. The lock

\textsuperscript{5} In the \textit{Dungeon Master's Guide} (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1979), Gary Gygax introduces a discussion of social class as follows: “There is no random table for determination of a character’s social status to be found here. That is because the inclusion of such a factor will either tell you little or nothing of useful nature, or it will abridge your freedom with respect to development of your campaign milieu” (88).

\textsuperscript{6} Mark Rein-Hagen, \textit{Vampire: The Masquerade: A Storytelling Game of Personal Horror} (Clarkson, CA: White Wolf, 1992). Gygax describes “adventuring” in essentially economic terms of risk and suggests that such risks are most appropriate for middle-class characters: “adventurers would come from the younger children of aristocrats—those who will inherit little and wish to remain in the favored class. Some would come from the middle group—adventurous persons who aim at becoming members of the aristocracy through successes in such adventures. Few, if any, would come from the lowest class, i.e. the bondsmen and common laborers” (\textit{Dungeon Masters Guide}, 88).

\textsuperscript{7} Indeed, even when these games describe history, it is as a collection of objects. Originally the “treasure” won upon successful completion of a \textit{Dungeons and Dragons} mission was fairly generic, for example: gold, gems, magical potions of several standard types, magical swords that increased the player’s chances in battle, and so on. Over the course of the expansions to the game in 1976, and then in the first mainstream rulebooks in 1977 through 1979, descriptions of treasures in the game increasingly focused on artifacts with very distinctive histories. While most of the description of treasures continues to be concerned with finding more mundane objects of value, the attention given in these rulebooks to particular artifacts increases. One item, the “Jacinth of Inestimable Beauty,” for example, comes attached with a legend drawn from the history of one campaign world: “Legend relates that the \textit{Jacinth} was possessed by the fabled Sultan Jehef Pe’reen for a time and then passed into the Land of Ket and southward into Keoland (see \textit{The World of Greyhawk}), where all trace disappeared” (Gygax, \textit{Dungeon Masters Guide}, 158). In no other part of these rulebooks are such histories so important.
on a box might be opened with a key or picked by a skillful thief, but players could also propose prying it open with a tool or carrying it to the top of a wall and dropping it. Some of these activities are covered by standard tables that define chances of success, but even when actions that fall outside of the rules are proposed by players (dropping the box from a height), the result can be interpolated based on other rules. A box, for example, can be assigned hit-points and the damage caused by being dropped from a height might be calculated using combat tables for blunt weapons. It is because players might propose actions that have no precise definition in the rules that all role-playing games have some type of referee who controls no particular character but who constructs the spaces explored, controls the players’ opponents, and determines the outcomes of all actions. Precisely the opposite is the case in more traditional board games, where players do not have the option of inventing, for example, a new kind of move in the middle of a game of chess. These games are defined not only by the objects on the board (the pawn, the rook) but also by a very strictly limited range of actions and events.

The contrast between game worlds based on objects and those based on events is nicely exemplified by the game described in Robert Coover’s novel *The Universal Baseball Association*. This novel tells the story of Henry Waugh, a man who becomes so obsessed with a kind of baseball simulation game he has invented that he gradually loses contact with all of his social relationships outside of the game. Although Coover’s game may at first seem similar to role-playing games because it relies heavily on statistics and complex charts, these statistics describe not objects but events. Coover explains, for example, what happens when dice-rolls call for the Extraordinary Occurrences chart to be consulted: “Two successive throws of triple ones and sixes were exceedingly rare . . . but when it happened, the next throw was referred, finally, to the Chart of Extraordinary Occurrences, where just about anything from fistfights to fixed ball games could happen.” The characters of Waugh’s game have relatively few individual statistical qualities (they are defined simply as a Rookie, Star, or Regular). Henry, however, comes to identify them as personalities, as he builds elaborate narratives around these random statistical events: “Henry was always careful about names, for they were what gave the league its sense of fulfillment and failure, its emotion. The dice and charts and other paraphernalia were only the mechanics of the drama, not the drama itself. Names had to be chosen, therefore, that could bear the whole weight of perpetuity” (46–47).

What is especially noteworthy about the contrast between role-playing games and the baseball game described by Coover is that they locate agency in very different ways. In both role-playing games and the baseball game Coover describes, we recognize characters acting within an overall narrative. But while the players of role-playing games control these actions and try to manipulate the statistics to produce a desirable narrative end (power, success, discovery), Coover’s Waugh is active only in how he records the events. Although Waugh must make certain tactical decisions, throughout the game he quite literally plays both sides of the fence—making decisions for both teams in a particular game that are fair and obey common game management practice. Waugh strives to keep his own desires and agency out of the actual play of the game, allowing the random generation of events to determine the outcome. Indeed, when he invites a friend to play the game with him, he is irritated to find him making illogical or unconventional choices (189); it is clear that Henry’s game decisions strive to replicate standard ways of playing. In this novel, narrative worlds are organized around events that proceed by their own logic, but at the expense of creative agency in shaping their direction. For all that he seems to be playing a game, in fact, Waugh’s relationship to his baseball league is much closer to that of the reader of a traditional narrative: he observes events and responds to them, participating only to the extent that he gives particular events meaning. In contrast, it is clear that one of the goals of role-playing games is not merely—as is often claimed by proponents—to participate in an ongoing narrative, since this is what Waugh does. Instead, role-playing games give players something to do and make them responsible for the outcome of the adventures that they undertake.

I have focused primarily on the implications of the move from large-scale troop-based to individual combat. The other innovation that we can see occurring in the original *Chainmail* rules—the introduction of fantasy elements—may initially not seem relevant to the issue of player agency. However, without the fantasy elements, these rules would essentially function as a way of recreating an antiquated style of combat, with emphasis probably placed on greater and greater accuracy in the details of moving.

9. Game designers routinely suggest that role-playing games are a way of helping to create shared narratives that we would otherwise consume passively in novels or films. In *Rifts Game Master Guide* (Taylor, MI: Palladium Books, 2001), Kevin Siembieda remarks in his preface to a recent role-playing game manual: “We role-playing gamers use our power of imagination to create and tell stories. Stories each and every player in the group helps to mold through his or her character’s actions and interaction with others in the gaming group. Together, we create a *shared experience* visualized in our heads. Together we shape an epic story of adventure and heroism” (9).
using, and maintaining various military units. Such historical simulations do have a small but loyal following as part of the gaming community but are not usually considered role-playing games.\(^{10}\) What strikes me as important is not merely that extraordinary things happen in role-playing games, but that the nature of these extraordinary things seems to line up directly with precedents laid down by a variety of popular and literary subgenres. Daniel Mackay notes that after the appearance of Dungeons and Dragons, “Many new role-playing games reflected the literary influences of the designers”: “The trend was to create role-playing games based on works of literature. The worlds of Jules Verne, J. R. R. Tolkien, or Michael Moorcock ceased to function as a generic fantasy model and became the very thing that the role-playing game intended to simulate. This trend also applies to the comic-book influence in role-playing.”\(^{11}\) The emphasis is not on the fantastic in general but on fantastic elements whose origin is clearly in a certain kind of speculative or fantasy literature.

If one considers the various types of role-playing games, one is immediately struck that they are directly connected to various subgenres of contemporary popular writing. Lawrence Schick’s catalogue of role-playing games compiled in 1991 reads like a list of subgenres within popular literature; he groups them into categories like superhero, espionage, fantasy, horror, humor, mystery, science fiction, westerns, swashbucklers, and pulp adventure stories. Mackay goes further and suggests that role-playing games have a reciprocal relationship with fantasy literature, and that the industry as a whole has evolved towards cross-marketing: the “strategy of using novels to stimulate interest in role-playing successfully brought new role-playing gamers into the fold. Readers were drawn to the game to discover what they were missing. In turn, the publication of novels based on role-playing games influenced the literary genre itself as new authors used the game as inspiration for their own tales” (20). Good examples of this reciprocal relationship are the very popular “Forgotten Realms” novels produced by TSR, the publisher of Dungeons and Dragons. Such novels not only obey the general milieu of the game but also describe a particular world whose maps and histories players can purchase to use in their own Dungeons and Dragons game. Characters

10. Greg Costikyan notes the different audiences for role-playing games and historical war games in his history of the game company SPI. Noting the narrow but loyal audience for war games, he points out that “in 1982, the 30,000 subscribers of Strategy & Tactics, SPI’s flagship magazine, were the most avid wargame enthusiasts on the globe. More than 50% of them, per SPI’s own feedback, owned 100 or more wargames; most of them bought a dozen or more games very year, not counting the games they received as subscribers to the magazine” (“A Farwell to Hexes,” http://www.costik.com/spisins.html).

and situations described in these novels then appear, in full statistical detail, in game information about the “Forgotten Realms” setting. Role-playing games, then, are fundamentally a way for players to engage in favorite books and popular subgenres, to make beloved texts into a place where one can play. Although many recent role-playing games are fairly strict about defining their world through close attention to the texts that inspire them—*The Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, Lovecraft’s horror fiction—what is remarkable about the original *Dungeons and Dragons* is how catholic its sources are. To read through the original 1974 rules for this game is to be struck by how much these rules are a system for intertextual connections. Probably the simplest example of this intertextual quality is the list of creatures that the game offers up as antagonists for play. The original 1974 rulebook draws its creatures from a variety of myths and legends. While some of these creatures are generic enough that they betray no particular textual or mythological origins (giants, ogres, trolls, goblins), others clearly come from particular sources. Mummies and vampires, for example, can be traced back to modern horror films, while creatures like medusae and chimeras are obviously lifted from Greek mythology. When this list of creatures is expanded to create the *Monster Manual* (1978) as part of the launch of the game into mainstream toy- and bookstores, the creatures become even more heterogeneous: from vaguely naturalist creatures like dinosaurs and sharks to others imported from various mythological categories like djinni and leprechauns. The intertextual logic of these borrowings becomes more apparent in the explicit treatment of mythology in the game. The last of the first-generation “supplements” to the game, *Gods, Demi-Gods & Heroes* (1976), describes deities using standard game statistics (the Egyptian god

12. Such is the case in particular of the novels describing the adventures of Drizzt Do’Urden written by R. A. Salvatore (see, for example, *The Crystal Shard* [Renton, WA: TSR, 1988]). Salvatore created this character based on the *Dungeons and Dragons* milieu, and TSR has included game statistics about him in subsequent publications like Ed Greenwood et al.’s *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast, 2001).


Set, for example, has 275 hit-points.\textsuperscript{16} What is perhaps most remarkable in this strange book is that alongside traditional pantheons of deities (Egyptian, Greek, Norse, Indian, and so on) are descriptions of deities from fantasy worlds like the Robert E. Howard’s Conan novels. This book shows how fundamentally the game is rooted in allowing players to bring elements from many different fantasy books together. And what allows these games to make such intertextual connections is the way that the objects that make up these game worlds have been defined statistically. A regularized statistical definition allows objects from a variety of textual worlds to be combined and compared. Having read \textit{Gods, Demi-Gods & Heroes}, for example, players know that while the Egyptian god Ra can move a third faster than the Greek god Apollo, the latter is a slightly better fighter (17th vs. 16th level).

Because it is built on such a messy intertextuality, \textit{Dungeons and Dragons} is the best available model for how these games draw on literary sources. Although games based on a single literary world (such as Anne Rice’s vampire novels or H. P. Lovecraft’s horror stories) frequently have the reputation within gaming communities of being better games for more serious players, it seems to me that role-playing games inherently involve borrowing from various sources.\textsuperscript{17} The very idea of \textit{playing} in such a world means bringing one’s experiences to bear and connecting these worlds to other sources of inspiration.\textsuperscript{18} Again Mackay is helpful in summarizing the way that such games are performed by players. Mackay describes gameplay sessions as “hyper-textual”: “The shifting . . . from frame to frame in the role-playing game performance is analogous to navigating from link to link in a hypertextual space. Just as the navigation between links in cyberspace presents the possibility of continuing on to new links and never returning, so too in sessions


\textsuperscript{17} Complaints about the heterogeneous nature of \textit{Dungeons and Dragons} go back almost to its beginnings. Bruce Galloway complains in his guidebook \textit{Fantasy Wargaming} (New York: Stein and Day, 1981) about the odd mixture of creatures and objects that populate the game world and concludes, “Motive is the key word. D&D scenarios exist in a vacuum, and that is why we call them unsatisfactory. To be satisfying, a fantasy scenario must contain its own intrinsic and consistent logic. There are a variety of ways of achieving this. One . . . is to choose a fantasy world which already ‘exists,’ complete with its own geography, history, opposing deities and races. These can be found within the course of dozens of paperback fantasy novels” (x).

\textsuperscript{18} So it is that Gygax remarks in 1979 about the problems of setting role-playing games in nonhuman worlds: “Those works which do not feature mankind in a central role are uncommon. Those which do not deal with men at all are scarce indeed. To attempt to utilize any such bases as the central, let alone sole, theme for a campaign milieu is destined to be shallow, incomplete, and totally unsatisfying for all parties concerned unless the creator is a Renaissance Man and all-around universal genius with a decade or two to prepare the game and milieu” (\textit{Dungeon Masters Guide}, 21).
where the setting, story, and characters are not sufficiently engrossing, there is the danger of digressing into out-of-character anecdotes and free association of popular-culture references from which the players never return” (75). Mackay suggests that performance in role-playing games frequently involves borrowing from a variety of cultural sources and texts, even when the game world itself strives to be less hybrid than the original *Dungeons and Dragons*. The statistical construction of objects in role-playing games allows them to carry their worlds with them in order to make intertextual combinations possible.

Although I have focused entirely on role-playing games in this discussion, what I have noted about the way that statistics are used in these games has implications for a wide variety of contemporary narrative practices. Certainly the most obvious relevance is to computer and video games, which are becoming an increasingly important and mainstream form of entertainment. Not only are some of the most important titles in these games directly descended from the statistical systems defined by *Dungeons and Dragons* or indirectly by from the war games that inspired it, but the ways in which activities and narrative are imagined in these games are usually statistical in nature. It is an unremarkable part of any of the ubiquitous first-person shooting games that fill publishers’ lists that players will be able to sustain a number of injuries before dying, that different weapons will do different amounts and kinds of damage, and so on.19 This is quite a contrast to first-generation arcade video games like *Pac-Man* or *Space Invaders*, in which the player was defeated the moment his or her icon was struck by an opponent. A more interesting example of the way in which the worlds and creative practices imagined in role-playing games can influence narrative play in general is in fantasy sports, which has no direct genealogical link to role-playing games. Like role-playing games, fantasy sports are built around collections of objects—in this case, players from various professional teams. In a particular fantasy sport—the most popular in America are baseball and football—players assemble a team made of up of real-life professional athletes. Players determine the success of their assembled teams and win games against other players based on the success that the real-life athletes had with their own teams in real-life games. In his introduction to the rulebook *Rotis*-

19. While a relentlessly mundane computer game like *The Sims* seems to be the very antithesis of the fantasy world that I have been describing, precisely the same sorts of statistical definition of characters takes place in that game, since players receive job promotions by increasing a variety of core skills and bodily attributes (mechanical, logic, charisma, etc.), which will remind us a great deal of the *Dungeons and Dragons* core attributes of strength, intelligence, and so on.
serie League Baseball (1984)—the first rule system for fantasy sports—Daniel Okrent emphasizes the way that such fantasy games build on and transform the nature of being a fan by allowing players within this game to act, to become agents rather than passive spectators. He writes, “One could say we merely wanted to raise the ineluctable movements of generations enthralled by baseball to another, higher plateau. Assembling a collection of baseball cards, playing two-man stoopball while doing an eight-year-old’s version of play-by-play, proposing trades to hypercritical radio talk-show hosts—what were all these preadolescent endeavors but preparation for the Rotisserie League?”

While role-playing games may be the best example of this contemporary shift towards narrative built around statistically constructed objects, the use of the same basic type of narrative object in fantasy sports makes clear that such narratives are a broad contemporary phenomenon.

**Invention, Accounting, and Agency**

I have argued that role-playing games provide a framework in which players may adopt a more active relation to fictional texts and genres. In the process, I would like to suggest, these games imply a very different way of understanding fictionality. This shift in thinking about agency and fictionality is evident not only in role-playing games and fantasy sports but also in the ways that critics think about narrative texts in fictional world theory.

We can see what is at stake in this discussion of fictionality in statistics-based games by turning to a study of the relationship between statistics and creativity in narrative—Mark Seltzer’s study of American naturalist writing, Bodies and Machines. Seltzer sees naturalist writing arising out of a cultural crisis about the nature of identity in industrialized society precipitated by the division of labor. Once production divides those who make the machine from those who use it, we can no longer be sure “what exactly it means to produce some thing.” According to Seltzer, this “uncertain agency of production” leads to a fascination with imitation and reproduction. If industrial production treats individuals as mere elements in a larger process over which they have no control and which they may not even understand, they can easily wonder whether they are not themselves just as much the product of the economy as the tables and chairs that they are making. Furthermore,


increasingly expansive advertising works to shape and direct the desires of these workers as consumers, just as production fills stores with more and more items to desire. Seltzer’s comments on Henry James’s *The American* are helpful to understand the link between the making of workers and the fostering of workers’ desires: “this logic of equivalence between bodies and objects, between persons and things, and between the passions and the interests defines the logic of the market and of market culture. The logic of the market and of market culture projects a fantasy of perfect reciprocity—the equation of interior states and economic conditions, of desires and goods” (57).

In this cultural environment, Seltzer argues, naturalist novels become fascinated with the mechanical qualities of writing—for example, the “birth of the newspaper,” which for Mark Twain is the birth of writing of “a mechanical sort . . . not written by hand, but printed.” Seltzer explains:

> The naturalist mechanics of writing is . . . not simply a reduction of action to “the scene of writing” (that is, to the scene of the writer’s self-absorption or self-reference); nor is the naturalist mechanics of writing simply a transparency through which appears the materiality of writing in general. . . . The foregrounding of the scene of writing and the materiality of writing in these cases indicates how writing and mechanics in naturalist discourse refer back to each other in circular fashion; it registers the fascinated, and at times excruciated, coupling of the work of writing and the workings of the body-machine complex. (19–20)

Interest in the physical act of printing can manifest itself explicitly as Twain’s fascination with the typewriter and Paige typesetting machine (“designed to work on the model of the person, imitating the movements of the compositor” [9]) or subtly as the description of a dead soldier’s shoe as paper-thin in Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* (111–12). According to Seltzer, naturalist writers search for sites where they can observe a discrepancy between the subject’s will and the social or economic structure that he or she inhabits; there is “no end to the work of disclosing and accounting for the discrepancies between what things and persons look like and what they ‘are’; no end to the work of ‘adjusting’ subjects and structures, coordinating the everyday practices, disciplines, and dispositions of the body and the formal and juridical principles in relation to and against which these practices

function” (90). The result is an image of agency that dwells on the points of crisis. For Seltzer, “if agency in modern culture appears always in the form of a crisis of agency, such a panic about agency makes for the ritualized reaffirmations of individuality and self-possession that motivate and mobilize these contradictions” (145).

The paradoxes of the mechanical body and the problems of agency that Seltzer describes have obvious similarities to the statistical objects of role-playing games. Indeed, in the culture that Seltzer describes, individuals seek out statistical standards precisely as a way to define their individuality: “The shifting measures of persons and things redefine typicality and the meaning of the standard, such that the statistical average and norm serve to correlate measure and humanity, that is, measure and individuality. The correlation of persons and measures makes possible the cases and classes and sizes that, in turn, individualize individuals” (82). Much the same paradox is evident in the statistical qualities of role-playing games, where stories of the extraordinary and dramatic are translated into numbers that make the genuinely unexpected more and more difficult to make part of the game. Indeed, I have already noted that role-playing games are built around controlling chance: depending on random events but narrowly limiting the effects of chance to overrule player tactics. When players know, for example, precisely their number of hit-points and the possible damage caused by an opponent’s weapon, they can calculate all possible outcomes of a particular encounter. This predictability can help to explain why many handbooks warn players against knowing too much about the rules of the game. The 1978 revisions to Dungeons and Dragons split the reference books into a player’s book and a book for the referee.23 In the preface to the latter, Gygax warns, “As this book is the exclusive precinct of the DM [Dungeon Master or referee], you must view any non-DM player possessing it as something less than worthy of honorable death.”24 The desire not to allow players to calculate the odds of every action can be seen as a recognition that doing so robs the game of the feeling that something extraordinary might happen. Obviously, outside of the scope of actions covered by numerically based rules, the game can still stage surprising events and introduce unlikely characters. But since these rules are often used to determine the outcome of particularly important events (a climactic battle, for instance), allowing them to be entirely predictable seems to some designers to set an inappropriate tone for the game as a whole.

The image of creativity in naturalism and role-playing games will certainly seem to be a peculiar one, since play is built around forms of imagination that will seem decidedly secondary. Creativity here means the creative use of predetermined statistical rules. George Steiner’s discussion of how our ways of thinking about creativity have changed in the twentieth century in *Grammars of Creation* can illuminate the issues of agency that I have been describing here. Steiner’s most relevant distinction is between creation and invention. Where the former implies that something has been created out of nothing, by a pure act of will—“‘creation,’ properly understood and experienced, is another word for ‘freedom,’ for that *fiat* or ‘let there be’ which has meaning only in its virtually tautological relation to ‘let there not be’”—the latter is connected to its circumstances and immediate needs. Steiner explains:

> The crux is this: “invention,” in our social history, in industry and technology, taken in their comprehensive sense, is, more often than not, applied mathematics. Invention is answerable, as Edison emphasized, to specific needs, to pragmatic possibilities as these are offered by the availability or manufacture of new materials (re-inforced concrete for the modern metropolis, titanium for the Museum at Bilbao). Invention fills a niche in evolving totality as do rare metals in the table of elements. It is, again in the best, most energized sense, “interested” and “useful.” (183)

Invention, Steiner goes on, is ultimately combinatorial and subject to the “sovereignty of the pre-fabricated” (153); it is quite unlike genuine creativity, which is “organic and transcendental in that no anatomy of their constituent elements, no technical dismemberment of their gestation and possible sources can account for the vitality of the whole” (167). Clearly these two ways of thinking about imaginative “making” imply different notions of agency. In creation agency is supreme and independent of all circumstances; in invention agency is subservient to conditions, which provide the “needs” that the invention satisfies. Steiner sees a shift—which he attributes to Dada in general and Duchamp in particular—by which creativity loses its validity and contemporary artistic practice is seen more and more as a form of invention. Much as Seltzer suggested, the prominence of invention is for Steiner a product of modern industrialized economics.

The similarity between the creativity expressed by players in role-playing games and invention’s reliance on pre-formed elements should be

obvious. Indeed, one of Steiner’s examples of the shift in contemporary thinking about creativity is Duchamp’s pursuit of chess: “Invention is identified as the primary mode of creation in the modern world. It follows that art is becoming amateurish indulgence, that a Marcel Duchamp is better employed at chess. Here also, if the pun is allowed, the move is perfectly calculated and significant. Like art, poetry, or music, chess is transcendentally trivial. . . . The Surrealist indignation that so important an artist as Duchamp should have relinquished art for a board game wholly missed the point” (331). I have, of course, suggested that role-playing games are more complex in their imagining of creativity and their use of statistics than board games, but the point is generally the same: industrial production seems to turn all making into a form of invention. If this is the case, some of the features of role-playing games become more significant. Not only do these games clearly work with predetermined elements—the story components drawn from the narrative tradition that makes up the game system—but they also embrace statistical ways of representing action and character. To play such games creatively is to use statistics and manipulate prefabricated objects in unexpected and resourceful ways.

I have suggested that role-playing games allow fans to become involved in and work with literary subgenres; they can, in other words, claim for themselves a certain agency in fandom. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that the game exists to make these sorts of comparisons of books within a subgenre (fantasy, science fiction) possible. Naturally, critics who talk about these games assume that their appeal is either psychological (allowing players to create powerful alter egos) or narrative (pulling players into a story whose resolution they hope to discover). It may be, however, that a part of the pleasure of these games is organizing and combining the various stories and subgenres that players enjoy. Since players usually come to these stories as fans of the subgenre of writing that they emulate (medieval fantasy, futuristic science fiction, westerns), play is less a matter of escape and more a matter of sifting through the relations between genres and what it means to be a

26. In note 9 I observed the appeal to the shared construction of narratives. Other designers and proponents of the game have emphasized the psychological and personal value of role playing. In the rulebook for Vampire, Mark Rein-Hagen describes the formation of identity through role playing in childhood and remarks, “This is why it is impossible to fully leave yourself behind when you roleplay. Part of your character will certainly be different from yourself—in fact, quite frequently you will play someone with traits entirely different from your own—but always, in some essential way, that character will reflect some aspect of yourself” (23). A better-known articulation of this psychological value of role play is Sherry Turkle’s influential discussion of role playing in online environments, Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).
fan. In this regard, role-playing games are exemplary artifacts of fan culture and reflect the cultural work done by objects that achieve cult status. In trying to define what makes a film suitable for cult status, Umberto Eco settles on its ability to be broken into components: “I think that in order to transform a work into a cult object one must be able to break, dislocate, unhinge it so that one can remember only parts of it, irrespective of their original relationship with the whole.”

It seems to me that something similar is going on in role-playing games, where objects from fictional texts or subgenres are being removed and transplanted into the game world. Cultural studies like Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* have gone a long way toward changing how we think about popular fiction by emphasizing the personal and social work that is done by reading this fiction. Likewise, a number of critics have claimed that the phenomenon of fan fiction—the continuation of storylines by fans of a television show or movie—is a way for everyday people to take some control of a media culture that seems beyond their control. Role-playing games in this regard are a form of cultural practice that allows players to intervene productively into popular genres of fiction.

## Objects and Agency in Possible World Theory

I have described a kind of fictionality that positions itself intentionally outside of the categories of literary institutions that have otherwise defined my other strands of contemporary fictionality. It may seem inevitable that this understanding of fictionality will be limited to popular literature, and that it will have no relevance to academically respected methods of literary analysis. In fact, I would like to argue, the concept of fictional worlds developed out of a possible-worlds model of literary semantics similarly allows critics to emphasize their agency in relation to literary works. Although at first glance

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30. Likewise, although a full discussion of the issue is beyond the scope of this chapter, the evident desire of fans to be involved with the professional sports in ways other than simply attending games and following news of their favorite teams may well reflect alienation from the changing economics of professional sports. It may be that there was a time when agency was not a significant part of being a fan of a particular sport; the desire to claim agency may result from the sort of anxieties that Seltzer describes earlier in the century manifesting themselves now in professional sports.
this recent way of thinking about fictional worlds seems miles away from the consumption of popular fiction that characterizes role-playing games, both emphasize the objects that make up their narrative worlds in order to answer the question, what do we (readers, critics, fans) do with the stories we love? More generally, this interest in fictional worlds reflects a similarly irreverent stance towards the literary.

The idea that fictional works imply some “world” that readers intuitively grasp is a very traditional way of thinking about our experience of literary texts. This concept has undergone significant change over the last three decades through the influence of literary semantics, which describes how fictional statements can refer to nonexistent objects. When critics define a literary work as a “possible world,” they argue that within such a hypothetical context such references can indeed be meaningful. It is clear, of course, that fictional worlds cannot be considered possible worlds strictly, since fictional worlds are created by an author and possible worlds are simply identified by logic.\(^\text{31}\) Nonetheless, the possible-world framework allows the traditional idea that a novel contains a world to be made more meaningful; as Marie-Laure Ryan remarks, “in being borrowed and returned by philosophers, the dead metaphor [of the world of a book or author] receives a new influx of life. The concept comes back to textual semiotics sharpened by a repertory of analytical tools which reveal new territories to be explored.”\(^\text{32}\)

Interest in fictional worlds understood in the context of possible-world theory tries to describe the logic that animates a particular world and gives it coherence. The search for a way of speaking about fictional worlds is the attempt to describe the particular kinds of coherences that exist even in narratives that violate our traditional sense of the realistic. As Richard Routley notes, “In general, each work will have its own internal logic.”\(^\text{33}\) I find Lubomír Doležel’s distinction between extensional and intensional narrative worlds especially useful, both because it is more concrete than most possible-world theory, and because it marks a limit to the kinds of textual features that possible-world theories can attend to. Like the statistical structure of role-playing games, the basic building blocks of Doležel’s theory are entities: “A possible world is not a random assemblage of entities; it is constructed in accordance with certain postulated global principles. . . . By


imposing global restrictions, we construct a narrative world whose entities are semantically homogeneous in some respect(s). Under this interpretation, narrative world appears as an organized macro-system of constituents (entities).”  
Such worlds are characterized by Doležel as “extensional”—that is, concerned primarily with the simple existence and enumeration of narrative entities. He contrasts this to intensional narrative worlds, which we become aware of through the “texture” of the story (“[t]exture is our term for the ‘wording’ of the text” [201]). Narrative worlds achieve texture when regularities of description can be noted. Doležel’s macrosemantic method “is interested in global principles of sense organization. Since we assume that text sense is determined by the forms of the texture, principles of sense organization will be determined by global regularities of texture” (201). Doležel’s example is the use of proper names and descriptions in Robinson Crusoe. Although all of the characters in the book are equally part of its extensional world, the particular way that Defoe describes these characters distinguishes between those given proper names like Crusoe and Xury from those defined simply by their profession, family relation, or nationality, like “my father” or the “English captain’s widow.” Doležel argues that this pattern of description forms the texture of the novel, which sorts characters into two types and creates a “two-value function” (201–2) that contributes to the sense or meaning of the novel.

It should be clear that role-playing games substitute the statistical description of its entities for the “texture” of traditional fictional worlds described by Doležel. As Doležel suggests, what transforms a set of objects into elements of a value system is the differential way of describing them. In role-playing games, in contrast, value and differentiation reside within the statistical construction of the objects. Both ways of appealing to worlds, however, share an interest in breaking the text down into the building-block elements that Steiner associates with invention. In doing so, both also define and emphasize the agency of players and critics who interact with these texts and create their own mixtures while comparing works. Doležel’s example of naming in Robinson Crusoe is especially significant, since it suggests the underlying differences between these two ways of thinking about textual worlds and marks what I will argue is a boundary beyond which the appeal to fictional worlds no longer emphasizes agency in the way that role-playing games do. So long as texture is a way to grasp more fundamental fictional objects, it is the equivalent of statistics in role-playing games; when texture begins to take

on a life of its own and transcend the objects it describes, I will show, the agency of the critic becomes more problematic.

For Doležel, the objects of the textual world are primarily recognizable from the actual world; they are given meaning by the texture of the narrative, the particular ways they are described. The laws organizing these entities are subtle and to be inferred from the texture of the narrative. Although not working from a possible-worlds basis, Félix Martínez-Bonati notes that much of our understanding of narrative worlds is a matter of inference: “The novelistic narrator’s universal judgment is a commentary on, not a constitutive determination of, the world he is speaking about. Such commentaries can be, and often are, inadequate to the corresponding fictional world. The nature of the fictive world is determined by the universal implications of non-universal judgments.”

Indeed, recent theories of fictional world influenced by possible world theory have taught us to recognize that one of the games that fictional narratives play is pretending to refer to real-world objects, while subtly smuggling in judgments that we grasp through the implications of the texture of those references. The concept of texture describes how readers are able to grasp the aesthetic principles that transcend simple references to real objects. Objects in written narrative, then, have a dual identity: as we read we shuttle between all that we know about these objects in the real world (fathers, captains, widows) and their more limited use in the texture of the narrative (their difference, for example, from Xury and Crusoe). The tension between these two definitions of the same object helps us to grasp the contours of the fictional world, what Doležel describes as the general patterns of contrasts that make up the intensional world. In the case of Robinson Crusoe, we recognize the two-value opposition between types of characters. Quite a different thing happens in role-playing games, where


36. It is at least in part for this reason that speech-act theory has continued to be an important, if usually background, part in developing a notion of fictional worlds through literary semantics. Peter J. McCormick characterizes speech–act theory as providing the “standard” view of fictionality (Fictions, Philosophies, and the Problems of Poetics [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988]), even though the claim that fictional reference is “pretended” or “nonserious” has little intuitive sense for how fictional language works outside of the philosophical traditions out of which this theory has been developed. Thomas Pavel concludes his discussion of speech-act theory in Fictional Worlds (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986) by suggesting that fiction contains “a mixture of pretended and genuine statements” and arguing “in fiction one does not always need to keep track of pretended and genuine statements, since global relevance is apparent in spite of such distinctions” (25). Such pretended references do seem to get at fiction’s ability to appeal both to real-world objects and to the way that they have been limited by the narrative.
the evaluation of the entity—in this case, characters and their opponents—is itself an explicitly defined constituent of those objects. In role-playing games the statistical construction of the object functions as the equivalent of texture in a written narrative, as objects from popular genres are transformed into objects that can become part of the game.

In focusing on entities as his starting point, Doležel is typical of the way that possible-world thinking and the broader field of literary semantics have defined fictional worlds. Uri Margolin notes that many critics have seen such individual objects as the basic building blocks of fictional worlds, and quotes Martínez-Bonati: "the fundamental compass of narrative is a world of individuals." Why this focus on entities? One explanation is that the field as a whole has its roots in philosophical debates about the validity of reference to nonexistent objects; in other words, how can we have a meaningful debate about a fictional character, since such a character obviously does not exist in the real world? Nonetheless, this does not seem adequately to explain the prevalence of objects as the bedrock of fictional worlds. There is no reason, after all, that we might not speak about narrative world as a structure of events. But when these recent theories of fictional worlds do discuss events, they usually treat them through a theory of modalities and thus define them as a state of affairs modifying the objects of the world. Modalities describe logical constraints that frame a state of affairs: alethic constraints define the possibility, impossibility, or necessity of a state of affairs; deontic constraints, the proscriptive or prescriptive norms for a state of affairs; axiological constraints, the valorization of a state of affairs; epistemic modalities, the knowability of a state of affairs. A good example of this treatment of events through modalities is Doležel's recent possible-world theory of fiction, *Heterocosmica.* Because it describes the conditions under which events come about, a modal theory of narrative events emphasizes the objects and spaces that frame these events. Indeed, each of the types of modal restrictions that Doležel describes is observable primarily through its effects

40. Doležel’s discussion of modalities in *Heterocosmica* draws heavily on a much earlier essay; see Lubomír Doležel, “Narrative Modalities,” *Journal of Literary Semantics* 5 (1976): 5–14. Modalities continue to be an important way to explain the structure of events in fictional worlds. See, for example, Marie-Laure Ryan’s use of Doležel’s modality theory in *Possible Worlds* (111).
on characters. For example, Doležel describes alethic constraints as able to “determine the character of all the world’s entities, particularly of its persons. Fictional persons of the natural world are possible counterparts of humans, their properties and action capacities are fictional projections of actual persons’ attributes.” Treating events in terms of modalities allows Doležel to link multiple narrative worlds. At the end of his chapter on modalities in *Heterocosmica*, Doležel describes cross-world journeys, where characters who obey different modal structures (who may, for example, reflect different definitions of the possible) interact. In such situations, it is narrative objects (characters) that allow the mixture of modal structures. Doležel offers an example: “The devil of Le Sage’s *Le Diable boiteux* . . . travels . . . to observe, and to comment on, the natural world. But in several episodes he succumbs to the temptation to intervene in the human world by physical acts. He thus follows a time-honored tradition that gives supernatural beings the capacity to act in the natural world” (131). The structure of what is possible in the supernatural and the natural worlds are combined and compared here precisely by allowing an entity from the one to travel to the other. Recent work, then, has defined fictional worlds as primarily comprised of objects because doing so provides a way to compare and mix texts—just as we have seen role-playing games use statistically defined objects as meeting points for many fictional sources.

This turn to mixed worlds is not unique to Doležel’s study. Indeed, one of the most influential applications of possible-world theory to fiction in recent years, Thomas Pavel’s *Fictional Worlds* (1986), ends with a very similar image of mixed narrative worlds. Pavel argues, “the world view of a given community may divide into several ontological landscapes. European society at the end of the eighteenth century was still keeping the Christian element as an essential component of its ontological territory. This territory was, however, much wider than the Christian world: even among those not primarily interested in the progress of science, the rumor would circulate that new and disturbing cosmological theories were being proposed.” Pavel’s conclusion that “[o]ntological landscapes foster the plurality of worlds” seems to be the most important and far-reaching claim of his book, since it paints a rich image of the give-and-take between fiction and science, tradition, and invention. Such pluralities are created when societies are willing to tolerate entities drawn from a variety of sometimes-overlapping, sometimes-conflicting worlds: “At the margins of ontological landscapes, one finds leisure worlds, or worlds for

42. Pavel, *Fictional Worlds*, 139.
pleasure, which often derive from older discarded models. Each culture has its ontological ruins, its historical parks, where the members of the community relax and contemplate their ontological relics” (141). Pavel’s claim about the mixture of worlds is remarkably similar to the way that Doležel ends his section on narrative worlds in *Heterocosmica*, and I would suggest that the similarity is not accidental. This recent interest in fictional worlds is at its most powerful when it describes the interaction between many different, seemingly contradictory macrosemantic regions. And a crucial component of this theory’s ability to describe the interaction between these regions is its focus on narrative entities. Because theories of fiction influenced by possible-world theory define narrative as a mixture of objects, critics pursuing this theory are especially able to account for heterogeneous texts—combining realistic humans and devils, to use Doležel’s example—and our movement as readers and critics between many different texts.

The mixture of worlds through attention to narrative entities ultimately, I would suggest, helps to explain what it is that critics do with fictional texts. Answering this question has seemed especially important because earlier structuralist theories have defined the agency of critics and writers very problematically. In *Fictional Worlds*, Pavel’s point of departure is the reduciveness of the structuralist intervention into the literary text. Taking his example of Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of the Oedipus myth and its subsequent reworking by other structuralists, Pavel writes, “it is difficult to believe that all myths, stories, or texts can be reduced to single elementary semantic structures consisting of four terms in a proportional relationship. Semiotic objects are complex constructions, overloaded with meaning; to postulate so rudimentary a sense involves a considerable loss of information” (7–8). In contrast, Pavel suggests that a semantic approach to fiction better respects the complexity of the text and its relation to the culture in which it is written and read: “Freed from the constraints of the textualist approach, theory of fiction can respond again to the world-creating powers of imagination and account for the properties of fictional existence and worlds, their complexity, incompleteness, remoteness, and integration within the general economy of culture” (10). In *Heterocosmica*, Doležel makes a similar point about how interest in fictional worlds allows for a different type of involvement in the text: “The art of the folk storyteller or popular crime-fiction writer produces variations on stock tales and characters and can thus be described by a ‘narrative grammar.’ But the creative energy of literature is beyond the grasp of such a restrictive model. Literary narratology needs a theory of poiesis, of the invention of new stories in and through new texts” (ix). Doležel’s description here is an attempt to understand the creation of and how to intervene into
fictional texts—just as the popular writer finds ways to intervene productively into earlier works and time-tested formulae.

If we think of theories of fiction influenced by possible-world theory as essentially methodologies for intervening into texts, then focus on transtextual objects becomes understandable. But we can already see the limits of this approach even with Doležel’s essay. Taken to an extreme that he wisely avoids, Doležel’s description of texture as a subtle network of values implied by the way that entities within a text are described could make the critic subservient to every subtlety of the text, implying that lifting objects out of a narrative would constitute a kind of heresy of paraphrase since the organizing texture would be absent. In fact, this type of close analysis of the specific texture of a world is not at all typical of theories of fiction influenced by possible-world theory, which usually range over a wide variety of texts and take most of their theoretical energy from the connections and comparisons they can make between disparate narratives.43 By paying less attention to texture and more to the entities that make up their worlds, theorists interested in fictional worlds are able to make cross-textual comparisons much more easily. Doležel’s theory of how texture contributes to a narrative world actually has more in common with discussions of fictionality that focus on style. Erich Auerbach’s discussion of Homer at the outset of Mimesis, for example, attends to fictional worlds as a direct product of texture: Homer’s poem “ensnares us, weaving its web around us, and that suffices him. And this ‘real’ world into which we are lured, exists for itself, contains nothing but itself; the Homeric poems conceal nothing, they contain no teaching and no secret second meaning.”44 When Auerbach compares The Odyssey to the description of the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis, he does so not by focusing primarily on characters and settings but by attending closely to the texture of both works—what is described and in how much detail. Something of a middle point between Auerbach’s attention to texture and possible-world theory’s focus on objects is instanced by Roland Barthes’s S/Z, which analyzes texture (the particular lexia that make up Sarrasine, some as short as a single word)

43. Pavel’s discussion of fictional worlds opens, for example, with the example of references to Samuel Pickwick and geographical features of London (11), but then goes on to talk about philosophical issues raised by these references rather than to describe the texture of Dickens’s novel. A few pages later Pavel is in the midst of the sorts of transtextual comparisons typical of fictional world theory: “During the reading of The Pickwick Papers does Mr. Pickwick appear less real than the sun over Goswell Street? In War and Peace is Natasha less actual than Napoleon?” (16). For an example of close analysis focused on a particular author and text, see Lubomír Doležel, “Intensional Function, Invisible Worlds, and Franz Kafka,” Style 17 (1983): 120–41.

while at the same time breaking the text up into various codes (such as the semantic code “femininity”) that appear in many other texts. Barthes’s assertion in this study that such an analysis is endless—“it is a nomination in the course of becoming, a tireless approximation, a metonymic labor”—reminds us that focus on texture emphasizes not our actions in bringing texts together, but the endless reservoir of codes contained in the text, which can never be turned into the manipulable building blocks that narrative objects seem to be.45

Theories of fictional world based on possible world thinking do not, then, follow Barthes in attention to texture but instead assign to the objects themselves the job of bringing texts together. More typical of possible-world theory is Doležel’s description of “secondary narrative worlds” in his essay on extensional and intensional narrative worlds: “Narrative worlds defined as sets of compossible actants shall be called secondary narrative worlds. The comparison with cross-world identification is, then, based on the construction of a secondary world embracing a set of primary narrative worlds” (199). More so than the concepts of texture and intensional worlds, Doležel’s theory of secondary narrative worlds is typical of the eagerness we can observe in many critics working with the concept of narrative worlds to pull examples from a wide variety of texts, frequently jumping between characters drawn from different works. Doležel’s description of secondary narrative worlds as critical constructions prefigures the way he describes the popular fiction writer two decades later. Just as a novelist creates a world by intervening into a genre, so too the critic creates a world by intervening into narratives written by novelists.46 In other words, interest in possible world accounts of fiction arise in part from an anxiety about the proper way to engage with fictional texts in the wake of structuralism, much as role-playing games reflect a struggle to engage with literary subgenres in an age of mass-produced media. For both, worlds offer translation as the creative—or, following Steiner, we should say inventive—principle for engaging with such texts.

In role-playing games and fictional world theory, then, we can see a fifth distinct strand of contemporary fictionality. Not only does this strand mark a

46. Although not strictly a matter of fictional worlds, I would put Menachem Brinker’s definition of theme in the same category as Doležel’s secondary narrative worlds: “our quest for a theme or themes of a story is always a quest for something that is not unique to this specific work. The theme is understood as potentially uniting different texts” (“Theme and Interpretation,” in The Return of Thematic Criticism, ed. Werner Sollors [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993], 21). Brinker’s essay appears in a book about the “return of thematic criticism” after structuralism and seems to reflect the same attitude about how critics intervene into texts.
different way of thinking about the value and use of fictional narrative that I have described in other chapters, but it also completes a trajectory that began with the highly literary debates about postmodernism in the first chapter. Over the course of these five strands I have shown a variety of fictionalities that reflect in large part different relations to literary institutions. Where Barth’s myth was a direct restatement of traditional mid-century literary values, Alice Walker’s archive adopted a position just outside of that tradition in the hopes of transforming the nature of the literary canon and the disciplines for studying it. Subsequent definitions of fictionality in metafiction and science fiction have adopted increasingly outside positions, frequently citing literary institutions as a mere framework for individual performance (chapter 3) or celebrating the value of extra-literary narratives for symptomizing the culture (chapter 4). In the role-playing game we have finally arrived at a form of fictionality positioned distinctly outside of literary institutions, in which the practice of picking and choosing literary and genre material does things with text that traditional literary study would deem inappropriate. The range of definitions of fictionality, then, reflect the range of positions that can be adopted toward literary institutions.