Critical Game Design in Tabletop Roleplaying Games: Applying Two Methods

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This extended abstract unpacks the result of applying Khaled & Barr's (2023) *method for design materialization* (MDM) and Rennick & Roberts's (2021) *trope-informed design* to a case of tabletop roleplaying game (TTRPG) design. It demonstrates the value of future work on critical design in analog games via the grounded approach of these and other tools of critical game design.

Malazita & O'Donnell (2023, 6), identifying a break between game design research and games scholarship's analytic edge, introduce *critical game design*. They define it as "epistemic practices, material interventions, and institutional and noninstitutional systems that work toward the deep synthesis of game design, cultural critique, and reflective design research practices" (6). Six articles follow their special issue introduction and share examples of such research. None, however, address TTRPGs or any suggestion of analog games. Although this is due to game design's emphasis on *digital* games, it remains an oversight of a potentially fruitful overlap of perspectives. Consider, for instance, what cross-pollination may offer to discussions of TTRPGs, including the most notorious: that of race in *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974).

One of the special issue's articles provides an overview of a methodology termed the *method for design materialization* (Khaled & Barr 2023; MDM). MDM aims to resolve problems of "acknowledging how design works in practice and not just in theory," as well as "to support evidence-based claims about game design" (55). It comprises software version control and "reflective journal[ing] . . . maintained inside the version control repository" (58–62). This allows for tracing paths inside the development process, through which one scans for insights across a combination of commits, journal entries, and build reconstructions (62). Khaled and Barr suggest that, while "the data can be reasoned about in deductive, inductive, and abductive ways . . . a concerted analysis ought also to involve a *grounded design theory* (GDT) stage" (62; italics for emphasis); that is, deriving theory from evidence within the repository.

The most obvious break between the MDM and TTRPG design is that version control occurs within software design, in this case *digital* game design. Although developing a TTRPG on a platform like GitHub is within the realm of possibility, I found better affordances *and* community familiarity were available through MediaWiki, the

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

software most famously used by Wikipedia. This led to capturing the MDM's version control and reflective journaling in a similar manner: by hosting a custom MediaWiki instance to prototype the MDM via the vertical slice of an in-development campaign setting for the *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game* (Bulmahn 2009).

One distinction is how histories are handled at the page level as opposed to across the whole wiki. A view of the entire repository at any state is possible with GitHub. I embraced the modularity provided by remaining at the page level. Threads emerge with careful references in page edit summaries (akin to commits), explaining *why* changes are being made in relation to other game system components. One then traces these threads through the wiki's pages much as they would files in a repository. This modularity further challenged any requisite physicality of the end-product. Fan wikis already document TTRPGs to the extent that play is possible independent of purchasing a game's sourcebooks. Might one abandon that physical (and expensive) nature to release a game born-digital? Errata and reprints become unnecessary. Long-time players may sense the tensions this produces within certain playgroups. Yet, hybrid play is already common through similar assistance with digital tools.

In leaning into this abandonment of a physical end-product, I coded custom tabs for the top of each page to link to two new subpages: proposed changes and archived versions. The former invites community discussion and the latter captures the page at given points prior to major overhauls. MediaWiki's built-in category feature extends this by allowing the compilation of groups of archived pages or proposed changes, which may then be referred to like a prior or future edition, respectively. Lastly, in keeping with the TTRPG medium's heavy integration of community, I noted MediaWiki's export and import feature for groups of pages, allowing for forking a project in the vein of a GitHub repository.

Outside of Malazita & O'Donnell's special issue, Rennick & Roberts (2021) introduce *trope-informed design*, the "consider[ation of] how and when to perpetuate, subvert, or transcend tropes . . . [as] tools that can make or break a player's experience." Their usage focuses on linguistic tropes in dialogue design, but their discussion does not limit "trope" or their concept to the linguistic. In designing a scifi Western campaign setting, I faced recreating harmful tropes associated with Indigenous Americans, such as Othering through stereotype or depiction as an alien species. One might consider excluding a representative stand-in altogether, yet as Gurr (2015, 34) highlights within postapocalyptic fiction, the "absence" of Indigenous Americans may justify "the settler colonialist logic" of settler ownership of the land. I thus modified the trope of "cowboys and Indians" to feature *two* migrations from the same originating planet, by the same species, to the planet where the campaign setting takes place. The first occurs many centuries earlier and the second more recently, emphasizing a shared origin with differences in cultural terms. This helps draw attention to the function of the trope rather than side-stepping the baggage of genre and history.

Critical game design proves as productive for the design of analog games as it does for digital games. Methods honed on digital games, like the MDM and trope-informed design, may prove transferable. Medium-specific insights are also of expected interest. Such future work should feature a description of a project in longer form, including the use of additional tools and more extensive demonstration of the design process or product.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Luke Eric Lassiter (Marshall University) for supporting an earlier version of this project; Mike Shier (University of Central Florida) for supporting this iteration; and Alex Whittington for providing hardware for hosting the project and assisting with troubleshooting.

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