<u>Realism as a Constraint on Fantasy</u>

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1. Introduction

In this essay I discuss how realism operates to constrain works of creative fantasy. Most

of the discussion concerns games, especially role-playing games, that take place in a fantasy

milieu. I also discuss the role of realism in utopian political philosophy, however, including in

particular John Rawls's conception of political theory as a search for what he terms a "realistic

utopia".[1] Realism plays a surprisingly similar role limiting and informing the content of fantasies

in these apparently unrelated domains; as I explain below, Rawls's understanding of realism as a

limit on utopian thought illuminates how realism serves as a constraint on fantasy games. I close

by suggesting briefly that this discussion of games and politics may also illuminate how realism

constrains fantasy in works of literary fiction.

2. Playability versus Realism

The first role-playing game, *Dungeons & Dragons*, was co-created by Dave Arneson and

Gary Gygax and published in 1974.[2] That game and its successors in the same brand remain the

most famous examples of the role-playing genre. This genre emerged from military simulation

games, and both Arneson and Gygax were avid wargamers. The key innovation of role-playing

games, setting them apart from earlier board games and military simulations, is that each player

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[1] The fullest statement of Rawls's political philosophy is found in Rawls (1971), and his second opus is
Rawls (1993). Rawls elaborates the idea of a realistic utopia only in later work, however, at Rawls (1999),
especially 11-16, and at Rawls (2001), especially 4-5 and 12-14.
[2] Arneson and Gygax (1974). Jon Peterson (2012) is a definitive account of the prehistory of the genre.

establishes a character or persona within the game which they subsequently develop over multiple sessions of play.

The most widely played and influential role-playing game is *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, and it was created by Gygax alone. It shares the role-playing structure and heroic fantasy themes of *Dungeons & Dragons*, but it has such vastly more detailed rules and reference resources that Gygax regarded it as a wholly separate game.[3] It was published in a series of books between 1977 and 1979.[4] Interestingly these two classic role-playing games stand near different ends of the spectrum of rule complexity. The original *Dungeons & Dragons* has a relatively simple design and a brief set of three rulebooks. It includes a smallish list of fantastical abilities which characters in the game might develop, and deploys a relatively straightforward mechanism for resolving combat situations. The rulebooks have comparatively few rules and they contain little information about the geographical, cultural, anthropological, or ecological environment that characters are to explore in the game.

By contrast the first edition of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* is, to this day, among the most complex games in the genre. Not only does it have many more rules than its predecessor in the *Dungeons & Dragons* brand, these rules pertain to far more detailed aspects of the depicted

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[3] Gygax sold his intellectual property rights to both games in 1985; the brands are currently owned by the game company Wizards of the Coast. The two classic games were overhauled in 2000 to such an extent that they constituted a new game not readily compatible with prior editions; this new game was labeled the third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The two games were also merged at that point, as *Dungeons & Dragons* materials and *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* materials were no longer published separately. An earlier, far less extensive revision occurred in 1989 with publication of the second edition of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*. A further significant revision came in 2008 when the fourth edition was published, and yet another major revision – reportedly returning the game closer to its original incarnations – began in 2012 and was released in 2015.

[4] Gygax (1977, 1978, 1979). James Ward and Robert Kuntz (1980), which elaborates the role of divine beings within the game, is not strictly necessary as a sourcebook; it was officially sanctioned by Gygax, however, and these four books constituted the basis for the wave of popularity of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* in the early 1980s.

fantasy world. The combat system is more baroque, so much so that some rules governing combat are used by a vanishingly small proportion of those who play the game.[5] This attention to detail, already present in the original rulebooks, increased over time. A second series of sourcebooks for *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* was published between 1985 and 1987.[6] These books increased the detail of existing rules and added rules to govern previously undescribed or underdescribed domains of character activity, such as mountaineering, mining, belaying, camping, and the effects of weather. So much new material was added during the mid-1980s, in fact, that games using these sourcebooks in addition to the original rulebooks became known retrospectively as "edition 1.5" of the game.

Many of these new rules were first introduced in *Dragon* magazine, which (like the two classic role-playing games) was published by Gygax's company Tactical Studies Rules. *Dragon* debuted in the mid-1970s as a discussion forum for hobbyists interested in the new role-playing genre.[7] Gygax's articles in the magazine had a special status as quasi-official supplements to the material found in the official published rulebooks. He wrote a regular column for *Dragon* called "From the Sorcerer's Scroll", and he consulted with the editors about a recurring feature called "Sage Advice", in which the magazine would answer questions and adjudicate disputes about rules. The magazine covered games other than *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, but its success – indeed its existence – depended on the popularity of those games, in particular the latter. And the magazine was indeed successful, with a total run of 359 issues over more than thirty years before it ceased publication in 2007.

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[5] One example is "weapon-specific armor class adjustments", where the combat effectiveness of a weapon used by an attacker varies depending on the type of armor worn by a defender. See Gygax (1978), 38.
[6] See Gygax (1985), but note also Kim Mohan (1986), Douglas Niles (1986), and Jeff Grubb (1987).
[7] The magazine was originally called *The Dragon*, but the name was later shortened to *Dragon*. It grew out of an earlier, even more specialized publication about military games called *The Strategic Review*.

The most frequently recurring theme of the articles and letters published in *Dragon* was the tension between two purportedly incompatible virtues in a fantasy game, which were labeled "realism" and "playability". [8] The former consists in preserving the laws of nature of the real world and describing a fictional setting in detail. The latter consists in being simple enough for players to understand a game's principles and mechanics and for play to proceed without onerous recordkeeping or rule consultation. Gygax weighed in on the discussion most explicitly in an essay entitled "Realism v. Game Logic", which appeared in *Dragon* in July 1976. In that piece the principal architect of the genre of role-playing games came down in no uncertain terms in favor of the position that, wherever they seriously conflict, the value of playability systematically supersedes that of realism.

Gygax illustrated his claim with the simple mechanic, used in both classic versions of his game, for determining what happens when a character falls to the ground from a great height: the player rolls an ordinary six-sided die for each ten feet the character fell to determine how many hit points of damage the character sustains. (Hit points measure the injuries a character withstands before becoming incapacitated. In early versions of the game a character reduced to zero or fewer hit points would die; in later versions reduction to zero generally indicated unconsciousness but not immediate risk of death, reduction below zero indicated a critical condition resulting in death unless attended to, and reduction to -10 or below indicated death.) This example was well-chosen: subsequent issues of *Dragon* saw numerous attempts to improve this mechanic by introducing a more complex variant, but the original mechanic is widely, and in my view rightly, regarded as superior to these alternatives.

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[8] A classic problem case was powers of illusion, which proved more difficult than other elements of heroic fantasy to capture with a playable game mechanic.

Notwithstanding Gygax's unequivocal stance favoring playability over realism, and his apt illustration with the central case of falling damage, his analysis of the tension in game design between realism and playability is too crude. This claim can be immediately motivated by noting the relatively uncontroversial fact that the first edition of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* is widely regarded as *the* classic game of the role-playing genre even though it is among the least playable. One illustration is the game's system governing the use of magic spells, which is based on the milieu of Jack Vance's fantasy novels rather than on the more playable system of spell points.[9] In a spell point system a spellcaster has a given amount of magical power and each spell cast reduces this by a certain quantity, typically varying with the power of the spell, until the character is reduced to zero spell points and so must restore them before performing any further magic. The earliest computer games with a fantasy setting used spell point systems, since it was easier to write code for them.[10] In the Vancean system of Gygax's games, by contrast, characters with magical abilities must memorize specific spells in advance, and their magic powers become depleted once they have used all these previously prepared spells. This Vancean system of magic is less playable than a spell point system because it slows play: players are required to engage in more advance planning, and both players and referees are required to do more recordkeeping. But the system's great advantage is that it is more realistic, in the sense relevant here, as it provides a richer backstory about the principles by which magic operates in the fantasy world.

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[9] Gygax discusses the influence of Vance on the principles of spellcasting in his games at Gygax (1979), 40. Vance began as a pulp writer in the 1940s, and over his long career he published dozens of novels and stories. Most pertinent in the present context is the *Dying Earth* series of four fantasy novels; see Vance (1950, 1966, 1983, 1984).

[10] It should be noted, however, that the greatest fantasy games designed for early home computers like the Apple II and Commodore 64 – the *Wizardry* series, developed by the software company Sir-Tech – used a Vancean spell system. *Wizardry*'s status as the classic early computer role-playing game is evidence of the wisdom of Gygax's choice of a Vancean magic system for his tabletop games.

Although there is not a general consensus among hobbyists on the issue, I think it is fair

to say that Vancean systems are superior to spell point systems as a mechanic for a fantasy role-

playing.[11] If that judgment is correct it already establishes that Gygax's position in "Realism v.

Game Logic" is overstated and that the tension between realism and playability in fantasy games

is a trickier issue to negotiate than his discussion suggests. The superiority of the Vancean system

of magic does not by itself demonstrate that playability can be greatly diminished in the interest

of realism, however, for even the more involved Vancean spell system is relatively playable. That

spell system was not, after all, an innovation of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*; it was present

already in the simpler rules of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

On many points of difference between the two classic games, however, the more complex

system of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* seems clearly superior. There is much more material

of a quasi-scientific sort, explaining the abilities and cultures of different races (dwarves, elves,

gnomes, and the like).[12] Similarly there is much more material about the abilities and habits of the

various monsters characters may encounter.[13] One of the more popular regular features in *Dragon*

was the "Ecology of …" series, where the behavior, life cycle, and natural history of a fantastic

creature would be explored.

In addition to the rulebooks and the discussions in *Dragon*, Gygax also published, mainly

for use with *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, specifics of the particular campaign setting he used

in his home game. This fantasy world was called "Greyhawk" after its most prominent city (also

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[11] Even apart from its heightened realism, the Vancean spell system helps limit the power of spellcasters and so preserves game balance among different sorts of characters. I discuss game balance below.
[12] This material is found in various places but see especially Gygax (1978), 13-19, Gygax (1979), 15-16, and Gygax (1985), 7-13.
[13] Gygax (1977) is the classic source here, but Turnbull (1981) and Gygax (1983b) also greatly expanded the amount of information available regarding creatures both fantastic and mundane.

after a species of bird which flourished near that city). This setting was first detailed in the *World of Greyhawk* supplement.[14] Many official published adventure modules contained additional information about this world, and in time an entire sourcebook appeared under the title *Greyhawk Adventures*.[15] This material enabled a richer engagement with the world of a fantasy role-playing game than was previously available. Even though it was not part of the official rules of the game, the material was nevertheless crucial in further differentiating role-playing games from tabletop board games.

This material also made clear that despite its numerous fantasy elements, Gygax's game was grounded in the highly specific historical frame of Europe circa 1400. The various political domains of the Greyhawk setting were transparently based on late medieval Europe, and in some cases southwestern or central Asia. Furthermore the state of the art of military technology in the game fell in the narrow period after the longbow was widely used (mid-14th century) but before cannons were powerful enough to render castles obsolete (roughly the mid-15th century).[16]

Not all the more detailed material improved the game; at times it introduced unnecessary complexity well understood as an unjustified loss of playability. In the later years of first edition *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* Gygax was accused, with some warrant, of failing to distinguish clearly enough between the rules of the game – which would apply whether a home game was set in Greyhawk or not – and the particular culture and history of his favored fantasy world, which might be replaced in a different campaign setting. Thus even defenders of the first edition of the

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[14] Gygax (1983a).

[15] Ward (1988). Gygax also published novels set in Greyhawk; the series was later extended, with Gygax's permission, by the writer Rose Estes.

[16] Apart from its pure fantasy elements, the chief difference between Gygax's setting and the actual Europe of 1400 is the absence of monotheism in Greyhawk. The setting is a bit as if the religion of the Homeric era survived through the manifold political and technological changes of the subsequent two millennia.

game should concede it overreaches in the direction of realism at the expense of playability. The successors in the brand were correct to seek to streamline the game, even if the overall result in each case was arguably an inferior variant that overreached in the opposite direction.[17] But as an achievement of game design I find it difficult to deny that *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* stands above the more playable alternatives, *Dungeons & Dragons* included, that it largely superseded. Accordingly we need an account of the tension between realism and playability which captures that fact. Such an account must not lose sight, however, of Gygax's emphasis from "Realism v. Game Logic" that it is games we are discussing, not simulations or artworks, and that games must be assessed in large measure by their playability. In the next section I turn to political philosophy, more specifically the work of John Rawls, for resources to help address and illuminate the tension between realism and playability.

3. Realistic Utopia

In the opening passages of *On the Social Contract* Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously enjoins political philosophers to "take people as they are, and laws as they might be".[18] John Rawls, widely (and in my view rightly) regarded as the greatest political philosopher of the 20th century, develops Rousseau's injunction into the idea of a "realistic utopia".[19] There is by design an air of paradox to this term, since it is nearly definitional of a utopian conception of politics that it is in some respects unrealistic. Rawls's realistic utopia is in a way not an exception, since it involves idealizations never fully satisfied in the actual world. But Rawls, like Rousseau before

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[17] Even if first edition *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* is the superior game of the genre, it of course does not follow that it is to be preferred in all contexts. There are contexts where checkers is preferred to chess, after all, and where low art is preferred to high.

[18] Rousseau (1762), 46. I have re-translated "men" as "people" and "can" as "might".

[19] Rawls develops this idea explicitly at Rawls (1999), 11-16, and Rawls (2001), 4-5 and 12-14.

him, is concerned not to engage in political theorizing that is utopian in the pejorative sense, a mere flight of the imagination unclearly related to actual human affairs. In Rawls's view a theory of politics should be utopian in the sense of providing an ideal vision of society which may be used to evaluate the status quo and establish priorities for reforming institutions. But in his view political theory should also be realistic by refraining from treating human psychology as itself up for reform. The basic contours of human psychology help define politics, in Rawls's approach, and so are not subject to criticism by an ideal political conception.[20] Thus we take people (or their broad psychological capacities and dispositions) as they are, and laws (or more generally societies and their institutions) as they might be when created and applied by those people.

This is not the place to attempt a full characterization of Rawls's account of social justice, which is both fascinating and intricate, already a part of the philosophical canon less than fifteen years beyond Rawls's death.[21] It is not even the place to attempt a full characterization of Rawls's idea of a realistic utopia, though it bears mention that this idea figures very deeply in his thought and is under-discussed even in the voluminous secondary literature on Rawls's work. Instead I want to focus on Rawls's characterization of the realism component of his idea of realistic utopia. The aim is to elicit resources to help illuminate the earlier discussion of realism as a constraint on the design of fantasy games.

In a late work Rawls writes: "There are two necessary conditions for a liberal conception of justice to be *realistic*. The first is that it must rely on actual laws of nature ... The second … is that its first principles and precepts be workable and applicable to ongoing social and political

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[20] Rawls charges Karl Marx with utopian overreach on just this point; see Rawls (2001), 157-158.
[21] For those interested in learning more about the details of Rawls's theory, Samuel Freeman (2007) is a very fine exposition. Among Rawls's own works the best entry point, in my judgment, is Rawls (2001).

arrangements."[22] Rawls's "workability" is close kin to the "playability" of the *Dragon* magazine

discussions (ironically enough), yet it is a constituent of realism as he understands it.

Rawls contends that a utopia must include a realistic understanding of what citizens are

like and must also be realistically applicable by citizens themselves. These two constraints apply

regardless of what sort of society the realistic utopia is to regulate, but in a democratic society the

latter constraint takes on a special significance. This is in part because the ambit of citizenship in

a democratic society is wide: there are no legal slaves or subordinate castes, and there is no legal

restriction on political power due to sex, race, or ethnicity.[23] Furthermore in democratic societies

the entire citizenry is treated as competent to contribute to the shaping of laws and other major

social institutions, and political offices are determined by competitions open to all citizens. Thus

everyone, or at least all competent adults, must be able to understand and apply the standards

articulated by an ideal conception of society. The wide ambit of citizenship, when coupled with

openness in principle of all offices to all citizens, makes the constraint of "workability" especially

pressing in a democratic society. There is no space for a restricted class of priests, functionaries,

aristocrats, or bureaucrats who understand and apply the conception to the citizenry at large.

Of greatest interest for present purposes is that Rawls regards this workability as itself a

constraint of realism. The first aspect of Rawlsian realism is to have an accurate, systematic, and

rich portrayal of what people are like, including in particular their social psychology. The second

is to have an articulated ideal conception of society which is clear and simple enough for people

to use as they create, reform, and apply laws. In a democratic society there is an especially close

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[22] Rawls (1999), 12-13.
[23] Even the presence of large numbers of foreign nationals is a potential problem in a democratic society, since it introduces a body of individuals who are subject to a society's laws but lack the status to participate meaningfully in the formulation and application of those laws.

connection between these two constraints; since *all* citizens are to participate in the creation, reform, and application of laws, both elements of Rawlsian realism mainly concern general facts of human social psychology. Rawls uses this frame to investigate competing ideal conceptions of society. In particular he considers the prospects, in light of human psychology, for each ideal to sustain and perpetuate itself through the technological, cultural, and generational changes which are characteristic of human societies.[24] In Rawls's approach the extent to which an ideal (once established) would be freely accepted by succeeding generations is tantamount to a criterion of adequacy of that ideal; and according to Rawls's plausible working understanding of human social psychology, people tend to freely accept a prevailing conception of society to the extent that they experience participation in a society regulated by it as sincerely cooperative.[25]

Rawls does not develop a political theory for non-democratic societies, but even there his constraints of realism have application. In such cases there is less unity between the two elements of Rawlsian realism, since laws in non-democratic societies apply to everyone but are created and applied by only a subset of the population. Nevertheless a single frame of understanding – realism as a constraint on utopia – captures both these sorts of desiderata on a theory. For Rawls it is vital that the ideal conception used as a standard of criticism be one appropriate to human societies, to the social world of beings characterized by human nature as we know it. This is because in his view this ideal's existence serves not only to help criticize the status quo but also to reconcile us to the fact of our own humanity. However bad the status quo (or its etiology) may be, in Rawls's view there is room for hope rather than despair so long as there is some worthy ideal appropriate

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[24] This idea appears in various places in Rawls's work; see, for example, Rawls (2001), 180-181. For a much fuller discussion see Garthoff (2015).

[25] This idea pervades Rawls's work, but the fullest statement of his conception of human psychology is found at Rawls (1971), 453-512.

for beings like us.[26] A Rawlsian realistic utopia thus aims to unify the functions of social criticism and social reconciliation, with both functions filled by a single ideal political conception. Armed with these ideas from Rawls's approach to political philosophy, I return in the next section to the tensions between realism and playability in the design of fantasy games.

4. Playability *as* Realism

Almost all the discussion of the tension between realism and playability in game design, including in the pages of *Dragon*, treats these as independent and competing values. Thus the frame of discussion is not about how to synthesize or unify these values but instead concerns which of them should take precedence when inevitable tradeoffs between them arise. It is difficult to develop a greater understanding or appreciation of the merits of competing positions when they are juxtaposed this way. Different people are attracted to different weightings of the competing values, and so form different judgments about which tradeoffs are to be accepted and which are not. But absent a more abstract overarching value which subsumes the competing values, or more generally absent a broader theoretical framework within which to situate competing claims with respect to one another, it is difficult to illuminate (much less resolve) the conflicts.

As was observed in the previous section, Rawls regards *both* having a rich, systematic, and accurate account of the people governed by a system *and* having a system simple enough to be understood and applied by people as aspects of realism. This connection suggests a different frame for disputes about tradeoffs between realism and playability in fantasy games. Instead of regarding realism (reliance on actual laws of nature) and playability (workability) as independent values often in competition, we might instead apply Rawls's idea and attempt to understand each

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[26] See Rawls (2001), 3-5. Also relevant is Rawls (1993), 101 and 171-172.

as an aspect of realism in a broader sense. The hope is that doing so enables richer understanding

of the values at stake in game design, both to illuminate what is at stake in these disputes and to

inform judgment about which to privilege when tradeoffs cannot be avoided.

The tight connection between laws of nature and workability in democratic theory – that

both are largely sub-domains of human social psychology – is not available in this case. There are

at least two important reasons for this. One is that role-playing games in general, including the

classic examples discussed here, do not have a democratic administrative structure. Normally

there is one individual – in the *Dragon* discussions variously termed "judge", "referee", "game

master", or "dungeon master" – who has autocratic authority with respect to the rules.[27] All the

other participants are subject to this individual's rulings, with no avenue of appeal other than back

to the same authority. This authority is explicitly understood to extend not only to interpretation

of official rules and the creation of new rules, but also to the suspension or alteration of official

rules. The cooperativeness of a game accordingly rests mainly on this person's knowledge of the

rules, skill when interpreting and extending these rules, and ability to apply the rules consistently

and fairly. The only other recourse participants have is to exit the game.[28]

The second important reason why there is greater distance between the two elements of

realism in the context of games is that fantasy settings typically involve significant departures

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[27] Gygax advises referees on this point as follows: "The game is the thing, and certain rules can be distorted or disregarded altogether in favor of play. Know the game systems, and you will know how and when to take upon yourself the ultimate power." See Gygax (1979), 9. This passage appears in the introduction to the original *Dungeon Masters Guide*, and so is among the most authoritative sources about the game. I tend to think Gygax overstates this point, and that fidelity to the rules importantly constitutes the gameplay as cooperative rather than as, say, a manipulation of the players by the referee. But Gygax is clearly cognizant of the fact, important here as in legal theory, that fetishizing rules seldom makes for judicial excellence.
[28] Rawls emphasizes that the analogous point does not hold in the political case; people do not in general enter societies voluntarily and do not in general have the ability to exit their societies. In Rawls's view this entails that societies should be understood within a political theory as involuntary social structures rather than as voluntary associations. See Rawls (1971), 13.

from the laws of nature of the actual world. In the classic versions there are immortal (though not omnipotent) divine beings who grant powers to their devotees, there are incantations harnessing magical forces to affect minds and alter nature, and there are fictional races and species of both humanlike and decidedly non-human sorts. Thus realism here does not mean complete fidelity to the actual laws of nature, but instead means having a rich and systematic accounting of the laws of nature of a fictional world. But generally speaking it serves realism to minimize departure from actual laws of nature, since actual laws provide a realistic coherence difficult to recover through more thoroughly fictional laws and principles.

Thus in role-playing games the first aspect of realism concerns the metaphysical and quasi-scientific principles of a game's fictional setting and the social scientific principles of its many denizens, including especially the characters portrayed by the people playing the game. By contrast the second aspect is realism about the (human) players who create, interpret, and apply the rules of the game; this includes especially the referee, but also includes the other participants, since the success of the game depends on their experience of it. Both are aspects of realism in the relevant sense, for both place limits on the sorts of games which players are apt to experience as cooperative and fulfilling activities.

Let me now illustrate how this unified frame can be used to help illuminate tradeoffs between realism and playability. Consider first a fairly uncontroversial principle of role-playing game design known as "game balance". This is the constraint that the different sorts of characters be roughly balanced in skills and powers. Thus if one character is a warrior-type with special skill in combat, then that character should have little or no ability to use magic; similarly those who use magic should typically have a diminished effectiveness when fighting. Another example is that members of nonhuman races typically have certain abilities, such as the ability to see in the

infrared spectrum, which human characters lack; but partly for this reason nonhuman characters are generally more limited in the upper bound of skills they can develop.[29]

Game balance is an aspect of playability. Understood simply as an imaginative exercise, there is no particular reason the denizens of a fantasy world need be of roughly equal potential as adventurers.[30] But this is a crucial constraint on the design of fantasy role-playing games, for it is vital that the game be experienced as cooperative by the players. Moreover this constraint is, in Rawls's sense, a constraint of realism. The game is to be experienced as fair and cooperative by the participants, given the basic facts of human social psychology, and it is plausible that game balance is normally necessary for this. In addition this game balance must not only obtain, it must be manifest in the sense that we can expect, in light of human psychology, that players will pick up on it and appreciate it.[31]

Although not usually defended in this terms, another way Gygax wisely incorporated playability considerations is by making "critical hits" (attacks automatically resulting in death), and more generally the instant death of characters, a relative rarity. Inclusion of such attacks is not an obstacle to playability in the short term, since a mechanic for deathblow attacks need not be cumbersome. But constant vulnerability to immediate death stands in the way of playability in

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[29] The constraint was explicitly understood by Gygax to apply not at each stage of an adventuring career, but rather over its entire course. Thus wizard-types were by design less powerful than warrior-types at the beginning of play but more powerful if they survive to later stages of the game. Interestingly Rawls makes the analogous point about distributive shares in his theory of justice: these are assessed over the course of an entire life, not by any snapshot of the distribution at a particular time. See Rawls (1971), 175-183.

[30] Hence there is no direct analog to this constraint within the domain of fantasy literature, which I consider briefly in the essay's concluding paragraph.

[31] Certain unofficial but commonly permitted character races, such as gully dwarves and half-goblins, are by design weaker than other races, and some players enjoy the underdog status which accompanies playing these characters. But in practice most players are not interested in such inferior options. At the other end of the spectrum Gygax cautions referees against permitting powerful non-anthropoid monsters to be played as characters. The desire to play such creatures is understandable, as they commonly have powers well beyond those available to beginning characters. But these creatures tend not develop their powers over time, and so as Gygax observes they typically become dull to play in the long run. See Gygax (1979), 21.

a broader sense, for it requires players to create new characters more frequently and also serves as a disincentive to players becoming invested in their characters.

Consider next what may have been the most contentious point of discussion in *Dragon* during the 1980s: that the rules of first edition *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* disadvantaged female characters by setting their maximum strength score lower than that for male characters. Endless letters were published either criticizing this as an unnecessarily alienating feature of the game (a playability consideration) or defending it as a realistic reflection of lawlike differences between the sexes.

In view of the overriding aim of constituting a cooperative and fulfilling activity, this feature of the rules of first edition *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* constitutes a major flaw; and the charge that the rule is relatively unplayable because unnecessarily alienating diagnoses well its objectionable character.[32] As was frequently noted in *Dragon*, the game is fantasy. Even if such a fact obtains in a lawlike way in the actual world it is not essential to carry it into a world containing gods, monsters, and magic. Realism about players is thus more significant than realism about characters in this case.

That said it seems to me not similarly objectionable to have sex-differentiated strength maximums if these are clearly compensated by advantages to female characters of a comparable magnitude. (Moreover I would say appropriate compensation in this case is fairly clear: female characters should have a higher maximum score for constitution, which in the game is an overall measure of health and vigor. This reflects the fact that in the actual world human females are less susceptible to death and disease at every stage of life.) In that case there would be no advantage

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[32] This parallels Rawls's assessment of ideal conceptions of society by the extent to which they discourage alienation; see Rawls (2001), 130-132.

playing one sex rather than the other, and so the differentiation as such need not inhibit game balance or cooperativeness. There are already differences in profession and race which define characters in profoundly different ways in game terms. In such a context having a relatively minor difference grounded in sex need not greatly affect the success of the characters or the relative status of the sexes within the game. The rationale for such a sex-differentiated approach would be to minimize departures from the actual world in the natural laws governing character abilities. There is of course no problem with a game system which assigns equal maximum strength scores to female and male characters, but it is easier to develop a rich and systematic fantasy world if as much of the actual world is preserved as is compatible with the changes necessary to effect the fantasy. And in any case the larger theme of this essay is that questions like these should be addressed by considering the relative contribution of playability and realism to realizing the overarching value of realistic cooperativeness among game participants.

5. Conclusion

In this essay I have discussed how realism constrains fantasy. I have focused on games, using the tension between realism and playability in role-playing games (discussed in *Dragon* in the 1970s and 80s) as a principal context of discussion. I have used John Rawls's conception of a realistic utopia in political philosophy to illuminate that discussion. In particular I have explained how Rawls's dual constraints of workability and preserving the laws of nature can be adapted to unify the constraints of realism and playability beneath the single overarching value of realistic cooperation at the gaming table.

In closing I want to mention a possible further application of this family of ideas, namely to the genre of literary fantasy. In such literature the relevant tension is neither between realism

and playability nor between preserving laws of nature and workability. In literature the tension arises instead between realism about a fantasy world's characters and setting and realism about the *audience* who is to understand and appreciate that world. Questions about how best to resolve that tension may also be illuminated by assessing tradeoffs between the constraints against the overarching value of realistic cooperation, where in this case the cooperation is between author and audience. That further application of this frame of discussion must be explored on another occasion, but it strikes me as promising to pursue.

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