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## ROLEPLAYING GAMES IN VISUAL MEDIA

How to make tabletop roleplaying games engaging for an outside audience?

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Tämä tutkimus on laadittu itsenäisenä, alan toimijoista riippumattomana työnä. Ensisijaisena tarkoituksena ja tutkimustavoitteena on selvitys pöytäpelien soveltuvuudesta visuaalisen median (web series/vastaava AV-materiaali) sisällöksi, tai sisällöntuotannon apuvälineeksi – ensisijaisesti varsinaisena, keskeisenä sisältönä, mutta huomioiden myös mahdollisuudet esim. käsikirjoitus-työkaluna hyödynnettäessä.

Analyysi perustuu omakohtaiseen kokemukseen, peliteoriaa ja dramaturgian perusteita koskevaan kirjallisuuteen, sekä alan asiantuntijoiden julkisiin kirjoituksiin ja haastatteluun.

Tutkimuksen saavutettuna tuloksena on johdatus ja esittely merkittävimmistä tuotannoista aihepiiriä koskien, sekä päätelmiä niiden menestyksen syistä. Alkuperäinen tutkimustavoite on jäänyt osittain täyttymättä.

Tulokset ovat käytettävissä tulevan aihetta koskevan tutkimuksen apuna sekä johdatuksena merkittävimpiin teoksiin.

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Asiasanat: roolipelit, suoratoisto

## ABSTRACT

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This is an independent study with the goal of examining the suitability of using roleplaying games as creative content and framing device for visual media production in a documentary manner.

Personal experience, literature on the foundations of narrative and game theory, and an interview and published articles of experts form the knowledge base for this study.

As a result, this study acts as an introduction and reference to the notable roleplaying shows produced, with observations on their structure and possible reasons for their success. However, the intended results of original goals remain inconclusive. Still, this study can be utilized as an aid and introductory reference for future research on the subject.

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Keywords: role playing, games, web series, livestreaming

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## 1 Introduction

I've been involved in the hobby of roleplaying games from around 2004 with active involvement in the local scene of Oulu, Finland since 2010. In that time, I've familiarized myself with the processes of designing traditional games, and during the years I've assembled a diverse background of different aspects of roleplaying. In the summer of 2012, I attended the *Ropecon* event, where one of the guests of honour was Peter Adkison, the founder of *Wizards of the Coast* and the CEO of *GenCon*, who was speaking, along with Martin Ericsson, about his then-upcoming project of integrating tabletop roleplaying into visual media in the form of a web series.

Other forms of using roleplaying games in audio-visual entertainment in general were also discussed in this panel – both as supplementary methods of storytelling and production, and as the narrative itself – also in the form of live-action roleplay. I was inspired by the idea of exploring ways of doing something that I've passionately done for a significant part of my life in a new way, and possibly even popularizing the hobby that I love in the process.

Adkison has since abandoned his experiments in the field, but his work did raise some points on how to approach this venture, and possibly refine his methods, and there are others that are working on similar projects that have been relatively successful.

In recent years, roleplaying games have gained popularity and the selection of published games has diversified notably through to works of independent developers. From my personal experience, there seems to be a sizeable group of people who are interested in taking up the hobby. However, the learning curve and opportunities to start without an existing network of local players is difficult. Therefore, some sort of demonstrative show that could give a glimpse of the gameplay would be useful for players that are either starting out, or looking to switch or diversify systems, as well as for developers as a marketing tool.

Seeing that roleplaying games have been researched extensively as an educational tool, and application of games in general as a management tool, why not see how they can be used more widely in their intended use, as entertainment? The popularity of Let's Players on Youtube, as well as the very existence of E-Sports tournaments as spectator events shows that digital gaming

has its bases covered, and more importantly, it also indicates that people really like to watch other people playing games.

In this document, I will explore the possible methods of making a tabletop game that can be interesting – and more importantly, entertaining – for an outside observer to watch. I will also evaluate the viability of the idea in general through examination of earlier attempts at the concept – as well as similar, ongoing projects – as example cases.

I have mainly focused on formats where the game itself is the main feature, or focus of the show, with the assumption that the reader has at least a passing familiarity with the hobby. After all, the series analysed are made by people in the hobby for others in, or at the very least have an interest for the hobby. The in-crowd nature of the productions also means that most of the readers who would benefit from this text are already passionate about gaming or involved in the industry of publishing games. That being said, I will also touch upon the applications of roleplaying games as development tools, such as writing aids, although to a much lesser degree.

Being a relatively new field of expression that is primarily distributed in the form of web series, locating references and sources in traditional written form has proven quite challenging – due to this, the majority of reference material is, out of necessity, in the form of internet articles, videos, and a creator interview. The original intent was to interview multiple notable creators (for example: Matt Mercer, Wil Wheaton, Peter Adkison and Jason Morningstar were among the people contacted) but I was only able to schedule an interview with Zak Smith/Sabbath of *I Hit It With My Axe*.

## 2 Roleplaying explained

Due to being a relatively new cultural field, and therefore lacking commonly used and defined academic terms, it is rather difficult to define what a roleplaying game is. Nearly every system includes its own definition or opinion, and nearly every player has their own variation of the nature of the game. Out of all the explanations that I've come across during my years in the hobby, besides the flat non-statements like "cops and robbers with a referee", "cooperative storytelling" and such, the most evocative definition for a layman may be the description of an "interactive improvisational radio drama". *Dungeons & Dragons Rules Cyclopedia* from 1991 describes role-playing games as being much like "radio adventures" – to use a more common turn of speech, radio drama or -plays – with the important distinction that role-playing games are interactive, with the players actually participating in the telling of the story instead of just passively observing (*Rules Cyclopedia*, 1991, p.5).

By breaking down the term of roleplaying game itself to its base parts, they are – as the name suggests – games in which the players assume a role. To reference the *Rules Cyclopedia* definition again, players "control the actions of a character in a story, decides on [their] actions, supplies [their] character's dialogue, and makes decisions based on the character's personality and [their] current game options" (*Ibid.*). In addition to this, one of the people playing the game takes to role of a *Game Master*, who may also be referred to as a *Dungeon Master* – or *DM* for short – in *D&D* specifically, or in other games, as referee, storyteller or the like. The roles are described as follows:

"[The Game Master] will create the world and setting in which the adventures will be taking place and will create a variety of characters to populate the world. The DM will also develop situations taking place in that world and will then run adventures—acting as the main narrator of the stories in which the other players' characters will participate.

The other players will create characters—the heroes of the DM's story. The DM will present their characters with situations, and they'll decide how to react to those situations. Several situations progressing toward a conclusion become an adventure or story; a number of adventures played one after another become a campaign." (*Ibid.*).

So, in short, a group of people tell a story collaboratively amongst themselves, and share the creative load using the rules of the game as a tool to accomplish that. One of the players acts as the narrator or director of the game, facilitating play by preparing the outline of the stories, han-



dling supporting characters and adjudicating rules, and the others enforce their agency through the actions of the “main cast”, so to speak. In filmmaking terms, the game master is something like a mix between director, screenwriter and the supporting cast, even though that description is not an entirely accurate representation of the role. Some other game systems alter this dynamic between the players and the GM by dividing up the responsibilities between players equally so that there is no Game Master per se, or have the players take turns handling that role, but this general division of work is the most common one.

Roleplaying games are usually played with the help of little more than stationery, a bunch of dice and a set of rules, the narrative taking place in the players’ imagination – many games include other supplementary material such as miniatures, maps, chits, tokens and the like, perhaps even dioramas for miniatures and other far more grandiose material – but what is actually required to play is a bunch of people, and some sort of social conduct. The pens, paper, dice and printed rulebooks are helpful, but essentially optional.

The history of the hobby/of roleplaying games begins with tabletop miniature war games, in which the players control whole armies of little pewter men. At some point in the seventies, someone – usually attributed to Gary Gygax and David Arneson – got the idea that instead of armies, it would be more interesting to play as individuals and bring more characterisation to the mix, resulting in the release of the first tabletop roleplaying game, *Dungeons and Dragons* - or *D&D* in 1974. Since the release of the first edition, an estimate of 20 million people have played the game, with some 1 billion USD spent on published material. It remains the most popular roleplaying game to this day, especially in the US (Waters, 2004).

As *D&D* has its roots in wargaming, the rules of the system are heavily combat-oriented – in later years, there has been an increasing number of alternative systems released, with different focuses for their rules according to the intended playing experience, alternating from combat-oriented games played differently to modelling of social structures, completely freeform games and everything in between. The market is still dominated by rules-heavy, simulationist games with their main focus in combat, with *D&D* and its derivatives as the most prominent title, but smaller titles with different focuses are starting to gain ground. While fantasy games are prominent, a game for nearly every genre can be found.

In terms of game theory, roleplaying games could be construed as a fusion of mimicry or *mimesis* and *agôn*. In *mimicry*, the “core fun” of the game is the imitation of something, playing pretend, and assuming a role (Caillois, 2001, p19-23). *Agôn* is competition and test of skill on a more or less level playing field (Ibid. p.14-17). In addition to that, *alea*, or games of chance is involved in the equation, but not in the strict sense of a “game in which the decisions is independent of the player, and the outcomes are out of their control” (Ibid. p.17), but rather as a complementary element to increase uncertainty and provide unexpected results for the benefit of creating emergent stories.

In a more freeform way of describing the main draw for players of role-playing games, the escapism (or the creative outlet of “playing make-believe”) with some of the control of the imaginary story, but also responsibility over the creative burden is transferred over to the other players and to random chance in the form of relying on dice, and the rules provide a frame that the players can use as a group to overcome challenges placed on them by the game master.

### 3 Definitions

The following text will be making frequent references to the following terms regarding roleplaying games, so in the interest of readability, I will explain the key concepts here.

**Role-playing game:** A game in which the participants cooperatively create a story based on a set of commonly accepted rules. Roleplaying games can be further classified as tabletop, or pen-and paper roleplaying games; live-action role-playing games; and as an extension, various sorts of videogames in electronic media are also identified by the term, although in their case, the definition usually incorporates only some elements of character progression and the assuming of a role akin to a traditional game - For the sake of brevity, and the focus of this document, I will use the general term "roleplaying game", or the abbreviation "RPG" in reference to pen & paper games unless otherwise specified.

**Tabletop game:** As the name suggests, a game that is played on a table – therefore including pen and paper roleplaying, card, and board games. Commonly used contextually to refer to pen and paper roleplaying games.

**Pen- and paper roleplaying game:** A game where the players express their characters and their actions verbally, instead of physical acting or dressing up as them.

**Live Action Roleplay, or LARP:** A roleplaying game where the players act out the actions of their characters instead of describing them.

**Game system:** (Or contextually, just a *system*.) The ruleset for a specific roleplaying game publication.

**Game session:** The event in which a game is played. A game session that is not intended to be a part of a campaign is commonly known as a one-shot. Compare with an episode of a series in terms of television production.

**Adventure:** a story segment in a game, somewhat comparable to a story arc, or in some cases a season of a TV series. May be a one-shot, or spanning several sessions of play.

**Campaign:** A series of game sessions or adventures with a continuous plot or continuity. Compare with series in terms of television production.

**Player:** A person who takes part in a roleplaying game.

**Player Character:** The entity through which a player participates in a game, the role which they assume and whose actions they control. Commonly shortened to *PC*.

**Non-Player Character:** Characters that are controlled by the *game master*, not by the *players*. Most likely to be a supporting character or an antagonist. Commonly referred to as *NPC*.

**Game Master:** The person responsible for the design and control of a roleplaying game, acting as the supporting, or *non-player characters* and as something akin to a director and writer of a film within the context of the game. Commonly abbreviated as *GM*.

**GM:** short for *Game Master*.

**Game group or play group:** (Or, just a *group* contextually) the GM and the players collectively.

**PC:** short for *Player Character*.

**NPC:** see *Non-Player Character*.

## 4 Need and Demand

As explained in the introduction, roleplaying games have gained popularity – or depending on one’s view, regained it since their exit from the mainstream after the 80’s – and wider social acceptance in recent years with the selection of published games also diversifying through the efforts of independent developers. There is interest towards taking up the hobby, but the prospect of starting a game can be daunting given that a local group of players is required and someone in the group needs to have a handle on the rules beforehand. This means that the initial investment required to even start playing is high in terms of time, effort, and people, and the group needs to be within the same, relatively small region geographically to be able to set up a game session.

The possibility for games played through the internet, in the form of video conferences, virtual tabletops, and instant messaging somewhat alleviates the issue with logistics, but is not a viable possibility for some, and not preferred by others. In addition to potential players interested in starting gaming, a show that could showcase gameplay would also serve developers as a marketing tool. In addition to catering for potential players as an introductory reference or as a surrogate activity to actually playing a game themselves, people who are already engaged in roleplaying games and interested in how other groups play are a strong potential demographic as well.

According to Martin Ericsson, there is already a precedent of a show promoting the gaming scene in the form of *Barda*, a children’s game show-type of episodic series that includes elements of live-action roleplay and has allegedly had a major positive effect in the Danish LARP scene among children. In addition to this, in the same panel, Ericsson had an interesting point about the subject of media within a subculture, in the vein of skate- and snowboarding films – essentially, the practice of hobbyist sharing their experiences with others of their subculture in the form of videos has already happened with other activities. (Adkison & Ericsson, 2012).

With roleplaying games, this process is constantly developing – there are many creators trying to find the way of doing things that suits them best, and several have been relatively successful:

*Tabletop*, which I will discuss later on in cases, has done a great job on introducing board gaming to a wider audience, but its episodic format is ill-suited for handling a roleplaying campaign beyond one-shots played for demonstrative purposes. There is evidence that games featured in

*Tabletop* have had a boost in sales after their respective episodes have aired, with instances of the game in question running out of print due to increased demand.

The other cases covered are series about specific campaigns. The earliest examples as a dedicated series are *I Hit It with My Axe* and *the First Paladin*. To my knowledge, *I Hit It with My Axe* is *the* first tabletop RPG series made in video – or at least the one which has reached a notable audience – and its nature as a pioneering project shows. The pacing is a bit odd to my tastes, and the barely existent recording budget makes itself known in a bad way, but it has its advantages and has set the groundwork for filming game sessions. *The First Paladin* is rather similar in its mission: to make a series about roleplaying campaign, with more focus on the story and characters, it is also plagued by the pitfalls of low-budget filmmaking – Both *I Hit It with My Axe* and *The First Paladin* are also geared towards an audience that is already familiar with the system played, or rather make the assumption that the viewer is already knowledgeable on how roleplaying games in general work – the intended audience is therefore, either intentionally or as an oversight, people who already know how to play roleplaying games, and the narrative could be said to be impenetrable to an audience who is just interested in finding out “what this roleplaying thing is about”. Both of are also more or less done as traditionally edited shows with the footage cut into an easily digestible size.

*Critical Role* takes a different approach, broadcasting the game live over *Twitch* – it follows the same pattern as *I Hit It With My Axe* in being a continuation of an existing game and group, but has completely different pacing since the audience sees the game as it is. Due to the natural pacing, it is more accessible to viewers introducing themselves to roleplaying games in general since they see all of the game processes, but on the other hand, the time investment for a four-hour stream is considerably greater and requires more patience from them than a show cut into 30-minute episodes.

Regarding the later productions, *Titansgrave: The Ashes of Valkana*, *Force Grey: Giant Hunters*, and *Acquisitions Incorporated: the Series* all follow the pattern of edited series with a seasonal structure that is cut into episodes roughly between 30 to 60 minutes in length with narrative and graphical improvements to aid the viewers with the readability of the game on the rise. Later RPG spotlights in *Tabletop* also seem to imitate the shows mentioned above that are produced prior to, or concurrent to them.

For those it may concern, viewership statistics for individual shows are presented in their detailed analysis under Chapter 6, alongside references to the details of the claims made above. As evidenced by the multitude of shows already produced on the subject, there clearly is demand for a show that features roleplaying games as a central part of its content, and judging by the season renewals of series and the long-running streams, these productions seem to have been successful – at least there are enough people that actually watch them to keep making more. The audience that is interested and willing to watch a show based on a roleplaying campaign is clearly there, and in addition to people who have been involved in RPGs for a long time, it includes potential new players as well.

With the exception of *Titansgrave*, all of the mentioned series have *Dungeons & Dragons* as the game that is being played. However, there is a far wider selection of games that are known and recognizable; there is an unfilled niche for a series that features a game wildly different from *D&D* that could be filled – restricting RPG shows to just fantasy games out of the multitude of possible genres feels like wasted potential.

In addition to being used as the narrative of a show, roleplaying games can be utilized as writing tools – *The Devil Walks in Salem* is a filmatization of a game session, or to be more specific, an adaptation of a story emerging from a game session of *Fiasco* (Adkison, 2013). *Fiasco Companion* by *Bully Pulpit Games* has further discussion, interviews and essays regarding the usage of the game as a writing tool as well as on its usefulness for performers. (*Fiasco Companion*, 2011, p.144-162)

## 5 Considerations

A show that features roleplaying games as its main content and presents it as a game for an outside audience to watch needs to be entertaining. This may seem a simple non-statement, but it needs to be addressed due to the way roleplaying games are. Being a form of participatory and collaborative storytelling – and while people may enjoy just observing a story despite its structure and framing – tabletop games are usually not designed with spectators in mind. The default audience in a game are the players themselves, and there are factors that need to be taken into account when making the transition of including an outside audience into the mix. The format is fundamentally different from traditional drama structure seen in theatre, film, television and radio, in which the audience is a passive observer.

In other words, the players participate while the audience in traditional media is a spectator. While traditional narratives in scripted media are meticulously structured to tell their story in the exact way and form the author envisioned them, the storylines in most games – and specifically in tabletop roleplaying are emergent and reactionary, built upon the interaction between players. This makes a game that is aimed at an outside audience more like improvisational theatre than a scripted play. There are precedents of improvisational entertainment shows that have been successful productions in the past, such as *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* and others using a similar format, some of them popular and on the air at the time of writing. In addition to these, the Spex theatre acts enjoy popularity in Finland and Sweden, and using elements of those forms could prove useful in the exploration of improvisational storytelling. Kristin Firth makes an interesting observation that roleplayers and improvisational performers are similar in that they both tell stories by both playing off of, and being inspired by the other participant of their respective activities – in her opinion, the two groups have more things in common than they have differences. (Fiasco Companion, 2011, p.159)

To set a foundation for deeper discussion, the traditional narrative, in its most basic form, presents information as a logically structured, connected sequence of events (Lacey, 2000, p.15-16). For the sake of consistent terminology, we could also take Lacey's definitions of *story* and *plot* for later use to avoid possible future confusion – in the most terse way possible, plot is everything explicitly stated in a text, and the story is the order of events in the text that are either explicitly presented or inferred to. (Ibid. p.16)



The role of the narrator in a roleplaying game is shared between the players and the game master with the players traditionally being limited to narrating through their characters, while the game master exerts their narrative power omnipotently, with the exception of the agency of player characters – In other words, the game master has narrative control over everything except the motivations and decisions of the player characters – the will (while not necessarily the actions) of the PCs is the domain of the players and nobody else's. This means that the game master cannot seize the narrative control of the players – or it is, in the very least, considered extremely poor form to do so – and has to just guide or bait them towards his planned storyline. The initial plotting of a story is more about milestones and highlights that may happen with no certainty on how exactly the story progresses to those points. It could be said that while the story still has a beginning, middle and an end as per usual as set by the expectations for a traditional narrative structure, the actual events of the formed plot are unknowable before they happen.

Since no participant in a game has absolute control over the narrative, the stories in roleplaying games are *emergent* – the narrative is built upon happenstance and reactionary responses to events that happen instead of following a script to its intended conclusion. Therefore the story needs to have gaps left into it intentionally to be filled with the creative solutions of and interaction with the players – having a plot that is too strictly defined leaves no room for the players to manoeuvre in and the game practically ceases to be a game. The game master – or the author of a game book or published adventure to be used by a group – is not designing complete plots or even stories, but drafts for them to be completed during play with the players. To take the emergence further, the random elements arising from the rules of the played game ensures that some events that come to be a part of the story are not up to the decisions of either the players or the game master, but rely entirely on how the dice fall. With little hyperbole, it could be said that the same adventure never produces the same story even with the same group.

Beside the *narrative control* being shared by the participants in games, the *narrative voice* differs from traditional forms significantly. Whereas in more traditional storytelling, the narrator is usually either a disembodied, omniscient entity, or one or more voices bound to a single point of view at a time – be it in a first or third person perspective – the narration of roleplaying games bounces back and forth between the players and the game master constantly, in a discussional manner. To compare with *polyphonic narratives*, the participants of a game do not narrate entire chapters in turn, but rather feed off each other and narrate together – it could perhaps be illustrated as the

players, as well as the game master, being like characters or actors in a story narrated by the game itself?

As the most important factor, that difference between players and viewers discussed earlier, and the resulting difference in narrative and dramaturgical practices associated with good storytelling has to be addressed. Stressing that which has been said before, roleplaying games are traditionally aimed for a small audience which is actively participating in the narrative themselves, as opposed to an audience of indeterminate size that is just observing the plot passively. The audience of a game, or the *players* have agency, whereas the audience of a film, play or TV series or equivalent, the *viewers*, do not. Combined with the fact that viewers who are likely to be interested in a show that is framed as a game being played, are also likely to be interested in – and familiar with – the game itself, it is fair to assume that they'd be concerned about the authenticity of the play experience. This view on the importance of authenticity and player enjoyment is also supported by the statements given by the creators of the better-known RPG shows in existence: Zak Smith of *I Hit It With My Axe* says that the authenticity of their game is the most important thing leading to its success (Attachment 1), and the people behind *Critical Role* have made similar statements (Gallagher, 2016). Therefore, the players cannot be just actors playing a role for the benefit of the audience; they need to be involved as players who are genuinely enjoying the game. This makes finding a way of working out how to weave a story that is interesting and entertaining for both the players and the viewers particularly important. So, the elements of player agency and participation have to be retained, but the players should also be able to provide a story that doesn't require a part in that agency to be enjoyed.

As an additional challenge, the pacing of most games is so that sessions tend to have long stretches of nothing happening, or “packing thirty minutes of excitement into four hours”. This can be addressed by editing footage and cutting inconsequential detail from the final product, but some of that “nothing” may unexpectedly end up acting as foreshadowing for later story elements that emerge from table talk and so on. Cutting content to make it more accessible for an audience is also always a judgement call. In an ideal situation, some adjustments would be made for the game to flow better. Despite this, it has been proven wildly successful to just do a series live with no editing, as shown by *Critical Role* in particular.

As said by Will Hindmarch in his exercise of building a screenplay with the help of a game, the way the story takes form differs between games, scripts – and also adaptations of games – the

narrative space is different and gets used in a different way as a result. Table talk – both in the way of out-of-character discussion in addition to describing things that cannot be shown – leads to presenting and establishing plot elements in a player-facing way and delivering the story in a fashion that does not need to be dramatized, and possibly even couldn't be delivered for a passive audience. (Hindmarch, 2001, p.33)

This leads to the second important point, which is the choice of a suitable game. Most of the roleplaying shows made are using some edition of *Dungeons and Dragons* which is likely to be, at least in part, due to the larger viewership and better exposure the game offers for the audience. The knowledge of, and familiarity with games suitable for serialized play on part of the creators is also likely to play a part in this. However, *Dungeons & Dragons* is a rules-heavy game with a focus on combat/action, and it lacks support for exploring some potential narrative elements beneficial for a show. Another game might work better for creating a story for an audience, but is likely to have a bigger challenge in selling itself to a large enough audience to be a viable production.

All of these considerations affect each other and the size of the audience, or perhaps more aptly, the ratio of players to viewers, plays a part as well. It is entirely different to accommodate a handful of spectators than a potentially worldwide audience. However, in my experience games are already capable of accomplishing that in the former case, judging from all the times I've seen passers-by huddling around a table in events to see what's going on. So, the issue might very well be smaller than I make it out to be.

Besides using games as the narrative medium of a story, there are many other ways to use games as potential for storytelling. The projects that have already been completed include those that are documentary in nature, focusing on the game and its players, demonstrations for giving good games the recognition they deserve, and attempts to create narratives through emergent storytelling by playing a game, putting emphasis on the characters and what happens to them while leaving the players and the game itself in the sidelines.

## 6 Cases

The main cases I will cover are some of the most well-known existing shows that have dealt with tabletop roleplaying to a notable degree, and which I see as something to learn from and therefore, warrant closer examination. These shows are, in a chronological order of release, *I Hit It with My Axe*, *Tabletop*, *The First Paladin*, *Critical Role*, *Titansgrave: Ashes of Valkana*, and *Force Grey: Giant Hunters*. There are others that are taken in in lesser detail for being only tangentially related to the main subject, or due to my inability to analyse them in full detail.

### 6.1 I Hit It with my Axe

Launched on *The Escapist Magazine* in with the first episode airing in 17<sup>th</sup> march 2010, *I Hit It with My Axe* is a documentary-style web series about a *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign, as played by people in the adult entertainment industry – or, porn stars playing *D&D*, in more earnest terms to borrow from the actual name of the blog by the game master and creator, Zak Smith – also known as Zak Sabbath. Said blog – [dndwithpornstars.blogspot.com](http://dndwithpornstars.blogspot.com) – has been active since 15.10.2009. There have also been plans to release another season of the series, currently on hold indefinitely due to differences with *the Escapist*. (Smith, Zak: We're not playing D&D with the Escapist Ever Again, 2015 & Attachment 1)

The series itself consists of short episodes, 36 in total, generally between seven to ten minutes of runtime. The episodes were released weekly during its run, featuring a rotation of guest stars. Most of the players were relatively new to the game – half of the regular cast had been involved in roleplaying for less than a year when the filming started, and the guests were mostly first-timers. One of them, Satine Phoenix, later started her own series, *Maze Arcana* in 2016, which will be introduced in more detail later.

*I Hit It with My Axe* is, to my knowledge, the first series that is built around a roleplaying game in video, or at least the first one that has reached major visibility – Smith himself considers *Penny Arcade's Acquisitions Inc.* to be an earlier work, though, even if it doesn't deal in video. (Attachment 1). This pioneering nature of the series shows in the production, and not in a particularly good way. The series has a home video feel to it instead of being presented as a "proper" enter-

tainment series, which, to be fair, might be intentional, or at the very least a result of limited resources available. According to Smith, this is largely due to the budgetary constraints of the original *Escapist* run, stating that majority of the budget went towards ensuring that the cast was available to film the show, and as the series was started at the initiative of *the Escapist* – which is an understandable reason for not going through extra effort to develop a side project. The planned second season was intended to feature more in-depth interviews of the players, a practice that has been proved to be functional in later series. (Smith, Zak: We're not playing D&D with the Escapist Ever Again, 2015 & Attachment 1)

With this in mind, *I Hit It with My Axe* can be considered as a successful first attempt in the field of roleplaying game web series– it has its problems, but that can be construed as either a result of lack of proper resources or knowledge of what the production crew is supposed to be doing. The biggest initial hiccups are grown out of fast in the course of the first seven episodes or so, Smith himself attributing the quality of the early episodes to rushed production (Attachment 1). In any case, the progress made during the development is severely limited by the available assets. Judging it by the standards set by its followers seems unnecessarily harsh.

To go into detail, the structure of the series starts to improve around the eight episode, Zak himself vouching the 18<sup>th</sup> as the best of the bunch. (Smith, Zak: Must Organize Useless Ideas, 2012) On my initial watch-through, there seemed to be an overarching issue of focusing on the players and the game instead of bringing the emergent narrative and focusing on the story and the characters, something one who plays roleplaying games might expect from a series built around the hobby. Showcasing the interplay between the characters and their players is all well and good, but the cast in *I Hit It with My Axe* frequently seem to neglect using the names for their characters when referring to them. The strong points of *Axe* are its punk-rock-authenticity that is brutally honest, watching a group of beginners getting into the game is part of the appeal of the series, at least for people who have been playing for years.

For what it is, *I Hit It with My Axe* works due to its good cast chemistry and the unusual and to some people perhaps controversial premise helps with publicity. The main problem is the low budget, resulting in technical issues that drive away potential audience, and the short runtime leaves little room for content.

Regardless of intent, the show has succeeded in getting visibility, and has spawned other shows that use RPGs as source material. Peter Adkison cites it as an influence for *The First Paladin*. (Adkison: *Can Roleplaying Games Create Good Stories*, 2013) It has some apparent problems, mostly stemming from inexperience and some from poor circumstances, but it is doing something right.

I feel that the main appeal of the show for me is watching the enthusiastic beginners learning the ropes of the game, and the good chemistry of the table certainly helps with that. It can be clearly seen that the cast is picked up by the distributor and play out of joy for the hobby, instead of being selected for the purpose by the production team. The so-called “gimmick” of the show just happens to be there, instead of being a calculated, artificial publicity stunt. Due to this, the sessions read as an actual game that has been documented instead of a scripted event, and that level of authenticity improves the series as a whole. It has a lot to improve, but it is a good starting point for introducing roleplaying to mainstream media.

(See Attachment 1 for more information.)

## 6.2 Tabletop

*Tabletop* is a web series hosted by Wil Wheaton, on the *Geek & Sundry* channel. The show started on the 30<sup>th</sup> of March, 2012 and is still ongoing, currently on its third season. The basic format is to play a different tabletop game per episode with guest stars as players. These guests are, more often than not, actors, writers, game designers, webcasters and other personalities from geek culture.

The featured games are primarily board games, but some pen and paper roleplaying has also been covered (see “Tabletop episodes” under references). These episodes will be my main focus as cases relating to *Tabletop*, the board gaming content being of secondary importance.

As a testament to the financial viability of the format, *Tabletop*'s third season was 282.8% funded through Indiegogo, with a goal of \$500,000 (final funding being \$1,414,154). Incidentally, this made *Tabletop* the most successful digital series campaign on the platform (*Tabletop* season 3 Indiegogo Campaign), until that record was broken in March 2015 by *Con Man*. (Sandwell, 2014) As I noted earlier, the show has also had a significant effect to the sales of games featured in it. In terms of views, Youtube statistics for the individual RPG episodes range between 1.6 million

and some 460 000 views. (Tabletop: Dread Part 2, Tabletop Dragon Age RPG pt. 1, retrieved 5.12.2016)

The most important episodes in relation to this document are those featuring tabletop RPGs. With the intention of the show to introduce games the creator likes to a wider audience, all of those covered so far are less known publications with interesting mechanics, which is exactly the sort of thing the audience and industry needs to develop and renew itself. The rotation of guests also offers a possibility of observing group dynamics to see what kinds of players are entertaining to watch together, even in the environment of more goal-oriented board games in addition to roleplaying.



Figure 6.2.1: Tabletop Fiasco episode part 1 – pictured from from left to right: John Rogers, Alison Haislip, Wil Wheaton, Bonnie Burton.

The RPG features of *Tabletop* started with the coverage of *Fiasco*, a game by Jason Morningstar and published by *Bully Pulpit Games* that, according to its own description, is a game about “great ambition and poor impulse control”, in the vein of Coen brothers films. Diverging from common conventions of traditional roleplaying games, *Fiasco* has no Game Master – Instead, the players take turns to weave their story together. Further details about the game are less important, the focus of the game being in the narration, and the rules set so that they define the genre and encourage player behaviour towards what serves the narrative in a way that supports said genre.

The players in the *Fiasco* episodes were Wil Wheaton as the host and John Rogers, Alison Haislip, and Bonnie Burton as the guests – making the cast consist of professional writers and actors. This worked in the favour of the episode, by having industry professionals taking part in a game that aspires to create sessions that mirror the structure of a movie. *Fiasco*, however, works better as a participating game where all the people present are involved in the creation of the story. Considering that all the games that I've personally played are more reminiscent of writing crew brainstorming session instead of a final product that could be presented to an audience, the game session depicted in the episode working can most likely be attributed to the players' familiarity with such practices and the power of editing.



Figure 6.2.2: Tabletop *Dragon Age* episode, part 1: Pictured from left to right – Sam Witwer, Kevin Sussman, Chris Hardwick, Wil Wheaton, Chris Pramas.

The second roleplaying episode featured a game more traditional in its style, presenting the *Dragon Age RPG*, based on the video game of the same name. The guests this time around were the designer to the game itself, Chris Pramas, along with Sam Witwer, Kevin Sussmann, and Chris Hardwick, the last three all being actors yet again. Devices used to enhance the introductions of characters and the recap between episodes were spiced up with the inclusion of illustrations (see fig. 6.2.3, overleaf), which seems to work for presenting purely verbal gameplay, especially in a fantasy environment. The pace of the game, being essentially a one-off session edited into two parts, shows that, as a contrast to *I Hit It with My Axe*, a traditional game turns silly and nonsensical when the cast has not had time to work their chemistry out. The same effect can be



seen in convention games played amongst strangers that are at a “different wavelength” – there is a high possibility that someone ends up not taking the session seriously and wrecks the flow of the game.



Figure 6.2.3: Illustration from Dragon Age RPG episode part 2.

In the *Dragon Age* episode, this happens and while it is an entertaining piece to watch, the reason for the entertainment in the episode does not stem from the game itself. The game is, for one reason or another, a backdrop that provides the viewer with a situation where the players can interact with each other, but is in itself left out of focus. That may be because the viewer doesn't like Pramas' delivery, or the players' antics, or the lack of story emerging from the game, but in the end, the game in these episodes is secondary to the players. For me, the problem seems to be Sussman and Hardwick's characterisations growing old too fast, and there is no doubt that the nature of the session as a more traditional fantasy game one-off falls victim to the pitfall of people not investing in their characters and the story in favour of just playing it as a quick action game.

The overall result in a similar situation might be better if the group as a whole had some common history around the table, which could lead to more investment and crafting a story, instead of playing cheap caricatures.

One other important point that emerges from watching this episode is the relatively loose editing that has to be done in order to present the game results in a lot of moments where nothing of

importance happens. Yet again, when compared to the short runtimes of *I Hit It with My Axe*, the tight editing works in favour of a game-centric presentation, since all of the time during which nothing happens can be cut. The longer episodes feel more suited to a playstyle that keeps things interesting and moving along with the story, which worked for *Fiasco*. *Dragon Age* suffers from the combination of long runtime and not having an engaging story to support the gameplay, partially caused by the actions of the players. Nevertheless, the episode is somewhat entertaining, as I already mentioned, but a similar dynamic would be far less likely work in a long-running series built around the campaign that was started in this game, or a game like it.

What *Tabletop* excels at is the performance and charisma of its host, Wil Wheaton, and the guests have a good chance of being entertaining in their own right, being performers of one kind or another. The featured game content is made accessible and explained to the audience, in a way that could be characterized as tutorial-like, which is good for promotion work and people watching to learn the games presented, but on the other hand, distracts from the people and is unnecessary in a context where the audience is already familiar with the game.

The major problems of *Tabletop's* format, as far as narrative campaigns are concerned, stem from the episodic nature of the series. The main point of the show is to showcase and promote games to the audience which means that all of the games played are one-shots and a sizeable portion of the modest runtime of roughly half an hour per episode is dedicated to explaining how things work. This is, however, necessary for the show's intended purpose, and the format is not usable as it is for covering a campaign at large. This is not to say that the structure could not be adapted to be more suitable for such with relatively little effort, by extending the runtime and cutting back on the rules briefs – if they're featured at all – as the show goes along.

In later seasons, *Tabletop* has featured *Dread*, an atmospheric and mechanically simple RPG that fits the one-shot cut into the two-episodes-form the show uses for roleplaying titles – this is thanks to the simplicity of the game and its thematic focus, and it can be seen that the experience gained from covering the previous games has been put to use to improve the way that episode is handled.



Figure 6.2.4: Tabletop Dread episode. Ivan Van Norman, Laura Bailey, Molly Lewis, Wil Wheaton.

Currently there is also an episode on *Mice & Mystics* which is somewhat similar to roleplaying games in design, and episodes for *Misspent Youth* and *FATE Core* have been announced. (Tabletop season 4 lineup, 2016)

### 6.3 The First Paladin

*The First Paladin* is a production by *Peter Adkison*, released under *Hostile Work Environment*. It was launched in 2012.

Somewhat bafflingly, the series is based on *D&D 5<sup>th</sup> Edition*, or *D&D Next* as it was known in its still unreleased form during the production run, and has the founder and former owner of the company that publishes the product behind the wheel. Regardless of this, the show manages to be a low-budget production – despite obviously having the system selected for promotional purposes in addition to better exposure and familiarity with the gaming crowd. The illustrations that are used could be of higher quality – see *Force Grey* for a parallel – the stop-motion detracts from the people around the table, and the game is played in a way that emphasizes the weaknesses of the system and undercuts its strengths. The whole thing seems like a side project that would work far better with greater focus on things that work for the production, but instead the resources are

spread too thin over too many experimental elements that all end up suffering for no other reason than lack of commitment.

These, however, are minor details compared to the biggest problem the series has – the people around the table are not interesting enough. Unlike *I Hit It with My Axe* and *Tabletop*, the players are not performers, which is not a bad thing in itself, but the whole experience ends up being awkward to watch with some of them trying too hard with their delivery. It could be said that the worst part of *The First Paladin* is precisely that – trying too hard. The end result doesn't look natural.

#### 6.4 Critical Role

First aired via Twitch.tv in March 12<sup>th</sup> 2015 and produced by Geek & Sundry, *Critical Role* is a long-running series that is still ongoing with more than 70 episodes out – 77 at the time of writing to be exact (Twitch: Geek & Sundry videos, retrieved 5.12.2016). The episodes air weekly on Twitch as a live broadcast for subscribers, and are later posted to Geek & Sundry and later to Youtube. Like *I Hit It With My Axe*, the show features a pre-existing game group and campaign instead of one specifically started for the purposes of production.

The cast for the show includes Matthew Mercer as the GM, and Travis Willingham, Marisha Ray, Taliesin Jaffe, Ashley Johnson, Sam Riegel, Liam O'Brien, Laura Bailey, and formerly Orion Acaba as players – the entire cast consists of professional voice actors. Johnson has been a guest in *Tabletop* before, other members of the cast have later appeared in *Tabletop* as well, or are announced as players in future episodes of that show.



Figure 6.4.1: First episode of Critical Role: Clockwise from top left – Matthew Mercer, Liam O'Brien, Laura Bailey, Travis Willingham, Taliesin Jaffe, Marisha Ray, Orion Acaba, Sam Riegel.

It is possibly the most successful role-playing series yet – to illustrate that in numbers, the show has over 37 million minutes watched on Twitch for the entire run, averaging over one million minutes per episode according to Geek & Sundry. The Twitch channel has over 10 000 paid subscribers (Kuchera, 11.01.2016). According to the later episodes, that figure is outdated and off by a wide margin – the display graphics in episode 77 indicate that current number of subscribers is nearly 30000 (see Figure 6.4.2, below). On Youtube, the channel has over 1,4 million subscribers and 4,6 million views – the first episode alone has 2,7 million views, with more recent viewership statistics implying that the show has around 200 000 active followers on Youtube. (Youtube: Critical Role playlist, 5.12.2016) Admittedly, the channel subscriptions are for *Geek & Sundry* and include other programming than *Critical Role*. In addition to official videos, the show has an active fan community that edit their own highlight videos, do animation based on scenes from the show and so forth, so the official viewership figures are not necessarily entirely accurate. Considering the runtime of the episodes, it is also safe to assume that the views do not reflect the full extent of viewership, some of the watchers hitting fan works, clips and re-uploads instead of the official videos.





Figure 6.4.2: Illustrating the change of set and display graphics, as well as Twitch subscriptions at the time of the live broadcast of episode 77.

As it can be seen from the attached images (Fig. 6.4.2 & 6.4.3), *Critical Role* has had a considerable amount of production resources poured into it since the conception of the series. It has a dedicated set and graphical design, sponsors and product placement of gaming paraphernalia, the cast is wearing merchandise of the show, and so forth.

## 6.5 Titansgrave: Ashes of Valkana

One of the fulfilled stretch goals of the 3<sup>rd</sup> season Indiegogo campaign for *Tabletop* was a spin-off series focusing on a full-length RPG campaign, released in 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 2015. The series, called *Titansgrave: Ashes of Valkana*, was made partly because of public demand for such a show, evidenced by being a crowdfunding stretch goal, requests from *Tabletop* audience & backers of said Indiegogo campaign. (*Tabletop* season 3 Indiegogo campaign) This can be seen as further proof that a roleplaying game-focused web series is something that the audience wants, and is worth producing.

*Titansgrave's* initial concept judged by the promotional material made public prior to its release seemed to be exactly the sort of format I was thinking about as the most feasible way of implementing the concept for a RPG series using edited footage, and the show delivers on that impression.



Figure 6.5.1: Titansgrave set and cast, from left to right: Wil Wheaton, Hank Green, Alison Haislip, Yuri Lowenthal, Laura Bailey.

*Titansgrave* is done as a series in a seasonal format, consisting of a total of 10 episodes for the first season announced (for late 2016 in Gencon 2015, but currently delayed). The runtime for individual episodes is roughly 40-50 minutes, akin to a traditional “one-hour” TV spot. Cast of players is Wil Wheaton as the Game Master, with Ashley Johnson, Yuri Lowenthal, Alison Haislip and Hank Green as players – Haislip and Lowenthal having previously been visiting players of *Tabletop* and Bailey being in the cast of *Critical Role* and later appearing in *Tabletop’s Dread* game. So, again, the entire cast is actors, voice talent and a vlogger – all of them professional performers.

The production is largely similar to that of *Tabletop*, with the difference of being shot on set specifically designed for a game instead of on location (Behind the Scenes footage of *Titansgrave*). The display graphics that aid the audience in following the game are a close match to the way they were used in *Tabletop*. Unlike all other notable series before it, *Titansgrave* uses a game system that is not *Dungeons & Dragons* – that being *Fantasy AGE*, the same system featured earlier on *Tabletop’s Dragon AGE* episodes to tell its story.

Also differing from the productions of both *I Hit It With My Axe* and *Critical Role*, the players are picked for the production to play a game specifically planned with the show in mind, instead of just documenting a game that is already in place. Admittedly, the cast seems like they know each other personally, just like in a game played amongst friends, and the interpersonal chemistry of the group works great. As opposed to the earlier *Tabletop* one-shots, everyone is on the same page about the nature of the game, so the mood stays consistent and the players stay in character, so the issues one would assume to arise from having a cast with no shared gaming history are avoided.

## 6.6 Force Grey: Giant Hunters

In short: Matthew Mercer of *Critical Role* runs an eight-episode series based on a D&D module published by *Wizards of the Coast* (*Storm King's Thunder*). The show seems to be promotional, considering that it is endorsed by the publisher, and the airing time for the first seven episodes, running from July 11<sup>th</sup> to August 2016, coincides with the September release of the adventure. As for ratings and statistics regarding the show, the run of these episodes got more than 1.1 million Youtube views. (Force Grey Youtube playlist, 22.8.2016) The eighth episode of the series was played live on 5<sup>th</sup> of December 2016, 5pm PST (Force Grey: Lost Episode Announcement)

In addition to Mercer, the cast includes Chris Hardwick, Ashley Johnson, Jonah Ray, Shelby Fero, Utkarsh Ambudkar, and Brian Posehn added in and replacing Hardwick for the latter half of the series. Hardwick and Ray have previously been in *Tabletop*, Johnson in both *Tabletop* and *Critical Role*. Ambudkar and Fero are known for projects unrelated to roleplaying games, and Posehn is known for, in addition to his history as an actor, voice talent, and comedian, the host of the long-running D&D podcast, *Nerd Poker* (Ibid.).





Figure 6.6.1: The full cast of Force Grey – from left to right: Matther Mercer, Chris Hardwick, Ashley Johnson, Utkarsh Ambudkar, Shelby Fero, Jonah Ray, Brian Posehn.

The presentational style of the show draws heavily from Titansgrave, being shot on dedicated set and using a similar graphical style to convey game information to the audience. The illustrations used to evoke the atmosphere are of high quality, apparently using existing art assets of WotC's D&D line, specifically illustrations of *Storm King's Thunder*, and using what seems like the same artist for new art for a consistent design style (Figure 6.6.2).



Figure 6.6.2: Force Grey character illustrations

Setting it apart from the other campaign play-oriented series regarding narrative and pacing, *Force Grey* is cut into half-hour episodes, and is far more action-oriented than its predecessors – However, the combination of limited screentime, short series length and a heavy direction focus on the game elements detract from the potential of a story the series has. This is partially a matter of opinion as well, but I find the cast chemistry somewhat wanting – everyone involved seems

to be having a genuinely good time and they clearly enjoy the game and are having fun, but from a spectator's perspective, the players' personalities are clashing, or not meshing well enough. Accommodating all of the players into the game adds to the list of compromises that need to be made. These issues are diminished after the first couple of episodes, and the cast chemistry works considerably better on the latter half of the series. Most of the awkwardness is probably the result of some of the players being new to the game.

Mercer gives an excellent and evocative/animated performance as both a Game Master and a performer in general, and salvages much of the early episodes from being just a series of dice rolls. Once the players get their act together towards the end of the run, it starts to feel that further episodes with the same group would, in my opinion, be worth watching.

The archived video of the live broadcast from 5.12.2016 has gotten over 3000 views on Twitch (Lost episode Twitch 7.12.2016) and roughly 9600 on Youtube (Lost episode Youtube 7.12.2016) within a day of the original broadcast. The live episode breaks away from the format of edited footage-episodes, being a four-hour unedited stream. The cast for the live performance had to be changed due to scheduling conflicts, resulting in Johnson and Ray not making an appearance and being filled in by Dylan Sprouse and Emily V Gordon – the former of which is an actor and also runs the *D&D* Twitch stream *Pugcrawl*, the latter being a writer and a producer. (Ibid.) as a side note, *Pugcrawl* has a following of some 5600 subscribers (*Pugcrawl* Twitch channel, 6.12.2016) – judging from the amount of video views, it seems that the subscribers may have spiked as a result of being a guest star in the *Force Grey* stream.

The Live stream special episode along the earlier season offers an opportunity to examine the effects of doing the different formats with the same group for a closer look on how the same people in the same campaign perform under differing conditions. Unfortunately, a deep analysis on the matter is not possible due to time constraints.

## 6.7 Other Cases

This section describes, in brief, projects that are either tangentially related to the main focus of this study, shows directly relevant to the main focus that I've been unable to analyse in detail for one reason or another, or both.

### 6.7.1 Maze Arcana

Maze Arcana is created by Satine Phoenix and Ruty Rutenberg, also features Zak Smith as part of the cast and Taliesin Jaffe of *Critical Role* as a returning guest star. Satine was also a player in *I Hit It With My Axe*. Livestream, first season of 8 episodes completed in 20.11.2016.

My familiarity with Maze Arcana is quite limited, having mostly second-hand information on it through Zak Smith's blog posts. It is mentioned due to including cast from *I Hit it With My Axe*. Going by the details revealed in my interview, it seems to be a serious production – being shot in a studio with extensive crew, the main creators being invested in the work almost full-time and other details (Attachment 1) imply that it's more than a simple hobby project. Unfortunately, comprehensive statistics of viewership are not easily available. (Ibid.)

### 6.7.2 The Devil Walks in Salem

*The Devil Walks in Salem* is another production by Peter Adkison, a stand-alone film about the Salem witch trials that has its screenplay based on a roleplaying session (with *Fiasco*, covered above, as the system). Even though the film has been more or less completed, it has only been pre-released for *Kickstarter* backers and premiered in *GenCon* of 2014 – the public release was hinted to be “perhaps around *GenCon* 2015”. (The Devil Walks in Salem one year update, 2014) Since I'm not among said backers and unable to find a copy, I'm unavailable to give a detailed analysis of the project's results, but the success of the campaign and the result of the production of the film in general may give new insights on how to approach roleplaying as a writer's tool. Jason Morningstar, the writer of *Fiasco*, seems to be giving it high praise. (Morningstar, 2014) Based on publicly available information, the final pledges that got the project started add up to \$43,730 with 196 backers (The Devil Walks in Salem *Kickstarter*, retrieved 2016). Compared to the funding of *Tabletop*'s third season, however, it seems quite modest.

### 6.7.3 HarmonQuest

HarmonQuest premiered the 14<sup>th</sup> of July, 2016 on Seeso (Seeso: Harmonquest 2016). The series has been renewed for second season on the 19<sup>th</sup> of October, 2016 (Petski 2016) – only the first episode is available for free through Youtube as promotional material, with 1,255 million views (HarmonQuest Episode 1, 17.7.2016).

The full season of 10 episodes being behind a paywall, I unfortunately cannot analyze it in depth. However, the first impressions given by the episode that is available paint it in the light of being more of a straight-up adult animation comedy show with trappings of a roleplaying show. In other words, the casual player feel is strong, with the guest stars outright stating that they are new or so rusty that there is practically no effect to playing roleplaying games. The format seems to have a rotation of guest stars that get invited into the show and replaced by a new one in every episode – something that I have previously stated to be a bad practice in my opinion. The whole concept is completely different from what is done in the examples of web series discussed earlier, with fully animated episodes cut with the players playing the game in front of a live studio audience. The general tone tends toward the wacky and silly, something a viewer would expect from an episodic comedy show.

Practically no effort is made to stay in character, which is quite obviously intentional. The main focus of the show is not the storytelling despite the production resources dedicated to illustrate in game events, but the cast of comedians within the context of a game played in the exaggerated setting full of fantasy clichés.

The publishing model is an interesting departure from the way other series have done theirs, but so is the general approach and focus towards the game elements. I'm not entirely convinced of the viability of the model, but then again, I'm not a part of the intended audience either.

### 6.7.4 Acquisitions Inc.

*Acquisitions Incorporated* has been running as an audio-only podcast since 2008, created by the people behind *Penny Arcade*. (Penny Arcade announcement, 26.4.2016) I'm not very familiar with the show personally since I disliked the style in which their live games were played – or their pacing or some other detail that I could not put my finger on way back then. Disinterest might be a more apt way to put it, since my main issue with the live sessions and podcast was that I just

didn't find it interesting. However, the franchise seems to have a strong and persistent following so it is worth mentioning. While *Acquisitions Inc.* is not technically a web video series, there franchise has frequent live games at PAX conventions starting from 2010 (PAX 2010 Acquisitions Inc. recording 31.5.2012).

Additionally, *Acquisitions Incorporated the Series* was launched in June 8<sup>th</sup> 2016 with the first episode hitting roughly 200 000 Youtube views. (Acquisitions Incorporated the Series episode 1, 2016), and is based on the game from earlier podcasts and live plays. The entire series currently spans 12 episodes of varying length from between 30-80 minutes. The total views on the 23<sup>th</sup> of August, 2016 are listed at around 240 000, individual episodes currently fluctuating from around 140000 to 400000 views. (Acquisitions Inc. the Series Youtube playlist, 2016).

The cast for the shows consists of Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik of *Penny Arcade*, Scott Kurtz of *PvP, or Player versus Player* and Patrick Rothfuss, the author of *The Kingkiller Chronicles* as players, and is ran by Chris Perkins, who is a game designer for *Wizards of the Coast*. So, by profession there are three webcomic artists, a writer, and a game designer.

The playstyle is rather light and casual when it comes to storytelling and getting into character, as the players are actively detaching themselves from the characters they play. Also, even in an edited series, the group is rather prone to distracting table chatter. The group has clearly played their game for years together, and it shows in a positive way and their chemistry is good, but the atmosphere and everything about their playstyle is, to me, not engaging enough to just watch – it does seem like a well-run game that would be interesting to play in, but it falls a bit short in being interesting to an observer.

#### 6.7.5 The Spiral

The Spiral is an European thriller miniseries that aired in the fall of 2012, and got nominated for the Digital Emmy in 2013 (IMdB page, retrieved 2014), incorporating live-action roleplay as part of its transmedia coverage, along with some unrelated augmented reality elements enabling audience interaction. (Roleplaying Games in Visual Media panel, Ropecon 2012)

The roleplaying elements incorporated in The Spiral are mostly focused on using a LARP in the background, as supplementary material to support the series and distributed virally and as minor

features lifted to the TV-series continuity itself. Sadly, both of the web pages for the series, <http://www.thespiral.eu/> and <http://www.thespiraltheseries.com/> are now defunct. The public broadcasting networks that distributed the series during its run no longer have it archived for viewing either. This makes the retrieval of associated videos difficult. For those interested, a brief case study of the series can be found in <https://vimeo.com/53333035>, and their production company's series page, <http://www.caviarcontent.com/films-tv-series/26/hans-herbots/the-spiral>, is still functional.

## 7 Means of Distribution

Since the target audience is relatively small, the distribution of a series revolving around a roleplaying game is something that must be done through digital distribution.

Most of the revenue for such projects would come from advertising, merchandising, crowdfunding and possibly production sponsorship from developers of games or gaming equipment featured in the series, as evidenced by the current, most successful series published – *Geek & Sundry* and by extension, the shows on the site, seem to run on advertising and merchandise for the series is prominently available.

Making a series as marketing for a gaming product seems unlikely for the relatively small size of gaming companies and the risk involved in developing a series. *Force Grey*, however, is done in collaboration with *Wizards of the Coast*, but it being the largest company in the business makes this an exception – in general, this leaves video service advertising, fan products and crowdfunding or donations as the most realistic sources of revenue for independent projects, with product placement being a potential source of supplementary income. *Critical Role* has prominent sponsorship in the form of product placement, banner ads and paid-for messages in addition to subscriptions and merchandising.

Most of the series presented in Chapter 6 use the web series model, with *Critical Role* and *Maze Arcana* being livestream broadcasts. It is hard to make definitive statements with confidence given the breadth of my sample size on what the exact factors that affect the suitability of one form over the other are for a given project. If I had to make an educated guess, the episodic serials probably work better for productions with more experience or production resources for the editing work, and less adaptable play group. Live shows are easy to make, but considerably harder to make well, and require more improvisational ability from the performers. With the latter, being able to focus on the game and being interesting with minimal effort put into the attempt certainly helps.

## 7.1 Web series

Web series or similar distribution seems like the natural choice, due to relatively low production costs – compared to TV productions – easy distribution and social media aggregation. They also allow for the effortless release of supplementary bonus material that would otherwise end upon the cutting room floor, and its integration to the series proper.

It has been proven by Let's Players that webcasting seems to work for the purpose of games spectating. Also, out of the cases covered earlier, all the major ones are distributed as web series on an open or free platform – *Tabletop*, *Titansgrave*, *Force Grey*, *Acquisitions Inc.* and *The First Paladin* are hosted on Youtube with the videos embedded on the home pages of the series or its publisher, *I Hit It with My Axe* through *the Escapist's* own video service (and later episodes after dropping them as a publisher on Youtube). *Critical Role* is primarily broadcast live on Twitch, but the archived episodes are made available on Geek & Sundry's own video service and Youtube later. *HarmonQuest* is the only exception to this formula by not having free access to all of its episodes.

## 7.2 Livestream

Instead of an edited and meticulously produced series, a filmed live session is also a possible means of publication. While this allows for less editing, it has its problems, related to the nature of the games played – As I've mentioned earlier, there is the problem of “thirty minutes of excitement packed into four hours”, or, in other words, a lot of time to a game during which nothing happens.

However, alongside an edited series, the live sessions could work as supplementary material, and also lend credibility to possible claims of playing unscripted if the audience considers the authenticity of such practices important enough.

Live streaming is likely to be a valid form of broadcasting in cases where it is a part of a larger production effort, used as supplementary material alongside a more finalized product.



*Critical Role* shows that livestreaming works as a primary format for a show, having gained massive following compared to the other series – going on to prove that with a good enough group, lengthy live broadcasts with little to no post-processing can be a valid way doing a roleplaying show. This is great news for those interested in starting their own shows, considering that the bar for entry in regard to proficiency in video production skills is not set prohibitively high.

### 7.3 Stand-alone productions

Detailed analysis is not in the scope of this text, being something more likely to be applied to projects such as *The Devil Walks in Salem*, in which the source material may be game based, but the final product is done to be closer to traditional media, in the form of films or miniseries that are fully acted instead of just described around a table.

Taking a page from the *Tabletop's Fiasco* episode, with the right group of players it could be possible to use a game that is designed to be watchable by an audience. This would require a group of players that can bring enough life to said game in order to make it entertaining in its own right, which is a major challenge.

## 8 Conclusion

The cases show that shows built around roleplaying- and other tabletop games can be used, and have already been successfully used, as a form of entertainment. Are the games a significant reason for the success of these shows, and if so, what are their merits compared to traditional scripting?

The increased amount of shows in the past gives the impression that the format is developing or improving, and there are far more low-profile, casual livestreams now than there were a few years ago. The games are a major component of the shows in question, and in terms of narration they seem to be doing a lot of things right. There is a lot of room for improvement, but that is to be expected of productions that are experimenting and acting as the pioneers in a field that has not yet found the “best practices” for itself. Sharing stories made through games does not seem to be a problem or a hurdle that prevents or hampers people from enjoying the content opposed to traditional forms of storytelling.

There is a significant amount of things that can be seen as practices that are consistently for the benefit of a series about RPGs, the most prominent being the casting of able performers that have a good chemistry with each other. Zak Smith agrees that good chemistry is the most important thing for a working cast, but considers that the people involved being interesting is key, instead of them specifically being performers. (Attachment 1) “Being interesting”, however, is a vague qualifier. According to my observations, the notable positive qualities that make cast members interesting to watch play, in no particular order are:

1. Being comfortable and able to act natural with cameras rolling – The cast of the dedicated *Geek and Sundry* roleplaying shows (*Titansgrave* and *Critical Role*), and *I Hit It With My Axe* are exemplary in this regard, acting as if the cameras aren’t even there.
2. Evocative and animate performances – spicing up the play with gesturing, doing character-specific voices and so on.
3. Immersion into the game – what most of the series that I find lacking have in common is a noticeable detachment between the player and character – the cast of *Acquisitions Inc.*, for example, tend to handle their table talk as if they were playing with dolls in the most stereotypical way possible. Keeping character and describing actions in a diegetic

way helps with viewer immersion, it's vastly better for a player to say "I'm going to try doing this" instead of "can my guy roll to do this thing".

4. Not getting hung up on unnecessary details, playing the game loosely for the benefit of other players and the audience. Insistence and overt inquisitiveness regarding things nobody else cares about is bad enough in a home game, and even worse in a game that is made for an audience that includes people other than the play group. While it may be for a gag rather than genuinely bad player behaviour, see *HarmonQuest* ep.1 for an excellent example of bad form in this regard.

In addition to what makes cast members watchable, the group having a clear mutual understanding of the nature and tone of the game is also important. Not being on the same page results in personality clashes, which leads to bad chemistry, and as mentioned before, having *good* interpersonal chemistry between the players is at the core of having a successful game. For me, tangential table chatter is also annoying enough in a game I'm actually playing in, and if a show has that to any noticeable degree, I'm probably going to look for something else to watch. I understand that this is a matter of preference and I may personally represent a completely different demographic the creators are making their shows for, of course.

The fact that the same handful of people seems to be involved in most of the successful – or most widely known and popular ones, if those are to be considered separate qualifiers – projects that are presented. Most of them are only "one or two degrees of separation" away from each other, which does indicate that the pool of players available that are fun to watch, or otherwise viable to be featured in the shows done by their publishers, is also rather small. Leveraging the "star power" of the cast – which pretty much means that having famous people involved in the production – also helps in its own right by making the show interesting to viewers who are not there for the game, so to speak. Additionally, such leveraging could be of help not only to the production in the form of wider audience, but also to the hobby in general by means of exposure and positive presentation.

An established game or a game optimized for single sessions seems to work better than one which is underprepared and covered in shorter scale than it is intended to be played, but that shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone who is familiar with regular gaming.

The question on whether a show should be focused on documenting games and their players or the characters and the story is somewhat inconclusive, with a heavy focus on games and players faring better on the existing productions, but there doing a fair comparison proves difficult since shows that focus heavily on the storytelling haven't really been made yet – the perceived functionality of “gamey” shows may be nothing but selection bias. It remains to be seen how a project with a strong focus on storytelling would succeed – a major challenge in getting a concept like that to work would likely require a way to externalize the players thoughts, or the character's perspective to the audience somehow, which is difficult to execute while preserving the framing as a game.

Due to the selection bias of 1) analysing only on the more notable shows, or those that have been the most popular or successful, 2) serious commercial projects, 3) following a closely similar format to each other, and 4) dedicating focus on the productions that I find personally interesting leads to the end result being inconclusive. For a more well-rounded analysis, it would be beneficial for further research to:

1. Get a more varied sample of material, including especially:
  - a. Smaller, less serious productions, such as Twitch streams from groups that are doing them just to share their hobby with others, and not as a product.
  - b. Examples of “bad” shows – both those of objectively shoddy production and content, and those that the researcher just personally dislikes for one reason or another – having well-explored points of reference on how not to do things is useful in order to eliminate bad practices.
  - c. Experimental productions that diverge from the practices of the series presented here.
  - d. Wider selection of different forms of production – my cases are heavily weighted toward series that are post-produced to be presented as short episodes and neglecting more detailed exploration of streams with long runtimes.
2. Exploring the pre-video forms of roleplaying entertainment, such as podcasts in more detail.
3. Giving all cases equal attention regardless of personal preferences, the material's perceived success, and its actual quality as a show. Impartial analysis.
4. In addition to focusing on roleplaying productions alone, taking a look of other types of shows may be of use. To quote Zak Smith's answer to what he said he learned from doing *I Hit It With My Axe*: directly as an example: “A lot. I don't think the format has been

perfected yet--I think ideally what you'd want is a show kind of like the UK Top Gear where the premises and context are set up in interesting, performative audience-facing ways but then actual challenges are real and filmed well from lots of angles on the ground. So much of D&D is about what's going on in a players' head [sic] that that needs to be externalized somehow." (Attachment 1).

5. Experimenting with the possible applications, making a production yourself.

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#### **Attachments:**

Zak Smith interview conducted via email between 28.11.-1.12.2016. (Attachment 1)



**P:** Interviewing Zak Smith – also known as Zak Sabbath or just Zak S depending where you look – the man behind the D&D internet show *I Hit It With My Axe* and also a player in another, *Maze Arcana*<sup>1</sup> about the production of those shows. In addition to making webseries, he also keeps a blog<sup>2</sup> and has written a couple of game books that won some awards<sup>3</sup> and makes art in general, and is probably more famous for those things, but that's beside the point here.

Zak, is there anything else people reading this should know about you before we start?

**Z:** I'm very attractive.

**P:** It could be said that *Axe* was, if not the first roleplaying game as storytelling-type webseries (at least in video, as far as I know), a major influence in popularizing the idea<sup>4</sup>.

**Z:** I think *WOTC*'s official thing where they got the *Penny Arcade* people or whoever to play in a black room may have come first.

**P:** I believe the first *Acquisitions Inc.* to be recorded in video was at *PAX Prime* 2010, so you did get on that train some six months before them. It's not too much of a stretch to assume that the existence of *Axe* might've actually influenced that choice.

**Z:** If we influenced them, they never said anything about it. They're pretty different.

**P:** How familiar are you with the series that have spawned off it<sup>5</sup>?

**Z:** I have a passing familiarity.

**P:** Any commentary on those that you might have?

**Z:** Mainly they seem like: The games are a bit more railroaded than ours and there's less social context. Also I think edited shows and records of unedited play are almost such different beasts they shouldn't be compared.

**P:** A fair point. *Axe* certainly has an authentic and unscripted feel to it. Not having a "season finale" or story- or character arcs planned into the run probably plays into that?

**Z:** If you have scripted story arcs then I'm asleep. For us it'd be like scripting a soccer game – "Oh here's the last-minute goal!" The stories I like in games are emergent.

**P:** Sure, if you're not doing emergent stories, why play at all? Read a book or something.

But perhaps I was using "story arcs" in a looser sense than you, though – In gamey terms, more in the line of having a season of production as a "main questline" with a goal on number of sessions to be played, or episodes with set runtimes to be cut into, some encounters that are planned as the finale and that sort of thing, as opposed to just "winging it and making stuff up as you go".

**Z:** If you have a "main questline" or "planned encounters" you're not running a game I wanna play or watch. And if you think the only alternative to that means just "making stuff up as you go" then I guess I wrote all those D&D books and blog entries for nothing.

**P:** Seems like I miscommunicated, or am just reading your voice too personally. I think that we're both on the same page that it's better to go in game first and make the production fit it rather than the other way around, then?

**Z:** Yes.

**P:** What do you see as the selling point or "draw-in" for audience of *Axe*? For *Maze Arcana*? What makes – or made – them stay for the long run?

**Z:** For *Axe*, primarily I just thought it was funny. It also provided some context for the kind of game you get if you roll using the kinds of DIY or Old School sandbox rules and stuff that we use. It's basically a character-based comedy though; these people are like this and interact in these ways.

**P:** I think that some people might see it as a bit gimmicky and playing into the "porn stars (or adult entertainment people in general) doing nerdthings" - hook to get people watching. But apparently that's just the way things happened to be like, and not a conscious decision on your part. Might've, or probably did play into the initial production idea of *the Escapist*, though?

**Z:** That's our game group, those are our players. I am 100% sure there are people who were interested because that's a novel gimmick but it also happens to be true to life.

**P:** But yes, what you said before seems to be the reason people stay. On to *MZA*.

**Z:** With *Maze Arcana* I think it's much more about people at home kind of tuning in to "play along".

**P:** I think that it goes with the spectative format of livestreams in general. Anything that sets it apart from the other 'streams, in your opinion? Beyond the obvious (and highly subjective) "it has those guys in it", of course.

**Z:** I don't watch enough streams to say, honestly. I mean, we do officially use *Eberron*, so I suppose that might be a thing for some people.

**P:** You think that what you did with *Axe* could be compared to skateboarding videos of the past few decades or the like? As in: sharing within a community, or people into a hobby filming stuff that they like for other people who also like that stuff. Or maybe you have a better analogy?

**Z:** Yeah – I guess in a way all of the wider post-YouTube and post-Vine stuff is kind of like that. Niche extremism.

I mean if you subtract out the video element, it's a lot like the indie media that has supported gaming since the beginning--if you talk to Jennell Jacquays or somebody they'll tell you about back in the day when they used to mimeograph all their game talk and mail it out to each other in these Amateur Press Associations. This is just the next step I guess.

**P:** Thoughts on if RPG series could be a *Thing* in the future? In addition to being a legit storytelling format, maybe as a vehicle for product placement or a promotion tool as well. Anything, really. Also, to get a sense for the viewership of both of your shows - are there any stats available for the episodes other than cobbling them together from the video views – subscriptions to channels and so on, and for *Maze Arcana*, audience for live casts?

**Z:** I think it could be a thing if someone really invested in it like any other network show. Or if a group of genuinely megafamous people started filming their home games. That is: It would require either a lot of money and production or a room full of late-night talk-show level celebrities.

I don't know the stats on *Maze*; it's on so many different platforms. I know *Axe* would get millions of views but so did basically anything *The Escapist* put up before they collapsed.

**P:** Was there a “deeper mission” for doing *I Hit It with My Axe* beyond the officially stated “the guys at *the Escapist* read our blog and asked if the sessions could be filmed?”

**Z:** Originally there wasn't but as soon as we started getting reactions from folks I realized that we were showing people some things they'd never seen before:

- Real women acting like real women.
- DIY non-corporate D&D.
- What playing D&D is actually like outside organized play.
- Porn people acting casually in an environment where they're comfortable.
- etc.

And so the more people seemed shocked and surprised by these things the more I realized it was important to show them how all that worked.

**P:** Do you feel that the show has had an impact for the better, or if it has "raised awareness" for the viewers? Do you feel that you were proving a point, or pushing the agenda, or was it something that just happened naturally?

**Z:** I think we accidentally had an impact for the better at least within the online RPG community – a lot of people who met because they were *Axe* fans have gone on to do lots of cool collaborations on RPG books and conventions and stuff. I know that, for example, Stacy Dellorfano who runs the all-female-led RPG con *Contessa* was influenced by *Axe* and met other women she works with through the fan community around that and my blog. And me and Taliesin from *Critical Role* were talking and he was like "Oh I loved that show" – I think it was kind of the Lo-Fi Indie Rock Fave for people who later ended up doing D&D shows.

**P:** Having been on both sides of the table for a game series (GM for *Axe*, player for *MZA*), what are the key differences between a home game and one done with an audience in mind, in your experience?

**Z:** Ideally, nothing. When it goes wrong, the audience game ends up limiting how people interact and it's less interesting, honest and funny. It's important to make the filmed game as much like a home game as possible.

**P:** I agree that having an authentic feel of looking at an actual game, rather than just having something that made to look like one, is important.

More on the practical side of things than ideals, though - was there any major difference in how the game was actually run and played, and the dynamic in general with cameras rolling?

**Z:** Oh totally. With *Axe* we just played a regular game at home and two guys held video cameras and then I edited out anything that could get us arrested. On *Maze* there's a studio and there's a crew and they have catering and sound guys and all that and it's all live. So completely different atmosphere.

**P:** How about the differences between those two roles in a series?

**Z:** Well in *Axe* I was ultimately responsible for everything: I was a host (at my house), a GM, a director, and I had final say on every cut. On *Maze Arcana* I'm just one of 4-5 talking heads so I just try to do my best with the space allowed me.

**P:** Could you give a ballpark estimate on how much work went into the production of an episode of *Axe*, or would into something similar? Any insight on how it was with *MZA*?

Session prep, games and recording, editing, scheduling – basically the whole works. How much of that was figuring out how things work instead of just doing them by rote?

**Z:** *Axe* was:

- You play D&D for 4-8 hours.
- Make sure everyone got paid enough that they all didn't book work that day – usually when we play D&D 1-3 random players are missing on any given session because they're doing anal or a music video something.
- Pay 2 friends to film it.
- 1-2 weeks at a laptop to edit those 4-8 hours into 7-15 episodes.
- A few hours a month of back and forth with the *Escapist* via email.

Game prep was a non-issue, that was stuff I was gonna do anyway for our game. The editing was the major hurdle.

*Maze* is completely different – I only show up on Sundays and play but I get the impression from Satine and Ruty that they basically spend the entire week doing nothing but preparing stuff for the show. It's a whole tv production on their end.

**P:** Any lessons to take back home from doing those shows?

**Z:** A lot. I don't think the format has been perfected yet – I think ideally what you'd want is a show kind of like the UK *Top Gear* where the premises and context are set up in interesting, performative audience-facing ways but then actual challenges are real and filmed well from lots of angles on the ground. So much of D&D is about what's going on in a players' head<sup>[sic]</sup> that that needs to be externalized somehow.

**P:** It's been six years since *Axe* was shot. If you were to do it again, what would you do differently?

**Z:** Like I said: *Top Gear*.

**P:** Speaking of having a do-over, do you have any plans for a second season, or just doing more episodes? How about a completely new series?

**Z:** We might. I have tons of footage that's never even been cut; it's just getting the time to do it on top of everything else.

**P:** What would you consider to be the most successful aspects of the production of *Axe*? How about major challenges?

**Z:** Most successfully: it's funny. Like it's an authentic reality show about a bunch of girls being interesting and fun and real. The challenges were mostly just getting enough time and cameras and money to record that on the right day at the right time. You can see in like the first 5 episodes or so everything was soooo last-minute that it was hard to get good footage.

**P:** Relating to that: How much of the style of *Axe* – such as: camera work, episode length, etc. – can be attributed to budgetary constraints?

**Z:** Basically all of it, as far as I'm concerned. *Axe* was one of Escapist's most expensive shows because they had to pay all of us enough that we wouldn't just book a porn shoot that day instead.

**P:** You've stated that *Axe* was shot with a pre-existing game and cast of players, but if that was not the case, what would you consider to be the important elements of cast selection and session prep for a production like that? Would it be any different from inviting people to a regular, private game?

**Z:** I don't think it's very different. In both cases you want people with good interpersonal chemistry.

**P:** Good chemistry certainly seems to be one of the most important cast considerations. Do you think that it helps to have professional performers involved as well?

What most of the successful, or more engaging shows of this type seem to have in common is that the cast is primarily voice talent/screen actors or other performance artists – and conversely, the bigger pitfalls of others seem like they stem from people being uninteresting.

**Z:** I think to have a good show you need interesting people – they don't have to be professional performers to be interesting though. However having a good show and a popular show are different – I think to have a popular show it probably helps to have famous people or just have so much money thrown at production (like in any reality tv) that the regular people on the show effectively become famous.

**P:** Yeah. Having performers in probably helps in a number of ways, and what makes them interesting to watch is more of something that tends to come with the package. Not an intrinsic quality of being one.

Moving on. If someone else was to start making an episodic series or a livestream of a game, what would give as advice on how to approach that from your personal experience? Or is that something you'd consider a fool's errand?

**Z:** I think livestreams are difficult because so much of the game is in what players are thinking -- we tried to address that somewhat by splicing interview footage into *Axe*. Other than that, just

basically handling the logistics well – lots of mikes lots of cameras, good chemistry with the people etc.

**P:** Axe would've definitely benefited from having a more robust recording budget. Any other "nice to have" that come to mind?

**Z:** Nice to have? A budget covers everything it's "nice to have". You have more time so you can do more experimental things.

**P:** Was referring to recording budget specifically, so; cameras, lighting, sets, mics, maybe sound- and camera guys – things limited to footage, sets and audio. Other than that, stuff you'd like to do or get, as opposed to stuff required to be able to?

**Z:** Ideally it'd be nice to have more editing staff and support for the website etc.

**P:** How about having people new, or relatively so, included? Part of the appeal of Axe, at least to me, was seeing players introduced – or re-introduced – to the game instead of having the table full of seasoned players.

**Z:** We had new people pretty much every day of shooting.

**P:** Is there a sweet spot for the player experience of the cast, in your opinion?

**Z:** No. Inexperienced people are great because you can explain things to the audience in an organic way and they ask funny questions, experienced people are great because they develop a kind of narrative flow. It's all good. If you like playing with people, they should be on the show.

**P:** Looping back to the "railroadiness" of other shows, any specific challenges that come to your mind regarding doing purely emergent storytelling as opposed to scripting a season / arc outline? Things like: normal campaign framework vs. audience-facing story frame, fudging the game to "protect story assets", Game prep vs. scripting dynamics in general...

**Z:** No. I'm a good DM or try to be so there's no "story assets" that need to be protected. If they kill the king and I didn't want them to then I was stupid for putting the king in a place where they could get to it<sup>[sic]</sup>. And now the story's more interesting because it's a surprise and I have to improvise something cool. If you can't handle that you can't be a DM. At least not for anyone interesting.

**P:** True that, at least as far as regular home games go. Goes with high-emergence style and not needing to hit production milestones, I'd assume.

In addition to having RPGs as the core subject matter of a series, do you think they could see any successful, serious development use in the making of series or films? There have already been some attempts, such as basing a screenplay on a session of *Fiasco*<sup>6</sup>, and the gamebooks themselves have included essays on using it as a writer's tool<sup>7</sup>.

Is this a thing that you'd see as something worth getting into, or more of an experimental dead-end that leads to just the platform-equivalent of fantasy airport paperbacks?

**Z:** I'm sure it could be done – I mean, the Godfather was based on a terrible book. But it's Sturgeon's Law y'know so 95% chance it'd be crap. You need someone who doesn't see the world

through Hollywoodvision where they think the audience needs to constantly be reminded they're watching something exciting but also doesn't see it through Nerdvision where they think spending a half hour explaining that Queen Chrysanthemum loves Prince Petunia is a good idea.

**P:** I think that this is a good endnote. Thanks for the interview.

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Footnotes:

1: The first 36 episodes of *I Hit It with My Axe* ran from 17.3.2010 to 17.11.2010 on *The Escapist* (<http://www.escapistmagazine.com/videos/view/i-hit-it-with-my-axe>), with ten more episodes released between 11.7.2016 and 22.9.2016 (<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLPXBot2-dQsb01ErSvhlyrtNHGippAmP->). The first season of *Maze Arcana* ran from 16.10.2016 to 20.11.2016.

2: <http://www.dndwithpornstars.blogspot.com>

3: *Vornheim: Complete City Kit* (Otava Book Printing Ltd., 2011, ISBN 978-952-5904-24-6) Indiecade 2012 Technology Award, UK Role Players Golden Crown Award for Best Supplement, Diehard Gamefan 2011 Best Campaign Setting Award, Old School Ruckus Award. *A Red & Pleasant Land* (Otava Book Printing Ltd., 2014, ISBN 978-952-5904-60-4) – Gold ENnie for Best Setting and Best Writing, Silver ENnie for Best Adventure and Product of the Year, all 2015 (<http://www.ennie-awards.com/blog/about-us/2015-ennie-award-winners/>); Indiecade Jury Special Recognition Award, Indie RPG Awards Best Production.

4: Peter Adkison cites it as an influence for his the First Paladin, for example. (<http://www.peteradkison.com/can-roleplaying-games-create-good-stories/>)

5: The ones I'm more familiar with, in more or less chronological order: Some episodes of Wil Wheaton's *Tabletop*, *The First Paladin*, *Critical Role*, *Titansgrave: Ashes of Valkana*, *Harmon-Quest*, *Force Grey: Giant Hunters*, *Maze Arcana*, probably others. Oh, and *ChariD20* is also a thing.

6: *The Devil Walks in Salem*, short film, 2014

7: Hindmarch, Will: *Using Fiasco as a writer's tool* – published in (Walmsley, Graham: *Gangster London Writer's edition*; Bully Pulpit Games LCC, 2011) (Morningstar, Jason & Segedy, Steve: *Fiasco Companion*, Bully Pulpit Games LCC, 2011)