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The Layered Frames of Performed Tabletop:

Actual-Play Podcasts and the

Laminations of Media

Brendan Decicio

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### The Layered Frames of Performed Tabletop: Actual-Play Podcasts and the Laminations of Media

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Despite their sudden growth in popularity, the role-playing actual-play podcasts have either been ignored or grouped with the genre of audio drama in prior scholarly works. Examination using frame analysis shows, however, that these podcasts are distinct in their engagement of the audience on multiple, simultaneous levels; levels which correspond with well-known media genres such as Documentary, Fiction, and Game Play. Each frame has its own layer of identities, conduct, and avenue for appealing to audiences just as these genres have their own distinct appeals. Through the combinations of these frames, familiar tropes and techniques such as Short-Form Improv and Campbell's monomyth are broadened and challenged, and identities become entangled in this post-modern medium. Delineating the features of these frames and exploring their interactions and interconnectivity not only helps to distinguish the actual-play podcast as its own distinct podcast genre, but also highlights the potential for using such frames or frame analysis in other media forms.

Keywords: actual-play, role-playing, TRPG, podcast, frame analysis, Glass Cannon Podcast, laminations, documentary frame, game frame, fictional frame, improv, monomyth

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## **The Layered Frames of Performed Tabletop: Actual-Play Podcasts and the Laminations of Media**

### Introduction

In their book on podcasting, Martin Spinelli and Lance Dann ask questions about the relationship between podcasting drama (or radio drama, or audio drama) and that of the relatively new role-play podcast:

Why has podcast drama not yet had its breakthrough moment? Followers, producers, and academics have yet to settle on a name for the form and it seems to remain a niche interest, though a significant one with passionate devotees. Meanwhile, the remarkable rise of the role-play podcast opens up new and exciting performative possibilities. How might these inflect the future of podcast drama?<sup>1</sup>

It is easy to lump the role-play podcast with audio drama. After all, both offer stories of fiction, played out to the listener through narration, dialogue, and perhaps sound effects. Yet the fan reactions and “performative possibilities” hinted by Spinelli and Dann show that there must be under-researched differences between the two.

Under scrutiny, it is evident that the role-play podcast--or the “actual-play,” to be more precise--is more different from the audio drama than it is alike. Actual-play has not quite escaped the niche corner it has occupied since its birth, just as audio drama has been cemented as a struggling form since we exited the “Golden Age” of radio. However, actual-play is swiftly growing in popularity, with a surprising number of shows becoming not only popular but economically viable (the latter being perhaps more shocking than the former in the world of podcasting; though a majority of actual-plays still struggle financially). Role-players are taking microphones to their games and people are listening, and these people are not just pre-existing fans of the games they play. In fact, these shows are bringing listeners to the games, heralding

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Spinelli and Lance Dann, *Podcasting: The Audio Media Revolution* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 2019), 288.

what some are calling a “Renaissance” of tabletop role-play.<sup>2</sup> Niche though they may be, this rising growth and influence upon a subculture of role-players (a growing subculture itself) indicate that it is time these shows received a closer examination.

What has led to the actual-play’s success? I posit that this is due in large part to the unique layered and laminated structure of these shows which attempt to capture fan attention from multiple fronts. These shows are a complex series of frames, from the personalities of the players, the mechanics of gameplay which import improvisational techniques into a dramatic narrative, to the fantasy and science-fiction narratives which harken back to some of mankind’s most pervasive myths. Such a mixture of frames and viewpoints may have once been too overwhelming for audiences and past distribution techniques, particularly when associated with complex fantasy narratives which last for years. However, our postmodern culture has trained society to be more open to interacting with multiple identities at once, and on-demand podcasting gives us the chance to listen when we want, opening the door for the actual-play to have its shining moment.

### Definitions and Examples

For the uninitiated, some definitions will be necessary before delving into the unique qualities and possibilities of this media form. Actual-play podcasts are recordings of groups of people playing tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs).<sup>3</sup> They are also called role-play podcasts, however, such a moniker is also applied to “talk show” style podcasts where hosts sit down and

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah Whitten, “How Critical Role Helped Spark a Dungeons & Dragons Renaissance,” CNBC, last modified March 14, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/14/critical-role-helped-spark-a-dungeons-dragons-renaissance.html>.

<sup>3</sup> There is a debate over whether Tabletop Role-Playing Games should be abbreviated “TRPG” or “TTRPG.” While it is true that TTRPG is perhaps more vernacularly popular today and less likely to be confused with Tactical Role-Playing Games, a subgenre of computerized role-playing games, TRPG has been the standard abbreviation amongst scholars ever since they ceased to be referred to as “Fantasy Role-Playing Games.” This paper will use TRPG in accordance with this standard usage in scholarly works. Likewise, “role-playing” will be used in accordance with scholarly precedent, except in the case of titles and quotations where “roleplaying” was used in the original.

discuss industry news, gameplay, mechanics, and official or unofficial game lore. For clarity, specificity, and because talk shows are outside the scope of this examination, the term “actual-play”<sup>4</sup> will be used from here on.

These shows are produced using a variety of TRPG systems, the most recognizable being *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)* and the *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game*. The “Tabletop” in TRPG is because these games are traditionally played with the group sitting around a shared table, rolling physical dice, manipulating game pieces called “miniatures,” and using physical rulebooks. It should be noted, however, that it has become increasingly acceptable (and sometimes necessary) to play “tabletop” online via web services such as Roll20, where players can chat online and view a shared and manipulatable digital “board.” Digital character sheets, which streamline play by performing the calculations used in play automatically, are also common. It needs to be stressed then that even when these digital technologies are used, these are not video games. The storyworld has not been pre-programmed, and each group has great control over their style of play. These digital technologies primarily help with ease and access to play, and allow actual-play producers who stream video to share their version of “table” with the audience.

Unlike board games where gameplay is centered around “winning,” these games are collaborative storytelling systems that arguably can’t be “won” at all.<sup>5</sup> In traditional play, a group of people gather in the same room for a gaming session. Most are the players, who role-play as “player characters” (PCs) living out lives of adventure within the storyworld and interacting with “non-player characters” (NPCs) and fighting monsters, all of which are controlled by the

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<sup>4</sup> Not to be confused with “Let’s Play,” which is typically a YouTube format video of hosts playing through video games while talking to the audience of their stream. “Actual-play” has been developed by the role-playing community to specifically refer to role-play shows, and, almost exclusively, podcasts. That said, the method of analysis used here could have applications to “Let’s Play” due to similarities in their layering of frames.

<sup>5</sup> David M. Ewalt, *Of Dice and Men: The Story of Dungeons & Dragons and the People Who Play It* (New York: Scribner, 2013), 9-10.

Gamemaster (GM).<sup>6</sup> Both parties use the rules established by the system (or homemade rules specific to each group, called “house rules”); but when any question about the rules comes up, it is the GM who adjudicates, even as far as contradicting the rules-as-written. It is because of this adjudication by another person that gameplay, and therefore the associated story, is able to be much more varied than that of computerized role-playing games.

Each system is different in what type of settings, characters, or gameplay they best support, and because of this, actual-plays can vary widely. *D&D* and *Pathfinder* both emphasize a “sword and sorcery” or “high fantasy” style of medieval mythology mixed with magic; *Starfinder* is futuristic science-fantasy; *The Call of Cthulhu*, and *Delta Green* are Lovecraftian horror systems set in different eras, etc. Even when using the same system, actual-plays produced by different groups will be vastly different from each other due to the actions and tastes of the specific cast, especially the GM, who is more or less considered to be in “control” of the story (though in truth this control is shared with the players, whose PCs drive the story forward).

Though these podcasts are produced using these systems as an integral framework, that does not mean that listeners of the shows need to be well-versed in them. “Listeners” are not always “Gamers” themselves, either due to circumstances preventing their play or simply lack of desire. Such non-gamers can still draw enjoyment in consuming the media and becoming an audience to the actual-play’s connected, yet distinct, contextual definitions which help the understanding of events,<sup>7</sup> called frames (which will be further explored in the next section).

Indeed, these shows have reached such a large fan base outside of the preexisting TRPG

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<sup>6</sup> Dungeons and Dragons refers to their gamemasters as “Dungeon Masters” (DMs), and other terms such as “storyteller” are also used depending on the system. Gamemaster and GM will be used, however, as it is a more suitable system-agnostic designation.

<sup>7</sup> Erving Goffman. *Frame analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1972), 10-11.

community that it is having a noted effect within the community itself as these listeners transition to players.

It is important to remember, though, that these shows, despite the name of “actual-play,” are not identical to the experience of participating in a TRPG. Whereas in a TRPG, the audience and the actors are one, the actual-play has a traditional non-participatory audience. The actual-play media is being constructed and formed to suit this audience. Just as documentary subjects change their behavior, consciously or unconsciously, before a camera, so too do cast members present a side of themselves and their gameplay and stories which they feel most acceptable to the audience. Episodes can be edited and trimmed. For example, *The Adventure Zone* even redid an entire episode after being displeased with what happened organically in the first pass.<sup>8</sup> These shows present the best parts of the TRPG experience while permitting their audience to skirt around the worst parts.

This analysis will draw from specific examples in the actual-plays of the Glass Cannon Network (GCN). The GCN primarily uses the *Pathfinder*, and *Starfinder* systems. Particular attention will be paid to their flagship show, *The Glass Cannon Podcast (GCP)*, which is a story based on Paizo Publishing’s “Giant Slayer Adventure Path.” In it, the players control heroes trying to save their world from the ever-growing threat of invading giants. This choice of subject is, admittedly, arbitrary as there are plenty of actual-plays worth attention, some more well-known and financially successful than those of the GCN. These shows were selected due to a combination of personal preference, my familiarity with their systems of choice, their inclusion of a “behind the scenes” show (*Cannon Fodder* and its revamped version, *Cannon Fodder Friday*) which gives insight to production and gameplay, and their prolific release schedule

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<sup>8</sup> *The Adventure Zone*, “The Adventure Zone Zone: Balance Finale Edition,” hosted by Griffin McElroy, on Apple Podcasts, 1:16:15 to 1:18:15, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-the-adventure-zone-zone-balance-finale-edition/id947899573?i=1000391428346>.

which makes them a suitable case study. Since their first episode released in 2015, they have continued to release episodes every week, with over 250 episodes in their flagship show. Their Patreon (a service which allows fans called “patrons” to donate to producers and artists via monthly subscriptions) is in the top 1% in earnings, with over 10,000 donors paying a total of over \$72,000 each month.<sup>9</sup> This funding is separate from whatever they make due to merchandising, live show ticket sales, Twitch.tv subscriptions, and the few ads they run. The GCN have added additional shows beyond the GCP, including *Androids and Aliens (A&A)*; *Raiders of the Lost Continent*; *Echoquest: Superdungeon*; *Glass Cannon Live! Strange Aeons*; *Side Quest Side Sesh*; *New Game, Who Dis?*; and *Legacy of the Ancients*. They have also expanded beyond just audio, with *A&A* and *Side Quest Side Sesh* being video streams that are later rereleased in podcast format, and *Glass Cannon Live!* is a touring live show likewise rereleased online.

This analysis will focus on the podcast versions of these shows. No one medium is definitively better than the other, but fan responses to the GCN have indicated a portion of fans prefer the audio format.<sup>10</sup> As such, it’s reasonable to note that there is something specific to the podcast form that appeals to fans. Moreover, a great deal of this analysis relies on the ability of the audience to swap between the frames presented to them through the medium. These frames exist regardless of the medium used for the actual-play and are even present in the process of play itself, but audio-only media such as podcasts allow the listener to better control the shifts between these frames via the mental image. “It is auditory in the physical dimension but equally

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<sup>9</sup> “Patreon Top 1000,” Graphtrreon, accessed October 4, 2020, <https://graphtrreon.com/patreon-creators>; “The Glass Cannon Network,” Patreon, accessed October 3, 2020, <https://www.patreon.com/glasscannon/posts>.

<sup>10</sup> Brendan Decicio, “Do you prefer the podcast format or are you excited for Troy’s apparent goal of going visual?” Reddit, April 14, 2019, [https://www.reddit.com/r/TheGlassCannonPodcast/comments/bdb5ak/do\\_you\\_prefer\\_the\\_podcast\\_format\\_or\\_are\\_you/](https://www.reddit.com/r/TheGlassCannonPodcast/comments/bdb5ak/do_you_prefer_the_podcast_format_or_are_you/).

powerful as a visual force in the psychological dimension.”<sup>11</sup> Since these visuals reside in the “psychological dimension,” listeners are less influenced by the visuals of streamed games or animations and can be more aware of every frame and how they are layered simultaneously.

### Mediated Frames

A common method of examining the TRPG has been through the adaptation of Erving Goffman’s work *Frame Analysis*. “Frames comprise shared norms, expectations, and understandings of what things, events, and roles to find in a given situation; how to behave in those situations and for what purposes.”<sup>12</sup> Frame analysis is fruitful in role-playing game (RPG) studies because of the layered nature of action, identity, performance, and narrativity which occur within these games, each of which constitutes a separate yet simultaneous frame. Not only do these frames provide a convenient structure of analysis, I argue that through them, the actual-play becomes a unique media form and the actual-play listener derives a great deal of enjoyment.

Frame analysis was first applied to TRPGs by sociologist Gary Alan Fine, who has identified three frames within the TRPG event: the “primary framework” of the “real world,” “the game context,” and “the gaming world” where the fictional characters operate.<sup>13</sup> Since then it has been adapted to examine different aspects of RPGs. The number and designations of frames is not fixed. Daniel Mackay, in his exploration of the performativity of TRPGs, has added a narrative frame and split Fine’s “gaming world frame” into two distinct frames: the performative frame where PCs act, speak, and live; and the constative frame where the gaming

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<sup>11</sup> Tim Crook, *Radio Drama: Theory and Practice* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999), 8.

<sup>12</sup> J. Patrick Williams, David Kirschner, Nicholas Mizer, and Sebastian Deterding, “Sociology and Role-Playing Games” in *Role-Playing Game Studies: A Transmedia Approach*, ed. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (New York: Routledge, 2018), 230.

<sup>13</sup> Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 186.

world is described by the GM acting in the role of narrator.<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Grouling Cover retains a three frame model, keeping Mackay's narrative frame, and returning to Fine's game, and social frames. However, she further subdivides each frame into two forms of speech or action.<sup>15</sup> The differences in each theorist's use of frames typically serves to highlight specific frames which more closely correlate with the theorist's focus. For example, Mackay, whose work states TRPGs qualify as a performing art, emphasizes the narrative, performative, and constative frames as being closer to his "spheres" of theatre.<sup>16</sup> Cover, focusing on a strict definition of narrative, goes as far as to establish an explicit hierarchy of narrativity, with the narrative frame occupying the highest level and the social frame the lowest.<sup>17</sup> Fine discusses both the stability and instability of frames (through frame shifting or "up-keying" and "down-keying") and how these relate to engrossment.<sup>18</sup>

Delineating these frames is particularly profitable in studying the actual-play because it not only helps to understand the experiences and actions of the creators, but also allows for a correlation to specific media genres. Each in turn has a unique appeal to an audience. Though individual taste dictates one's enjoyment of one genre or frame, potentially establishing personal hierarchies, all frames have their own importance and influence on the actual-play as a whole and have the potential to be enjoyed by their own merits. Because of this, I utilize a three-frame model most closely related to that of Fine.

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<sup>14</sup> Daniel Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2001), 55-56.

<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Grouling Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2010), 88-105.

<sup>16</sup> Mackay, 85-92.

<sup>17</sup> Cover, 94.

<sup>18</sup> Fine, 196-200.

Starting with Fine’s “actual world” frame or the “social frame inhabited by the *person*” as described by Mackay,<sup>19</sup> we see that Fine defines this frame as “the commonsense understanding that *people* have of the real world. . . It is a framework that does not depend on other frameworks but on the ultimate reality of events.”<sup>20</sup> This is the act of friends gathering together, in this case to participate in the recording of a gaming event; the production of the actual-play. It includes their conversations, actions, and presence as real *people* being manifest in the Actual World.<sup>21</sup> To reference the *GCP*, this frame would be present as real-world *cast members* (Troy Lavallee, Joe O’Brien, Skid Maher, Grant Berger, and Matthew Capodicasa) talk about their lives, current events, make jokes unrelated to the game, etc. In the actual-play, this social world is filtered to the audience through the medium. The listener is not physically present, even if the “intimate” nature of listening through earpods presents the auditory illusion of being present at the table.<sup>22</sup> Though conversations unrelated to the fantasy stories are present and indeed vital to the actual-play, these are curated by both the desire to produce entertaining content--resulting in a shift in social roles--and through post-processing in an attempt to present a seamless experience for the listener. This curated experience presents aspects of the actual world, but not its entirety, effectuating a “hyperreal”<sup>23</sup> representation of the role-playing group’s normal social frame. As it is in line with the actualities of radio and documentary, I shall refer to this as the *Documentary Frame*.

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<sup>19</sup> Mackay, 88.

<sup>20</sup> Fine, 186.

<sup>21</sup> M.L. Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), vii, <http://atraf.ir/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/jahanhayeh-momken.pdf>; Cover, 91.

<sup>22</sup> Spinelli and Dann, 83.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1983), [http://layoftheland.net/archive/art6933\\_mapping2010/readings/BaudrillardPrecession.pdf](http://layoftheland.net/archive/art6933_mapping2010/readings/BaudrillardPrecession.pdf), 1.

Next is Fine's "game context," the frame where *players* determine the action in the fantasy narrative through the use of game mechanics, rules, and structures.<sup>24</sup> When looking at this event through a media lens, it is tempting to lump this together with the Documentary Frame since the actions taken within this "game frame"<sup>25</sup> are still taking place within the Actual World<sup>26</sup> and are recorded as an actuality. This is a different frame, however, because the roles associated have shifted. The persons involved are no longer simply *people* occupying social roles but *players* enacting the ritual of the game. This frame is also liminal, acting as the intermediary between the Actual World and the fictional world. When Berger rolls a twenty-sided die, for example, that action represents not only the person performing a physical act (which we hear) but also his character Barron attempting to perform an action (which we imagine), and the two meet at the junction of the gaming event. The actions, conversations, and roles taken within this frame are informed by both the fictional narrative being developed by the player character and the desires of the players themselves. Whereas the Documentary Frame vies for attention via the personalities and stories of real people, potential enjoyment in the Game Frame comes from learning or understanding the operations of the game and the mechanical formation of the narrative. While an apparent simile might be to compare this gaming event to mediated sporting events, this aspect also operates like that of a "behind the scenes" special feature where enjoyment is found in the documentary nature because of its context with a fictional narrative. The audience gets to see the mechanics in operation simultaneously with the fictional narrative, creating a layered and laminated experience. This paper will continue to designate this frame as the *Game Frame*.

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<sup>24</sup> Fine, 186.

<sup>25</sup> Mackay, 54.

<sup>26</sup> Cover, 94.

Last is the “gaming world” frame of Fine,<sup>27</sup> which correlates with Cover’s “narrative frame.”<sup>28</sup> It is here where the *player characters*, those entities separate from their players, live their lives within the fantasy realms of magic and monsters. Drawing from M.L. Ryan’s *Possible Worlds*, this fantasy frame was described by Cover as an “Alternate Possible World,” a world separate from the Actual World of reality which is then referenced and constructed by the presentations of this Possible World through text and narration.<sup>29</sup> As a separate world, the cast members of the *GCP* (such as O’Brien or Maher) do not occupy a place in it. Instead their PCs (L’orc, and Gelabrous) live in this frame and have their actions determined by the players in the Game Frame. Likewise, the settings, enemies, NPCs and plot of this frame are presented to us and shaped by the GM, Lavallee, who exists outside of the frame. The narratives (or narrativity, depending on how strict a definition of narrative you choose to follow)<sup>30</sup> that occupy this frame fit the genres of the radio drama or fiction series.

However, simply continuing to call this frame “the narrative frame” in context of the actual-play is complex, since early linguists typically defined “narratives in terms of representing (rather than creating) an event and in terms of having narrators and narratees,” a definition accepted by many in ludology.<sup>31</sup> Through the distribution of these gaming events as recorded media, the actual-play episodes themselves become representations of events which have occurred to the players, who are sharing their stories to listeners. Thus, it can be argued that the Documentary Frame has a greater claim to the title of “narrative frame.” Meanwhile, neither Mackay nor Cover use Fine’s “gaming world frame,” as it is focused on the actions of the characters and does not adequately acknowledge the integral role of narration and description.

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<sup>27</sup> Fine, 186.

<sup>28</sup> Cover, 94.

<sup>29</sup> Cover, 93.

<sup>30</sup> Cover, 72-87.

<sup>31</sup> Cover, 73. Ludology is the study of games.

For the sake of specificity without fracturing this frame into multiple sub-frames as Mackay did, it shall be referred to as the *Fictional Frame* in this analysis, thereby correlating it with other fictional media which it resembles.

It is our engagement with all of these frames and the ability to shift between them that separates the actual-play from media like radio drama, documentaries, or television series, which present a story entirely within a single frame.<sup>32</sup> The listener is not only capable of navigating the layering of identity but draws enjoyment from the interplay and tensions between person, player, and player character. In this way, the actual-play is a distinctly postmodern media form, as shown in Sarah-Lynne Bowman and Karen Schrier's synthesis of RPG studies and Sherry Turkle's multiplicity of self:

Sherry Turkle<sup>33</sup> emphasizes the multiplicity of self as common to the postmodern experience of engagement with multiple media at once. According to Turkle, each window in our computer screen represents a new presentation of self and an exploration of an alternate aspect of our personality. Thus, role-playing characters are extensions of this inherent multiplicity.<sup>34</sup>

In the case of the actual-play, this multiplicity isn't present in multiple windows of digital media, yet each layered frame still brings with it a "new presentation of self" that mimics this digital effect in the analog world. Though traditionally Documentary, Game, and Fiction are held separate, in the actual-play they are truly laminated, meaning that the audience becomes "entangled and involved" in multiple frames simultaneously.<sup>35</sup> They are not merely layered together due to mere simultaneity; each frame directly influences the events and interactions

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<sup>32</sup> Some media do acknowledge the existence of other frames, e.g. a character in the Fictional Frame acknowledging the existence of an audience in the Actual World is "breaking the fourth wall." Such acknowledgements in traditional media tend to be fleeting compared to the near-constant frame shifting in actual-play. Other shows do present more than one frame, but few, if any, have the near constant laminations of three frames as in actual-play.

<sup>33</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 1995).

<sup>34</sup> Sarah Lynne Bowman and Karen Schrier. "Players and Their Characters in Role-Playing Games" in Zagal and Deterding, 397-8.

<sup>35</sup> Fine, 182.

which happen in the other two. Though this paper works to separate these laminated layers for the purpose of discussion and understanding, in the consumption of actual-play media, no perfect separation can occur since this interactive co-existence of frames is intended to become a cohesive whole.

### The Documentary Frame

There is a meme which highlights a supposed “paradox” of *D&D*. Variations exist, but commonly the meme shows the *D&D* red box starter set with the caption: “Nerdiest Game Ever Made - Requires Friends.”<sup>36</sup> As silly as the meme may feel, it is true that media representations of “nerd” culture have historically been presented as anti-social, which seems at odds with the TRPG as a symbol for such culture. This disconnect between a subculture's practice and its representation has been noted by RPG scholars:

Whilst early depictions of RPG games and culture contain many of the features that would, over time, become tropes in representing role-playing and role-players - the all-male gaming groups hunched around a table in dim lighting, poor grip on reality and interest in childish fantastic content - all these depictions show (perhaps unavoidably) that role-playing is social. This important aspect of each game means that even when RPGs are depicted as “different” or “niche,” they are usually seen as subculture, or culture, that demands collective activity.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps it is the apparent paradox which has made TRPGs a fascinating field of inquiry for sociologists since Fine’s 1983 study. Such a paradoxical subculture also makes for an entertaining subject within documentarian media.

Though these games may appear to predominantly utilize the Game or Fictional Frames, the truth is they require a gathering of people enacting the “ritual” of play. This “primary framework” identified by Fine is the filter through which the other frames reach the listener.

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<sup>36</sup> “Nerdiest game ever made Requires Friends,” Quickmeme, accessed September 9, 2020, <http://www.quickmeme.com/meme/3uj8ol>.

<sup>37</sup> Esther MacCallum-Stewart, Jaakko Stenros, and Staffan Björk, “The Impact of Role-Playing Games on Culture” in Zagal and Deterding, 183.

Even when the Fictional Frame is being emphasized via in-character speech, we hear the voice of the person, the actor, delivering the speech. Unlike a theatrical performance or a radio drama, the identity and persona of the actor is not hidden or ignored to complete the illusion of the character's existence. The person is present, and indeed may not be totally focused on the Game or Fictional Frames at all times.

Each of the GCN's episodes opens with a discussion amongst the players before actual game-play begins. Though sometimes this conversation is a recap of past episodes, more often it is unrelated to the campaign. The topics can range from discussions of popular media or current events, to what the cast members have been doing in their lives. For example, one episode contains a nine-minute discussion concerning the disappearance of the GM's favorite die while they were arranging a new audio-recording setup.<sup>38</sup> Some might feel these discussions are off-topic, but they do serve to present the cast members themselves as characters to the audience.

It is important to remember that, though they are not presenting a fictional persona per se, the roles the cast take in the Documentary Frame are nonetheless characters. This is because they are curating their presentations of themselves for a mediated audience. To wit, Lavallee has states that when they play as a group of friends without recording equipment, they can be more "off the cuff, raunchier, dirtier" and that the entire experience has a more "laid back nature" compared to recording an actual-play.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, because segments of the event deemed unentertaining may be cut out, the post-processing of shows removes the actual-play from the practice of playing the game with friends. In the actual-play, the social aspect of the TRPG is being structured beyond the more organic "Social Frame" established by theorists who study

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<sup>38</sup> *The Glass Cannon Podcast*, "Episode 107 - Broom Service," featuring Troy Lavallee, Joe O'Brien, Skid Maher, Matthew Capodicasa, and Grant Berger (The Glass Cannon Network, June 12, 2017), on Apple Podcasts, 00:04:10-00:13:10, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-glass-cannon-podcast/id1000451229485>.

<sup>39</sup> *Cannon Fodder*, "Cannon Fodder Friday 4/10/20" featuring Troy Lavallee and Joe O'Brien (The Glass Cannon Network, April 10, 2020), on Crowdcast, 1:03:49 to 1:07:30, [https://www.crowdcast.io/e/cannon-fodder-friday-2?utm\\_source=profile&utm\\_medium=profile\\_web&utm\\_campaign=profile](https://www.crowdcast.io/e/cannon-fodder-friday-2?utm_source=profile&utm_medium=profile_web&utm_campaign=profile).

table play which isn't distributed to listeners. Indeed, documentary theorists accept the fact that the persona in a documentary is not completely "real," as the process of filming itself affects the subjects. "Jean Rouch stated that the filmmaking process is 'a sort of catalyst which allows us to reveal, with doubts, a fictional part of all of us, but which for me is the most real part of an individual.'"<sup>40</sup> The players in actual-play are undeniably more "real" than their PCs, yet the fiction in their presentation remains, which is why this frame is best described as a "Documentary Frame."

Whether due to this curation or perhaps to the personalities of the cast, the Documentary Frame itself can be a draw to potential fans. For one, popular actual-play podcasts, live streams, or produced shows will often have a cast with some celebrity. *Critical Role*, arguably the most popular actual-play media to date, is led by the voice actor Matt Mercer known for his roles in English dubs of anime such as *Attack on Titan* and video games, including *Resident Evil 6* and *Fortnite*.<sup>41</sup> The rest of the cast has similar professional experience, and other recognizable names such as Whil Wheaton and Felicia Day have been guests of the show.<sup>42</sup> Dan Harmon, creator of the TV show *Community*, and co-creator of *Rick and Morty*, has also made *HarmonQuest*, a hybrid TV series of live actual-play intercut with animated renditions of the Fictional Frame.<sup>43</sup> Fans of these actors and creators may be drawn to their works by their notoriety. Even with cases such as the *GCP*, where the cast was not famous before producing their show, the types of

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<sup>40</sup> Jean Rouch and Steven Feld, *Ciné-ethnography*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), quoted in Patricia Aufderheide in *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 53.

<sup>41</sup> "Matthew Mercer," Crew Members, *Critical Role*, accessed October 3, 2020, <https://critrole.com/members/matthew-mercer/>.

<sup>42</sup> *Critical Role*, Campaign 2, "Vox Machina Ep. 20 - Trial of the Take Part 3," featuring Matthew Mercer, Travis Willingham, Laura Bailey, Marisha Ray, Taliesin Jaffe, Liam O'Brian, Sam Riegel, and Ashley Johnson, August 13, 2015, <https://geekandsundry.com/critical-role-episode-20/>; *Critical Role*, Campaign 2, "Vox Machina Ep. 18 - Trial of the Take Part 1," July 30, 2015, <https://geekandsundry.com/critical-role-episode-18/>.

<sup>43</sup> *HarmonQuest*, featuring Dan Harmon, Spencer Crittenden, Jeff Bryan Davis, and Erin McGathy, July 14, 2016 on Seeso.

discussions their fans have about them and their group can likewise equate to a growing celebrity itself.

For fans of TRPGs unable to find groups of their own, the inclusion of the Documentary Frame in an audio environment designed to feel as if listening from the table results in a closeness to the cast not dissimilar that of playing with friends, albeit in a dominantly one-way mode lacking interaction.<sup>44</sup> This closeness can add to the illusion that actual-play is a faithful recreation of the ritual of play itself, which results in actual-play media with groups known for their skill and personalities becoming an ideal template for new gamers entering the hobby. More than just the stories of the Fictional Frame, these listeners enjoy and aspire to the type of interactions and play which occur in the Documentary and Game Frames.

Indeed, believing these shows to be real representations rather than the “hyperreal” they actually are has created an effect some in the subculture deem problematic. For example, it has resulted in new players having unrealistic expectations for GMs who do not have the acting training of actual-play GMs such as *Critical Role*’s Mercer. The TRPG community has termed this the “Mercer Effect,” which “is inherently a compliment to Critical Role and Matthew Mercer as it acknowledges their skill and charisma,” yet places undue pressure on GMs by players who are “unaware of their own inexperience and how that impacts the game.”<sup>45</sup> The fact that these shows have become popular enough to have created a named “effect” on the culture of TRPG players demonstrates how influential actual-plays have become.

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<sup>44</sup> *Glass Cannon Live!*, “Strange Aeons Marathon -- Night 3,” featuring Troy Lavalley, Joe O’Brien, Skid Maher, Matthew Capodicasa, and Grant Berger, August 30, 2020 on Twitch, 03:54:30-03:55:13, <https://www.twitch.tv/videos/726433061>. Some interaction is possible. In live-streamed actual-play, for example, fans were able to correct a rules mistake made during play when the GCN cast was streaming on Twitch and monitoring the video chat. In pre-recorded episodes, such corrections sometimes occurred through emails sent between recording sessions, and though they didn’t change what had happened, they did alter future episodes.

<sup>45</sup> Andrew Girdwood, *What is the Matt Mercer Effect?*, Geeknative, published August 9, 2019, [www.geeknative.com/68009/what-is-the-matt-mercero-effect/](http://www.geeknative.com/68009/what-is-the-matt-mercero-effect/).

## The Game Frame

Not only are the producers of actual-play media "persons" who play fictional characters, it is important to remember they are players playing what is, at its core, a game. Each TRPG system, despite its unique aspects, has one thing in common with all others: they are games containing rules systems—sometimes very complex ones—for directing play. The core game components, both conceptually and as marketed products, are the rulebooks. A group can play years' worth of stories with only one or two core rulebooks, one set of dice, some paper, and a pencil. The core rulebook, in turn, establishes the basic methods used to play out the scenarios that occur in the game. This includes the terms of success and failure, the options and abilities available to each character, and the people / creatures / objects / locations within which characters may interact. Out of preference and partnership, the GCN almost exclusively focuses on systems developed by Paizo Publishing (*Pathfinder 1st* and *2nd editions*, and *Starfinder*). Accordingly, these are the systems whose specific mechanics will be examined in this paper. However, the general concepts reviewed should apply to any system present in an actual-play.

There is a persistent penchant found amongst fans of TRPGs for celebrating a systems' ability to account for a wide variety of playstyles. Lavalley succinctly expresses this sentiment in his own words during play: "This is Pathfinder! You can do anything your imagination can think of!"<sup>46</sup> Though a persistent ideology, it is false, as every system is inherently a series of mechanical instructions and limitations. Just because a player wants their barbarian to cast spells does not mean they can arbitrarily cause him to do so, as the rules dictate the criteria that must first be met in order for the character to gain access to those abilities within the game. The perception persists, however, because the freedom of choice and action is far more diverse than it

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<sup>46</sup> *The Glass Cannon Podcast*, "Side Quest Side Sesh Episode 3," April 13, 2020, 1:06:17 to 1:06:22, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-glass-cannon-podcast/id1007021910?i=1000471409754>.

is in digital or board games. Having a GM to arbitrate allows the player to propose unanticipated actions or ideas that may not be represented in the rules, or a case can be presented to the GM for allowing an exception to the rules. A programmed computer game is unable to allow such improvisation. Yet this improvisation is still structured around the existence of the rules.

This framework of rules has significant overlap with short-form improv, where rules and gimmicks serve to direct the performance. As defined by Besser et al., “short-form improvisation revolves around the performance of short ‘games’. . . The humor in this ‘game’ is derived from the predetermined gimmick.”<sup>47</sup> Short form places constraints upon the performers who must then improvise humorous situations based upon the gimmick. An example from the improvisational comedy TV show *Whose Line is it Anyways?* is the game “props” where each team is given some large foam object and required to make a series of jokes based thereon. Each joke is made in a matter of seconds, and the consecutive jokes rarely reference each other.<sup>48</sup> In this game, the gimmick of the prop is forced upon the teams and their performance is shaped by this gimmick. Likewise, the performances within a TRPG are structured by the rules and constraints given yet remain improvisational, as evidenced by the GCN cast’s routine references to the improv technique of “yes and.”<sup>49</sup> Whereas improvisation is rare in radio drama practice and study despite its noted potential,<sup>50</sup> it is vital in the actual-play, most notably in the use of dice.

Each TRPG has its own methods of establishing the randomness used to encourage improv and surprise within its games, but the majority rely on dice in some form. *D&D*,

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<sup>47</sup> Matt Besser, Ian Roberts, and Matt Walsh, *The Upright Citizens Brigade Comedy Improvisation Manual* (New York: Comedy Council of Nicea LLC, 2013), 7.

<sup>48</sup> *Whose Line is it Anyway?*, hosted by Drew Carey and Aisha Tyler, (Hat Trick Productions, 1998-2020), on CW Seed, <https://www.cwseed.com/shows/whose-line-is-it-anyway/adam-rippon-2/?play=2f928712-c910-4aa5-89bd-278f4171b850>.

<sup>49</sup> “Yes and. These two simple words are the building blocks of every Long Form improv scene. ‘Yes’ refers to the idea that you should be agreeing with any information your scene partner gives you about your reality. ‘And’ refers to the adding of new information that relates to the previous information.” Besser, Roberts and Walsh, 12.

<sup>50</sup> Crook, 246.

*Pathfinder*, and *Starfinder* are all examples of “D20 systems,” where the primary die used is a twenty-sided die (d20). Players may announce their intent for their characters to perform an action, but in many cases, the fictional character is not allowed to complete that action until the die roll verifies their success. For example, in order to successfully attack an enemy creature in *Pathfinder*, one must roll the d20, add any bonuses they get from their character’s abilities or other rules, and compare the resulting number to the target’s “Armor Class” (AC). Only when the number is equal to or larger than the AC is the character or GM allowed to roleplay the effects of the successful hit. Dice aren’t solely used in combat, however, as the GM can call for a roll in any circumstance where success isn’t guaranteed, such as having to roll a “bluff check” when one character in the Fictional Frame attempts to deceive another.

Rolling dice to determine plot development does bring strengths and weaknesses. Some complain that the ever-present threat of failure, which in *Pathfinder* could result in character death, can lead to anticlimactic endings of personal narratives or unrealistic results. However, determining success and failure by dice allows narrative flow to press on with an amount of dramatic apprehension, a desirable quality for many players and listeners alike. Indeed, dice use in actual-play expands the narrative potential for such improv techniques.

Whereas the short-form improv gimmick is used almost exclusively for the construction of humor, dice have just as much opportunity to create pathos within a TRPG. In a game where a “natural” (rolled) twenty in combat can result in double, triple, or even quadruple damage being done to a character (called a critical hit), a single roll can spell the difference between life and death. An example of this is found in episode 189 of the *GCP*. The PC Four Bears is a shaman who is added to the adventure after it is halfway completed. He has an elaborate backstory of the spirits of his ancestors pushing him on towards vengeance and his exposition implies he is going

to be a long-lasting character attempting to resolve his vendetta over an extended period. However, in episode 189, a single attack from a monster kills him outright. Though such an unexpected death may seem anticlimactic, O'Brien's performance of his character's ultimate failure displayed his emotion through his level of description. The end result is a scene that displays a more somber and reflective mood, rather than a solely disappointing one. In this instance, the randomness of the dice steers the story in an uncommon direction, and chance creates a commentary about the suddenness of death.

The ability of these established rule systems to represent combat and death is a specific strength for the actual-play podcast. Combat within actual-play is presented to the audience via descriptive narration, in-character dialogue (both of which are parts of the Fictional Frame), and in the use of the Game Frame's rules. Audience members can use knowledge of the rules and actions described to clearly understand the sequence of otherwise chaotic events,<sup>51</sup> thereby bypassing a long-standing problem of audio drama, outlined as early as the 1933 work of former BBC producer Hilda Matheson:

Matheson's prescience on radio drama's weaknesses extended to the risks of 'plays of incident' which depend on action. She so rightly judges that 'adventure, excitement, fights and quarrels, are all apt to involve a confusion of noises and of voices which is exasperating to a listener'. She recognised that sound plays needed as much precise 'blocking' in the sound stage before the microphones as any stage play. Principal characters needed to stand out clearly from their background. Overwrought and emphasised realism confuses the story and distracts the focus of the ear.<sup>52</sup>

Unlike the complex radio drama where sound effects and character dialogue are necessary to evoke such action, actual-play can use the mechanics of combat provided by the Game Frame to clearly progress a narrative of "adventure, excitement, fights and quarrels" in a

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<sup>51</sup> As mentioned, not all listeners have this prior knowledge. However, the act of listening to play itself can become a method to learn these rules. Therefore the Game Frame of actual-play also can appeal specifically to individuals trying to enter the hobby.

<sup>52</sup> Crook, 75.

manner which is low-budget and acceptable to listeners, excepting for personal preference. Rules such as turned-based combat, positioning dependent actions, and established tactics that are part of gameplay act to clear up narrative confusion without relying on blocked sound. Yes, sound effects or music are often used in the actual-play to augment the experience, but these are not as meticulously planned as in radio drama and are not taken to be accurate representations of events. In fact, the *GCP*'s GM Lavallee does not control such sound, but instead, the player O'Brien who does so reactively. The onus of presenting events to the audience remains in the use of verbal description and dialogue, as filtered through the established rules of the Game Frame. Indeed, fans of the TRPG systems, having an insider's perspective of the rules and how they operate, may even find pleasure specifically in these mechanics and battles, much like a sports fan can draw excitement from learning and recognizing the plays of their teams and their opponents.

Audience engagement with the Game Frame is also tied to an investment with the characters as they face their opposition and competition, inside both the Fictional Frame and Game Frame. The Fictional Frame provides obvious competition in the existence of monsters and other NPCs which act as the PC's antagonists. The struggles between them are played out in the Game Frame as various challenges, but because each of these individual antagonists are under control of the GM, often the GM in the Game Frame (and sometimes the GM's person of the Documentary Frame) takes on antagonistic aspects as well. However, this competition between players and the GM may be merely an illusion. As noted by Fine, "High-status referees and those who emulate them adopt a flippant style; this style in conjunction with the commitment that these referees typically make to balance their world lead players (particularly

those less experienced) to believe that these referees are sadistic.”<sup>53</sup> It should be noted that Lavallee does show signs of purposefully putting on this sadistic air as his GM persona. Whether illusion or no, however, the appearance of this competition means the listener can engage with the story much like the audience of a chess match or a sports fan, cheering on their favorite players or characters to succeed in face of this constructed opposition. Actions and tactics which may be seen as overwhelming in a purely narrative account are a source of enjoyment in and of themselves in the actual-play.

For the listener versed in the rules systems and monsters available in the show’s system of choice, the mechanics also offer the opportunity for a form of dramatic irony. *Pathfinder* and *D&D* have a series of monsters which get reused in many campaigns, and often their statistics and abilities do not change much from adventure to adventure. This means that there are instances where the player or listener knows more about their adversary than the PC. In the case of the player, this can lead to a negatively-perceived phenomenon known as “meta-gaming” where a player uses their out-of-game knowledge for an in-game advantage. For the more passive listener and player who refuses to metagame, however, this knowledge can heighten the tension, particularly if they know that an enemy has some powerful ability that hasn’t as yet been used. On the online fan discussion communities of the Glass Cannon Network, nearly every episode which ends in a mid-combat cliffhanger prompts some fans to request and/or post information of the monsters. Other discussions also pop up in these weekly discussions, many mirroring that of sports commentary. Fans review which rules were broken and missed by the GM, talk about the PC’s likelihood of success, and discuss potential tactics that could help the adventuring party. There is even a weekly fan-produced podcast, the *Glass Cannon Nation Fancast*, which, though it no longer releases episodes, reviews each associated *GCP* and *A&A*

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<sup>53</sup> Fine, 227.

episode and provides outside commentary, voices fan theories, and provides greater insight into the game systems themselves.

Not all fans engage with the rules and mechanics to this level, and some see the acquiring of such knowledge as “spoiling” the show. However, there is a large “knowledge community” of fans that draw satisfaction in using game materials to predict the narrative, much as Henry Jenkins observes with the subset of *Survivor* series fans who tried to predict the show via research and collaboration.<sup>54</sup> Chance, which is absent in most radio dramas or other adventure narratives, encourages this more active engagement with the audience, as Mary Beth Haralovich and Michael W. Trosset explain:

Narrative pleasure stems from the desire to know what will happen next, to have that gap opened and closed, again and again, until the resolution of the story. . . in *Survivor*, unpredictability whets the desire to know what happens next, but how that gap will be closed is grounded in uncertainty due to chance. . . In its invitation to prediction, *Survivor* is more like a horse race than fiction.<sup>55</sup>

Within the Game Frame, this statement holds just as true for the actual-play, a dynamic otherwise difficult to find in the genre of fantasy adventure present in the Fictional Frame.

### The Fictional Frame

Taken alone, the Fictional Frame is what would make actual-play podcasting most similar to radio drama. This is where the PCs live out their lives of adventure, typically an extended narrative in actual-play. Actual-play would struggle as broadcast audio, not only because of its niche nature but because TRPG campaigns often take years to complete.

What podcasting does allow the dramaturgist is the freedom to work with an audience who can choose when and where to listen. They can control their sonic environment. If the phone rings, a nappy needs changing, or the boss enters their office, they need only

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<sup>54</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), Kindle edition, 25-58.

<sup>55</sup> Mary Beth Haralovich and Michael W. Trosset, “Expect the Unexpected: Narrative Pleasure and Uncertainty Due to Chance in *Survivor*” in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, eds. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 83-84.

take a temporary break from the narrative, the pause button can be pushed, and the story resumed at a more convenient moment. This allows for complex plotting and intricate storytelling.<sup>56</sup>

Through podcasting, these stories of adventure can include the sidetracks, minor adventures, and distractions which naturally occur during gameplay, events which would seem tangential to a more tightly produced narrative but bring an amount authenticity and a potential appeal to the TRPG fan.

To many, the Fictional Frame is seen to be the most important aspect of the TRPG and actual play. The shows themselves emphasize this; each episode of the *GCP* starts with an intro sequence that provides a sneak preview into the events of the episode. Though aspects of the other frames are certainly present, the Fictional Frame is emphasized in these recaps. Being a curated intro, this prevalence indicates the importance of this frame to the creators. This is of little surprise, as it is this frame which is emphasized to the players by the game systems themselves:

Pathfinder is a fantasy tabletop roleplaying game (RPG) where you and a group of friends gather to tell a tale of brave heroes and cunning villains in a world filled with terrifying monsters and amazing treasures.<sup>57</sup>

The Dungeons & Dragons roleplaying game is about storytelling in worlds of swords and sorcery. It shares elements with childhood games of make-believe. Like those games, D&D is driven by imagination. It's about picturing the towering castle beneath the stormy night sky and imagining how a fantasy adventurer might react to the challenges that scene presents.<sup>58</sup>

The ability to create these stories is the central focus of the game systems, and historically is what separates them from war games and modern board gaming. TRPGs thrive by allowing their players to take part in tales of adventure, to make choices beyond that which

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<sup>56</sup> Spinelli and Dann, 120.

<sup>57</sup> Logan Bonner, Jason Bulmahn, Stephen Radney-Macfarland, and Mark Seifter, *Pathfinder: Core Rulebook, Second Edition* (Redmond, Washington: Paizo Inc., 2019), 7.

<sup>58</sup> Jeremy Crawford, Mike Mearls, and Christopher Perkins, *D&D Basic Rules* (Renton, Washington: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2018), 3.

novels or even computer RPGs allow. The urge to create a story taps into humanity's ties to myth. Indeed, these stories are often compelling because the players are, consciously or unconsciously, pursuing Campbell's monomyth of the hero who leaves home, meets powerful allies, goes on an adventure with various trials, and returns triumphant.<sup>59</sup> In creating a PC and controlling them through the TRPG adventure, the PC lives within the Fictional Frame. Although the PC is separate from both the person and player identities occupying the Documentary and Game frames, the PC is nonetheless a construct of the player and is controlled by the player. In other words, the identity of the PC is part of the identity of the player. The TRPG player is not simply telling the monomyth; through the Theatre of the Mind, they are vicariously living it through their character identity.

Stories that follow the form of the monomyth resonate because they tickle something deep in the unconscious mind. So imagine what happens when you're not watching or reading that adventure -- you're experiencing it. That's what D&D does: It doesn't just tell a story, it puts you in it. You become 'the hero with a thousand faces.' The experience penetrates deep to the core of your being.<sup>60</sup>

The listener of the actual-play does not personally experience this control,<sup>61</sup> so their mode of consumption brings the experience closer in line with viewing a film or reading a book. This is the price one pays for being a passive consumer rather than a participant. Unlike a novel or film, however, the listener of the actual-play is aware of the player who is taking part in the story construction. They are not consuming a carefully pre-plotted product, and even as they are listening to old episodes well after their recording dates, they are still participating in a story where the heroes are experiencing the story as they go. The Fictional Frame's ability to present a relatable monomyth narrative aids with the distribution of these shows. They appeal to

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<sup>59</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, 3rd Edition (Novato, California: New World Library, 2008), 211.

<sup>60</sup> Ewalt, 121.

<sup>61</sup> While listening. As before discussed, a large amount of listeners to actual-play are players themselves or eventually transition from being listeners to players, taking with them preconceptions of play formulated by their actual-play consumption as discussed earlier with the "Matt Mercer effect."

listeners who know nothing about these games or the rules present in the Game Frame because the narratives in the Fictional Frame resonate with archetypal themes. The shows manage this without appearing too derivative because of the ways the Game Frame then subverts these themes.

Though various theorists have made the connection between the monomyth's pervasive presence in the cultural subconscious, and in players' subsequent modeling of characters and games on the monomyth, not enough focus has been given to the ways in which TRPGs resist the monomyth. As stated above, players act in *pursuit* of the monomyth, but rarely do these games actually conform to the monomyth perfectly. To use the *GCP* as an example, the campaign starts out following the structure of the monomyth: the heroes feel the call to adventure when a mysterious murder occurs. Once on the path, their desire to stop an invasion by Giants leads them to an ever-heightening series of trials. They gain new, often magical allies and acquire powerful items to help them on their quest. These early episodes contain signs that the monomyth will be honored, but then the tragic happens. Gormlaith, the party witch played by Matthew Capodicasa, falls to her death against a foe only tangentially connected to the plot, because of the results of a single die roll.<sup>62</sup> Gormlaith is merely the first of many to perish in pursuit of victory.

As discussed, the Game Frame introduces aspects of improv and unpredictability into the Fictional Frame. In systems that highlight combat, such as *Pathfinder* and *D&D*, and in their actual-plays, there is little guarantee that a given character will succeed at the trials presented along the way or will survive the journey and return. Though Campbell does indeed discuss the

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<sup>62</sup> *The Glass Cannon Podcast*. "Episode 50 - Flies, You Fools!" May 9, 2016, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-glass-cannon-podcast/id1007021910?i=1000368366628>.

possibility of death being a step along the way of the hero's journey,<sup>63</sup> typically these tales result in either the hero's triumph or postponement over death or some greater moral lesson.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, the happy ending in the monomyth is typical because it is closely related to "the prime function of mythology to . . . carry the human spirit forward."<sup>65</sup> "The happy ending of the fairy tale, the myth, and the divine comedy of the soul is to be read, not as a contradiction, but as a transcendence of the universal tragedy of man."<sup>66</sup> The TRPG character within the Fictional Frame is still subject to the universal tragedy of man, at least theoretically. Despite having inner power, magical aid, and even the fate of the world in the balance, the dice might determine the character's efforts are for naught at any moment.

There are two standard procedures in place for when a single character dies in the Fictional Frame: either the deceased is brought back through magic (a route which repairs much of the rift between game and monomyth) or the player "rolls up" a new character with their own reasons to pick up where the last left off. The former is an option typically available only for mid to high-level play in *Pathfinder*. Furthermore, even when it is an option, many players would rather play a new character or find narrative justifications to let their PC rest, so the latter tends to be the more common solution.

From the Documentary and Game Frames, the introduction of new characters or reintroduction of deceased ones makes sense. The alternative would be that PC death results in a cast member leaving the show, and the possibility of being taken away from the story might diminish the fun of the game. So, within the Fictional Frame there is a theoretically endless supply of characters with heroic potential, only waiting for a vacancy to hop into the events of

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<sup>63</sup> Campbell, 211, 222, 318-21.

<sup>64</sup> Campbell, 308-9.

<sup>65</sup> Campbell, 7.

<sup>66</sup> Campbell, 21.

the story. It has been argued that this ideology of endless adventure and reward reveal *D&D* and *Pathfinder*'s distinctly American value system:

American culture has some nuances that are unique to it, one being the notion of limitless growth for businesses, consumer buying power, and the economy. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, this ideology is true of dungeon exploration too. There's always a monster with treasure around the next corner, always a new area to explore, always a new frontier to conquer.<sup>67</sup>

Failure is always an option and tragedy is an ever-present possibility which provides a significant amount of narrative tension and prospective enjoyment for the listener. However, the adventure as a whole continues on without the fallen, the plot being pushed on by the PCs who embody the "limitless growth" and inexhaustible heroic potential of those who enter the story later. In this respect, these TRPG narratives become less focused on the ability of a specific character to perform heroic acts, and more focused on the heroic potential in all. Campbell anticipates such tales, stating that "differing characters. . . can become fused," and still conform to the monomyth.<sup>68</sup> TRPGs allow us to face the tragedy of the human condition, but often these tragedies are minor and their tales ultimately end optimistically as a group of heroes, perhaps not the same group that started the adventure, emerges victorious.

This scenario assumes, of course, that the tragedies along the way are spread out, allowing for at least one survivor each time they occur. If this is not the case and the entire group dies in the same event, termed a "Total-Party Kill" (TPK) by players, then it is possible that the GM decides the adventure dies with the group. It can be difficult to continue the story under such circumstances. *Pathfinder's GameMastery Guide* provides a list of strategies which recommend methods to continue a story after a TPK. Though some try to emulate the monomyth's structure of success and return, "Let Failure be Failure. . . consider letting evil seize the day" is on that list

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<sup>67</sup> Michael J. Tresca *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson, North Carolina: MacFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), 13, DriveThruRPG PDF.

<sup>68</sup> Campbell, 212.

of *recommended* courses of action.<sup>69</sup> Use of this particular strategy has actually occurred with the GCN. In “The Silent Tide” stream, the party is entirely defeated trying to thwart an undead invasion. They are not all killed, but the survivors were captured and ransomed back to the organization that sent them out. The story ends with them being berated by their employer, and the tale of the invasion goes unresolved, with no details given as to whether the villains succeed in overrunning the city or whether other heroes step in after the party’s defeat.<sup>70</sup> Had this not been a prequel story, it is probable Lavallee would not have kept them alive.

These tensions with the monomyth are more likely present when the monomyth is actively pursued, as the flexibility of TRPGs does allow for games where becoming a successful hero is not actually the goal. The game allows for alternative scenarios, like players having evil characters, or characters with goals different from trying to save the world or gain a boon as in Campbell’s monomyth. Talking about his character in *Side Quest, Side Sesh* episode 3 who is an adventurer for hire simply looking for a job, O’Brien says, “This isn’t the hero’s journey necessarily. . . You’re not set on a path where. . . you are the Chosen One.”<sup>71</sup> Sometimes the stakes are lower and PCs are non-heroic characters who are simply not interested in living out the monomyth, or the system or game being played tries to emphasize a different type of story. One such example occurs when the Glass Cannon Network decides to try out and review the British-made TRPG *Paranoia*, where players take the role of members of the lowest caste in a futuristic society based on clone labor. The difference between the narratives in this game and

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<sup>69</sup> Cam Banks, Wolfgang Baur, Jason Bulmahn, Jim Butler, Eric Cagle, Graeme Davis, Adam Daigle, Joshua J. Frost, James Jacobs, Kenneth Hite, Steven Kenson, Robin Laws, Tito Leati, Rob McCreary, Hal Maclean, Colin McComb, Jason Nelson, David Noonan, Richard Pett, Rich Redman, Sean K Reynolds, F. Wesley Schneider, Amber Scott, Doug Seacat, Mike Selinker, Lisa Stevens, James L. Sutter, Russ Taylor, Penny Williams, Skip Williams, and Teeuwynn Woodruff, *Pathfinder Role-Playing Game GameMastery Guide* (Redmond, Washington: Paizo Publishing LLC, 2010), 49-50.

<sup>70</sup> “Pathfinder Second Edition - Silent Tide Part 2,” featuring Troy Lavallee, Joe O’Brien, Skid Maher, Matthew Capodicasa, and Grant Berger (The Glass Cannon Network, July 30, 2019), Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5saz3gT-oYg>.

<sup>71</sup> *Cannon Fodder*, “Cannon Fodder Friday 4/10/20,” 21:49 to 22:41.

those of the more monomyth-aligned *D&D* or *Pathfinder* systems is described by Capodicasa: “The idea of ‘winning’ . . . is a very American perspective to put on this game. You don’t really win in this game. . . The fun is like, oh, you failed and then the GM makes it. . . all the more hilarious. . . Existence is so futile in this world. . . That’s the fun of it.”<sup>72</sup> Even within systems that more closely adhere to the monomyth, it remains possible that the PC is trying to be a hero, but the player is purposefully holding them back to heighten the drama that occurs in the Fantasy Narrative Frame.

While the act of “‘playing to lose’ to evoke negative experiences similar to e.g. tragedies in theater and literature” is becoming more recognized within RPG culture and theory, typically it has been explored in live-action role-play and free-form role-play rather than TRPGs.<sup>73</sup> Interviews with freeform role-players demonstrate that this style of role-play is “not fun, but the players described various gratifying moods and emotions.”<sup>74</sup> Since people are unlikely to seek out a “game” experience if the experience is painful, this shows how some TRPG players see the experience more akin to “art,” where negative experiences are more likely to be tolerated.<sup>75</sup> As actual-play is not just a game but a media product sent out to listeners, there is often even greater effort in trying to tell a compelling and dynamic story rather than just trying to “win.” This may encourage participation and engagement for players and listeners alike.

Joe O’Brien is the *GCP* member who has a playstyle most consistently close to “play to lose.” When building his characters, he often chooses options for the character based on what he

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<sup>72</sup> *New Game, Who Dis?* “Episode 4 - Paranoia Part 2,” featuring Troy Lavalley, Joe O’Brien, Skid Maher, Matthew Capodicasa, and Grant Berger (The Glass Cannon Network, May 7, 2020), on Apple Podcasts, 2:26:15- 2:26:45, [https://www.patreon.com/rss/glasscannon?auth=pHRFN2XSBhGSHytT9Rv\\_DK6JOJzzwVAd](https://www.patreon.com/rss/glasscannon?auth=pHRFN2XSBhGSHytT9Rv_DK6JOJzzwVAd).

<sup>73</sup> Sarah Lynne Bowman and Andreas Lieberoth, “Psychology and Role-Playing Games” in Zagal and Deterding, 250.

<sup>74</sup> Markus Montola, *The Positive Negative Experience in Extreme Role-Playing* (Tampere, Finland: Nordic DiGRA, 2010), online, accessed Sep 20, 2020, 4, <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/10343.56524.pdf>.

<sup>75</sup> Aaron Smuts, “The Paradox of Painful Art,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Volume 41, No. 3, (Fall 2007), 60.

thinks is right based on the Fictional Frame and not based solely on a character's mechanical options in the Game Frame. His first character, L'orc the orc ranger, faces negative community feedback because O'Brien decides to make him "old," a designation which carries with it mechanical penalties that make success in game play harder than with an "optimized" build. However, the choice is an appropriate one narratively, since O'Brien wants L'orc to be a retired member of the Black Arrows, necessitating an older character. This is merely one of many examples where narrative "flavor" is chosen over effectiveness within the game. Whereas the act of maximizing your chances of success by building a character who emphasizes their strengths, termed "min-maxing," could mean you "succeed" in gameplay more often, purposefully adding flaws sets up a harder struggle and chance for tragedy, which some find preferable in a storytelling game and actual-play. This being said, O'Brien and Capodicasa opine that *Pathfinder* includes enough danger to obviate the need to purposefully "play to lose" in order to guarantee that tragedy will happen at some point.<sup>76</sup>

This potential for failure and tragedy is a foundational element of these games and podcasts. Unlike radio drama or a novel, these stories are not wholly predetermined. Narrative tension is heightened by the unknown, and the events of play are unique each time a group plays an adventure. This is how podcasters like the GCN are able to produce media based on "prewritten" modules and adventure path books and still have it be "their" story. Many groups play through such pre-written material, which acts as the bare scaffolding for a complex story. These books typically have a general plot hook and establish the people and challenges that the PCs might come across, as if the monomyth adventure were written down but every mention of the hero was removed. The books are not narratives in and of themselves, but are manuals or

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<sup>76</sup> Cannon Fodder. "Cannon Fodder Friday 4/17/20," featuring Joe O'Brien and Matthew Capodicasa, April 17, 2020, on Crowdcast. 1:00:33 to 1:03:35, <https://www.crowdcast.io/e/1y9pzhx4>.

guides for the GM to help establish his adventure which then becomes a narrative as the players play through it.<sup>77</sup> Even if multiple groups play through the same module, their experiences will not be the same, and even if someone has read through the entire book, they will not know what paths the PCs will take or whether they will be successful. In this way, an actual-play fan familiar with the adventure materials will have access to a dramatic irony from knowing where the adventure assumes the story will go, but will not have the experience “spoiled” entirely because of the lack of narrative guarantee.

### The Laminations of Frames

This analysis has so far attempted to distinguish each frame, yet it is even more important to recognize how they work together. Throughout this examination, the frames have been described as “layered” and “laminated.” This is not merely due to their shared presence within the actual-play, but to the way they are fixed together by their interactive nature; distinct enough that they can be analyzed, yet with liminal events which do not cleanly belong to one frame or the other. What happens within one frame does indeed influence the others.

It has already been established that the Game Frame exerts a great influence on the events within the Fictional Frame, providing the rule structure and randomness that creates tensions and modulations of the monomyth. This influence goes both ways, however. I have said before that TRPGs differ from video games because an appeal can be made to the GM to allow things not covered in the rules, or to alter or even ignore a rule if the GM feels the state of the narrative in the Fictional Frame calls for it. In other words, the circumstances of the Fictional Frame can alter the play and rules in the Game Frame. In *Glass Cannon Live!*, Lavallee talks at length about how the game-defined “fascinated” condition can be argued to “not apply” to the current scenario, yet the narrative situation dictates that he decides it will apply. So, he prescribes exactly what will

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<sup>77</sup> Cover, 79-84.

and will not counter it in this specific example, a prescription which is unclear in the actual written rules.<sup>78</sup>

Likewise, the Documentary Frame is involved in this interplay. A character “breaking the fourth wall” by acknowledging the existence of the players or their worlds is demonstrating knowledge of the Documentary Frame within the Fictional Frame without entirely exiting the Fictional Frame. On the other side, sometimes when undesirable events occur in either or both the Fictional and Game Frames; trash talk, exclamations, and personal jibes can be thrown at the players/people of the Actual World. Consequently, though these frames are fictional and fun, our perceptions of the people in the Documentary Frame can be shifted by what they do in the Game and Fictional ones. Even more subtle in its interplay is the way the GCN will often have events acted out as part of the Fictional Frame without being part of the canon of that frame. These “flash scenes” occur when the process of “yes and. . .” has resulted in something humorous yet ill-suited for the narrative; the players will enjoy themselves by pushing the improv and then finish by returning to the “real” narrative where the scene didn’t occur.<sup>79</sup> These sequences are narrated as if they took part in the Fictional Frame, yet they do not affect any of the continuity that exists in the narrative. They are performative “what if?” scenarios played out by the actors present in the Documentary Frame for pure enjoyment and then wiped away when they become inconvenient for the plot in the Fictional Frame.

There are many other such laminations that can be explored, but it is fitting to conclude with a discussion of the “bottle cap.” Bottle caps as a device in actual-play are unique to the GCN, although other systems and, therefore, podcasts, contain devices which serve similar

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<sup>78</sup> *Glass Cannon Live!* “Strange Aeons Marathon -- Night 3,” featuring Troy Lavalley, Joe O’Brien, Skid Maher, Matthew Capodicasa, and Grant Berger (The Glass Cannon Network, September 13, 2020), on Twitch, 55:25 to 57:40, <https://www.twitch.tv/videos/726433061>.

<sup>79</sup> *Cannon Fodder*, “Cannon Fodder Friday 8/28/20,” August 28, 2020, 27:22-28:30, <https://www.crowdcast.io/e/7qn7lpxq/1>.

purposes (Hero Points in *Pathfinder* and Inspiration in *D&D*, to name two). In the context of the GCN, a bottle cap is not merely the topper to a drink (though when one is awarded, the GM does usually give a physical bottle cap to the recipient), but a boon given by the GM to reward a player. Once a player has a bottle cap, they can hold on to it and use it whenever they want to gain a mechanical advantage, typically the ability to roll two dice, rather than one, and take the better result. Bottle caps therefore alter the Game Frame by providing an otherwise absent mechanical advantage and increase the odds of favorable events in the Fictional Frame. It is the method by which these boons are distributed, however, that truly demonstrates the way these frames can influence each other.

Bottle caps are given for a variety of reasons, including effective tactical play during narratively tense moments<sup>80</sup>, playing an audio drop for a joke<sup>81</sup>, impressing the GM with the mechanical build of a PC<sup>82</sup>, a cast member showing up for a recording session despite illness<sup>83</sup>, correctly guessing an NPC's backstory<sup>84</sup>, a PC taking on personal risk to save the lives of NPCs<sup>85</sup>, and many other reasons. The distribution of bottle caps can be based upon actions in any frame, or even combinations of frames. Because the benefit of the bottle cap is beneficial in both the Game and Fictional Frames, players look forward to getting them and will even argue that a bottle cap is deserved after certain actions. This campaigning for a benefit is a direct appeal to the GM's person in the Documentary Frame. Further, because bottlecaps are associated with

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<sup>80</sup> *Glass Cannon Live!* "Boston, - Strange Aeons Session 15," March 26, 2020, 01:39:23-01:40:57, [https://www.patreon.com/rss/glasscannon?auth=pHRFN2XSBhGSHytT9Rv\\_DK6JOJzzwVAd](https://www.patreon.com/rss/glasscannon?auth=pHRFN2XSBhGSHytT9Rv_DK6JOJzzwVAd).

<sup>81</sup> *Androids and Aliens*, "Episode 65 - Checks, Lies, and Videotape," featuring Troy Lavalley, Joe O'Brien, Skid Maher, Matthew Capodicasa, Grant Berger, and Ellinor DiLorenzo (The Glass Cannon Network, July 9, 2019), on Apple Podcasts, 18:00 to 18:34, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/androids-and-aliens/id1376412132?i=1000443496569>.

<sup>82</sup> *Androids and Aliens*, "Episode 81 - From Dust til Gone," October 22, 2109, 38:20-00:43:01, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/androids-and-aliens/id1376412132?i=1000454553607>.

<sup>83</sup> Legacy of the Ancients Season 1 Episode 18 00: - 00:03:50

<sup>84</sup> *The Glass Cannon Podcast*, "Episode 154 - Cloudy With a Chance of Mess Hall," May 7, 2018, 55:15 to 55:25, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-glass-cannon-podcast/id1007021910?i=1000451229865>.

<sup>85</sup> *The Glass Cannon Podcast*, "Episode 153 - Mine Games," April 30, 2018, 23:10 to 31:01, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-glass-cannon-podcast/id1007021910?i=1000451229895>.

impressive, dramatic, or especially humorous moments, the term is also used outside of the actual giving and using of the bottle caps as a declaration of enthusiasm amongst players. To use a common example, the GM does not get to be awarded bottle caps, yet the players will still often yell “Bottle cap!” when the GM does something impressive. Bottle caps have become an icon of the GCN and are an effective yet simple example of the laminations of the three frames.

Layered frames do indeed influence the production of other media forms. After all, a crafted fiction is often based on some level of the actual reality of its creators. However, few media forms display this layering as overtly as does the actual-play. All three Frames become part of the podcast content. The personas of the creators in the Documentary Frame and the mechanics in the Game Frame which direct how the narrative develops are not hidden in special features, but are equally co-present and coincidental with the Fictional Frame. Indeed, whereas other media such as audio drama tends to mask this layering, actual-play uses its layered nature to its advantage, finding ways across all frames to appeal to listeners and create enduring fans.

### Conclusion

The discussed Frames and their various laminations are not just integral to the Actual-Play podcast, they are a major distinguishing characteristic and, I argue, a key strength that has aided the popularity of the growing genre. Their simultaneous presence in the shows affects the creation of narrative through the use of improv techniques and gimmicks which affect humor and pathos alike. Their ability to present character location and action through a combined use of in-character dialogue, out of character player discussion, and established game mechanics allow for narrative clarity without requiring expensive sound blocking. Perhaps most important for their growth in popularity, the laminated frames provide three distinct methods for drawing in and retaining fans: rather than hiding the creators, the Documentary Frame appeals to the listener’s

desire to vicariously experience the social joys of playing, and exploits any potential celebrity the players may have; the framework of the Game Frame allows for deeper narrative clarity, introducing much of the improv aspects and creating an avenue for fans to gain greater insight in the formation of narrative; and the story in the Fictional Frame provides a narrative (or narrativity) that alludes to the monomyth and resonates with much of our media culture while remaining uncertain thanks to chance.

If, as Spinelli and Dann have stated in the quote that opened this discussion, Actual-Play has managed to grow in a way that Audio Dramas and other more “traditional” shows have struggled to match, then I posit that any attempted explanation that does not include these frames in some form or another is incomplete. True, all shows are influenced in some way or another by the existence of frames; however few, if any, strive to collect those frames and include them all in the distributed product. As TRPG theorists have made manifest, the games have gained great success by being built upon layered frames. Podcasts recently have also managed to grow and be successful by incorporating aspects of the TRPG frames. Even if Actual-Plays and their emphasis on geek subculture do not appeal to someone personally, their shift in production and storytelling, and resulting popularity, are worth noting and looking for in other media. Perhaps the fundamentals of the laminations of frames can bring exciting new potential to shows and stories outside of the Actual-Play. They need not perfectly duplicate the patterns of actual-play, but incorporating these layers into a cohesive whole might just end up being the “break through moment”<sup>86</sup> that a radio drama, or another media form, needs to succeed.

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<sup>86</sup> Spinelli and Dann, 288.

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