A Multitude of Settings : A Typology of RPG Gameworlds

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To think that tens of millions of individuals over the world in the past thirty-five or so years have participated in improvised story telling in the fictional settings created by the roleplaying game hobby is, quite frankly, quite staggering and certainly one that will receive some small mention in cultural history of our time in the future. But how do these various published worlds stack up? There has been, by now, more than sufficient time to generate quite a variety of styles and thematic considerations which can be reviewed with the objective to tell whether there is any particular elements which provide lasting aid in the establishment of such settings. The overall orientation is, as always, constantly seeking improvement and further improvement for the RPG industry.

As an attempt to derive a typology, a simple classification is used which illustrates the key features of a multitude of settings. This is not, of course, an exhaustive study as the sheer quantity of game worlds is beyond the scope of this article. First, is the what can be described as (i) heroic fantasy, (ii) mythic fantasy, (iii) historical fantasy, (iv) modern fantasy, (v) science fantasy, and (vii) science fiction. The emphasis on the word "fantasy" will become apparent. The terms do not necessarily represent just a spatial-temporal location, as this is just the most obvious component of setting, but also setting devices in place which contribute to character generation and which can drive the narrative.

1. Heroic Fantasy

The key characteristics of this conventional fantasy is a very high degree of similarity with well-known fantasy themes and setting, which perhaps can be accurately (albeit somewhat disparagingly) described as a "quasi-medieval Tolkien-feudal-Conan soup". Included in this category are many of the D&D-derived gameworlds such as Blackmoor-Mystara (the former was incorporated into the latter), Greyhawk, Forgotten Realms, and Dragonlance. Almost archetypal, Middle-Earth is also in this category, as is Warhammer FPG's Old World, GURPS's Yrth/Banestorm, Harnmaster's Harn, Earthdawn's Barsaive, Powers & Perils's Perilous Lands and DragonQuest's Frontiers of Alusia. There are, of course, a plethora of other gameworlds which are not mentioned in this context, undoubtedly to the chagrin of some readers who will feel their favourite has been neglected.

The main advantages of these game worlds is their familiarity. Elves, Dwarves, Orcs and Halflings are recognisable fantasy races and are present in all the mentioned gameworlds; we know what these species are. For nearly all intents and purposes the Dwarves of Greyhawk, Middle-Earth and Perilous Lands are identical. The primary setting is analogous to that of the European peninsula from the iron age to the high middle-ages (although the Old World for WHFPG goes into an early modern period), again familiar to those of the main demographic who purchase RPGs. Actually, there was a very interesting market demarcation in fantasy RPGs in the early days of the industry, with D&D being explicitly "steel age" (i.e., medieval), RuneQuest taking the "bronze age", Rolemaster the "iron age" and, as mentioned, Warhammer taking the early modern period.

The world where these games are set are likewise familiar and non-magical. This is not to suggest that they do not contain magic and spell-casters, but they are secondary to normal physical expectations. The world is not magical but there is magic in the world, which can extend or temporarily alter normal physical laws. There are similar climates, seasons, astrological bodies and gravity to what one would expect. Notably most have a year of around 365 days (Harn has 360 days, Greyhawk 364, Banestorm, Middle-Earth have 365, Faerun has 365 days with leap years etc). Despite

this there sometimes scant regard is paid to what is acceptable features for geography (rivers flowing over mountains and then on to the other side is a "feature" in Greyhawk and in the Perilous Lands of Powers & Perils).

These conventional fantasy RPGs are typically the most popular, partially due to their literary familiarity and partially due to their lack of exotic metaphysics and ontology. Their disadvantages are usually two-fold; the first is limits to creative imagination. Fairly quickly it became a case of "yet another Elf, nothing new under the sun". A regular solution is this boundary limit is provide additional detail within those limits, and make minor alterations to the conventional style (e.g., the kender in Dragonlance as an alternative to halflings). Thus quite a multitude of supplements are released for the aforementioned gameworlds. A more distasteful component is that conventional fantasy replicates, uncritically, conventional prejudices, especially in relation to race and skin tone and yet typically has a low level of moral complexity.

A variant of heroic fantasy is to make the setting exotic, but in most other cases still following the conventions of heroic fantasy. This is evident in the D&D supplements SpellJammer and Ravenloft providing a "space fantasy" (but not science fantasy) in the former, and a pocket dimension of horror in the latter. The most consistently exotic example of heroic fantasy is undoubtedly Talislanta where there is next to nothing in terms of flora and fauna that can be said to be familiar; "no elves" was a key phrase to the gameworld and one that ha been followed with some vigour. Even the basic cosmology appeals to the exotically different; two suns, seven moons and a forty-nine week year.

2. Mythic Fantasy

Unlike heroic fantasy, which is largely an invention of the twentieth century, mythic fantasy derives extremely heavily from the more unfamiliar thematic considerations of religious mythology and traditional faerie tales. Included in this category are RuneQuest/HeroQuest's Glorantha and D&D's Planescape. To an large extent the White Wolf games (Vampire, Werewolf, Mage etc), despite their usually contemporary setting also fall very heavily into this category. This small but influential number is indicative of some of the inherent difficulties in designing mythic fantasy gameworlds but also the rewards of doing so when they are successful. Despite the title, Aria: Canticle of the Monomyth, is not necessarily an example of mythic fantasy, but rather of heroic fantasy with a strong simulationist orientation.

Familiarity in mythic fantasy is often present, but beyond the surface the more alien characteristics become notable. Glorantha has elves and dwarves for example. Everyone is familiar with what a vampire or a werewolf is. But beyond this some surprises result; the Gloranthan elves are actually walking plants, more akin to Tolkien's ents physically and with a personality closer to that of old-man willow, thoroughly alien, as elves are in real-world mythology but not in Middle Earth. The vampires and werewolves of the White Wolf games are not just monsters, but beings with a very deep sense of identity.

Unlike heroic fantasy, where the setting is primarily normal, the setting in mythic fantasy is primarily magical. In Planescape the recursive rule of three (events happen in threes), the unity of rings (the tendency of the status quo to return) and the centre of all (all is the centre in infinity) are ontological foundations, not additions, to the setting. Likewise, as has been gradually revealed over the course of the gameworld's history, Glorantha is a world where mythology determines reality.

Although not often phrased as such, mythic fantasy in RPGs is also more accessible in terms of analysis of synchronic and diachronic time, as expressed by the famous anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. What is meant by synchronic time is the standard series of events in a narrative, even including matters of narrative flow (exposition, rising action and tension, climax, resolution, denouement). Diachronic time instead refers to the reinforcement of meaning through the reappearance of metaphor. This is particularly notable in Glorantha with the rise and fall of hubric empires (the Nysalor experiment, the Godlearners and the Empire of Wyrm's Friends, the Lunar Empire). Mention is made here of Earthdawn and Shadowrun which certainly have the potential to be mythic fantasy in this sense, but are instead heroic and science fantasy respectively.

Likewise mythic fantasy has atypical geographical features. Planescape is the otherworldly innards of a clockwork universe, Glorantha a squarish flat world floating on a great ocean, and even the normal reality of White Wolf's line is derived from a systematic destruction of the imagination. The moral themes, contrary to a position of fairly obvious abstract allegiances of "good" v "evil", have more to do with context. Glorantha emphasises cultural and racial perspectives embodied in specific myths (the universalistic Godlearners despised by all). The White Wolf line reaches a height in defining shades of grey in Hunter: The Reckoning. Planescape takes what is the easily supposed D&D moral alignments and gives them a twist with an emphasis on factions.

3. Historical Fantasy

Historical fantasy has played a minor but consistent part in the various gameworld settings for RPGs, starting with the inclusion of historical pantheons in the original edition of Dungeons & Dragons and the use of Celt, Vikings and Mongol in the Swords & Sorcerers supplement for Chivalry & Sorcery (and the stand-alone version of C&S for feudal Japan, Land of the Rising Sun). As a complete game Squinter's Man, Myth and Magic bears particular comment as an example of the category. Putting aside the fairly primitive mechanics of the game system, the actual scenarios sought to recreate many fantastic stories of Europe and the Fertile Crescent from c4000 BC to 100 AD. Despite this setting, the stories themselves and even the title of the game, the setting does not constitute "mythic fantasy", the game does not have a mythic metaphysic. Similar comments can also be made of the "Mythic Europe" of Ares Magic.

In addition to these are the historical fantasy campaign packs produced for Rolemaster and the Hero System (Mythic Egypt, Mythic Greece, Vikings etc), the historical sourcebooks for AD&D (Charlemagne's Paladins, Celts, The Crusades etc), and the enormous collection of historical material for GURPS (Aztecs, Celtic Myth, China, Egypt, Greece, Imperial Rome, Japan, Russia, Vikings). Obviously these are all written with a good consideration of the perspective of the historical participants themselves and invariably come with decent research and source material. A particularly rich source of campaign setting is achieved through various time travel mechanisms (e.g., GURPS Infinite Worlds). In this respect the science fiction element, setting-wise, is less significant than the diversity of historical locales, although the use of time-travelling technologies as plot devices is relatively common.

Mention must be made here of the relative lack of strict historical game books, i.e., those without any fantastic content whatsoever. There is a small number of games of historical pirates (Pirates & Plunder, GURPS Swashbuckler), the 'manifest destiny' ("Western") period of the United States (Boot Hill, Western Hero, Aces & Eights), the range of material for GURPS WWII, and some contemporary espionage settings (e.g., Top Secret, Danger International). It is evident that when engaging in the process of collaborative improvised story-telling that historical stories that incorporate a sense of magical realism as appropriate to the characters is the tale have a greater sense of verisimilitude. Consider the notable popularity of even Western RPGs that include just an appropriately small amount of the fantastic (e.g., Deadlands, Dogs in the Vineyard)

4. Modern Fantasy

A similar caveat to that just stated applies for modern-era games. Although there are some strictly historical examples (e.g., Top Secret) with an orientation toward the cinematic (e.g., Spycraft) a combination of investigative-horror (Urban Arcana, Unknown Armies, Conspiracy X, modern Cthulhu, White Wolf games) or surreal and paranormal (e.g., Heaven and Earth, Over The Edge, Engel) seems to have greater appeal. The principle of escapism continues to apply; in pre-modern games the historical change can be sufficient and in the contemporary setting even then the exotic is required: the old joke of "Papers & Paychecks" as an interesting FRPG only works for those in an real environment that is sufficiently removed.

Whilst rarely fulfilling the repetition of theme common in mythic fantasy, requisite for the appellation 'mythic', modern fantasy RPGs often seek alternative ontological foundations for the game-world, the most notable in this regard being White Wolf's Mage, which argues for a consensus reality. Albeit portrayed in a deliberately cinematic fashion the cosmology of Torg also has a mythic cosmology, where initially separate cosms (with varying degrees of magic, technology, social integration etc) have been brought together to one place through unifying devices which provide

portal capabilities.

A modern setting provides a high degree of familiarity and accessibility. The opportunity to gradually introduce components that the world is not quite what it seems provides both escapist and imaginative opportunities. Thus the setting component feeds into the narrative creating both a setting that has greater depth and believability, whilst also creating a richer plot.

5. Science Fantasy

Rod Serling defines science fiction in contrast to science fantasy as follows: "[S]cience fiction makes the implausible possible, while science fantasy makes the impossible plausible." The admixture of science and technology with magic and spells within a fiction and often spurious justifications has sometimes made the distinction between science fiction and fantasy problematic. However, as Serling's quote indicates there is minimal justification in science fantasy for the more paranormal elements whereas often science fiction engages in significant explanatory effort.

So it is too in RPG gameworlds. In some cases, such as Rolemaster's Shadow World, there is a some effort to describe how the various fantastic and magical effects occur (a nexus between dimensions, a planet bathed in "magical radiation") with a pseudo-scientific perspective. When this is carried out it is quite common for the gameworld to include devices from both science fiction and fantasy. Another gameworld which certainly fulfils this criteria is Tékumel, from Empire of the Petal Throne. In both these cases there is a definite emphasis on a fantasy world with technological artefacts being items of discovery from a distant past. Skyrealms of Jorune is an exception where the two genres are highly merged from the outset. Perhaps the most well-known example of science fantasy is the Eternal Champion series of RPGs based on the works of Michael Moorcock. Whilst Stormbringer starts at the fantastic and can move towards the technological, Hawkmoon tends in the other direction.

Various superheroic roleplaying gameworld also have this sort of setting as well, despite often having a temporal placement in the modern day. Whether it is the Marvel or DC universe or that of Champions or Mutants & Masterminds, the application of pseudo-scientific justifications for paranormal powers ("bitten by a radioactive spider") is both diverse and usually implausible - however no more implausible than that presupposed by fantasy. On a similar trajectory one may also include some nominal science fiction games that take similar accounts, such as the mutant powers of Gamma World, or the same in Paranoia.

6. Science Fiction

By a science fiction setting what is meant is those RPGS that include fictional technologies usually in a futuristic setting, and excluding the influence of supernatural forces. With this criteria some games with a modern setting, such as Call of Cthulhu, are actually strictly science fiction games as the setting is primarily about the influence and effect of aliens on earth, a point that is common within associated literature, and even more notable on the more contemporary supplement, Delta Green. Even when thoroughly fantastic elements appear (e.g., Azathoth, the idiot God of the centre of the cosmos, time-travelling Elder Things), although notably the scientific (even speculative) foundations magic and spell-casting as glossed over. Added to this list one may also include Paranoia's Alpha Complex, despite some stylistic elements and a rather

Of course, other science fiction RPG settings are presented in a much less ambiguous manner. Classic RPG settings such as Traveller's Imperium, the Star Wars Empire setting, Spacemaster's Imperium all provide a stricter science-orientated perspective, although in each of these cases the pseudo-science of "psionics" ("The Force" etc) has a notable role. The emphasis on monarchical political systems is sometimes justified from the perspective of communication only being as fast as travel; the concept of democratic federations under the same technology is invariably overlooked, indicating - like heroic fantasy - a replication of conventional prejudices.

In comparison cyberpunk RPGs (Shadowrun being the obvious exception) are even stricter with regards to a "hard science" perspective, with Cyberpunk, Eclipse Phase, GURPS Tranship Space allowing no supernatural or paranormal

effects. Notably the settings also take a more realistic approach to political and economic structures as well which suppositions of widespread disenfranchisement through corporate power and often the equivalent of corporate political institutions.

In all these cases however, the strong focus on science and technology as a replacement for magic and spells is well-stated by Arthur C. Clarke's famous dictum that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic". It also correlates, in a narrative sense, to Darko Suvin's claim that that science fiction is the mythology of modernity, by which he meant that it was a replacement for the speculations of traditional society which concentrated on the religious-fantastic.

Conclusions

The settings offered by conventional heroic fantasy are typically the most accessible as they rely on pre-existing knowledge in popular culture consciousness, which includes conventional prejudices and often significant distortions from the real-world fictions from which they are derived. Heroic fantasy with exotic settings is less accessible but provides ample opportunity for exploration and elaboration. Historical fantasy has the advantages of being both accessible and providing the opportunity for participants to engage in one of the most empowering aspects of roleplaying, the capacity to see the world through another character's eyes. If players manage to learn some history and cultural fiction as well, then this is further beneficial.

Whilst a high degree of accessibility is initially necessary to introduce a setting it does not have to remain as such. With an initial small scope, increasingly exotic, mythic or technological (for science fiction) elements can be introduced gradually and with significant outcomes. Indeed, this should be the case to help develop depth of setting. Most heroic fantasy and science fiction, when highly elaborated, becomes broad, but not deep. There is certainly no need for this, and it speaks poorly of gameworld designers who do not wish to address some of their own more problematic attitudes.

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