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**Role-Playing Games as Collective Storytelling in a
Performative-Game Podcast**

Bachelor's Thesis

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I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently and that I have listed all primary and secondary sources.

In Olomouc

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1 INTRODUCTION

Actual-play podcasts as well as table-top role-playing games they are using are becoming more and more popular. It is due to adaptations of the stories narrated through the table-top systems and its more positive portrayal in popular media, such as the Netflix's series *Stranger Things* (2015-), where the main characters are shown to play *Dungeons & Dragons* on several occasions. Another reason is its spread over audio-visual media; *Critical Role* (2016-) is perhaps the most popular example of actual play podcast, although it is not primarily a podcast but an audio-visual recorded stream. For this thesis, the actual-play podcast subjected to analysis is *The Adventure Zone* (2014-), mainly because it is created with the purpose of narrating a story rather than closely follow the game rules; for this purpose, it is also edited in postproduction, unlike the majority of actual-play podcasts.

In podcasts narrated with the help of table-top game systems the narrative is not created by one person but rather a group of people using the game system as a tool to decide the course of action. The purpose of this thesis is to explain how collective storytelling influences the narrative and prove that actual-play podcasts have a unique way to form a narrative that has used the process of gamification, mechanizing a popular work of fiction into a game, as an outline for the narration and went one step further to create something new.

2 ACTUAL PLAY PODCAST AS A GENRE

Performative-game podcast or an actual-play podcast are both used as names for a genre of podcast, as a voice-based media, with specific set of features. These features are composed by collective of narrators creating a narrative through the mechanics of 'Table-Top Role-Playing Games' (TTRPGs or TRPGs), being half scripted and submitting to the rules of improvisation. TTRPGs are game systems, which implies, they are a set of written rules, which can be used as a guideline for playing a game. Brendan Decicio in his thesis *The Layered Frames of Performed Tabletop: Actual-Play Podcasts and the Laminations of Media* states, that actual-play podcasts "offer stories of fiction, played out to the listener through narration, dialogue, and perhaps sound effects."¹ This means that

¹ Brendan Decicio, *The Layered Frames of Performed Tabletop: Actual-Play Podcasts and the Laminations of Media* (Brigham Young University, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2020).

the production of this genre is based on half scripted monologues, collective improvisation and postproduction, which differs from one podcast to another.

An important feature of an actual play podcast are its participants. The actual-play podcast requires more than one participant, usually four or more. As Jennifer Grouling Cover describes: “TRPGs are played face-to-face (around a table, most likely), and involve players “acting out” a role.”² These participants’ roles differ. One of these roles is the ‘Game Master’ (GM), which means, that a GM is the main narrator of the story. Person taking this role is the main contributor to the process worldbuilding. The original name of this storyteller is ‘Dungeon Master’ (DM), and even though it is spread more widely in the modern culture more than the acronym GM, it is mostly used to refer to the storyteller role for the TTRPG *Dungeons & Dragons*.³ This separation into main storyteller and players began with the early fantasy addition to *Chainmail*⁴, a strategic table-top game by Garry Gygax and Jeff Peren, that in 1971 developed into the first edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, where the premise of the game was to send a party of adventurers into a literal dungeon, let them deal with some logical puzzles along the way and defeat a few evil enemies. The characters portrayed by the other participants known as ‘players’ were supposed to be the heroes of the story and were regarded as such. Since the storyteller was representing everything what could lurk in the dark dungeon, they named him the dungeon master. GM can be used as more general term for such a role. Some TTRPGs actually tend to use their own terminology in attempt to distance themselves from the *Dungeons & Dragons*’s brand. These terms are for example ‘The Keeper’ from the *Call Of Cthulhu*⁵ TTRPG, ‘Master Of Ceremonies’ from TTRPGs by *Powered by the Apocalypse*⁶ or ‘Storyteller’ from the *Vampire: The Masquerade*⁷ TTRPG. The GM is a role intended for one person. The players then control each one character central to the story.

² Jennifer Grouling Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-playing Games* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2010) 6.

³ Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, *Dungeons and Dragons* (Tactical Studies Rules, 1974).

⁴ Gary Gygax and Jeff Peren, *Chainmail* (Guidon Games, 1971).

⁵ Chaosium Inc., *The Call of Cthulhu RPG Wiki* (Chaosium Inc. and Moon Design Publications, 2021).

⁶ Vincent Baker, Meguey Baker, *Apocalypse World* (Lumpley Games, 2010).

⁷ Martin Ericsson, Matthew Dawkins, Karim Muammar, Juhana Pettersson, *Vampire The Masquerade 5th Edition Core Book* (White Wolf Entertainment, 2018).

Narrative in actual-play podcasts is built around ‘player characters’ (PCs), these are the main characters portrayed by participants of TTRPGs, who are not taking on the role of the GM. All the other ‘side characters’ are referred to as ‘non-player characters’ (NPCs). This terminology is well established in TTRPGs as well as video games, some of the terms were actually taken directly from them, but the characters’ role in the narrative transformed. In video games, actions of PCs are decided mostly by the ‘players’ role-playing them, NPCs are managed by the GM. In TTRPGs the actions of all characters are decided collectively. And not only that, the narrative is developed by a GM presenting the scene and conflict to which the players are reacting by describing what their character would do in given situation. If the GM finds this reaction challenging, he can choose to let the player roll their dice, how many and which one is set by the rules, after assessment of the roll, which is either a failure or success, the GM proceeds to adapt the scene accordingly.

Because of the distinction between the players as actors and their characters, we can speak of them as two separate layers of narrative, in which the two narratives can meet on many occasions. The PCs usually possess some of the players’ characteristics, there are situations where what the players say in the real world’s layer blends with the state of the fictional world, and the occurrence of the characters “breaking the fourth wall” is not unusual as will be illustrated later in this thesis. In such cases we can talk about the actual-play podcast as a metafiction if we take in consideration that: “Metafiction describes the capacity of fiction to reflect on its own status as fiction and thus refers to all self-reflexive utterances which thematize the fictionality (in the sense of imaginary reference and/or constructedness) of narrative.”⁸ Furthermore, actual-play podcasts tend to be very conscious about their characters and world changing over time. With longer running podcasts the audience often notices differences in the story space leading to obvious plot-holes. The NPCs which are less engaged in the central plot tend to have similar features, such as character voices or physical description. Due to non-scripted storytelling, names of places or fictional historical events may change, either on accident or after an agreement between the GM and the players. The story time breaks. In such instances the narrators simply state their explanation or leave it to the audience’s imagination. Which leads us to another layer and that is the layer of audience.

⁸ Birgit Neuman, „Metanarration and Metafiction“ in *The Living Handbook of Narratology* (2014). <https://www-archiv.fdm.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/node/50.html>.

Listeners' can indirectly or directly affect the narrative world. Indirect influence is most prominent via fandoms, online communities in which fans of the show trade their experiences, theories and fan-content. Most podcast content creators work with fandom reception and try to build stable fandom base and communicate with their fans, which then has an impact on the show they create. For example, the fandom takes to a certain character and therefore the character appears on the show more often. *The Adventure Zone (TAZ)* podcast had a character of Barry Bluejeans which appeared in the first arch of *The Adventure Zone: Balance* story. He was killed off but the audience kept asking the McElroys' to bring him back, that is why he later came back and even became one of the main characters. Similarly, if an aspect of the podcast narrative meets with the backlash of the fandom, chances are it will not be appearing in the show anymore. Another, more specific, example of the authors working with the fans is can be found in the podcast *The Adventure Zone*, where fans of the show are promised to have a character named after them if they share the podcast on their social media. One of the more direct approaches to the audience was the decision to ask the fans to send them their ideas for magical and non-magical artefacts that the PCs could purchase in a fictional shop called Fantasy Costco, which became a consistent feature of the show, only to be replaced in different seasons by either a giant cat named Heathcliff or a catfish named Felix, they served the same purpose: selling the equipment chosen from listeners' suggestions.

To summarize, actual-play podcasts consist of the meta-layer, also could be called the out-of-character layer (involves the players and GM as omnipresent narrators), then the in-character layer (shows the discourse within the story), and the audience layer. Decisio in his analysis of actual-play podcasts based on 'Mediated Frames', a concept introduced by Erving Goffman in *Frame analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*,⁹ talks about Documentary, Game and Fiction frames. For Decisio, Documentary is approaching the out-of-character discussions and audience as one frame, which is a possible approach, but in the instance of some actual-play podcasts, such as *The Adventure Zone*, which is including the audience into the narrative a more suitable categorization is required. Fiction frame is the in-game narration; the story happening to the player characters. The game frame is considered to be the rules of chosen TTRPG system, which are written, but can change depending on the agreement between GM and

⁹ Erving Goffman, *Frame analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1972).

the players. The concept of game frame is also used by Gary Alan Fine in his work *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (1983). That's why the TTRPG used in the podcast must be also taken as another layer of actual-play podcasts. This layer is substantial, since the major and minor decisions of all the characters and world around them submit to the TTRPG's rules, and the in-podcast discussions of rules is inseparable from the genre. My analysis of collaborative storytelling in podcast views Decicio's categorization of frames as a theory, that needs to be expanded upon in relation to a specific actual-play podcast, with the initiative of the collective creation of narrative rather than documenting the process of playing a TTRPG game. The theory of layered frames is presenting functions of the TTRPG in relation to the narrative, these functions are limiting and some actual play podcasts, such as the one analysed in this thesis, do not fit into Decicio's categorization.

Lastly, actual-play podcasts follow, more-or-less, the same structure. The length is usually from two to five hours, if the content stays uncut. And between one and two hours if the audio is cut in the postproduction. When compared to the podcasts deriving from a radio dramas and broadcasting,¹⁰ they follow the basic structure of radio-play shows. However, there are some differences. The intro¹¹ part is usually substituted by recapitulation of previous episodes, since actual-play podcasts have mostly serial form and not episodic. After this introduction a jingle is played, if the podcast decided to include it. Halfway through the podcast, the listeners are confronted with an advertisement break, it is a remnant of the past that was preserved to this time. A common feature of fictional podcast advertisements is, that they tend to be personalized by the hosts of the show. For example, in *Welcome to Night Vale*,¹² the commercials are intertwined into the fiction itself, becoming part of the in-fiction narrative, this continues the tradition of radio-play shows such as *Inner Sanctum Mysteries*¹³ in which the story is "merging into advertisements rather than demarcating from them."¹⁴ In *The Adventure Zone*, the 'add break' is filled by one of its hosts reading out the pre-written commercials

¹⁰ See Tim Crook, *Radio Drama: Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2005).

¹¹ Intro and outro are not parts of the main narrative, but are surrounding it. They are paratexts. Intro takes place before the main narrative begins and usually serves to introduce the listeners to the story, that is about to unfold. Outro is used after the main narrative concludes and is providing additional information, mostly about the production and distribution.

¹² Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor, *Welcome To Night Vale* (Night Vale Presents, 2015-).

¹³ Himan Brown, *Inner Snactum Mysteries* (Blue Network, 1941-1952).

¹⁴ Richard J. Hand, *Terror on the Air!: Horror Radio in America 1931-1952* (McFarland, 2012).

or improvising an endorsement for their sponsors or their own merch. The usual outro, which is a part of the episode after the main story content of the show ends, consists of information about when the next episode will come out and a final jingle.

3 TTRPG SYSTEMS AS NARRATIVE TOOLS

TTRPGs are based on a standard set of rules that support the creation of a story. Chosen rules set boundaries for a narrative world the story is set in, helps to describe and grow with the characters as they level up, guide the characters through actions they take in the world and decides whether they achieve the objectives they set for themselves or not. The process of narration is then made whole by the communication between players. To conclude, rules of TTRPG create a guideline, but require a dialogue to make the storytelling whole. In other words, TTRPG rules help to give order to sequence of events into a story but lack additional discourse to create a narrative by themselves.¹⁵

To align with the purpose of this thesis, the TTRPG game systems in discussion are *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Fate*,¹⁶ *Blades in the Dark*,¹⁷ and *Powered by Apocalypse* TTRPGs, more specifically *Monster of the Week* and *Urban Shadows*, because these are the systems used in the main campaigns of *The Adventure Zone*. ‘Campaign’ means a long-term story in serial form. It is divided into ‘sessions’, these are the separate episodes, or in original TTRPG meaning of the term, a time when the players meet to play one whole part of the story. A story that is devised to be finished in one session is called ‘one shot’ or ‘one-shot campaign’. Even though a regular system, such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, can be used for one shot, systems developed specifically for their purposes exist. These systems tend to parody popular culture and media. One such system is titled *Lasers and Feelings*,¹⁸ it is a futuristic science fiction TTRPG, which name comes from an album by the band *The Doubleclicks* with the same name. Other one shot systems are *Oh, Dang! Bigfoot Stole My Car With My Friend's Birthday Present Inside*,¹⁹

¹⁵ Marie-Laure Ryan, “Narrative,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (Taylor & Francis, 2007).

¹⁶ K. Sullivan et.al., *Fate Roleplaying Game System Reference Document (SRD)* (Evil Hat Productions, 2013).

¹⁷ John Harper, *Blades in the Dark* (Evil Hat Productions, 2017).

¹⁸ John Harper, *Lasers and Feelings* (Published under: CC-BY license, 2021).

¹⁹ Weird Age Games, *Oh, Dang! Bigfoot Stole My Car With My Friend's Birthday Present Inside* (CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 license, 2018).

*Four Sherlock Holmes and a Vampire (Who Is Also One of the Aforementioned Sherlock Holmes)*²⁰ or *Dadlands*,²¹ an TTRPG system created by The McElroy Family.

3.1 Setting

Setting is crucial in defining story aspects, the choice of TTRPG system defines the setting of the story and the choice of the setting influences which TTRPG system to use, because they tend to be tight to a certain genre. *Dungeons & Dragons* was invented by Gary Gygax and Dave Anderson in 1974 and it was intended to be a high fantasy game, following the fame of the fantasy addition to the previous strategic war game called *Chainmail*. But unlike its predecessor it focused not only on the logical battle system but also more developing role-playing as the character used for the tasks given by the DM. Taking major inspiration from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*,²² which popularized the fantastical literature, *Dungeons & Dragons*' campaigns take place in their version of medieval times. However, as David Ewald states in his book about the origin and function of *Dungeons & Dragons*: "And just as fantasy fiction may include all kinds of different settings and plots, a fantasy role-playing game does not have to be constrained to a standard medieval setting."²³ Meaning that, even though the setting reminds us of medieval times, it is only partly inspired by them but often involves magic, steampunk technology or wild west-like territories. Even if *Dungeons & Dragons* itself is a set of rules, and the players can choose the actual setting by themselves, the authors offer more than one setting in modules sold as a separate books. Most famous *Dungeons & Dragons* setting is the *Forgotten Realms*, which has fully developed history, religions, diverse cultures, functioning organizations, and creatures native to different parts of the realm.

Even if *Dungeons & Dragons*' rules can be applied to variety of settings, some of them would require to make modifications to some extent; for example, TTRPGs set in modern times. There are systems created for urban fantasy settings, one of such being *The Monster of the Week*. As the name suggested, the system is set to remind players their

²⁰ Andrew J. Young, Justin McElroy, *Four Sherlock Holmes and a Vampire (Who Is Also One of the Aforementioned Sherlock Holmes)* (itch.io, 2018).

²¹ Griffin McElroy at al., *The Dadlands* (The McElroy Family, 2019).

²² J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004).

²³ David M. Ewald, *Of Dice and Men: The Story of Dungeons & Dragons and The People Who Play It*. (New York: Scribner, 2013)

favourite monster-of-the-week show, like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,²⁴ *Supernatural*²⁵ or *Twin Peaks*.²⁶ The story usually takes place in real life cities or fictional cities set in real states, but with the addition of fantastical aspect; this can include supernatural races, such as vampires or werewolves, or the involvement of magic in different forms. *Fate* system could also be used in this context, as well as in a sci-fi superhero campaign. In case of re-enactment of Wild West setting, with or without supernatural elements, *Urban Shadows* is one of the recommended rule systems. *Dadlands* is one of systems used specifically for one shot campaigns and is directly tied to a setting of parody of postapocalyptic world. However, *Oh, Dang! Bigfoot Stole My Car With My Friend's Birthday Present Inside* is not setting specific, it only affects the genre, which is a parodical comedy.

3.2 Archetypal Characters

TTRPG-playing communities tend to divide characters based on their archetypes. Archetype describes a prototypical and very specific concept of a character and works with the expectation character based on it will share the exact features of the concept. For example, *TAZ: Balance* character Magnus Burnside fits the archetype of hero; he is a brave warrior standing up for the weak. He does eventually break the archetype, but from his backstory of a 'folk hero'²⁷ he meets the requirements of the hero archetype. It is a common occurrence too; characters begin as an archetype and then they are slowly shaped by the story and develop into fully realised creations. Or on the contrary, they set on their adventure as a unique individual but are being categorised into set of their basic traits; they become stereotypical characters, or are taken as such. Another *TAZ: Balance* character Merle Highchurch is a dwarven cleric. Clerics are expected to be supporting healers, but Merle is referred to as unable to heal the party when needed, even though it is mostly taken as a humour, he never really fits the archetypal cleric class, but is suitable for the stereotypical 'grumpy dwarf' for his behaviour towards NPCs.

For this approach to archetypes distinction between archetypes and stereotypes in media is needed. The categorization used for the purpose of this thesis is presented by Mary Anna Kidd in her article *Archetypes, Stereotypes and Media Representation in a Multi-*

²⁴ Joss Whedon, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Mutant Enemy, 1997-2003).

²⁵ Eric Kripke, *Supernatural* (The WB, 2005–2006) (The CW, 2006–2020).

²⁶ Mark Frost and David Lynch, *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-1991) (Showtime, 2007).

²⁷ A Folk Hero is a background players can choose in the fifth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* for their characters, it helps to shape the character and assign attributes to them accordingly.

cultural Society.²⁸ Kidd's theory of distinction between stereotypes and archetypes originates in Walter Lippmann's (1922) study of stereotypes in society and Faber and Mayer's (2009) description of characteristics of archetypal characters, which was mostly influenced by Jung (2013) who first introduced archetypal patterns.

The archetypes used in TTRPGs are either taken from a popular media or have been intertwined with the stereotypes of characters culturally tied to certain genre. In TTRPGs, such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, both PCs and NPCs are a set of characteristics and stats on a paper to which the player or a GM adds a backstory and then weaves them into narration. Stats are a series of numbers used to add to or subtract from a dice roll. Some characteristics are closely tied with said stats. For example, if the character has the stat of charisma 16, they are considered charming, but if the number is 8, they are not. Other characteristics are more general. Amongst the more basic ones belongs their race, such as elf, human, hobbit or a dwarf. Another can be their class, which does not refer to their social status, but their occupation. The classes were expanded upon through the years, the main three being a rogue, a fighter or a wizard. This particular classification was taken from the TTRPG *Dungeons & Dragons*, therefore the features of characters resemble those from high fantasy literature.

Creating a playable archetype in TTRPG is connected to the process of gamification. When a new popular work of fiction appears with distinct characters, these characters can be divided into set of features, or in semantic terms²⁹ signs, together creating a code, that represents the character, this code can then be taken from its source material and each of the signs are given a value based on advantages and disadvantages this character can provide during game play; the code is also given a general name based on the original character. To illustrate, the *Lord of the Rings* narrative universe includes the character Aragorn; this is a capable fighter with both sword and bow; is knowledgeable about nature and survival; he is also shown to have learned certain type of magic relating to his craft. *Dungeons & Dragons* takes these skills as codes, which together create a code, a playable class a player can chose to portray, when deciding on playing warrior using both long and short ranged weapons, who knows a way around forest and has some knowledge

²⁸ Mary Anna Kidd, "Archetypes, Stereotypes and Media Representation in a Multi-cultural Society" *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 236 (2016): 25-28.

²⁹ Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Indiana University Press, 1979). 26-28.

about spellcasting. This code is named after the original character, but in a more general manner; in Aragorn's case, a Ranger, for Aragorn was known also as one of the Rangers of the North.

The world of TTRPGs takes on the archetypes of the narrative worlds the campaigns are based on, but many more developed systems surpassed their literary or audio-visual ancestors. *Dungeons & Dragons* races and classes were increasing with every edition, and each of them became both archetypal and often stereotypical over the years. The fifth edition now have races such as Tieflings, that is usually viewed as being discriminated, because their image is that of half-demons. Goliaths, who are a half-giant and mostly angry all the time, that is why a goliath character is usually connected with the class of barbarian, which can use rage as their advantage, but for the fair character balance, having strength as their strong trait, they have weakness in the form of intellect; their intelligence or wisdom stats are usually low and therefore they are not considered very bright. With more and more sourcebooks,³⁰ new possibilities for race variants arisen, these are called 'subraces'. For example, player can choose a different type of an elf; High Elf is viewed as proud and egoistic, unlike Wood Elves who are down-to-earth and most likely druids, or Dark Elves, who were considered to be evil in previous instalment. Evil could be considered both as a fundamental archetype of villain or partly an alignment, which is another one of statistics used to categorise characters. It is a scale from Good to Evil and from Lawful to Chaotic. It is expected that once it is established under which category characters fall, they will not deviate from it, unless they have a narrative reason for such an action, for example crisis of faith or they are confronted with a decision making them completely change character. In the table below Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox explain the specific alignments on examples.

³⁰ Books expanding the lore of the TTRPG's world. It brings players and GMs more possibilities for character creation, adds new magical items, spells and many more.

	Lawful	Neutral	Chaotic
Good	<u>Lawful Good:</u> "Crusader. . . Combines honor and compassion."	<u>Neutral Good:</u> "Benefactor. . . True good. Doing what is good without bias toward or against order."	<u>Chaotic Good:</u> "Rebel. . . Combines a good heart with a free spirit."
Neutral	<u>Lawful Neutral:</u> "Judge. . . True lawful. Reliable and honorable without being a zealot."	<u>Neutral Neutral:</u> "Undecided. . . True neutral. Act naturally, without prejudice or compulsion."	<u>Chaotic Neutral:</u> "Free Spirit. . . True Chaotic. True freedom from both society's restrictions and from a do-gooder's zeal."
Evil	<u>Lawful Evil:</u> "Dominator. . . Methodical, intentional, and frequently successful evil."	<u>Neutral Evil:</u> "Malefactor. . . True evil. Pure evil without honor and without variation."	<u>Chaotic Evil:</u> "Destroyer. . . Represents the Destruction not only of beauty and life but on the order on which beauty and life depend."

1. Jon Cogburn, Mark Silcox, *Dungeons and Dragons and Philosophy: Raiding the Temple of Wisdom* (Open Court Pub., 2012) 30.

These alignments are never used in *TAZ*, for the hosts of the podcast mentioned on several occasions that such a distinction does not fit the characters and would only restrict them, when making decisions for the character. Their characters however slowly developed their own archetype.

Monster of the Week does not use class as character typology, but refers to PCs as hunters and provides 'hunter types' as their background and each of them could be considered an archetype; for example, there is a hunter type called The Spooky, which is a character able to use supernatural powers for an unknown price. The handbook even provides Sam Winchester from the *Supernatural* and Willow from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as relevant representatives for this archetype. If a player chose The Spooky as their character, it is to be expected, that the price of their powers would come up sooner or later in the narrative. GM can also use their abilities to hint a storyline connected information to set-up later confrontations. If players chose their classes in *Dungeons & Dragons* or hunter types in

Monster of the Week their main concern is whether they lean into the archetype or go against it. On the other hand, there are one shot systems, that directly work with characters as archetypes and rely on their accurate portrayal. One such game is *Four Sherlock Holmes and a Vampire (Who Is Also One of the Aforementioned Sherlock Holmes)*. This TTRPG directly requires the player to choose a Sherlock Holmes adaptation and act as him specifically for the duration of the game; for reference, in the *TAZ: Elementary*³¹ one shot Travis McElroy plays the character of Sherlock Holmes from the 2009 movie by the same name³², with Robert Downey Jr. as the protagonist, and therefore must embody him with all his noticeable traits.

3.3 Actions and Moves

Each system uses its own definitions and descriptions of the rule-based possibilities provided for the characters to use when interaction with the narrative world. *Dungeons & Dragons* uses skill-checks, that allow the players to decide how to affect the story and with usage of those skills and a dice roll resolve whether the effect will positive or negative. For example, the PCs walk into a room and the GM is describing how it looks (it could be an office with a desk, a chair, few old-looking cabinets and a broken window) and the players decide they want to know, if they can notice anything specific (like what happened to the window); the GM tells the players to roll for a skill called perception, if the character is proficient in the skill (both literally and in terms of the rules), they roll a twenty-sided die and add a number modifier connected to the skill of perception (if their perception is good the number is over a zero, if not, it is usually below a zero), after the role the GM decides if the number rolled (with the added modifier) is sufficient to pass a number limit required to succeed in the skill check. Sufficient skill check means the PC gains additional information about the room (if the room was broken from the inside or if somebody used it to get in). Failed skill check does not reveal any new information. In the exact case of rolling a ‘natural twenty’ or ‘natural one’ the GM can decide to enhance the success or fail, because these are the two extremes of the possible rolls. The effect of this in narration is limiting the PCs to definite numbers of moves they can take and smooth the process of characters deciding how they will behave. It also takes the initiative from the players and GM alike to decide if the move has a positive outcome or

³¹ “Elementary” *The Adventure Zone* (Maximum Fun, 4 February 2018).

³² Guy Ritchie, *Sherlock Holmes* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2009).

not. Combat rules in *Dungeons & Dragons* add another set of narrative features, because the rulebooks name the ‘attacks’ based on what they help to achieve or what weapon they use. Combat is turn based; every PC and the enemies get an action in order of their ‘initiative’, a roll which decides who acts first, narratively one whole turn should equal six seconds all together, which means, even though the players one by one explain what their character is doing in the combat, the actions in fiction are happening simultaneously and in a span of approximately six seconds. This time period is important, because some of the spells or actions have a definite time limit. In PC’s turn the character can make one action, move up to range he has established in character sheet and a bonus action (or multiple, depends on the character’s class and level).

Powered by the Apocalypse systems are less combat focused, but they tend to use the system of moves that a character can use. Some moves are more general for all PCs and some are unique to certain types of characters. *Monster of the Week* has five stats called Charm, Cool, Sharp, Tough, and Weird. The moves are then connected to one of these stats. The general moves are Investigate a Mystery (uses Sharp as its relevant stat), Use Magic (Weird), Manipulate Someone (Charm), Act Under Pressure (Cool), Kick Some Ass (Tough), and more. Some of the hunter types allow to use different stats for the move, but it must be narratively relevant, or when levelling up the player can choose a move from a different type of hunter than he is. A hunter type unique move is for example a Panic Button (from The Mundane playbook), which lets the PC choose a route to escape and roll with the Sharp skill instead of just trying to Act Under Pressure. These moves are more of a character defying traits that can help to explain their in-fiction actions. This system also provides a mechanics for retiring a character, because unlike in *Dungeons & Dragons* it is usual that the characters leave or die and are substituted with a new one.

4 ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVE IN *THE ADVENTURE ZONE* PODCAST

First episode of *The Adventure Zone* (TAZ) was released on 18th of August 2014 on the *Maximum Fun* podcast network. It was supposed to be a special episode of *My Brother, My Brother and Me* (MBMBaM), which is another podcast hosted by Griffin, Justin and Travis McElroy. The concept of the MBMBaM show is in the hosts’ words: “An advice

podcast for the modern era.”³³ For the spin-off episode the three brothers invited their father Clint McElroy to join them. However, the one episode wasn’t enough, as the McElroys only got to create the player characters and set off to their first adventure. It soon became a separate series and due to its popularity, a stand-alone performative actual-play podcast. The first episode was later edited and re-released on 3rd of December 2014 as the official first episode of new actual-play podcast by the same name.

The podcast narrative takes serial form, which means the storyline is segmented and in the words of Jeremy Butler: “Serial expects us to make a specific and substantial narrative connections between one episode and the next.”³⁴ *The Adventure Zone* is divided into seasons by the creators themselves. Each season takes place in different setting and often uses other TTRPG system, then the season before it. The role of GM is transferred from one season to another and the PCs also change. Due to the nature of PCs being the main characters and the story revolving around their decisions, the narration is character-centric, the characters impact the story world around them and the world created by the GM is shaping the characters; without the PCs the story would not move forward, it is directly dependant on the character development. The causality of the narration is fully relatable to the main characters.

The usage of TTRPG systems leads to a definite structure repeated throughout the podcast. GM as a main narrator explains the set-up of the story; the PCs interact with the world; if a more challenging action is taken for the PCs, the players or the GM roll dice, after the result is decided, the GM interpret how it applies in the story world; the players can make suggestions and influence the interpretation. This is the recurring fundamental part of the narration. The GM could be considered the main narrator, since he is the one describing setting and has final word on the actions in the world, but since the story is dependent on the PCs, the players are elevated to the role of narrators on equal level; only they can decide if their character would take a certain action based on the character traits they decided on. The listener is told the story from the perspective of the PCs, but the GM also adds parts of the story as omnipresent narrator, these parts are epilogues of story arcs or teasers for the next arc.

³³ Griffin McElroy, Justin McElroy, Travis McElroy, *My Brother, My Brother and Me* (Independently released 2010-2011) (Maximum Fun, 2011 –).

³⁴ Jeremy G. Butler, Amanda D. Lotz, „The Television Serial“ *Television: Visual Storytelling and Screen Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018) 66-74.

In this analysis I will introduce the main and minor seasons and story arcs of *The Adventure Zone* and explain the specifications of what each of the arcs brought to the narrative, since the setting, the GM and therefore especially the style of narration changed. They do still share certain features and thus the world of *The Adventure Zone* functions as one narrative universe; the overview of which will be explained in the last part of this analysis. Event though the aspect of out-of-character personalities of the podcast are taken in account, it is not the focus of this thesis.

4.1 *The Adventure Zone: Balance*

The McElroys call *TAZ: Balance*³⁵ the first main season of The Adventure Zone podcast, it is then divided into story arcs. Each arc can be defined by its theme, the general setting of this whole season stays the same; it is one of slowly graduating high fantasy epic adventure. This campaign lasted three years, eight arcs and sixty-nine episodes, not counting the ongoing live shows, that are occasionally include the main PCs. It is also vital to mention that the first season called *TAZ: Balance* was the longest running story arc and defined the narration of the whole podcast. The McElroys also returned to *TAZ: Balance* setting in 2021 with the YouTube audio-visual mini-series titled *The Zone of Adventure: Imbalance*,³⁶ where they once again portrayed the same characters as in Merle, Magnus and Taako, with the difference of Griffin McElroy playing a previous NPC, an artificer gnome named Davenport, and Aabria Iyengar becoming the GM.

I have these micro-arcs, right? Like, The Murder on the Rockport Limited, that was a micro- that was an arc. That was one part of the storyline, and there's stuff that happens in there that affects the broader campaign.³⁷

TAZ: Balance has always two storylines: the main storyline, at first subtly hinted and after reveal becoming the main focus of the story, and the minor storylines of each arc. Every arc follows its own narrative structure with the set-up, where the PCs are sent to recover on their quest, where they are met with some sort of resistance which leads to the conflict and with-it a following conflict resolution. Main storyline is mostly expanded

³⁵ For the purpose of simplification, the seasons and arcs will be referred to with the official acronym for *The Adventure Zone* and the arc's given name.

³⁶ Aabria Iyengar, Griffin McElroy, Justin McElroy, Travis McElroy, Clint McElroy, *The Zone of Adventure: Imbalance* (The McElroy Family, YouTube, 2021).

³⁷ "The The Adventure Zone Zone" *The Adventure Zone* (Maximum Fun, 17 March 2016).

upon in ‘Lunar Interludes’, these episodes appear in between two arcs. The name is a variation on the name of the first three Lunar Interlude episodes titled *Moonlighting* from the end of the *Here There Be Gerblins* arc. These episodes also serve as a tool to level up characters. The levelling up is a mechanical way to describe character development and honour it in stats. With better stat modifiers and new skills, characters are more likely to succeed in tasks in further into a story, which shows that they have learned from their mistake. That being said, McElroys provide an explanation for why did their character became more proficient in certain skill.

The structure of individual episodes always follows the same structure.³⁸ It begins with the intro consisting of recapitulation of past events from previous episodes, although only using parts relevant to the story points happening in the current episode, working with listener expectations and building up the set-up for the episode. Then it smoothly transitions into Clint McElroy’s preview meta-commentary and a theme song. The theme song for *TAZ: Balance* is *Déjà vu*³⁹ by Mort Garson, with the exception of *The Stolen Century* arc, which features *The Unexplained*⁴⁰ by the same author as its theme song. The meta-commentary is also shown to be more intertwined with the main narrative storyline, when it is revealed after the finale, that the whole *TAZ: Balance* is a retelling of the story of the three main characters provided by an NPC called the Voidfish Fisher and its baby Fisher Junior, who is supposed to be providing the meta-commentary. After the intro the episode picks up the plot of the previous one and follows it till the end of the episode, when it not always brings closure to the minor storyline and the main storyline also remains unresolved. Outro is composed of *Maximum Fun* jingle and commercials; those are also inserted into the middle of the episode with one of the hosts of the podcast referencing the real time events surrounding the episode release. Apart from the story the hosts of the podcast are narrating, the podcast also inextricably contains discussions of rules, intertextual references to pop culture and humorous remarks, it is a comedy podcast after all. These jokes sometimes overlap to the in-character layer of the narrative. This structure is used in the following seasons as well with slight alterations of different theme song or intro altogether.

³⁸ With the exception of the first episode.

³⁹ Mort Garson, “Déjà vu” *Ataraxia* (RCA Records, 1975).

⁴⁰ Mort Garson, “The Unexplained” *Ataraxia* (RCA Records, 1975).

4.1.1 *Here There Be Gerblins*

The title of the arc is an allusion to McElroy's altering the story from a campaign book *Lost Mine of Phandelver*, this module served as an outline for first level characters. It consists of an easy plot serving as a learning experience for first-time players of *Dungeons & Dragons* and pre-rolled characters, which means the characters have prepared stats and only a few choices to build a character, that fits the player's imagination. By the previously mentioned alteration is meant the collective choice to call goblins gerblins. Griffin the GM also began developing a wider story, which would become the main storyline of the *TAZ: Balance*. As previously mentioned, the main characters *TAZ: Balance*, especially Taako and Merle, were based on the predetermined stats, creating a shell of a character, that is being expanded upon and later revised. Magnus Burnside is a human fighter played by Travis McElroy, he is described to be brave and strong, and the very embodiment of the fantasy warrior archetype. Merle Highchurch, portrayed by Clint McElroy, is a dwarven cleric. He is often jokingly criticised for not healing the other PCs when needed, for it is the stereotypical role of clerics as supporting characters. It becomes a trope in the series, even though it is an exaggeration for comic purposes. Taako is an elven wizard, who begins as an atypical archetype, since he is described as not being very clever, he does however know a variety of different spells and this characteristic is one of those which get revised later in the season. Another revision comes from Clint, when he decides to change the entity to which Merle is devoted to from Marthammor Duin to Pan. At the end of this arc, the characters are invited to join an organisation called The Bureau of Balance, which seeks to find powerful magical artifacts, referred to as Grand Relics, and destroy them. Joining the organisation gives the PCs a cause; it also shows signs of typical fantasy adventure narrative or fairy tale narrative, supported by the fact, that there are seven of these Grand Relics.

4.1.2 *Murder on the Rockport Limited!*

Murder on Rockport Limited first follows the three player characters Merle, Magnus and Taako on their way to the city of Rockport, where they are to retrieve a Grand Relic from a train. But they are forced to travel with the train and solve murder of one of the NPCs travelling with them. The theme of this arc closely resembles the narrative of a Whodunit? detective fiction. After boarding the train, the three PCs are introduced to a

small number of characters, amongst them are the elven staff of the Rockport Limited, engineer Hudson and assistant Jenkins, and the passengers: Graham the ‘Juicy’ Wizard, Jess the Beheaded, and Angus McDonald the Boy Detective. It is a closed company, since there are stranded on a train together, that is why when Jenkins is murdered, the main characters are left to figure out who from the rest of the people involved killed him. The process of investigation revolves around the PCs systematically questioning the NPCs and learning new pieces information about the characters. As is usual in detective fiction, Merle, Magnus and Taako represent the law, in a specific form, they are member of an organisation, who’s main goal is supposedly bringing peace to their world, which puts them in a place of authority. As usual in crime solving literature, the resolution is a bit unexpected and presents the listeners a plot twist.

4.1.3 *Petals to the Metal*

Petals to the Metal story consists of three episodes long combat sequence, but in altered version. The characters enter initiative in episode six of this arc and continue with the same turn-based action until the end of episode nine. Although the rules of *Dungeons & Dragons*’ combat apply, they are used for a wagon race. The three PCs are trying to outrun the other racers in a competition, even if their motivation of doing so is to get the relic from a racer called the Raven, which is convinced, she is invincible. They do have an NPC support of young halfling policewoman Hurley, who is romantically involved with the Raven. *Petals to the Metal* brought a tragic romance into the side storyline, because Hurley and Raven sacrifice themselves at the end of the arc and turn into a tree. It was criticised for supporting of the “bury your gays” trope, and therefore revisited at *TAZ: Balance* finale, where they appeared as dryads. Another trope, that has become constant in *TAZ* by this point is being saved by a strong competent woman, which is often stated by the hosts.

4.1.4 *The Crystal Kingdom*

The Crystal Kingdom provided listeners a story, where the characters are constantly reminded, that they are running out of time and meanwhile being pursued by unknown supernatural force, which suggests a hybridization of the sci-fi horror genre, since Merle, Magnus and Taako are sealed in a floating laboratory and confronted with numerous technological inventions, such as robots, but also a magical power in the form of one of the relics, the Philosopher's Stone, gradually crystalizing everything. The supernatural

power is shown to be a hunter for the goddess of death, a grim reaper named Kravitz, who becomes a love interest of Taako. This high-technology enclosed setting with the uncertainty of what is pursuing the characters is typical for space horror genre. Even with this setting, the narration never undergoes a transition from comedy. On the other hand, audience is provided with unfolding of more details of the main storyline. *The Crystal Kingdom* is expanding the narrative world by introducing the lore of how their planar system works and strongly hints the final antagonist of the season.

4.1.5 *The Eleventh Hour*

The title of this arc is connected to the one hour from eleven am to high noon, the PCs spent over and over again in a town called Refuge, which is stuck in a time loop and is separated from the rest of the world by a bubble. Forcing the characters to relive the same events in loops leads to repetitions, which are avoided by skipping the sequences, where the PCs figured out what to do; for example, convincing the deputy of local sheriff named Roswell, that they came to help and do not need to be supervised. The usage of a time loop in a singular location predicts the exploration of closed of story space and a way to interact with the NPCs that remain stoic due to the fact they are reliving the same events all the time; the PCs are however learning new information about them. Consistent re-enactments of repeating narration are required from the GM, which is achieved by omitting some of the story elements.

4.1.6 *The Suffering Game*

This story arc is copying the narrative structures of various television game shows; they represent the tests antic heroes are supposed to solve to succeed in their quest, in this case to find an important relic. As the title suggest the setting of this arc is a game show, one that lets PCs sacrifice what they hold dear. Apart from battle scenes, the tasks for the characters mostly require them to give up physical or intangible possessions, by which the listener learns more about the characters past and motivations. Magnus gives up the memories of his arch nemesis Governor Kalen only ever mentioned as a part of his backstory, losing a major part of his personality. Kalen's fate is never openly discussed again, because he does not appear as an active NPC in the podcast. Merle is forced to give up his eye and an axe fighting proficiency, which is resolved by introducing a memory of how he learned this skill and that memory being taken away. Taako also loses some of his skills, namely an athletic skill and his 'elven beauty', which is explained to

be an unnatural glimmer making him as an elf more alluring to others. These losses provide a more detailed view of the characters' personalities. It is the ending of *The Suffering* game, where *TAZ: Balance* main plot structure reaches its climax, because the characters discover what has been hidden from them and finally see the face of their enemy. It also unveils the anticipated twist of The Bureau of Balance not being the upfront fundamentally good organisation it was presented as, which was discussed in and out of character due to the hosts reacting to audience theories.

4.1.7 *The Stolen Century*

Most of *TAZ: Balance* is told in chronological order, with the exceptions of flashbacks, which are used to provide additional information about the characters' motivations, but *The Stolen Century* arc serves as a prequel to the story of *TAZ: Balance*, because in-game story-wise it predates the events of *Here There Be Gerblins*. It is referencing a hundred of years that the three main characters forgot they lived through. The arc is used as a story bridge between the revelations of the *Lunar Interlude* episodes at the end of *The Suffering Game* and the *Story and Song* finale, because it further explains the past of the characters and gives context for the final battle with the main antagonist, the Hunger.

The Stolen Century also uses different game system. The system name is also *The Stolen Century* and was devised specifically for this arc by Griffin McElroy. The rules are in many ways similar to many *Powered by the Apocalypse* games. Players roll two six-sided dice instead of the *Dungeons & Dragons*' twenty-sided one. Since the events of the previous arcs are set and the goal of this arc is to provide background, the collaborative storytelling moves from the TTRPG rules to the discussion about characters motivations. This is reflected by the fact, that the players only roll the dice, when the PCs decide to do something challenging for their character. As Griffin McElroy explains:

Most of the time we're just gonna be like having a conversation about what your characters do over this journey. It's only when you say that you're doing something that could be remotely challenging that you will roll.⁴¹

The three stats used for this system are Body, Mind and Heart, which reflect the physical capabilities, intellectual challenges and social skills. The PCs are also rewarded with experience points, bonds and assets, which they can use in the narrative or keep to the

⁴¹ "The Stolen Century: Chapter One" *The Adventure Zone* (Maximum Fun, 13 April 2017).

finale, where it provides an advantage against their enemy. The players spent the experience points on levelling up the characters for the finale, adding to their stats to make their characters more skilled in combat. Asset in this case is an abstract concept of a thing the players can use when they need to succeed but their roll is not high enough, they have to narratively explain what this asset is and how it is going to help them. Bonds are used in the finale to call upon NPCs to help them in the final battle. Last episode of *The Stolen Century* does not follow the established structure and features retelling of past events and flashback recordings, that serve the purpose of narrative continuity.

4.1.8 *Story and Song*

After the *The Stolen Century* the story directly follows the events of the lunar interlude from the end of *The Suffering Game*. *Story and Song* arc combines the rules of *Dungeons & Dragons* and the consequences of *The Stolen Century*. It also adds new tactic for the bond rolls, when the PCs are summoning NPCs to assist them in final fight. The bond rolls are done by rolling a ten-sided die and the players had to roll under the number of bonds they collected during the *The Stolen Century* arc. It is used as a gamification of the connections the PCs made with other characters during the campaign. The purpose is to tie the side storylines and provide listeners interconnectivity between the separate arcs of the story. The final arc is where all the past storylines meet and are brought to the final resolution. The epilogue in the last episode is conducted only in forms of dialogues between the GM and a character involved in the scene. This way the fate of the characters is decided by their players as well as GM who serves the purpose of setting the characters choice into context. *Story and Song*'s name is a direct reference of events in the finale, specifically the story of *TAZ: Balance* being broadcasted by the Voidfish with a song from another NPC, a bard named Johann, bringing his story to a close as well.

4.2 *The Adventure Zone: Commitment*

TAZ: Commitment was first of the minor campaigns, that followed *TAZ: Balance*. The 'era of experimental arcs' was meant to provide fans of the show possibilities in which *TAZ* could develop. *TAZ: Commitment*'s main focus are superheroes. The TTRPG system used is called Fate. The campaign was only four episodes long and lasted from November to December 2017. This mini-campaign was the first to feature an official set-up

episode,⁴² which introduced the listener to the narrative world of this season and served as a *Fate* system rule overview.

The characters of Nadiya Jones (Travis McElroy), Remy (Griffin McElroy), with the superhero name Springheel, and Irene Baker (Justin McElroy), who is also a thunder goddess Kardala, are recruited into the Do Good Fellowship and given superhuman abilities to fight crime in the name of the organisation. The story follows classical superhero comic genre tropes of modern era. The PCs are the very definition of heroes, their motivation is to “do good” and save the world. They encounter a small variety of villains they have to defeat. And in epilogue sequence are the listeners confronted with the possibility that the cause the heroes are following may be working against them.

4.3 The Adventure Zone: Amnesty

TAZ: Amnesty was a minor campaign consisting of five and one extra set-up episode, but then became the second major campaign of *The Adventure Zone* podcast, because it became popular amongst the listeners and the McElroys decided to expand on the narrative. The story is set in the fictional town of Kepler in West Virginia. The story sets-off in realistic small town but it is shortly discovered, that the town is connected to another magical world named Sylvain. The PCs are united under the same goal: to protect the town of Kepler and the secret of Sylvain. For this purpose, they join the Pine Guard, a small group of people, who pledge themselves to defend the two worlds (Earth and Sylvain). *TAZ: Amnesty* has four main PCs, because Clint McElroy switched from one PC to another before the last arc of the season. His first character is Edmund Kelly Chicane, but he calls himself Ned, or variety of fake names, since his background is one of a thief (handbook of ‘The Crooked’), specifically a burglar, and it is implied he had to run away from law a lot in his younger days. He owns and runs a museum of cryptids and a tourist trap named The Cryptonomica, he was given by the previous owner Victoria. Ned is the first PC, who was killed off it the in *TAZ* and was replaced by Arlo Thacker for the last arc of the story. Thacker first appeared as an NPC in episode twelve⁴³ of *TAZ: Amnesty*, and was previously mentioned in episode eight⁴⁴, but as a character he was

⁴² The first episode of *TAZ: Balance* could be considered set-up episodes, but because of the nature of it not intentionally being a set up episode, but the hosts own introduction into TTRPG and the fact, that it was meant to be the only spin-off episode, excludes it.

⁴³ “Amnesty: Episode 12” *The Adventure Zone* (Maximum Fun, 12 July 2018).

⁴⁴ “Amnesty: Episode 8” *The Adventure Zone* (Maximum Fun, 2 May 2018).

possessed by Quell, which is one of the main villains of the story, making his awakening the trans state an acceptable transition to PC, it also paved a way for his connection to Quell's power reasonable story-wise.

Travis McElroy plays a young woman by the name Aubrey Little. She is introduced as a stage magician, who, without knowing it, has actual magical powers. She discovers those with in the first episode (after the set-up episode). By MotW rules, Aubrey is a 'Spell-Slinger', meaning the player can take moves that allow the character to use powers beyond usual human limitations, for example to create flame out of nowhere. Her abilities are circled around fire at first, because she as a magician was used to making fake flame-based tricks, even her stage name was 'The Lady Flame'. She has a white rabbit she named Dr. Harris Bonkers, which plays a minor role throughout the campaign. On the other hand, Aubrey's character has a major influence on the plot, being the connection to Sylvain power and thus literal connection between the storyline of fight with the enemies coming to Kepler, trying to encourage war between Earth and Sylvain, and Sylvain's struggle to survive, because of her magical element being connected to Sylvain. In an episode of TTAZZ Travis McElroy describes the necessity to justify supernatural elements of his character Aubrey, because the more real-life setting and a character who was in fact mundane discovering she has magical powers forced him to.

Because we played in this more like grounded world, I really felt that it was important to justify her being able to do stuff. And so I always tried to time it with, you know, leveling up rather than just like, 'Uh, yeah, now she can shoot lightning!' Or more just looking at the Use Magic. I didn't wanna just be like, yeah, she's just gonna make a portal, a thing she's never done in her entire life So it became more of a narrative thing to figure out how to make that work?⁴⁵

Justin McElroy's character is Duck Newton, 'Duck' being a nickname he uses instead of his real name 'Wayne', which is only revealed in the season finale. As an archetypical background, Duck is a 'Chosen One', but he is chosen by a specific entity, later revealed to be an alien woman Minerva. This decision was discussed in the set-up episode, for Griffin as a GM did not want to let anyone take on the chosen playbook, since it would suggest the person would be the main character and the other two players would take on the roles of sidekicks. It was then decided, that Duck was chosen by a person for a goal

⁴⁵ "The The Adventure Zone Zone: Amnesty Wrap-Up!" *The Adventure Zone* (Maximum Fun, 24 October 2019).

he is supposed to fulfil. This aligns with the handbook mechanic of the chosen background, since the chosen one has to have a certain destiny. Duck's destiny is resolved at the final battle, making him and Aubrey the two characters who undergo the whole 'hero's journey'.⁴⁶ Their call to adventure happens simultaneously, when they join the Pine Guard. They have a mentor who trains them for their destiny, which is taken literally in Duck's case, because of the nature of The Chosen One archetype. And both resolve their goal in the finale.

Player characters of TAZ: Amnesty share certain characteristics, for they are all human and are not willing to take lives unless absolutely necessary. Their reasons for this behaviour vary. Ned is said to be a coward, which is depicted by scenes, where he lets Duck fight, while he creates more of a distraction or a support. It is pivotal in Ned's character development, when he decides to take a bullet for NPC named Dani, who previously became a girlfriend of Aubrey. Most of the characters motivations are revealed retrospectively. *TAZ: Amnesty* took the use of flashbacks from *The Eleventh Hour* arc of *TAZ: Balance* and made it a constant in the structure of an arc in the season. The season could be divided into minor story arcs, in which the characters discover a new threat in the form of a monster, prepare the hunt by collecting information about the monster, and engage in battle with the threat. While fighting the monster, in the most defining moments of the fight, characters are confronted with flashbacks, that reveal more information about their background. The character development is given more context this way and the players get to decide defining character traits. The main storyline follows similar evolution as in *TAZ: Balance*, but in span of less episodes and with the difference of hints being distributed more systematically until the final conflict and resolution.

The Monster of the Week system used for this story is requiring the players to roll two six-sided dice and based on the roll there are three possible resolution that impact the narration. If the roll is six or bellow, it does not mean the character fails in their action, but rather that based on the action taken an obstacle will appear immediately or later in the story. It is often referenced as a bad thing, that will happen sooner or later. If the roll is seven to nine, it means a mixed success. This resolution is most narratively interesting, because the GM and the player has to discuss if that means that the PC will succeed but

⁴⁶ See Joseph Campbell, *Hero With A Thousand Faces* (Princeton University Press, 1949). 28.

will have to sacrifice something in return or if the action will have an unexpected outcome or side-effect. On ten plus roll, the action taken will succeed completely. The concept of luck is also presented, when the player can use luck point to succeed completely, which is also reflected in narrative. For example, in episode nineteen, when Ned is failing to evade a goat-man enemy and Clint out-of-character decides to use luck point and after a brief discussion it is decided that means a jetpack which they used in previous episodes but got lost appears and hits the goat-man, and thus saves Ned.

Griffin: And then something super lucky happens. You hear something moving around in the brush, and you hear this noise like shhh and it's getting louder and louder and right when this goatman is about to collide with you, you see... the jetpack. You see the Flymaster that has been sort of blasting around Kepler for the last two days since you lost it following your stunt. It flies into the clearing and just collides with the goat man, knocking him off of his feet and out of this path of collision towards you, and finally gives up the ghost and just kind of lands at your feet, finally dormant as you get that nail slid out of the gun and get it functioning again.⁴⁷

4.4 *The Adventure Zone: Dust*

TAZ: Dust Followed the fate of *TAZ: Amnesty* with four and a set-up episode and later being revived for another four episodes, with its own set-up episode. The difference was, that in terms of *TAZ: Dust*, it is being considered two separate seasons. The story is set in urban fantasy version of wild west. Each season takes place in different city and even the PCs change, with the exception of one: Augustus Parsons, a ghost portrayed by Justin McElroy. Clint McElroy first played Gandy Dancer, a young woman with the character archetype of Wizard, but switched to Callum the Hunter. Griffin McElroy was Errol Ryehouse, a werewolf stuck in mid transformation due to curing lycanthropy, that went wrong, and Indrid Cold for the second season. Indrid actually already appeared in *TAZ: Amnesty* as an NPC, that meant the listeners, who heard it knew he is a mothman. For this purpose, it had to be explained, *TAZ: Dust* events precede those of *TAZ: Amnesty*, and Indrid does not have his mothman visage due to him being previously captured and stripped of power of transformation. One more addition to season two was guest host Erika Ishii as Lulu, a young woman tainted by Oni demon.

⁴⁷ "Amnesty: Episode 19" *The Adventure Zone* (Maximum Fun, 6 December 2018).

The system used is *Urban Shadows*, which main narrative feature is the concept of debts and factions. Debts create connections between characters, give them a reason to act on someone's behalf or help them get what they want. It helps to form a character, because the debts have to have narrative reason. For illustration, Gandy owed Augustus one debt for conducting an investigation for him without results. This allows Augustus to use this debt when he needs Dandy to do something she would not under usual circumstances not agreed to. Debts can be contracted between PC and PC, PC and NPC, or even PC and factions or organisations. Augustus owed the Church for taking care of his daughter after his passing. Faction system is a way to divide the supernatural creatures into separate categories based on their abilities. Although allowed by the rules, it is never narratively used as reason for rivalry in *TAZ: Dust*.

4.5 *The Adventure Zone: Graduation*

TAZ: Graduation took inspiration from classical fairy tales and leaned into the “hero fighting a villain” trope. The system of the season is *Dungeons & Dragons*. In this story world, the heroes and villains are trained to fight each other at the Hieronymous Wigenstaff's School for Heroism and Villainy. This way the antagonist role is taken from the characters called villains in this story, since even one of the PCs Sir Fitzroy Maplecourt (Griffin McElroy) is at certain point in the story training to be a villain. Argo Keene (Argo Keene) on the other hand, is studying to be a sidekick, while portraying the archetype of such. He does have an agenda of his own, but primarily cares for his friends' wellbeing. The third PC of *TAZ: Graduation* is Firbolg (Justin McElroy), which is both his name and a race; and its distinctive features are his slow talking and incompetence to comprehend accounting. This sets specific flaws that the character will be improving from early on, making the character development more obvious to the listener. Both the PCs' and NPCs' defining features are their archetypes, and whether they belong to one or break away from the stigma of established characterization. Most of the characters break away from their archetype; Rainer, an NPC, who is considered a villain and is of necromancer class, which is considered to be a negative character trait, proves to be a positive character and a helpful guidance for the PCs. One more distinction of this season is its named episodes, which are used to sum up events from the episode as well as humorously reference pop culture.

4.6 *The Adventure Zone: Ethersea*

TAZ: Ethersea features a five-episode long prologue as a set-up for the season. During this prologue *The Quiet Year*⁴⁸ TTRPG is played. This system is unusual TTRPG in comparison with previously mentioned systems; instead of rolling dice, the players draw cards and answer questions about the world while drawing the conclusions of their answers on a map they are creating. In the standard rules the game does not have a GM, but to align with the use for creating a setting for further narration, Griffin McElroy posed as the main narrator. The game distinguishes four seasons in a year the players take care of the fate of a small society; Griffin used the end of one season as a milestone, where he revealed more about the threat forcing their society to flee life on land and build a city beneath the waves. What followed was standard hero-centric storytelling with altered version of *Dungeons & Dragons*, since they used their own races and modified classes. A new race used for a PC was called Brinarr, and it is supposed to be a new form of life created from the formation of ethereal ghosts in coral body. This race is played by Clint McElroy, with the character Zoox. The season also features Travis McElroy as bard Devo la Main and Justin McElroy as a monk woman Amber Gris, who is the only character from this arc following the class archetype, because both Devo and Zoox take untraditional approach to their classes.

A new approach *TAZ: Ethersea* brought to the narrative was usage of system of random encounters for creation of minor story plots. It became a standard feature in the structure of each story arc within the story of this season of *TAZ: Ethersea*.⁴⁹ The random encounter is exercised each time the PCs leave in their ship for undersea adventure; right after the set-up of each mini-arc; one of the players then rolls a hundred-sided die and based on the result the GM decides what twist should he put in the story. The rolls in this campaign were usually low, which lead to more catastrophic occurrences. Most of the results were introduced instantaneously; for example, by discovering a deposit of valuable spice, which on further inspection and interaction with it was shown to be growing on the back of a dangerous giant turtle. One instance was a roll of natural one, which lead to return of the Sallow; an illness first introduced in the prologue episodes. The PCs were also responsible for it and therefore it became the plot of the next story arc.

⁴⁸ Avery Alder, *The Quiet Year* (Buried Without Ceremony, 2013).

⁴⁹ It is specifically stated in the show, that this is the first season of *TAZ: Ethersea* and is most likely to be renewed for season two on later date.

4.7 *The Adventure Zone: Steeplechase*

TAZ: Steeplechase campaign is set in a theme park by the same name. The entirety of the story takes place inside the walls of the theme park, which is described to be multi-layered and closed off. In fiction, Steeplechase is owned by the Devon family who started to build up the park on their land in rural Georgia and when they reached the limits of their land they started to build upward, or as Justin McElroy himself describes it:

And when they ran out of land, they went the only direction they could: up.⁵⁰

The premise of the season is based on stereotypical heist stories, such as perhaps the most influential heist 2001 movie *Ocean's Eleven*,⁵¹ which has not been the first or critically most acclaimed of its genre but has immensely popularized the trope. Daryl Lee in his book *The Heist Film: Stealing with Style*⁵² (2014) states, that the nostalgia of previous heist films and the fact that it was already a remake only added to the movie's attractiveness. Perhaps the same can be said about the indirect inspiration for *TAZ: Steeplechase*. However, the narrative world description, meaning it taking place in arcade-like theme park crawling with literal factions of criminals, and TTRPG system chosen to provide a sort of reins for collective narration shows the influence of one more genre, that being science fiction. Which would also fit the description because of the fact, that it is supposedly set in near future. Justin McElroy unveils during the setup episode, that it could be up to two hundred years from the year 2022, in which *TAZ: Steeplechase* started airing.

I tell you a little bit about this, this world. Um, it is set in the future, um, not like a thousand years, maybe couple hundred from now.⁵³

Krystal with a K, one of the characters, who appears at the beginning of each episode, from episode one onward, serves as a in fiction recapitulation of past events of this season. She also states in previously mentioned episode one, that celebrations of '150 years of Dreaming festivities' are happening at the start of the season, meaning, that it could further specify the date to be close to 2170's. She is both indirectly and directly involved with the narrative, being both one of the narrators and character in the world,

⁵⁰ "Setup – The Adventure Zone: Steeplechase" *The Adventure Zone* (Maximum Fun, 29 September 2022).

⁵¹ Steven Soderbergh, *Ocean's Eleven* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2001).

⁵² Daryl Lee, *The Heist Film: Stealing with Style* (Columbia University Press, 2014).

⁵³ "Setup – The Adventure Zone: Steeplechase" *The Adventure Zone* (Maximum Fun, 29 September 2022).

NPC to be precise. The character is portrayed by Autumn Seavey Hicks. As for whether the character will have more impact on the story remains unknown, since as of April 2023 the season is still in making.

4.8 One Shot Campaigns and Live Shows

Unlike the main and minor campaigns, one shots and live shows have episodic type of narration. The plot is resolved within a single episode. Live shows, that are set in the same narrative universe as any of the main campaigns tend to reference their resolved plot points and expand the story. The live shows also add the audience as another active participant in the narration. Not all of the live shows are considered canonical and thus official part of the narrative. One shot campaigns are used either for the bonus content on *Maximum Fun* network or for the live shows. Some of the more popular one shot get as it was with *TAZ: Dadlands*. There are also campaigns such as *TAZ: Elementary*, that consist of two episodes or *TAZ: (K)nights*, which has three episodes all together. Live shows and bonus content episodes tend to have one storyline, that is concluded by the end of the episode, or the miniseries.

The The Adventure Zone Zone (TTAZZ) is also a part of the podcast's narrative, specifically a narrative of a story arc the episode references, although these episodes are conceived as a different format. In *TTAZZ* the McElroys answer questions from listeners about characters and the world of appropriate *TAZ* season. *TTAZZ* first episode was released in 2016 after it was jokingly mentioned on the show and fans of the show demanded to get some of their question answered. It serves as a paratext (Gray, 2010) to the show, because the authors of the podcast themselves answer the questions about the characters or narrative and further broaden the story told. These episodes are released every year at real time event called the *MaxFunDrive*, when the content creators for the *Maximum Fun* network produce bonus content and try to get people to join the network as paying donors. They are also recorded after major campaign finale to reveal additional information about unresolved storylines.

4.9 The Adventure Zone as a Narrative Universe

The Adventure Zone as a whole creates separates stories told in the span of seasons, but they have more than the hosts in common. Both within and all together they create an inconsistent narrative, referencing plot points or characters, both PCs and NPCs in

different story arc than their own. There are tropes created from one campaign that overlap into another. Characters that appear in more than one narrative world. Archetypal characters being created from their own PCs. This can be observed, when characters from the previous seasons are referenced and compared to PCs from other campaigns. These are linked to the distinctive traits of the characters. For example, *TAZ: Balance* PC Magnus has the reputation of being impulsive and protecting his close friends no matter what. Later characters of the same player (Travis McElroy) are visibly trying to break free of this stigma. Other players playing the warrior archetype in later campaigns also have problem of being confronted about the similarities or differences. It is bound to the characters being made to fill a certain role in a group.

I made Magnus because I wanted to fill a role in like, in traditional D&D you need a fighter, you need a caster, you need a healer.⁵⁴

PCs are always dynamic characters. They undergo a character development. Perhaps most obvious one can be seen on the pre-rolled characters of *TAZ: Balance*, which start of as prototypical examples of the characters' race and class. Justin McElroy states in *TTAZZ*,⁵⁵ that at the beginning of his story Taako was an unintelligent wizard, but by the end of *TAZ: Balance* he is a fully realized creation. Which is a process the characters undergo from the set-up, to building their characteristics, and finally, to breaking the archetype. The PCs are usually reduced to their catch phrases, as "Taako's good out here" or "Magnus rushes in." Which is a feature of comic book heroes.

Another common feature concerning PCs is the nature of discussions of whether actions of certain character correspond with what was established about them. When reacting to the situation presented by the GM, the players should take their character personalities into consideration and act accordingly. In some cases, when the reaction is different than the reaction of the player would be in given situation, the players use discussion to decide whether the player in question kept to the character or deviated from them, and if they deviated, why they did so. Sometimes this represents certain character growth. Here we have one of the examples, where Justin is trying to explain to the monster attacking his character Duck, the monsters should not linger on this earth and let go.

⁵⁴ "Setup Episode: Commitment" *The Adventure Zone* (Maximum Fun, 4 October 2017).

⁵⁵ "The The Adventure Zone Zone: Amnesty Wrap-Up!" *The Adventure Zone* (Maximum Fun, 24 October 2019).

Justin: I'm addressing the monster—

Duck: It's okay, you just gotta let go. I've been through this—a lot of um, monsters already, and you're holding onto your—the Earth and life and everything, and it's just—follow the light, man. Just go ahead and like, release, let go, man.⁵⁶

It is a nonsensical argument since the monster is not dying, but based on what Justin's character knows about the monsters attacking their town, he would naturally deduce the monster is just refusing to leave this world, even though Justin as a meta-narrator has more objective pieces of information. That is why Justin is defending his actions and says: "That's what Duck's reaction would be. That is in the—I am playing a role!"⁵⁷

These discussions could be considered as characters breaking the fourth wall, but there are actually more exact examples of this process, when the PCs directly address something from the out-of-character layer. This process is initiated by the in-fiction PCs who reference an object, person or an even from the out-of-fiction layer. For instance, Aubrey is telling an NPC she has just the right amount of money needed in-character and when the GM (Griffin McElroy) is remarking that it is too convenient, she says: "And Griffin can't prove otherwise."⁵⁸

Breaking of the fourth wall is used for comic purposes in *TAZ*. The distinction between character and player is often dependant on character voices and those are not always provided, which is often joked about in the podcast and even appears in a PC dialogue with the Hunger (a villain in *TAZ: Balance*).

Merle: You find joy. I've found joy, honest to God, getting to know you. I've found joy playing chess with you. I have enjoyed— I haven't enjoyed, you know, getting my ass killed, but I find joy in whatever I do. I don't always do things right, and I don't always do things smart, and I don't always do a character voice, [Griffin laughs] but whatever I do, I find joy in it. Because at the end of the day... that's all you got.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ "Amnesty: Episode 28" *The Adventure Zone* (Maximum Fun, 31 May 2019).

⁵⁷ "Amnesty: Episode 28" *The Adventure Zone* (Maximum Fun, 31 May 2019).

⁵⁸ "Amnesty: Episode 10" *The Adventure Zone* (Maximum Fun, 15 June 2018).

⁵⁹ "The Stolen Century: Chapter Four" *The Adventure Zone* (Maximum Fun, 18 May 2017).

Another instance of not using character voice led to creation of character, that became constant in multiple of *TAZ* seasons. The character is Clint the Plane Walking Janitor; the name is referencing, that Clint can potentially appear every time Clint McElroy forgets to use character voice. Clint is not only multiverse character in *TAZ*; *TAZ: Balance* introduced the character of Garfield the Deals Warlock, which trades with the PCs in the lunar interlude episodes. Later seasons created their own variant of Garfield; *TAZ: Amnesty* had Heathcliff, a giant artificer floating cat. *TAZ: Ethersea* had Felix the Catfish providing wares for the characters. And even *TAZ: Commitment* referenced a character named Garfield to be in head of financing.

Breaking of the fourth wall is not exclusive to PCs, the NPCs can also recreate the process by the same principle. Griffin as a GM in *TAZ: Balance* the *Murder on the Rockport Limited!* introduced a dangerous situation, a fire-crab, which was attacking the PCs. Towards the end of the battle Jess the Beheader NPC appeared and when commented upon her late arrival she answered “Sorry I, uh, I had a pretty bad initiative roll.”⁶⁰ Which is a reference to the *Dungeons & Dragons*’ mechanics of initiative roll, which decides the order of characters in turn-based combat.

Each episode of *TAZ* is edited in postproduction, to reach the usual footage of one hour, to add sound effects or to decide whether parts of the story fit the overall narration. The GM might be the one who has the last say about how the story is told, the decisions cannot be made without the players involved. Perhaps one of the most illustrative examples is the discussion on the decision to kill off a character.

This is a distinction between playing an RPG with your friends and playing an RPG as a method of storytelling, right? Griffin or any DM or GM is not going to unilaterally going to decide to kill one of our other creations. We are telling this story collaboratively, right? There’s moment-to-moment stuff that they will discover organically as they’re playing and some big stuff has happened that way! I mean, some gigantic stuff has happened that way. But if Griffin, or whoever, is gonna take a player off the table it is going to be a discussion beforehand.⁶¹

⁶⁰ “Murder on the Rockport Limited: Chapter Five” *The Adventure Zone* (Maximum Fun, 6 May 2015).

⁶¹ “The The Adventure Zone Zone: Amnesty Wrap-Up!” *The Adventure Zone* (Maximum Fun, 24 October 2019).

The out-of-character layer, as well as the themes of *TAZ* story arcs, rely on inspiration in other media and intertextuality. The players and GM often reference popular media and the themes resemble famous pieces of fiction. The intertextuality however went one step further and created inner intertextuality, when the players or characters refer to something, that has happened in the narrative universe of this podcast. For example, in the *TAZ: Amnesty* the hosts of the show discuss, that the local waterpark, H₂O That Was Fun, “got pretty Phandalin-ed”⁶², which means destroyed beyond recognition, and it is a reference to the town of Phandalin, which was burnt down to a black glass at the end of the first arc of *TAZ: Balance*.

The Adventure Zone, being a comedy podcast, uses the out-of-character layer to humorously comment on the in-game world. These jokes can relay to the in-game layer, changing the course of actions of some characters, renaming them, or even reinventing NPCs. The out-of-game commentary is inseparable from the in-fiction story, the two layers together create a narrative affected by all the contributors and the audience layer that is influencing the participants choices and for that reason having impact on the storytelling process. The three layers combining are indivisible in this podcast indicating the perfect example of collective storytelling in actual-play podcast.

5 ADAPTING ACTUAL-PLAY PODCAST INTO COMIC BOOK

To this date (2023) five of the arcs of *TAZ: Balance* were adapted as graphic novels by Clint, Griffin, Justin and Travis McElroy, with the illustrations by Carey Pietsch. The books follow the main story points of the season, but there had to be some changes in the adapting process. Some of the changes were made due to legal reasons, since names of spells or items used in the podcast are a property of the *Wizards of the Coast* company owning the *Dungeons & Dragons* narrative universe with the module the first arc *Here There Be Gerblins* was based on, therefore even the names of places and some of the characters had to be altered; the town of Phandalin becomes Haverdale or the name of the character Klaarg changes to G'nash in the books. The exposition narrated by the GM is represented visually and leaves only the modified dialogues, that are still holding the tone

⁶² “Amnesty: Episode 12” *The Adventure Zone* (Maximum Fun, 12 July 2018).

of the podcasts humour. With the addition of explanatory text boxes in the form of parchments, as represented in the picture bellow.



2. Clint McElroy, Griffin McElroy, Justin McElroy, Travis McElroy, Carey Pietsch, *The Adventure Zone: Murder on the Rockport Limited!* (First Second, 2019) 86.

The graphical novel series also gave a canonical face to Garfield the Deals Warlock, who’s description was up to this point intentionally left vague. The fandom of *The Adventure Zone* assumed he looked like ‘the orange lasagne cat’, referring to the comic cat Garfield, a character created by Jim Davis. Most of the fan-artists draw Garfield as this cat and therefore Carey Pietsch decided for a similar look.



3. Clint McElroy, Griffin McElroy, Justin McElroy, Travis McElroy, Carey Pietsch, *The Adventure Zone: Murder on the Rockport Limited!* (First Second, 2019). 23.

The form of storytelling is changed to episodic, since it takes events from one story arc and transfers it into a single book. The recapitulations provided by the podcast at the intro part of the podcast are therefore not necessary; it is however moved to a beginning of a new book⁶³ in an art form. In the picture bellow we can see the “Previously on The Adventure Zone” section of *The Adventure Zone: The Eleventh Hour*, it is placed in front of the first chapter and resembles a tapestry that is a key element of the story of this arc; it recapitulates all the important story points from the previous books.



4. Clint McElroy, Griffin McElroy, Justin McElroy, Travis McElroy, Carey Pietsch, “Previously on The Adventure Zone” *The Adventure Zone: The Eleventh Hour* (First Second, 2023)

The metafiction narrative has proven to be inseparable from the story of *The Adventure Zone*. As it is the defining feature of TTRPG forming fiction, the GM is added as a character to the book narrative. However, the role of the GM has been fictionalized and has become in-fiction meta-narrator. He appears inside the panels overlapping into the gutter space and communicates directly with the characters. His narrative function is reduced to commentary and as a representation of out-of-character story. He no longer leads exposition monologues, but rather dialogues with the main characters about the

⁶³ Starting with the second in the series *Murder on the Rockport Limited!*.

game system rules, which is an inseparable feature of the podcast and therefore had to be relayed to the graphic novel as well. In the following tier Griffin as the GM is correcting Magnus about not having the knowledge of the spell Sense Mechanism and therefore not being able to use it. He illustrates breaking the fourth wall as well as influencing the story world by his correction.



5. Clint McElroy, Griffin McElroy, Justin McElroy, Travis McElroy, Carey Pietsch, *The Adventure Zone: Here There Be Gerblins* (First Second, 2018) 203.

The novelisation of the podcast removes the audience layer from the immediate narrative; the listener participation is no longer reflected in the story as it develops. As a retribution, a section of the book is added. At the end of the novel stands the Fanart Gallery containing drawings submitted by the listeners. That being said, the three main layers of the actual-play podcast are being violated or changed, which is a sign of the adaptation into a new media and a proof that the Decicio's theory layered frames of TTRPGs are not a suitable theory for this specific transmedia narration, because it is no longer a TTRPG storytelling, but a retelling of the story told with TTRPG tools. Modification has to be made, whether a minor one on the scale of omitting side story lines or a major one – redeveloping the narratology from meta-narration to fully fictional world.

6 CONCLUSION

The thesis introduced the phenomenon of collective storytelling in actual-play podcast. Main purpose was to provide evidence of a style of narration, that has its foundation in gamification of several pieces of various fictional worlds, and yet is able to create story that develops from its intertextual references and initial inspiration into an independent narrative, a story of its own, the construction of which is the result of collaboration between the narrator of the exposition, the gamemaster (GM), and players, who are controlling the main characters, the player characters (PCs). The GM also takes the role of all the minor characters, the non-player characters (NPCs). These two roles together create a narrative in both out-of-character and in-character layer. Out-of-character they comment on the story world and describe the actions happening to the characters in the in-character layer, which is where the PCs and NPCs interact. In the context of actual-play podcast a third layer is introduced, an that is the layer of the listeners, who can leave an imprint on the story told by communicating with the hosts of the podcast via social media or directly as a live audience.

Different 'Table-Top Role-Playing Games' (TTRPG) systems were introduced and explained in relation to storytelling as a narration supporting tools. The main three tools are the 'setting', 'archetypal characters' and 'actions and moves.' Firstly, the game system is both defining and defined by the setting, a fictional world, in which the GM and the players decide to narrate their story in. Certain game systems are used for specific setting, for example *Dungeons & Dragons* for high fantasy and *Monster of the Week* for urban fantasy. Archetypal characters are second important feature of TTRPGs; both PCs and NPCs often either begin their journey as archetypal characters, being created as characters inspired by pop culture, it is done so for simplifications of the character, which then leaves space for character development; or they can be turned into archetypal characters by the way they are portrayed. TTRPGs also provide the narrators with actions and moves related to the characters background and stats on their character sheet, which is a chart with character's skills being numerically valued. Actions and moves help the players decide what in-game actions should they take based on the characters background and skillset. The fate of the PCs in actual-play podcasts is then decided by dice rolls with the application of actions and moves taken directly from the rules; they help to decide the course of action of the characters. All of these tools have to be discussed and agreed upon

between the players and the GM. In conclusion, TTRPG system adds narrative features and creates guideline for the storytelling process which is then conducted between GM and players by dialogue.

This thesis focused on the analysis of collective story telling of singular actual-play comedy podcast *The Adventure Zone* and systematically explored its story arcs. Each of the story arcs brought new features into the narrative, because the setting, the GM and the TTRPG system changed. The focalization of the story arcs is on the PCs, who modify the narrative world around them and on whom the impact of the GM's decisions fall. The podcast uses or omits different parts of the rules in TTRPG manuals depending on the story told. The podcast is proven to be a fitting example for the theory of narrative layers in TTRPG actual-play podcast, since it uses all three in-character, out-of-character and audience layers to full extent, sometimes even erasing the borders between the first two and thus breaking the fourth wall, which has become a constant in *The Adventure Zone* as one of the features of the show's humour.

This comedy aspect is transferred into *The Adventure Zone* graphic novel adaptations, while losing some of the aspects of collective storytelling, for it is only a retelling of the story. And yet, this proves there is a story of significance that split from its previous intertextual based origins and became a separate story. The archetypal characters grew beyond their type and became a new form of archetype, even if just in a span of the podcast narrative universe. While the intertextuality and source materials remain vital parts of any performative actual-play podcast, it is proven, that the story can develop beyond the original works it is inspired by. Gamification of said source material with the game system provides a narrative support, from which a new story is told letting the audience view not only the in-fiction story, but also the creative process behind it and, in a way, to become part of it.

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ANNOTATION

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Abstract

The inclusion of Table-Top Role-Playing Games (TTRPGs), such as the popular gaming system *Dungeons & Dragons*, into the modern-day pop-culture made an impact in the form of the growth of performative-gaming podcasts, which employ the TTRPG methods for plot development. The goal of this work is to explore formation of narrative by the means of RPG techniques. Moreover, the focus is put on analysing aspects of story being affected by a group of contributors rather than one creator. Furthermore, using the method of narratology and demonstrated on the audio-podcast *The Adventure Zone*, this thesis is distinguishing the specific lines of storytelling and improvisation, based on to what extent they affect the final story, as well as its structure. As a genre founded on the gamification process of popular literal or media works, it is important to also examine intertextuality of its content.

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Abstrakt

Důsledkem zařazení her na hrdiny (Table-Top Role-Playing Games – TTRPGs), jakými je například populární herní systém *Dungeons & Dragons*, do pop-kultury moderního světa, je nárůst performativně-herních podcastů, které využívají her na hrdiny jakožto kreativních metod k posouvání děje. Cílem této práce je zkoumat, jak se pomocí těchto herních technik tvoří narativ. Konkrétně se zaměřuje na aspekt, kde je příběh tvořen více než jedním tvůrcem. Pomocí analýzy auditivního díla *The Adventure Zone* z pohledu naratologie vydělují jednotlivé vrstvy vyprávění a improvizace, podle toho, do jaké míry ovlivňují finální děj, stejně jako i jeho strukturu. Jakožto žánr založený na procesu gamifikace populárních literárních i mediálních děl, je důležité prozkoumat i obsahovou intertextualitu.

RESUMÉ

Popularita her na hrdiny (Table-Top Role-Playing Games – TTRPG nebo TRPG) a fiktivní tvorby s nimi spojované stále narůstá. Je spojována s dostupností zdrojových materiálů pro tyto herní systémy, ale také s využitím TTRPG v populární kultuře, kupříkladu v seriálu *Stranger Things* (2015-), kde je vizuálně reprezentováno hraní TTRPG her, konkrétně *Dungeons & Dragons*, a je využívána terminologie spojována s tímto systémem.

Další z významných vlivů na popularitu TTRPG her jsou performativně-herní podcasty neboli ‚skutečně herní‘ (actual-play) podcasty, kde účinkující vypráví příběh pomocí vybraného TTRPG systému. Brendan Decicio ve své práci *The Layered Frames of Performed Tabletop: Actual-Play Podcasts and the Laminations of Media* tvrdí, že actual-play podcasty jsou většinou řazeny do dramatických žánrů, i když do nich zcela nezapadnou, jelikož obsahují také prvky dokumentu, fikce a „game-playe“ – tedy improvizované hry. Nejvíce tento žánr podcastů proslavila audio-vizuální online streamovaná show *Critical Role*, která vychází i ve mediální formě podcastu.

Tato práce se věnuje podcastu *The Adventure Zone (TAZ)*, jelikož vychází přímo v auditivní formě, jakožto actual-play podcast, ve kterém jeho čtyři tvůrci využívají TTRPG systému ke tvorbě kolektivního vyprávění. Při této skupinové tvorbě narativu je nutno distingovat mezi jednotlivými druhy vypravěčů. ‚Game Master‘ (GM), v české verzi překládaný jako Pán jeskyně,⁶⁴ je hlavním vypravěčem, který hráčům představuje fikční svět a situaci, ve které se jejich postavy nacházejí. Hráči jsou dalšími vypravěči, které ztvárňují postavy známé jako ‚Player Character‘ (PC), tedy hratelné postavy. PC postavy jsou protagonisty společně vytvářeného příběhu. ‚Non-Player Character‘ (NPC) je název pro postavy nehratelné, které ovládá GM.

Narativ v actual-play podcastech je poté vytvářen interakcí mezi GM a hráči mimo fikční svět (out-of-character), ti rozhodují, co se děje jejich postavám ve světě fikce (in-character). GM dále využívá jednotlivých NPC, které komunikují s PC postavami in-character. Out-of-character a in-character jsou tedy určitými vrstvami vyprávění, ve kterých se vypravěči pohybují. Decicio používá kategorizaci tří mediálních rámců, tedy rámce herního (pravidla zvoleného TTRPG systému), rámce fikčního (in-character) a

⁶⁴ V českém prostředí je označení Pán jeskyně spojováno s konkrétním TTRPG systémem *Dračí doupě* (1990), ale byl generalizován také pro jiné TTRPG systémy.

rámce dokumentárního (out-of-character). Tyto rámce jsou ale limitující, a zcela nepojímají publikum, se kterým některé z herních podcastů komunikuje, a také jsou zaměřeny na dokumentaci hry na hrdiny spíše než záměrnou tvorbu narativu, která TTRPG systému využívá jakožto pomocného nástroje k vytváření příběhu.

Na hry na hrdiny je třeba nahlížet jakožto systém pravidel, který je spjatý s konkrétním fikčním světem, nebo literárním žánrem. Volba herního systému tedy záleží na zasazení příběhu. Pro příběh zasazený do světa fantasy literatury je vhodný například systém *Dungeons & Dragons*. Systém *Monster of the Week* (Příšera týdne) je lépe využitelný pro urban fantasy svět neboli prostředí moderního fantastiky. Proces výběru žánru může být i opačný, jelikož volba systému může pomoci s výběrem prostředí příběhu. Existují i TTRPG, které jsou určeny pro specifické zasazení, jakým je i *Four Sherlock Holmes and a Vampire (Who Is Also One of the Aforementioned Sherlock Holmes)*⁶⁵, kde se předpokládá, že bude příběh zasazen do fikčního světa známého detektiva Sherlocka Holmese.

Další pomocí, kterou TTRPG systémy nabízejí jsou archetypické postavy, závisí totiž na gamifikaci pop kultury, tedy inspiraci v populárním díle a převedení jeho typických znaků do formátu hry. Většina herních archetypů je založená na postavách z děl, jakými je i *Pán prstenů*. Tvorba postavy v *Dungeons & Dragons* se skládá především z výběru rasy a povolání. Mezi rasy patří například trpaslík, elf, poloobr, drakorozený, nebo půldémon. Typickými povoláními jsou válečník, zloděj, druid, čaroděj, nebo klerik. Jedním z archetypů postav převzatým z *Pána prstenů* je postava Aragorna, která by podle terminologie *Dungeons & Dragons* byla člověkem a hraničářem. Postavy jsou tvořeny také staty, numericky označených charakteristik postavy. Podle plusové nebo minusové hodnoty specifického státu se dá poznat, jak moc je daná postava charismatická nebo jak dobře zachází s mečem. Tyto staty se projevují i v akcích, které mohou postavy podle svého povolání vykonávat. Akce jsou jasně pojmenované a popsané, aby se předešlo diskuzím o jejich výkladu, i když právě takovéto konverzace jsou náplní out-of-character vyprávění. Názvy a specifikace statů a akcí je vždy spojována s konkrétním TTRPG systémem.

The Adventure Zone (TAZ) je actual-play podcast, který od své první epizody vydané 18. srpna 2014 vystřídal hned několik TTRPG systémů. *TAZ* podcast obsahuje sedm

⁶⁵ Český překlad: Čtyři Sherlockové Holmesové a upír (který je také jedním z dříve zmíněných Sherlocků Holmesů)

„kampaní“, což je název pro dlouhodobě sériově vedený příběh, a dále one-shoty (krátkodobé kampaně na jednu epizodu), kterými jsou záznamy epizod z živých představení a bonusové epizody pro přispívající posluchače Maximum Fun portálu, přes který Griffin, Travis, Justin a Clint McElroy vydávají svou auditivní tvorbu. *TAZ* tvoří jeden komplexní narativní svět spojený jak skrze out-of-character vrstvou, tak některými z postav, které se záměrně, nebo pouze v rámci humoru objevují v různých kampaních.

Svou podstatou je *TAZ* narativ odvíjen okolo PC postav. Některé z nich, kupříkladu tři protagonisté první kampaně *TAZ: Balance* Merle, Magnus a Taako, se stávají archetypy, jelikož jsou definovány především svými specifickými hláškami nebo činy. Merle je trpasličí klerik, který ale příliš nevyužívá schopnosti léčení, jež je pro kleriky typická, ale spíše využívá kouzla „Zóny pravdy“. Magnus je lidský válečník, který je definovaný hláškou „Magnus rushes in!“,⁶⁶ která představuje jeho zbrklost a temperamentní povahu. A Taako se vyvine z komicky hloupé postavičky elfího kouzelníka do poněkud ješitného, ale vychytralého mága. Především na tyto postavy, jakožto i postavy z dalších kampaní je v průběhu podcastu intratextuálně odkazováno. Stejně tak vypravěči zmiňují i na NPC postavy nebo události jako přirovnání, například město Phandalin se stane synonymem pro katastrofu, vzhledem k jeho zničení na konci prvního příběhového arku *TAZ: Balance*. Intratextualita je jen jedním ze způsobů, jak je v *TAZ* neustále bořena čtvrtá stěna, PC postavy často hovoří o něčem, co bylo zmíněno out-of-character. In-character narativní vrstva je oddělena také využíváním hlasů postav, na což občas hráči zapomínají, což se stalo součástí humoru *TAZ* podcastu.

The Adventure Zone podcastu vzniklo k dnešnímu datu (2023) pět grafických novel jako adaptací první kampaně *TAZ: Balance*. Procesem adaptování actual-play podcastu bylo provedeno hned několik zásahů do narativu, nejzásadnějším z nich bylo vymazání postav hráčů a GM se stal fikční postavou, tím se out-of-character vrstva přesunula do in-character vrstvy. Adaptace, jež nesleduje stejnou narativní strukturu, je ale důkazem, že s příběhem vytvořeným kolektivním vyprávěním s pomocí TTRPG systému jde dále pracovat a rozvíjet jej. Tento relativně nový způsob narace je unikátní a završuje proces gamifikace tím, že z se ze hry na hrdiny vytvořené na základě literárního díla stává dílo nové.

⁶⁶ Volný překlad: Magnus už tam běží!