Therapy Is Fantasy

Roleplaying, Healing and the Construction of Symbolic Order

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> They should have apprehended the method of visualisation and applied the illimitable virtue thereof for exalting one's condition.
>
> Barado Thodol: The Tibetan Book of the Dead. Translation by Evans Wentz, 1927.

This essay is an exploration of the thesis that healing as a cultural process can be the product of the manipulation of a symbolic framework of meaning. In such a process, the central concepts are those of passivity, empowerment, and the creation of meaningful cultural metaphors for the causal illness/ state of mind (Young 1977, Kovel 1976).

The essay focuses on one particular case from what might be characterised as a developing system. The western recreational activity of roleplaying has been in existence for little over ten years, and in its initial self-conceptualisation was a variation on traditional wargaming. Yet such has been the pace of its development that certain groups are consciously experimenting with its potential for healing along lines that parallel certain psychotherapies and indigenous healing systems. My case study focuses on one roleplayer, 'Malori' (a pseudonym) and the way in which she employs her roleplaying and visualisation skills to assist her in dealing with a disabling endogenous depression. In doing so I seek to identify the essential elements of the process and the structural characteristics of certain roleplaying groups which allow the potential for healing to be present. In concentrating on the construction of personal symbols through the creation of roleplaying personas or 'characters', my analysis will essentially be a semiotic one.

Methodology

The basis of this essay lies in a series of interviews conducted with five ACT roleplayers during October 1988. While the topic eventually centred around the material raised in the Malori interviews, I have found the information gathered in all of the interviews to be valuable in that I was provided with a broad cross-section of opinion in response to the basic questions raised in this essay. In the course of the project I have also drawn upon my own experience as a roleplayer and scenario designer.

Fantasy

Roleplaying occurs in the collective realm of fantasy. Most psychologists conceive of fantasy as the product of individual introspection, with the daydream as the quintessential form of fantasy. Fantasies are believed to reflect an individual's motives, needs, wishes, desires or ambitions through their unreality (Fine 1983:230). Yet western psychology, with its bias toward verbal and directed thought, seems to have displayed much more prudishness about fantasy than it ever did, say, about sex (Singer and Pope 1978:3). Terms typifying fantasy as 'regression in the service of the ego' (Kris, 1951 in ibid:5) demonstrate the psychological bias toward what is characterised as 'rational' and directed thought.

One of the characteristics of collective fantasy formations such as roleplaying is that because the creation of the fantasy is a group communicative process, one is able to access the processes of symbol formation in ways that are not possible when studying reports of dreams and daydreaming. As such, collective fantasy stands as a prime example of the symbolic interactionalist approach to the construction of meaning, a true universe of discourse. I shall return to explore this point when discussing roleplaying games as cultural systems.

Roleplaying

Roleplaying as a recreational activity is a translation of private fantasy activities such as daydreaming into social and game context that is structured and controlled by an agreed set of rules.

The historical roots of roleplaying lie in wargaming. In 1974, an American wargamer named Dave Arneson created a variation of his medieval fantasy wargame in which his players, rather than commanding armies of troops, took on the roles and personalities of individual fighters and magic users. From this experiment the hobby of roleplaying (and the game of Dungeons & Dragons) was born.

While there is tremendous variation between different styles of roleplaying, the essential elements are common to all. A group of players choose a certain milieu and a particular game system, be it fantasy (Dungeons & Dragons, Runequest), science fiction (Star Trek, Traveller), history (En

Garde!, Valley of the Kings), horror (Chill, Call of Cthulhu), adventure (James Bond 007) or humour (Toon, Bunnies & Burrows). Anything that can be imagined is a possible subject of a fantasy roleplaying game.

The players then create a persona, or character appropriate to that milieu using the rules of the game system. (A sample character, created for a roleplaying tournament held in Canberra in early 1988, is included with this essay). Using their imaginations, players create a personality, ideology and set of interests and goals for their character.

A person designated the gamesmaster ('GM' or simply 'god') then creates either an environment or storyline and guides the players through the myth that he or she has created, describing what they see, who and what they encounter, and the results of their actions. Plots range from something as simple as a murder mystery to be solved in an hour or two's playing time through elaborate, world spanning campaigns crafted with an eye to detail and involving intricate subplots which might span years of playing time.

The imaginations of participants are both aided and restricted by the games system, which imposes a structure onto the game universe, typically providing rules for resolving any action or encounter a character could be involved with – from falling off a horse, asking a (non-player) prince for his hand in marriage, or attempting to program an alien computer. These rules involve simple mathematical models resolved through the use of different types of dice (most commonly, four, six, ten and twenty sided dice, and pairs of percentile dice which produce a result from 1 to 100). Because of this, a character's skills and personal attributes are encoded as numerical values. Thus a character who is extremely intelligent may have an INT (intelligence characteristic) of 17 out of possible 20, or if she has a degree in anthropology, her anthropology skill might be 60 out of a possible 100.

The earliest published roleplaying games were closely related to their wargaming antecedents, focusing on combat and strategy and ignoring the subtleties of characterisation and drama. Dungeons & Dragons for example, the original roleplaying game, is also narrowest in its construction. It was designed as a strategy combat game, pitting good against evil, and not as a sociological simulation. The structural restraints of the rules system (which provided resolution systems only for combat-related activities) encouraged an ethos of male power-fame-virility fantasy, centring on values of masculine aggressiveness, confrontation and objectification. Plots usually consisted of 'dungeon bashes', fighting monsters to obtain loot. Not surprisingly, most players were teenage males, and few women participated.

As the hobby grew in popularity, other games systems entered the market which placed a much greater emphasis on the acting and dramatic aspects of the hobby – true roleplaying – rather than strategy and 'power gaming'. Historical, ecological and sociological backgrounds became more important as GMs led their players out of the dungeons and into the realms of politics, exploration and social interaction. The introduction of 'skill-driven systems' allowed non-combatant characters to be played – a game character could now specialise in anything from accounting to zoology. In some game systems, the ethos became one of nurturance and human relationships (Call of Cthulhu) or peaceful exploration (Star Trek) rather than power fantasy. With such developments – which I typify as the 'second wave' of roleplaying – more and more women were attracted to the hobby, and with many groups concentrating solely on the characterisation, storytelling and atmospheric aspects of roleplaying, the stage was at last set for an exploration of the psychological and symbolic potential of collective fantasy.

The essential feature of roleplaying is that the action of the game is generated and enacted in the imaginations of players. Though props such as miniature figurines, maps and photographs, sound effect tapes etc. may be employed, they are always secondary to what is occuring in the imagination of the players. A perilous climb to the top of a glacier may simply be a few dice rolls in the terms of game mechanics, but an experienced GM and players can turn it into a genuinely frightening experience. The GM describes the glacier, the difficulty of the climb, the effect of the cold on the characters etc, while calling for ability rolls on the dice at appropriate times. The players respond by describing their imagined feelings and fears, by talking to each other in character and by calling up images of the scene in their imaginations. With an experienced group a genuine dramatic tension is evoked that leads to strong feelings of anxiety and rushes of adrenaline, all without stepping outside of their Lyneham living room. Such is the power of fantasy.

Why Roleplay?

Relaxation and entertainment – pure fun – are the reasons given by most gamers for their involvement in the hobby. While this is hardly surprising, even those who regard the hobby purely as a recreational activity recognize a psychological dimension to their gaming. Four themes emerged in the interviews concerning the value of roleplaying:

Roleplaying provides an escape from social pressure. The following comment is typical:

> 'I roleplay as a therapeutic thing. I behave irrationally and outrageously in gaming to relax and enjoy myself… In life I cross-check what I'm doing and thinking. Its nice playing a character who wouldn't do these things… my characters are an antithesis of myself.'
>
> (Jamie).

Roleplaying aids to increasing one's sense of personal control and efficacy. As roleplaying characters are often much more skillful and/or powerful than the players who

have created them, it is often possible to obtain a strong sense of personal efficacy and achievement through an identification with their exploits. There is also a very strong element of cathartic release.

Roleplaying aids in increasing social skills. Most of those interviewed noted their belief that roleplaying increased one's empathy with other people, largely through attempting to understand characters that one played whose personality was different to one's own. Several gamers mentioned the encouragement roleplaying provided to try out novel social strategies, and the ease with which one could recover from roleplayings faux pas. For example:

> 'In a sense you've got something between yourself and the real world. It's like a shield…'
>
> (Malori)

> '…which is very handy when you're first going out. You're learning techniques and tricks which will eventually come into your own person… and you'll discover those tricks work.'
>
> (Elizabeth).

Roleplaying is educational. Gaming, especially in a historical or science fiction campaign, often encourages considerable research on the part of both GM and players. At what distance can you safely orbit a black hole? Where was William Butler Yeats living in 1928? Some players believe that merely playing in a historical milieu increases their knowledge of history and custom.

Roleplaying Games as Cultural Systems

Crucial to any semiotic analysis of characters within a roleplaying environment is a conception of how such an environment resembles a cultural system.

Roleplaying games create cultural systems as their avocation – worlds of imagination formed by the participants, given the constraints of their knowledge and the structure provided by the rules. Such creation works on all levels – material culture (architecture, fashion etc), ideology (politics, theories of power, gender constructions) and cultural themes (what religion is, how magic works, the nature of good and evil, theories of destiny, ontology and epistemology). Fantasy roleplaying games have social structure, norms, values and a range of cultural artifacts which are as real as such constructs can ever be – that is, they are real to those who participate in them.

Each gaming group interprets, defines and transforms elements within its society. Their gaming world is a transformation of mundane, shared realities. It stands as a caricature of social life, a simplified and exaggerated reflection of mundane reality. This cultural system expands as the game progresses the participants building and synthesising through their experience, just as in real life at any given time an individual never has access to a culture, but only to a rendering of that culture.

Each group develops a universe of symbolic discourse which Fine (1983:123) terms an ideoculture; 'a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviours and customs peculiar to an interacting group to which members refer and employ as the basis of further interaction'. This system expands as the players communicate and interact both within the game context and beyond it. The resultant artifact comprises three interrelated systems of meaning; the shared mundane reality (the base culture), the system of rules which structure the game universe, and the content of the game/ fantasy itself (the transformed culture). The resultant whole is a social world, a universe of symbolic discourse.

There are two characteristics of such conceptualisation that are central to my analysis. The first is that a roleplaying game is a shared fantasy. As such, it lacks the seemingly random, illogical features of fantasy as usually characterised by western psychology; it does not possess the ego-centric or autistic qualities that Freud or Piaget discuss as characteristic of fantasy (Fine, op cit:3). The shared nature also implies that relationships within a gaming group are constrained by members perceptions of what variables cannot be transcended under any circumstances, for example intelligence or maturity. Such perceptions organise the display of power within a fantasy world; even in players wildest flights of fancy we find the obdurate social reality of the 'real' world.

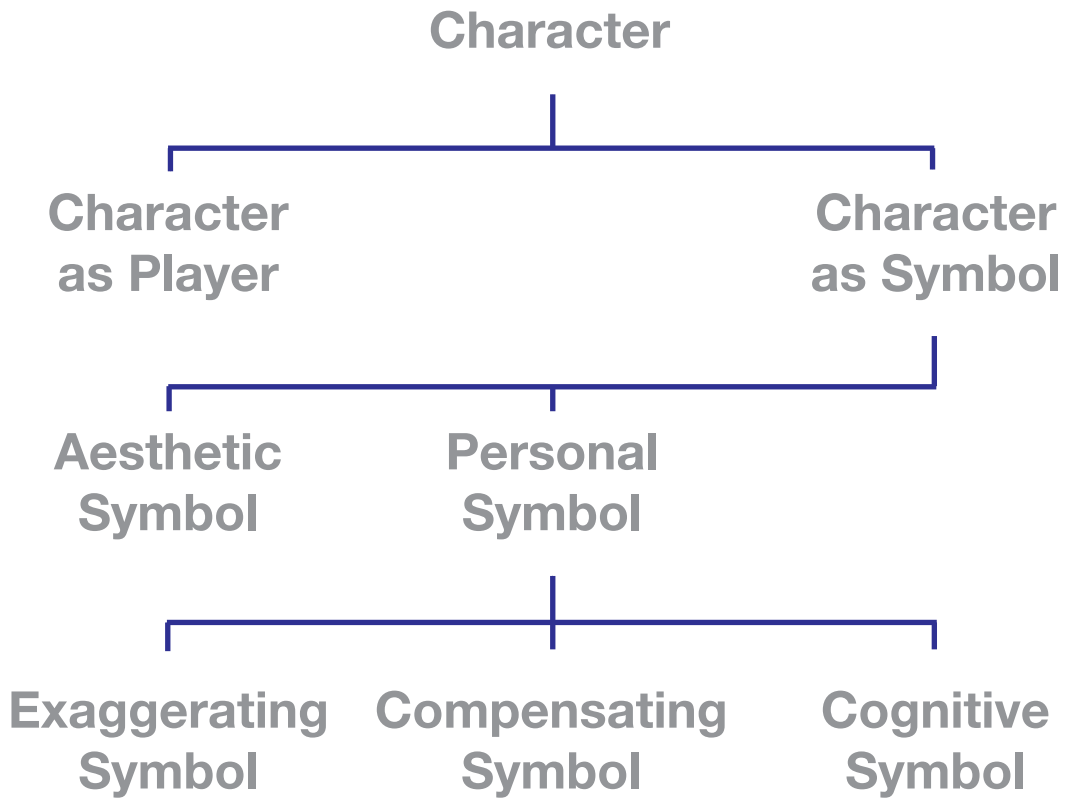
The second point is that a fantasy roleplaying game constitutes a voluntary and limited domain. Players act out/ work out their fantasies under an explicit sense of containment. Players must identify with their characters if the game is to be a success; in other words, they must invest their characters with meaning. Characters grow with experience; the depth of their game personality becomes more individual and unique over time. Correspondingly, the player's identification with the character grows – as evidenced by the very real trauma many players experience if their favoured characters die. In contrast to this growing identification with the character there is also an ideology of distance acknowledged between the players: a failure or repugnant moral attitude on the part of the character is not usually seen to reflect in any way on the player running that character. It's just a fantasy.

'Ethos'

On a fundamental level, a gamesmaster must establish a world view that directs the game action and which represents the implicit philosophy or ideals by which the world operates – what Geertz would characterise as the game's 'ethos'.

Fine (op cit:76-77) provides an example of such an ethos from a Dungeons and Dragons game characteristic of what I have described as the first wave of roleplaying. He saw the

FIGURE ONE. Roleplaying characters as symbols of the self: a typology.



'ethos' of that particular game as comprising the following themes:

- The Principle of Unlimited Good. Success is open to all, and one person's success does not imply the failure of another.
- The dichotomy of Good and Evil. There is no middle ground.
- Evil as any action outside the moral boundaries of a given society.
- The thematic importance of Courage.

To contrast such an ethos, what follows is a similar listing from a typical second wave game – in this case the Call of Cthulhu campaign in which I act as gamesmaster. The campaign is a literary-model game set in Europe during the nineteen twenties, and seeks to explore the existential dilemma of twentieth century humanity as exemplified in the 'cosmic horror' stories of H. P. Lovecraft.

- Survival as Triumph.
- Survival through the nurturance and support of others.
- The arbitrary nature of moral labels.
- Knowledge as Power, Knowledge as Danger.
- The Futility of Physical Effort.
- Inconsequentiality of human striving and human values when measured against the universal scales of Time and Space.

Such an ethos is created by the GM in consultation with the players; it is their actions and ambitions within the game universe that may cause the ethos to change over time or the game's style to evolve. Both GM and players attempt to shape the scenario to their own ends.

Game Characters as Personal Symbols

In situations such as those described above, the character must, to some extent, exist as a personal symbol. Such symbology may extent to the character being a conscious symbol of the self, and, in certain exceptional circumstances, a symbol imbued with transformational potential. In attempting to understand when such a symbol achieves such potential, I have constructed a typology of the Character as Symbol, illustrated at Figure One.

CHARACTERS AS PLAYERS typify a class of gamer who, in effect, play their own personalities – 'Themselves

with weapons on' as one interviewee described them. Typically, such players are young and/or beginners, and so set competitive goals for themselves, wanting to 'win' and willing to sacrifice character consistency in order to do so.

Those who invest their characters with meaning, **CHARACTERS AS SYMBOLS**, can be typified into two possible types, aesthetic and personal symbols. These categories are not necessarily contradictory.

Some characters are created simply for creative effect as **AESTHETIC SYMBOLS**. Such characters may be humorous, wistful, dramatic, a parody of a literary or film character, or simply possess a good deal of savoir faire appropriate to the gaming milieu. If such characters do take on aspects of their creator's personality, they are not consciously manipulated.

PERSONAL SYMBOLS fall into three broad categories. It is possible for a single character to combine elements from all three categories.

COGNITIVE SYMBOLS are in effect symbols of opposition, for they are created by players to explore some aspect of personality that they themselves do not possess. Such characters are answers to the question 'How does a royalist/ anarchist/ man/ woman/ elf/ blind dwarf/ alien/ minor god think, feel and act?' They are constructed as exercises in empathy, posited around perceived oppositions to the players own concept of selfhood.

The final categories that I have typified both are conscious manipulations of a player's perception of self.

EXAGGERATING SYMBOLS are characters created to amplify characteristics or skills that the players believe they possess. Thus, intelligent players create genius characters, sports-minded people create super athletes etc. Such characters are a way of building up a players self affirmation, for such characters are a source of uplifting emotional feedback when the particular skills or characteristics bring success. Such identifications may extent into the ideological realm, for as one interviewee explained:

> 'I always play rational characters because I'm a rationalist'.
>
> (Jamie).

COMPENSATING SYMBOLS are characters created to explore a characteristic or skill that the player believes they do not possess. 'Jack', the character created by Malori in the case study which comprises Part Two of this essay, is a compensating symbol par excellence. Such characters are attempts by players to 'round up' their own personalities into something more accomplished and balanced. Thus, shy players attempt to play forward, confident characters, cerebral bookworms create bare chested barbarians, impatient players create silent, meditative monks etc.

It is compensatory characters that demand the greatest investment on the part of players, not only in terms of roleplaying ability but also in terms of emotional energy and risk. While the rewards of playing such a character can be great, the associated risks mean that any failure will be taken on a very personal level. Because such characters demand a high level of conscious investment, risk, and energy, it is compensatory characters that have the greatest potential to become transformatory symbols – symbols and vehicles of healing.

Frames of Reference

An obsessive preoccupation with internal reality is seen as a sign of mental illness: how then is it that roleplayers, often investigating considerable time and emotional energy into their characters, do not succumb to the call of their inner world? The answer lies in the many 'frames' that constitute roleplaying reality, and the way a roleplayer must constantly 'flip frames' between the social world of her companion gamers and GM and the inner world of her imagination. A roleplayer adopts what Goffman (1974 in Fine, op cit:201) refers to as a pretence awareness context among her own selves, creating a number of temporary and compartmentalised roles for herself, shielding some types of information from some of her roles.

An example from a Call of Cthulhu game (a historical/ horror game set in England in 1930) demonstrates this constant 'flipping' between frames of reference. Jack, a character in the game, has discovered a German businessman searching his hotel room. Jack has an unloaded pistol. Jack's player is thinking and speaking on a number of different levels:

Level 1: (player to GM). 'I'll attempt to bluff him with my empty pistol'.

Level 2: (character to character). 'Oh I say, bad show old chap. Hands up!'

Level 3: (player thinking in historical terms). 'This guy is a Nazi, but probably it's only 1930. Jack wouldn't know what a Nazi is. He probably thinks they're some sort of socialists'.

Level 4: (player thinking in game terms). 'Jack's strength and size are both small. If the German tries to escape, he will have a good chance of success. My German is lousy, only 30%. I'd better stick to speaking English'.

Level 5: (player thinking in terms of game ethos). 'John is GM, and he doesn't allow characters to die without good reason. I'll risk it'.

Level 6: (player watching other players in the room). 'Rhys is whispering to the GM. His character must be nearby. I'm safe. But Jack doesn't know that yet!'

And so it continues. Every imaginative move is accompanied by some social interaction, some communication with ones GM, gaming companions or their characters. Every character action is screened by the player to ensure the character is not acting on information that he or she does not possess. Experienced roleplayers can easily achieve and maintain simultaneous orientation to several frames or levels with little confusion. As one interviewee commented:

> 'I can multi-task. I run game reality and external reality in tandem'.
>
> (Jamie)

The Gamesmaster and Transference

I have demonstrated that players may sometimes perceive their characters as symbols of self. I have also indicated that such symbols attract considerable emotional involvement on the part of players, and that the game revolves around the character being involved in highly dangerous activities in which they are challenged, threatened and pushed to the limits of their ability by the machinations of the GM's plot. Given the emotive nature of the transactions that he or she directs, and the position of the absolute power assumed within the context of the game, how do gamesmasters deflect the powerful feelings of transference that one would expect to flow from some players under these circumstances?

A GM is commonly called 'god' by players. This is an acknowledgement of the power that the GM commands during the game, and the way he or she controls the ultimate destiny of the characters within the game. A GM is akin to the 'powerful ritual elder' described by Moore (1983) in that he or she formulates and controls the group contract, gives the players permission to behave in certain ways and guarantees the continuing communitas of the group. It is the GM who is primarily responsible for formulating the group ethos as described above.

The GM is protected from much of the transferred emotion that we would expect such position to attract by two beliefs that permeate all gaming culture. The first is that, during play, the GM is merely a mechanic, a rulesmith whose primary duty is to impartially apply the rules of the game. If something adversely affects a character it is because of some unwise action on that character's part combined with 'bad luck on the dice'. Secondly, a GM will usually disguise a decision that he or she makes behind the pretence of a die roll. As the result of such a roll will not be seen by players (though the action of rolling the dice will), a GM can justify any occurrence as being according to the dice result. Not surprisingly, dice beliefs occupy a highly visible part of gaming subculture, with notions of 'killer dice', 'lucky dice' and 'lame dice' abounding. Dice throwing is often accompanied by ritualistic elements such as blowing on the dice, warming them between the hands, or 'throwing them high'. GMs have their own dice ideology. 'The dice', they say, 'don't lie'.

In this section I have attempted to describe roleplaying and the way that it functions as a cultural system in microcosm. I have examined players beliefs about the characters they create and attempted to delineate those circumstances in which a character symbol may take on healing/ transformative potential. I have briefly commented on the construction of a roleplaying ethos and the way in which roleplayers switch frames of reference during a game, in effect bracketing information from part of themselves.

One point must be strongly emphasised before examining the case study that comprises the second section of this essay. Roleplaying is difficult, and players do not always roleplay well. Within the gaming milieu there is considerable latitude in the degree to which a player submerges his or her own self into a character role, or adopts the identity implied by that role. The gamers interviewed for this essay are all experienced roleplayers, and in my own judgement (informed by seven years of running modules on the Australian convention circuit) well above average in their roleplaying ability. This experience and talent has allowed some of them to utilise their roleplaying in such a way that it has profound implications for their everyday life. In part two of this essay I examine one such instance in detail – how one roleplayer has utilised her gaming skills to fight a crippling endogenous depression. In such a case the true healing potential of the transformative symbol becomes apparent.

Part Two: Malori and 'Jack' – A Case Study.

> Two heavy trestles, and a board,
> Where Sato's gift, a changeless sword
> By pen and paper lies,
> That it may moralise
> My days out of their aimlessness.
>
> William Butler Yeats.
> 'Meditations in Time of Civil War'.

> The only thing you can do if you are trapped in a reflection is to invert the image.
>
> Juliet Mitchell.
> *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974).

Malori

'Malori' is a twenty seven year old, English-born Arts graduate. She has been roleplaying since 1982. Malori is intelligent, highly articulate and fully conversant with both the psychological and symbolic aspects of her hobby. Over the years she has won a considerable number of

roleplaying awards at conventions in Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne, a testimony to her obvious talent. With her partner (also a committed roleplayer) and a number of friends she has formed a collective which produces and organises roleplaying tournaments at national conventions.

Malori has created and played a large number of roleplaying characters over the years, but in the last twelve months has taken the unusual step of playing variants of a single character (a young Englishman called John 'Jack' Hargreaves) in all of her regular games. This unusual situation has resulted as Malori's response to a particularly disabling illness – a unipolar affective disorder, an endogenous depression.

Malori's Conception of Her Illness and its Origin

Malori has suffered the effects of her depression for at least twelve months, and has been unable to work more than a few hours a day. Her attempts to overcome the disease have taken her to psychiatrists, physical specialists, mental health counsellors, physiotherapists, dieticians and, more recently, to a naturopath. Her improvement has been marked over the last three months, but she is still restricted to a shortened working day. Despite her own initial scepticism, Malori has found her roleplaying the most effective instrument in fighting the disease.

> 'I have a form of endogenous depression which has far reaching psychological consequences apart from just the emotional depression. I get very depressed, quite dangerously so at times. There are a lot of physical side effects… continual tiredness, physical sicknesses which are sometimes difficult to cope with. I am constantly stressed… to the point of wanting to physically run away. There is no cause for the fear, and of course nowhere to run to. Socially it's difficult, as I can respond in an irrational fashion to perfectly normal social stimuli. I get very angry, dissolve into tears or end up in a towering rage for no apparent reason.'

Malori's doctors place the origin of the illness in the biological realm, but state that it usually has a psychological root. Malori, in fighting the illness, has attempted to work through its psychological manifestations with 'counsellors, psychotherapists, friends, and in particular with my roleplaying groups'. She sees the psychological root of her condition in terms of a poor self image which she believes a result of conflicting cultural images of Womanhood that she has assimilated.

> 'I come from a very protective Protestant background. In many ways I didn't have an opportunity to develop my personality… When I found myself in the big wide world, having responsibilities of my own, I was frightened and this thing developed in order not to have to face these things… I was diagnosed a year ago but I think I've had it… most of my adult life.'

> 'I feel guilty about letting people down, not being able to make people happy, making people unhappy, not living up to people's expectations, not fitting a role stereotype in an appropriate way… or fitting a role stereotype in an appropriate way!!'.

> 'There seems to be a real tension between the image of Woman that I was brought up with and the image of Woman I discovered when I went to school and university… It came to be very serious after I was married.'

> 'I feel I was brought up with a very negative image of femininity. Woman had to be passive, they had to wait for what they wanted, they weren't allowed to initiate anything… When all the priorities came out, you were last on the list.'

Roleplaying as a Healing Process

The conditions which aggravate Malori's illness have roots in her biological, emotional and social worlds. Ultimately too, her illness can be seen in part as a cultural disease, for she must deal with the effects of a rapidly changing cultural conception of womanhood, and all this entails in terms of her self image, needs and wants. Because symbols of Self and Woman were central to Malori's conceptualisation of the problems she faced, it is not surprising, given her background, that she began to explore these problems through her roleplaying.

Malori's roleplaying abilities had always contributed to her self-esteem. When, in the midst of her depression, she turned to roleplaying for solace and escape, she made a surprising discovery.

> 'I had begun roleplaying in 1981. I was really thrown in the deep end. After playing just a few months we attended a roleplaying tournament. There were a hundred and fifty entrants, and I won. It came like a bolt out of the blue. I discovered I was very good at it. Initially this was my prime motivation for roleplaying. I think that time was the beginning of my depression – I was at university. It raised my self-esteem enormously. I was good at it, I knew I was good at it, I had proved I was good at it, and I was going to prove everyone else that I was good at it.'

> 'I enjoy it on a very different level now. I noticed that when my illness was first diagnosed that when I roleplayed, I had no symptoms! I wasn't depressed, I wasn't physically ill. I was happy, I was strong. The difference between when I was roleplaying (especially when I was playing Jack) and when I wasn't was really quite strange. On one hand I was extremely ill, and on the other I was bouncy and energetic and having fun. I thought it would take drugs or intensive counselling to get that much relief from the sickness.'

There is always an element of escapist catharsis in roleplaying. Yet the fact that the effect centred around the character of Jack (to the extent that Malori gave up her other characters and began to play Jack in all of her

regular campaigns) indicated that the answer lies in the characteristics of Jack himself.

Jack Hargreaves

The character of Jack varies slightly (mainly in terms of age and elements of background) between Malori's campaigns. In the nineteen twenties Call of Cthulhu campaign he is a young English aristocrat, a dilettante with a Masters degree in linguistics (a copy of the game character sheet for Jack is attached). The character is consciously based around the figure of Jack Celliers, as portrayed by David Bowie in the 1983 film Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence. Jack's appearance as described by Malori closely resembles Bowie in his portrayal of Celliers. Malori felt that it was very important from a psychological point of view that Jack should have suffered, so she decided that he had been a prisoner of war.

> 'In the fantasy campaign… he's very much a heroic character, he's very sad, he's very battered.
>
> In the nineteen twenties campaign he's ten years younger, just out of Oxford, very personable, very clever, very charismatic. He gets a real hike out of being in dangerous situations – he goes looking for them!'

Jack as a Transformative Symbol

In developing Jack's personality, Malori was very conscious of the fact that she was creating a symbol which she compensated for her own perceived inadequacies.

> 'There is a certain amount of idealisation in the character. He provides things that I haven't got but would like to have. I've tried to bring out the more masculine parts of my character, to encourage them, but I've also tried to encourage some of the more feminine aspects as well – the ones I consider positive at this place and this time. So in many ways he's a composite of myself, but that's not all that he is… There are a lot of things that I could never do, that I could never be.'

In creating the character of Jack, Malori was sorting through the gender concepts of Man and Woman which threatened her and which she believed to have contributed to her illness. I questioned her as to why she had chosen to do this through a male, rather than a female, character.

> 'A male character isn't inhibited, isn't bound by my sorts of problems. I had earlier tried it with Coyote, with Windhover [female characters], but neither of them jelled in quite the way that Jack did. With Jack I wasn't saddled with the feminine parts of my character that held me back. I could make a choice and I could cut some of them loose. I kept the one's I wanted to keep or which would be useful to a man'.
>
> '… I kept the nurturance, protectiveness, sensitivity to other people's emotions, the desire to see people happy. … I made Jack bisexual, made him not afraid to be thought effeminate. I gave him a caring, maternal attitude. I a woman those things could become a problem. In a man they don't'.

In the creation and game life of Jack, Malori was able to pull out individual components of her psyche and examine them in a new light. By placing them onto a male character, she could examine each characteristic for its actual worth without having to worry about the values that conflicting role expectations placed upon them. Paradoxically, many characteristics – nurturance, sensitivity to others emotions – took on a very positive light when seen as part of a male personality, yet these same characteristics caused Malori great distress as components of her own personality because she equated them with the passive role model of Woman that she was trying to discard. In exploring the oppositions and cultural dichotomies that comprise gender role models, Malori is slowly reconstructing the balance of her psyche and consequently of her self image. She is able to judge her own personality in a new, more positive light. Through the personality of Jack, she is beginning to understand that characteristics such as assertiveness and sensitivity are not polarised oppositions but can in fact peacefully co-exist within the one person. Malori is reconstructing her models of masculinity and femininity, creating models that do not threaten or accuse her.

The Front Line

Malori has gained more than a cognitive understanding of her gender models through her use of Jack. In a roleplaying environment, she uses the character to experience some of the personality attributes she is trying to develop within herself. This is achieved through her actions within the game, with the support and cooperation of her gamesmaster and fellow players.

> 'I identify very heavily. I end up feeling what he feels, to the point of being physically frightened. But I'm in a controlled environment, so it doesn't trigger off the depression.'
>
> 'It's very effective. I can think of all sorts of things and feel all sorts of things through him. I get a very great sense of victory if he succeeds at something. I get that as well as he'.
>
> 'Escaping [from a very difficult situation] gave me a tremendous sense of victory. Having been rescued by the others gave me a tremendous sense of belonging. When they pulled him out alive… that was the best bit of all, tremendous release.'

Malori has invested so much of herself into the Jack character that she can experience his fantasy world victories as though they were her own. The character is compelled to seek out and challenge impossible odds – and even survival is seen as a victory. Perhaps Malori sees a symbolic parallel to her own situation, for beating her illness means continually taking on tremendous emotional risks, and trusting to the support of those around her. Like Jack, Malori survives, and in surviving prospers.

> 'You practice facing things that bother you. Whatever happens in a game you're physically safe, although obviously, having such a strong emotional identification, it would hurt me very much if he were killed.'

> 'I actively seek out things that bother me, that challenge me. I'm leading the party and so the decision is mine, and nobody else's. If it goes wrong, it goes wrong, and I take responsibility for that. If it goes right, everybody's pleased and they're pleased with me as well. That for me is a terrifying situation, having to make a decision and stand behind it, to take the responsibility if it fails. Through Jack, I also have to deal with physical danger, to overcome passivity, and to stay cool in a crisis. It's very challenging.'

With two friends, Malori has recently begun a campaign especially designed to challenge them as individuals rather than as characters. Malori, of course, plays Jack. A friend seeking to overcome shyness and social inexperience has designed a character to challenge her own inhibitions. The GM has introduced a new rule especially for this game, which is called the 'psychodrama' campaign. The rule is called 'The Rewind'. If one of the players feel that a given situation has gotten out of hand or that they have not responded as they should, they can request a 'rewind' and the scene is played out once again. With the introduction of such techniques, roleplaying moves away from being a purely recreational milieu into something that is pedagogic and explicitly therapeutic.

The Outer Game: Images of Jack in Everyday Life

Malori has learned to apply her personal symbols (and the attendant emotions and orientations which they evoke) in such a way as to control her depression in everyday situations.

> 'Often, very often, I find myself imagining how Jack would handle a situation that I find difficult. Sometimes that helps. Just thinking of him, I gain energy. The character has a certain power.'

> 'Being able to adopt a character in a game means to a certain extent you can also adopt him/ her/ it in real life if things get too hard. I often switch into 'Jack mode' if I'm very tired and have a lot of work to do, or if I'm very frightened of having to do something. I don't make a sudden and complete switch and become someone else, but there are elements of his personality I can pull out of mine that will help me in a given situation.'

It seems that on certain levels at least, Malori realises that much of what she has created and projected onto Jack already exists within her own personality. However, the progress of her illness and the gender roles against which she is fighting have meant that an affirmation of such characteristics within herself would be accompanied by strong feelings of guilt and denial. By projecting them onto Jack, the symbol can mediate the struggle between the differing gender models at war within her psyche, allowing her to draw upon emotional resources such characteristics provide without being wracked by the accompanying guilt. I believe that as Malori continues to regain control of her life, the power of Jack will slowly fade, to be replaced by an affirmation of his characteristics – confidence, assertion, leadership – within her own personality. Until that time, Malori will continue to draw upon the power that Jack and other associated symbols from her roleplaying can provide.

> 'Jack has a Japanese sword – a katana. It was stolen for him by a friend who helped him to escape… it has a very strong significance for me. It signifies that one can escape from bondage… it's very hopeful. Outside of roleplaying, I use it to think with. If I find myself getting into a negative thought cycle, I say 'This is going to stop, to stop NOW!' I visualise the sweep of Jack's katana. The thought is cut off. It's a very, very strong image.'

Over the last few months, Malori has grown steadily stronger, more confident, less afraid, less tired. Many factors have contributed – changes in her medication, improved diet and exercise, learning to relax more effectively through Tai Chi. In August, despite extreme physical sickness, Malori journeyed to Melbourne with some friends and took first prize in a major roleplaying tournament. Despite her depression, this was her second major prize within a year, and it seemed to mark a psychological breakthrough. In her own mind, Malori rates the therapeutic effects of her roleplaying equally with the support of her husband and the insights provided by one particular counsellor as being instrumental in her recovery so far.

What of the future? Malori has visualised an image of her depression as a living creature, a pathetic, tentacled Cthulhoid monstrosity. With the support of her companion roleplayers and GM, she plans to face the creature within the context of a game. What insights will such an encounter bring? Will Jack attempt to destroy the beast, to master it through confrontation or will he attempt to entrap and starve it? Malori is not sure how she will react to the encounter, but she feels strong and confident in preparing to face the creature. After all, the dice never lie.

Discussion

In an exploration of the common characteristics of psychoanalysis and shamanism, Levi-Strauss (1963:325) saw both as

> … stimulating an organic transformation which would essentially consist in a structural reorganisation by inducing the patient intensively to live out a myth – either received or created by him – whose structure would be, at the unconscious level, analogous to the structure whose genesis is sought on the organic level.

While cautious about wholeheartedly applying such an analysis to Malori's circumstances, I do find the basic

premise – living out a myth in such a way as to effect a mediation of opposites – a very useful one.

Malori has indeed created her own myth (on several levels) and in living that myth out has brought about a reconciliation of the conflicting gender roles that have made her live so difficult. What is perhaps unusual in this case is that Malori has created her own framework for healing (in effect, an indigenous healing system) out of elements available to her, namely the recreational milieu of roleplaying.

On the structural level, Malori created the symbol of Jack – unflappable, courageous and strong, to stand in opposition to the poor self-image of herself that was either a cause or effect of her depression.

OPPOSITION

SICK MALORI / JACK

HEALTHY MALORI

(MEDIATION)

Both the 'sick' image and the positive elements of the Jack image existed within Malori: the illness had emphasised one aspect, the roleplaying emphasises the other. As Malori gradually brings her illness under control, she is able to understand both aspects of her nature and bring them both under control as she reorganises her gender constructs. As the Jack symbol essentially signifies the elements of her personality she could not emphasise without feeling guilty, over time the following transformation has occurred:

ORIGINAL SELF IMAGE : JACK
::
SICK MALORI : WELL MALORI

Because of her intense emotional involvement with the Jack symbol, Malori was also living out a myth on another level – within the roleplaying game itself. With the cooperation of a small group of friends, who provided a structure of support and encouragement, Malori emotionally explored the implications of the Jack symbol, and gradually came to realise that Jack was an extension of herself, a symbol of self, and a symbol of both her condition and cure.

The heavy emotional involvement with the symbol meant that such an exploration carried risks, but ultimately, rewards as well – the opportunity to reorder elements within her psyche. Through Jack, Malori has begun to balance the conflicting cultural frameworks that place demands upon her – the image of womanhood inherited from her early life and the image which informs the day to day life of her marriage and career.

Initially, Malori regarded her roleplaying as a distraction, a temporary escape from the effects of her depression. As she came to understand the nature of Jack, she was able to gain a sense of self control, of self efficacy, and at least a partial liberation from the 'script' of her socialised response patterns.

The roleplaying also provided Malori with such a method of visualising her condition. With such visualisation, the act of 'naming the unnamable' (Young), Malori was able to manipulate and thus understand her condition, and gained the potential for suggestion and affirmation. For example, in visualising her illness, Malori saw it as pathetic, weak and frightened, inviting her sympathy. Examining this image, Malori was able to recognise her own ambivalence towards the depression, and how the illness had been protecting her from taking responsibility. In bringing this realisation to consciousness, Malori was able to deal with it, and thus move one step closer to health.

Summary

In the course of the essay I have explored in detail one case in which the conscious manipulation of personal symbols has led to a reorganisation of frames of meaning with a resulting personal empowerment and an eventual return to health. The case is unusual in that it has not dealt with an established healing system but one synthesised in extremis by an exceptional individual utilising symbolic frameworks available to her. As such it stands as one further example of the pervasive power of symbols in our daily lives.

Thanks

This essay would not have been possible without the time given so freely by James, Jamie, Liz, Paul and Malori in allowing themselves to be interviewed by this amateur ethnologist.

Above all, thanks to Malori, without whose courage and imagination these insights would not have been possible.

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APPENDIX: Call of Cthulhu Character Sheet for Jack Hargreaves

CALL of CTHULHU

Name.. John (Jack) Hargreaves
Occupation Dilettant Sex M Age 23
Nationality British Residence London/ Oxford

INVESTIGATOR STATISTICS
STR. 14 DEX 14 INT 16 Idea 80
CON 13 APP 18 POW 15 Luck 75
SIZ 11 SAN 66 EDU 15 Know 75
Schools Eton / Oxford
Degrees M.A. (Linguistics)
Damage Bonus/Penalty +D4

MAGIC POINTS
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
8 9 10 11 12 13 14
(15) 16 17 18 19 20 21

HIT POINTS
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
8 9 10 11 (12) 13 14
15 16 17 18 19 20 21

Appearance – Medium Height (5ft, 10ins) slim, fair hair + skin, Blue eyes, fine features. Histo-cratic

SANITY POINTS
(Insanity .....) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18
19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45
46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 (66) 67 68 69 70 71 72
73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99

INVESTIGATOR SKILLS

Accounting (10)	30	Geology (00)	10	Psychology (05)	40
Anthropology (00)	56	Hide (10)	40	Read/Write Eng. (EDU x5)	80
Archaeology (00)	50	History (20)	40	Read/Write. French (00)	55
Astronomy (00)	20	Jump (25)	53	Read/Write. Latin (00)	55
Bargain (05)	05	Law (05)	20	Read/Write Arabic (00)	55
Botany (00)	00	Library Use (25)	65	Ride (05) Motorcycle	60
Camouflage (25)	25	Linguist (00)	65	Sing (05)	25
Chemistry (00)	10	Listen (25)	54	Sneak (10)	50
Climb (40)	76	Make Maps (10)	15	Speak French (00)	55
Credit Rating (15)	na	Mechanical Repair (20)	20	Speak Arabic (00)	55
Cthulhu Mythos (00)	35	Occult (05)	65	Spot Hidden (25)	55
Debate (10)	50	Operate Hv. Machine (00)	00	Swim (25)	50
Diagnose Disease (05)	05	Oratory (05)	50	Throw (25)	60
Dodge (DEX x2)	50	Pharmacy (00)	20	Track (10)	20
Drive Automobile (20)	60	Photography (10)	10	Treat Disease (05)	20
Electrical Repair (10)	20	Pick Pocket (05)	05	Treat Poison (05)	20
Fast Talk (05)	60	Pilot Aircraft (00)	00	Zoology (00)	40
First Aid (30)	45	Psychoanalysis (00)	00	Play violin	60
Cricket	65			dance	50

WEAPONS

Weapon	Attack	Damage	Impale	Parry	Hit Points
handgun	64	D8	12	na	10
rapier	60	D6+1D4	12	55	10
grapple	55	na	na	na	na
fist	60	D3+D4	na	na	na

SPELLS KNOWN, OTHER SKILLS, NOTES

Dreaming (POW x1)	15
Dream Lore (00)	5

Summon Dark Young of Shub-Niggurath
Summon/bind Star Vampire
Contact Ghoul
Contact Nyarlathotep

Possessions –
Books and manuscripts.
1 Ching sticks – carved ivory
scrying glass
violin
copper amulet.

Flats – oxford and Cambridge.
Car – Bentley.
2. Husky dogs.