The Rogue and the City: *Thieves World* and the expanding role of Literature in Tabletop Roleplaying

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In exploring the historical development of tabletop roleplaying games scholars have identified the importance of war games, tactical board games (Peterson 2012), and specifically Diplomacy (Trammel 2013). These hobbies had a number of norms and conventions that experimental game designers drew on and extended in the early years of tabletop roleplaying. The literary influence of both, pulp writers of Swords and Sorcery (e.g. Howard 2015; Leiber 2006) and more literary High Fantasy (e.g. Tolkien 2007), has also been identified and discussed (e.g. Goldfond 2021; Vossen 2020). In this paper we aim to further develop how the relationship between tabletop roleplaying design and literature is understood by examining an early collaboration involving tabletop roleplaying game designers and fiction writers. While such collaborations are now relatively commonplace, in the early 1980s they had a massive impact on future developments in the fantasy sector of the tabletop roleplaying industry by embedding the literary figure of the 'rogue' in tabletop roleplaying through roguish settings, narratives and characters.

In this paper we examine the literature and rulesets introduced in Thieves World (Asprin et al. 1981), contextualizing this key work in relation to the prior fantasy cities developed by publishers Gamelords, Judges Guild and Midkemia Press. We argue that these minor, 'outsider' RPG presses shaped the growing relationship between literature and tabletop roleplaying through the figure of the rogue, by creating urban settings for them to explore.

From the late 1970s these minor and independent presses developed licensed or unlicensed materials for Dungeons & Dragons (Gygax and Arneson 1974), and began to experiment with fantasy world building through developing complex settings for roleplaying games. Such materials explored fantasy geographies, histories, politics, and cultures, and offered fantasy worlds, countries, villages, towns, and cities, establishing a close link between fantasy literature and games which permeated into the future.

Rather than drawing on fantasy literature for inspiration or reinterpreting a writer's intellectual property under license - e.g Chaosium's Call of Cthulhu (Petersen 1981), Iron Crown Enterprises Middle Earth Role Playing (Charlton 1982) - fantasy worlds such as Midkemia were a multi-purpose shared world setting for the Midkemia Press collective to produce both fantasy fiction and roleplaying game supplements.

The thief or the rogue was a crucial inspiration for the development of detailed fantasy cities for roleplaying games. The thief first made its appearance as a fan-made class in the early days of Dungeons & Dragons. The influence of the rogue figure in Dungeons & Dragons is palpable through literary characters from 20th century fantasy and Sword and Sorcery genres such as Bilbo Baggins (Tolkien 2007) and the Gray Mouser (Lieber 2006). The literary origin of the figure can be traced back to the 16th-17th centuries in Spain, where picaresque novels established the traits of the character and the setting through works including the anonymous El Lazarillo de Tormes (Anonymous 2019) or Alemán's Guzmán de Alfarache (Alemán 2012).

Early tabletop roleplaying settings were combat-oriented environments: the Wilderness and Dungeons. The introduction of the thief class created a new niche market that was focused on making the class more interesting and viable by designing detailed roleplaying environments in which a thief character could thrive. These environments could be found in supplements such as Gamelords's *The Free City of Haven* (Meyer et al. 1981), but, more importantly, Chaosium's H. G. Wells Award-winning *Thieves World* (Asprin et al. 1981), which presented the city as a new playground for players apart from the typical hub-city where players buy, sell and sleep (the hub is a central location from which players can move to different areas and later come back). Thieves World featured a detailed fantasy city made by writers and game designers tailored to the peculiar abilities of the thief class. The city and key characters were detailed by published fiction writers (such as Marion Zimmer Bradley) explaining plots, secret entrances, dark market locations, etc. The roguish setting provided by Thieves' World was a crucible for emergent roleplaying. The focus of the setting and the motivation of the NPCs (non-playable characters) highlighted everyday problems such as money, hunger, or social class conflicts, enriching the possibilities of fantasy role-playing games.

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