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CONSTITUTIVE FACTORS OF MEGA-CAMPAIGNS IN TTRPGS: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

Cristo León, James Lipuma, & Marcos O. Cabobianco

Abstract

This paper examines Table-top Role-playing Games (TTRPGs) in order to define the term Mega-campaigns and identify the constitutive factors within the TTRPG context. This paper will begin by providing background information on TTRPGs and their characteristics. It will then outline the methodological perspectives adopted in this study, followed by a systematic literature review. This comprehensive review will identify common factors relevant to Mega-campaigns in TTRPGs as well as outline the implications and significance of these factors within the context of Mega-campaigns.

Keywords

TTRPGs, adventures, mega-campaigns, narratology, ludology, game design, research, GPE model

Introduction

All analog games describe a standard set of rules, mechanics, and periods of play in which players engage in actual play activities termed sessions, matches, games, encounters, etc. Some analog games have established connections between each of these encounters, such as matches in chess or adventures in role-playing games.

Unlike other analog games, adventures in role-playing games provide the opportunity to participate in an ongoing series of interconnected stories that, over time, can build into campaigns. This paper examines Table-top Role-playing Games (TTRPGs), whose "style of play often encourages limitless,

unique narratives across thousands of iterations of the same campaign.”¹ We aim to define the term Mega-campaigns and identify the constitutive factors within the TTRPG context.

This paper will commence by providing background information on TTRPGs and their characteristics. It will then outline the methodological perspectives adopted in this study, followed by a systematic literature review utilizing the GPE Model. This comprehensive review will identify and present common factors relevant to Mega-campaigns in TTRPGs. The subsequent results will be discussed, analyzing the implications and significance of these factors within the context of Mega-campaigns. Finally, the paper will summarize the essential findings and their potential consequences.

Background

Table-top role-playing games (TTRPGs)² immerse players in a collaborative storytelling experience, where they create unique characters and embark on thrilling adventures. Guided by a referee, game master, or dungeon master (hereafter DM), players partake in interconnected campaigns unfolding as a series of linked adventures. The games employ a flexible system of rules and dice rolling (or, in some cases, cards) to simulate the challenges faced by characters and introduce an element of chance into the narrative, therefore adding mathematical language to the communication.

Scholarly works such as Fine’s *Shared Fantasy*,³ Tresca’s *The Evolution of Role-Playing Games*,⁴ Bowman’s *The Functions of Role-Playing Games*,⁵ Laycock’s *Dangerous Games*,⁶ and the initial chapters in Zagal and Deterding’s *Role-Playing Game Studies*⁷ provide comprehensive insights into the genesis and historical development of tabletop role-playing. These accounts highlight the convergence of various games and literary traditions in the 1970s that gave rise to this unique social practice and game framework.

¹ Mark Hines, “Game Mechanics and Narrative as Symbiotic, Co-Constructive Elements in *Tomb of Annihilation*.” *Analog Game Studies* X, No. 1 (2023), <https://analoggamestudies.org/2023/03/thats-just-what-the-book-says-game-mechanics-and-narrative-as-symbiotic-co-constructive-elements-in-tomb-of-annihilation/>.

² The acronym TRPG is commonly employed to refer to Table-top Role-playing Games. However, it is worth noting that it may also refer to ‘tactical roleplaying games,’ a distinct category. To maintain clarity and precision, this paper utilizes the acronym primarily in reference to Table-top Role-playing Games (hereafter TTRPGs) while acknowledging that certain concepts discussed herein can also be applied to the realm of tactical roleplaying games. Additionally, in the literature review, the term was more commonly found as “tabletop roleplaying games,” a commonly used and widely accepted term in the gaming community. It refers to roleplaying games typically played on a tabletop or other flat surface using physical components like rulebooks, character sheets, miniatures, and dice. The term is often written as “tabletop” as a single word, rather than “table-top,” to indicate that it is a specific genre or category of games. Similarly, “roleplaying” is typically written as a single word without hyphens, as it is a standard term used to describe the act of assuming and playing a fictional character’s role in a game or story. However, it is worth noting that the exact capitalization and punctuation may vary in different contexts or publications, but “tabletop roleplaying games” is the most commonly used and recognized format.

³ Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*, Paperback, First edition 1983, (University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 13-16; Cristo León, “Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds by Gary Alan Fine (2002) – Reseña [JRSSTEAM],” *Journal of Roleplaying Studies and STEAM* 2, No. 1 (2023): pp. 78-84.

⁴ Michael J. Tresca, *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games* (McFarland & Company, 2011): pp. 60-65.

⁵ Sarah Lynne Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2010), pp. 11-32.

⁶ Joseph P. Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015), pp. 186-199.

⁷ José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding, eds., *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, 1st ed (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 1-86.

In addition to this historical context, players of TTRPGs have cultivated rituals and experiences that enhance their gameplay, particularly in the context of longer and more intricate campaigns. Several factors have contributed to the evolution of role-playing within war games over time.⁸ These include advancements in gaming technology, the growing popularity of storytelling, the influence of fantasy literature and films, the desire for immersive experiences, and the inherent need for social interaction and community building. Additionally, the development of game systems and mechanics that allow players to assume character roles and make impactful decisions within the game world has been crucial to the evolution of role-playing games.

As complexity grew, a new TTRPG experience emerged involving interconnecting campaigns or multiple campaign settings and DMs. Some elements that the authors believe are characteristic of Mega-campaigns include multi-dimensional dominant characters, multiple referees, multiple systems, and crossovers between worlds. With these elements, a TTRPG may evolve into Mega-campaigns. In addition, these long-term narratives often develop complex mythologies co-created by players and DM(s) that move beyond simple worldbuilding into epic storytelling. However, there is no agreed-upon definition of Mega-campaigns within the TTRPG community.

This article establishes an operative definition for the authors based on their expertise, academic domains, and TTRPG practice. Identifying a paradigm shift is a complex process that does not occur suddenly or have a single specific origin. Instead, the authors draw from their diverse gaming experiences to identify the constituent elements in Mega-campaigns that emerged over time. Combined with the systematic literature review, the researchers identify five characteristics of Mega-campaigns: Conflict, Cooperation, Ritual, Narrative, and Multi-Dimensional Characters. These components facilitate the creation of more sophisticated and meaningful co-created narratives in TTRPGs. This led to identifying some critical research questions: What makes a successful campaign? How are components of successful Campaigns operationalized to provide a revised definition and classification of Mega-campaigns, and how do they contribute to player engagement and satisfaction? Is there anything more significant than the Campaign? What about the first fantasy campaign? Is it still an ongoing thing? Why does a successful campaign have to do with a mega-campaign?

A successful campaign in TTRPGs hinges on several key components contributing to player engagement and satisfaction. To operationalize the components of success, we can draw insights from enduring long-term campaigns like Greyhawk, Blackmoor, Glorantha, Forgotten Realms,



Figure 1: Recovered from *Afterlife Kiss*, Leo Luján, 2018, Artstation, Argentina. *Afterlife Kiss* © 2018 by Leo Luján is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

⁸ Dave Arneson and Richard Snider, *The First Fantasy Campaign: Play Aid*, 1st Edition (Judges Guild, 1977), <https://rpggeek.com/rpgitem/49927/first-fantasy-campaign>; Charles Adiel Lewis Totten, *Strategos: A Series of American Games of War*, 1st Edition (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1880).

Arduin, and Wilderlands that ran for decades, shaping how people perceive fantasy and gaming. These campaigns often utilize archetypal myths and characters, a concept thoroughly discussed in Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*.⁹ It adds a layer of narrative depth and historical resonance, thus contributing to their long-term success and cultural impact.

One crucial element is a regular and immersive schedule, which the Game Master (GM) should meticulously plan. Weekly or fortnightly sessions are the most sustainable, akin to TV episodes requiring ongoing immersion in an imaginary world. The sense of "it's all real" within the campaign world hinges on a steady commitment from both players and the GM, maintaining a sense of continuity. The success of long-term campaigns is defined by their ability to take players on a fulfilling journey. This might involve advancing characters from level 1 to 20 and beyond, exploring the intricacies of a meticulously crafted sandbox, or achieving grand goals such as being crowned king or achieving godhood. Importantly, success is not synonymous with a slow death due to waning interest; this is a fate that many campaigns tragically meet.

In this context, the concept of a mega-campaign gains significance. In contrast to a regular campaign, a mega-campaign represents an extended and epic narrative that spans an even greater duration, potentially across years. It requires a heightened level of commitment and investment from both the GM and the players. The legacy of these iconic long-term campaigns serves as a testament to the enduring appeal of mega-campaigns. In a world where distractions are numerous, the ability to maintain player engagement over the long haul, much like the legendary campaigns of yore, is indeed a remarkable achievement. Thus, a successful campaign, by extension, has much to do with the concept of a mega-campaign, as it embodies the pinnacle of tabletop RPG storytelling and immersion. It is a testament to the enduring allure of epic adventures in the realm of imagination, where players and GMs alike craft and experience narratives that stand the test of time.



Figure 2: Recovered from *Lycaon of Arcadia*, Leo Luján, 2018, Artstation, Argentina. *Lycaon of Arcadia* © 2018 by Leo Luján is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Campaigns in TTRPGs

In the TTRPG, players describe their actions and decisions within the game world within specific encounters. Then, the game master adapts the story and events based on those actions, allowing for player agency and choice. Campaigns in TTRPGs are a series of connected adventures that can be experienced over multiple game sessions. These campaigns are usually centered around a particular theme or plotline, and the players' characters are often the story's central figures. Campaigns can be as short as a single session or last for several years, with multiple characters being created and retired during the campaign. One common goal of DMs when planning a campaign is to articulate a series of adventures with the fundamental objective of

⁹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

providing experience to the player's party of adventurers to reach a determined level (i.e., the first adventure will be from levels 1 to 3, and the second from levels 3 to 5 and so on until we reach level 20).

The practice of role-playing games, exemplified by early campaigns like Tekumel, Blackmoor, and Brownstein, has the roots of the mega campaign's essence.¹⁰ These factors involve a fearless integration of diverse sources such as fantasy, war, and science fiction. Mega-campaigns have emerged due to players' aspirations to craft more extensive and intricate narratives capable of spanning years. While there is no universally accepted definition or classification for Mega-campaigns, they commonly entail interconnecting two or more campaigns or incorporating multiple DMs and campaign settings. A defining characteristic of Mega-campaigns is integrating different source materials, such as fantasy, war, and science fiction. The constitutive factors that underpin Mega-campaigns, originating from TTRPGs, are intrinsic to the essence of the initial adventures.

The Emergence of Mega-Campaigns in the Context of TTRPGs

Over time, some groups of players have taken the experience of TTRPG campaigns to another level by creating a new form of movement that the authors identify as Mega-campaigns. These Mega-campaigns involve interconnecting two or more campaigns, having more than one DM, and more than one campaign setting. In addition, Mega-campaigns aim to create longer and more complex narratives that can last years.

Mega-campaigns evolved from the desire of players to continue their characters' stories beyond the confines of a single campaign. They wanted to create a more expansive and intricate world with multiple storylines and plots that would allow them to develop characters with more depth and complexity. By linking different campaigns or having multiple DMs, Mega-campaigns can create a more immersive and dynamic world, with more opportunities for player agency and character development. Additionally, sometimes Mega-campaigns emerge from players' interest in exploring different settings or introducing reference materials outside the TTRPG realm, like movies, books, or other campaigns they have played with other groups.

Methodological Perspectives

The authors agreed to explore this topic from their particular academic domains of History, Humanities, and Theater, as well as the standard fields of Game Studies (or Ludology) and Social Sciences. The sources and conversations lead them to focus mainly on the study of games, including their design, development, and cultural impact. This, in turn, leads them to consider various disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, media studies, digital humanities, and game design. In particular, the TTRPG study falls under the subfield of Analog Game Studies, which explores non-digital games like board games, card games, and role-playing games. The authors also identified potential confusion during the literature review; using the search terms "RPG" and "Role-playing," both tabletop and therapeutic role-playing games articles were found.

The article focused on research questions pertaining to the design and experience of TTRPGs, approaching them through the theoretical frameworks of narratology, ludology, and game design. The authors further supplemented their exploration by incorporating personal experiences and qualitative examples, aiming to adopt a phenomenological approach to understanding the

¹⁰ Arneson and Snider, *The First Fantasy Campaign*.

constituent elements of Mega-campaigns. Additionally, they drew upon seminal scholarly works,¹¹ to support their analysis and discussion. The academic domain of theater can be connected to TTRPG campaigns by applying theater techniques and concepts, particularly Storytelling and Design. Conflict can be enhanced by improvisation, while Cooperation can be improved by collaboration and ensemble work. Rites can be added to the game world by creating rituals or traditions. The Narrative can be structured by using storyboarding and multiple perspectives. Multi-Dimensional Characters can be made using character analysis and development and adding backstories and motivations. The academic domain of History can be used to enhance Conflict, Cooperation, Rite, Narrative, and Multi-Dimensional Characters in TTRPG campaigns. Historical events and cultures can inspire conflicts, alliances, rituals, traditions, and narrative structure. Multi-Dimensional Characters can be created by drawing from historical contexts and social structures. Historical research can ensure accuracy and authenticity in the game world. Connecting History with TTRPG campaigns can deepen players' understanding and appreciation of historical events and cultures.

This methodology includes a Systematic Literature Review¹² and a Delphi approach¹³ for expert opinions on the definition of Mega-campaigns and their components.

Literature Review and the GPE Model

The authors agree with Frey's definition of Literature Review: "The term literature review can be viewed as both what is read and the process that has been undertaken to produce the work in question."¹⁴ Specifically, the authors selected the methodology of "Systematic Reviews of the Literature,"¹⁵ which aligns perfectly with the "General Particular Specific model (GPE)"¹⁶ developed by the author.¹⁷ In addition, this review was used to identify the most relevant studies in the fields of RPGs, Game Theory, and Narrative.¹⁸

¹¹ Such as Jonathan Gottschall, "The Positives—and Perils—of Storytelling," *Harvard Business Review*, 8 Feb. 2022, <https://hbr.org/podcast/2022/02/the-positives-and-perils-of-storytelling>; Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008); Christopher Robichaud, *Dungeons & Dragons and Philosophy: Read and Gain Advantage on All Wisdom Checks* (Chichester, England: Wiley Blackwell, 2014); J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays (First Edition)*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (George Allen & Unwin, 1983); José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding, eds., *Role-Playing Game Studies*.

¹² Jill Jesson, *Doing Your Literature Review: Traditional and Systematic Techniques, First Edition* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2011).

¹³ Ernst Theodor Wilhelm Hoffmann, *Delphi Saemtliche Werke von E. T. A. Hoffmann* (Delphi Classics, 2013).

¹⁴ Bruce B. Frey, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Measurement, and Evaluation, First Edition* (SAGE Publications, 2018), pp. 983, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781506326139>.

¹⁵ Svenja Bedenlier, Melissa Bond, Katja Buntins, Olaf Zawacki-Richter, y Michael Kerres, "Learning by Doing? Reflections on Conducting a Systematic Review in the Field of Educational Technology," *Systematic Reviews in Educational Research: Methodology, Perspectives and Application*, edited by Olaf Zawacki-Richter, Michael Kerres, Svenja Bedenlier, Melissa Bond, and Katja Buntins (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2020), pp. 111-27, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-27602-7_7; Julian Higgins, James Thomas, Jacqueline Chandler, Miranda Cumpston, Tianjing Li, Matthew Page, and Vivian Welch, eds., *Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions, Second Edition*. 2nd ed. (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2019), <http://www.training.cochrane.org/handbook>.

¹⁶ The name of the model in Spanish is "Modelo General Particular Especifico (GPE)."

¹⁷ Yáñez León, Cristo Ernesto, Patricia del Carmen Gerónimo Ramos, Yessica Monserrat Borjas Mayorga, y Víctor Hugo Guzmán Zarate, "Capítulo 14.- Modelo General Particular Especifico (GPE): Una Herramienta Convergente para la Revisión Sistemática de la Literatura," *Ciências socialmente aplicáveis: integrando saberes e abrindo caminhos VI* (Editora Artemis, 2022), pp. 173-83. https://doi.org/10.37572/EdArt_16122271214.

¹⁸ Ron Edwards, "RPG Theory: The Big Model or Forge Theory, *Wikipedia*, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ron_Edwards_\(game_designer\)#The_Forge_and_Adept_Press](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ron_Edwards_(game_designer)#The_Forge_and_Adept_Press); Gary Alan

This study's SLR followed a rigorous approach to identify relevant studies and gather data for analysis. The process involved several stages, including defining the research question, developing search terms and search strategies, screening and selecting relevant studies, and extracting data from selected studies.

First, the research question was defined, and search terms and strategies were developed to identify relevant studies. Then, the search was conducted across several electronic databases, including academic journals, books, and other relevant sources.

Second, the identified studies underwent a thorough screening and assessment to determine their eligibility, using predefined criteria for inclusion and exclusion. This screening process included an initial evaluation of the titles and abstracts of the studies, followed by a comprehensive review of the full texts of the chosen studies.

Third, the selected studies were systematically reviewed, and relevant data were extracted and synthesized. The data extraction involved identifying critical information such as study design, sample size, data collection methods, and findings.

The findings from the SLR were synthesized with the data collected from the qualitative methods to develop a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. In addition, the systematic literature review helped identify key themes and areas for further exploration while providing a broader context for the study. Finally, the author divided the SLR into three phases: Planning, Managing, and Reporting.

SLR Phase I: Planning

The systematic review of the literature using the GPE model had three phases. First, the authors structured the GPE model matrix in the planning phase to align with the "general SLR" and set the review's objective to inform the research questions about Mega-campaigns in TTRPGs. The research questions included:

- Q1. – How many documents exist in the Eric, Scopus, JSTOR, EBSCO, ProQuest, Wiley, Google Scholar, and Web of Science databases?
- Q2. – What contexts (academic, social, cultural, etc.) have been the subject of study in the last five years (2018-2023)?



Figure 3: Recovered from *The captain goes down with the ship*, Leo Luján, 2018, Artstation, Argentina. *The captain goes down with the ship* © 2018 by Leo Luján is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds* (University of Chicago Press, 1983); Henri Hakkarainen and Jaakko Stenros, "RPG Frameworks and Models: Blast from the Past: Meilahti," *Jaakko Stenros* (blog), 2 Aug. 2010, <https://jaakkostenros.wordpress.com/2010/08/02/blast-from-the-past-meilahti/>; Lars Konzack, "RPG Frameworks and Models: Wu-Ge Model," *Academia.edu*, 2015, <https://www.academia.edu/15815581>.

- Q3.- What are the constitutive factors of successful campaigns in tabletop role-playing games, and how do they contribute to player engagement and satisfaction?
- Q3.1.- How do Mega-campaigns differ from traditional TTRPG campaigns regarding their constitutive factors, player engagement, and narrative complexity?
- Q3.2.- What are the constitutive factors of Mega-campaigns in tabletop role-playing games, and how can they be operationalized to provide a clear definition and classification of Mega-campaigns?

The authors implemented a research protocol to create the review and determine how to evaluate the most relevant studies identified in the literature review. The first step was to identify the databases available to the researchers, which depended on their respective countries, the US¹⁹ and Argentina.²⁰ The second step was to select the databases for the search, which resulted in the consensus of nine databases, with ProQuest, ERIC, and SciELO being the main ones. Search terms were assigned to each research question.

Table 1. Search Terms for the Inclusion Criteria

Research Question 1	Research Question 2	Research Question 3
"Tabletop role-playing games"	"Campaigns"	"Campaigns"
"Campaigns"	"Traditional TTRPG campaigns"	"Tabletop role-playing games"
"Successful campaigns"	"Constitutive factors"	"Constitutive factors"
"Player engagement"	"Tabletop role-playing games"	"Game length"
"Player satisfaction"	"Narrative complexity"	"Story arcs"
"Gaming experience"	"Story arcs"	"Multiple storylines"
"Game mechanics"	"Game length"	"Character development"
"Narrative structure"	"Character development"	"Player engagement"
"Constitutive factors"	"Multi-Dimensional Characters"	"Narrative structure"
"Fantasy games"	"Multiple storylines"	"Operationalization"

¹⁹ "Business Source Premier," EBSCO Information Services, 2020, <https://www.ebsco.com/products/research-databases/business-source-premier>; "ERIC – Education Resources Information Center," ERIC Home Page, 2020, <https://eric.ed.gov/>; "Research Library Business Applications," Gartner, 2020, <https://www.gartner.com/explore/research-library?ref=qlinks>; JSTOR, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/>; Merriam-Webster, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>; "ProQuest Ebook Central," ProQuest, 2020, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libdb.njit.edu:8443/lib/njit/home.action>; Scopus, 2020, <https://www.scopus.com/home.uri>; Wiley Online, 2020, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/>.

²⁰ "Biblioteca Digital EXATEC, Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (ITESM), 2021, <https://biblioteca.tec.mx/c.php?g=1051921&p=7637528>; "Real Academia Española," RAE-ASALE, 2020, <https://www.rae.es/>; "Sistema de Información Científica Redalyc, Red de Revistas Científicas," Redalyc.org, 2021, <https://www.redalyc.org/home.oa>; "SciELO – Scientific Electronic Library Online," SciELO, 2021, <http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php>; "Springer Open Journals," Springer Nature, 2021, <https://www.springeropen.com/journals>.

We explored each term individually from a list of 18 unique words to gain a sense of their recurrence in the databases. This initial search resulted in the identification of 28 preliminary documents. We then performed a co-occurrence analysis with keywords as the unit of analysis and *full counting* as the counting method. We set the threshold for inclusion at three occurrences, and out of 166 keywords analyzed, 7 met the threshold. The link strength was weighted from 1 to 4 (see Figure 4).

Our analysis identified seven keywords that met the threshold and had a link strength of 1 to 4. However, we need to know these keywords and their link strengths to provide more specific feedback on our analysis. Additionally, we suggest further refining the search strategy based on the results of our study to identify additional relevant literature.

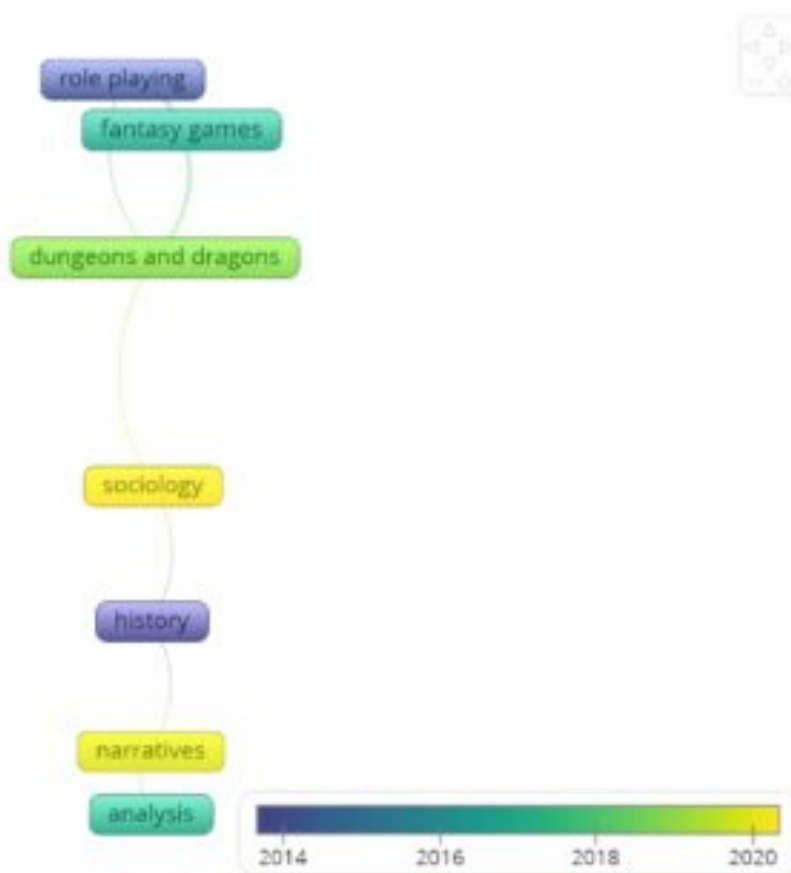


Figure 4: Exploration of the bibliographic data with VOSviewer by keywords.

This informed the next phase of the SLR, first by framing the publication date from 2014 to 2023 and second by identifying preliminary terms: Tabletop role-playing games, Fantasy games, analysis, and Narrative.

SLR Phase II: Managing Resources

To manage our resources, we began by using the following inclusion criteria: any field containing "Search Term 1" AND any area containing "Search Term 2" AND any field containing "Search Term 3," and so on. We created the first search based on the initial terms identified in the co-occurrence analysis. We selected a series of four *Terms*, and the review yielded a range of resources, including

books and peer-reviewed articles. It's worth noting that the book *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*²¹ is outside the scope of this review, although we identified several book reviews and articles that reference this source. Table 2 presents the search terms we used and the most relevant authorities we identified.

Table 2. Preliminary Terms and Resources

Terms	Book
Any field contains "Tabletop role-playing games," AND Any field contains "fantasy games," AND Any field contains "analysis," AND Any field contains "narratives."	<i>Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations</i> (Zagal and Deterding 2018)
Any field contains "Tabletop role-playing games," AND Any field contains "fantasy games," AND Any field contains "Game studies," AND Any field contains "analysis."	<i>Dread Trident: Tabletop Role-playing Games and the Modern Fantastic</i> (Carbonell 2019)
Any field contains "Role-playing," AND Any field contains "Fantasy," AND Any field contains "game," AND Any field contains "worlds."	<i>Strictly Fantasy: The Cultural Roots of Tabletop Role-playing Games</i> (Nachtwey and Kapell 2021)

We searched based on the initial terms and identified 23 unique documents. We then performed another co-occurrence analysis using keywords as the unit of analysis and *full counting* as the counting method. We set the inclusion threshold at four occurrences and found that out of the 234 keywords analyzed, 8 met the threshold. The link strength was weighted from 9 to 18 (see Figure 5). Our analysis identified eight keywords that met the threshold and had a total link strength weighted from 9 to 18. We noted that the terms "role-playing," "fantasy games," and "games" appeared again, but more importantly, we found the subjects of social sciences, cultural studies, popular culture, and fiction. With the information collected in this step, we can refine our search strategy by adding terms to the exclusion criteria.

²¹ Fine, *Shared Fantasy*.

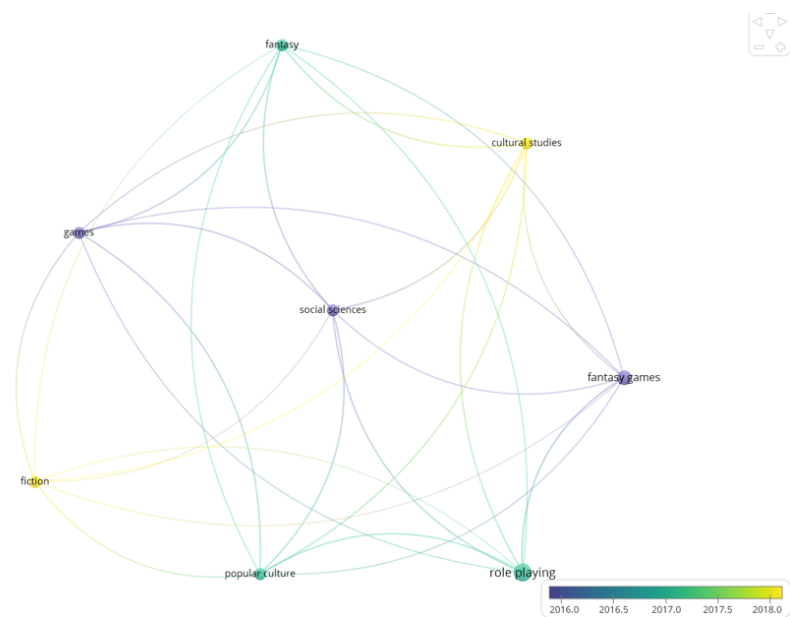


Figure 5: Exploration of the preliminary terms with VOSviewer by keywords.

For the exclusion criteria, we use the following: NOT title contains “Exclusion term 1,” NOT title contains “Exclusion term 2,” NOT title contains “Exclusion term 3”, etc. The list of exclusion terms was identified from the preliminary terms (see Table 3).

Table 3. Search terms for the exclusion criteria

Exclusion terms
Blockchains
Descriptive statistics
Marketing
Nintendo video games
Psychology
Photosynthesis
Research Methodology
Soft skills
Video game industry
Video games history
Video games in education
War games

Not title contains "MMORPG."
Not title contains "video games."
Not title contains "computer games."
Not title contains "virtual reality."

SLR Phase II: Managing Exclusion and Inclusion Criteria

For the search parameters, we started by including all documents published between 2014 and 2023 that had the following criteria: any field containing "Search Term 1" AND any field containing "Search Term 2" AND any field containing "Search Term 3, AND any field containing "Search Term 4". We then excluded results by narrowing the period from 2018 to 2023 and adding the inclusion term "(Publication Date) from 2018 to 2023." Additionally, we used the following exclusion criteria: NOT title contains "Exclusion term 1," NOT title contains "Exclusion term 2," NOT title contains "Exclusion term 3". The list of exclusion terms was identified from the preliminary terms (see Table 3). Next, we filtered the results by books and peer-reviewed articles. Additionally, all documents were filtered by relevance, and we created a record of the top 3 to 5 results from each search. This resulted in 23 books, 12 peer-reviewed articles, 2 conference papers, and 4 other documents across various databases, including Eric, Scopus, JSTOR, EBSCO, ProQuest, Wiley, Google Scholar, and Web of Science databases.

SLR Phase III: Reporting Results

Thanks to the preliminary analysis of the documents, the first important finding was that the dimensions of conflict, collaboration, and Narrative appear meaningful in the initial examination. We were able to approximate a selection of more relevant documents to explore and answer the research questions of the SLR. Table-top Role-playing Games (TTRPGs) are games where players assume fictional characters' roles and collaboratively create a story through improvisational storytelling. Campaign design in TTRPGs refers to the process of creating the world, setting, and story that players will interact with over multiple game sessions. The scholarly literature on the constitutive elements of campaign design in TTRPGs can be summarized as follows:

- **Worldbuilding:** Creating a fictional world is a fundamental aspect of campaign design in TTRPGs. This encompasses establishing the game world's setting, geography, History, cultures, and societies.
- **Story:** The central focus of a TTRPG is the development of a captivating narrative that sustains player engagement across multiple sessions. Campaign design involves crafting a compelling plot, along with well-defined characters and events that unfold throughout the game.
- **Characters:** TTRPGs heavily rely on interaction with player and non-player characters (NPCs), making their design a crucial component of campaign development. This entails the creation of distinctive and memorable characters that players will encounter and engage with throughout the game.

- **Rules:** TTRPGs operate under a specific set of rules that govern gameplay. Campaign design entails selecting or creating appropriate controls to determine the outcomes of player actions. This encompasses combat mechanics, skill checks, and other game-related aspects.
- **Setting the Tone:** Establishing the desired tone and atmosphere is vital in creating a consistent and immersive experience for players. Factors such as music, lighting, and other sensory cues contribute to setting the desired tone within the game.
- **Player Agency:** TTRPGs thrive on collaborative gameplay, and effective campaign design should provide players with an agency. This allows them the freedom to make meaningful choices that significantly impact the game's story and eventual outcome.

In summary, campaign design in TTRPGs involves the integration of a coherent world, engaging storylines, and well-developed characters, enabling players to immerse themselves in a collaborative storytelling experience fully. Successful campaign design necessitates a balance of creativity, careful planning, and adaptability to accommodate the unpredictable nature of player interactions.

SLR Selection Criteria for the Articles to be Included in the Review

The GPE model allows us to integrate a literature map where the most appropriate sources are identified to explain the dimensions identified initially, so the model serves as a planning and evaluation tool (see Table 4).

Table 4. GPE Model as a tool for evaluating the identified literature.

	Factors that contribute to effective campaigns in TTRPGs		
	General	Particular	Specific
General	[1] Huizinga, J. (2014). [2] Caillois, R. (2001).	[5] Totten, C. A. L. (1880). [6] Tresca, M. J. (2011).	[10] Laycock, J. P. (2015).
Particular	[3] Zagal, J. P., & Deterding, S. (Eds.). (2018).	[7] Arneson, D., & Snider, R. (1977). [8] Fine, G. A. (2002).	[11] Torres, D., Núñez Pacheco, R., & López, B. (2018). [12] Morgan, G. M., & Graves, C. (Directors). (2019).
Specific	[4] Mizer, N. J. (2019).	[9] Appelcline, S. (2014).	[13] Coe, D. (2017).
	Constitutive factors of Mega-campaigns in TTRPGs		

The list provides a comprehensive overview of scholarly works related to the study of role-playing games and games in general. These sources are grouped into six dimensions: Conflict, Cooperation, rite, Narrative, multi-dimensional characters, and contextual history/other.

1. Under the Conflict dimension, the list includes "*Strategos: A Series of American Games of War*" by C. A. L. Totten (1880), one of the earliest commercial wargames designed to simulate military conflicts. Also listed is "*The First Fantasy Campaign: Play Aid* (1st Edition)" by Dave Arneson and Richard Snider (1977), which provides rules and guidelines for running a fantasy campaign in an RPG system that includes rules for combat and conflict.
2. Under the Cooperation dimension, the list includes "*Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*" by Gary Alan Fine (2002), which examines the role of RPGs in creating and sustaining communities of players. The list also includes "Why People Play Tabletop Role-playing Games: A Grounded Theory of Becoming as Motivation" by Daniel Coe (2017), which identifies the desire for social interaction and Cooperation with others as a critical factor in players' engagement with the game.
3. Under the Rite/Ritual dimension, the list includes "*Homo Ludens*" by Johan Huizinga (Huizinga, 2014), which examines the characteristics and functions of play across different forms of human expression and interprets play as a form of rite or ritual. Also listed is "*Man, Play and Games*" by Roger Caillois (2001), which explores the nature of play and games and their relationship to other social and cultural phenomena.
4. Under the Narrative dimension, the list includes "*Tabletop Role-Playing Games and the Experience of Imagined Worlds*" by Nicholas J. Mizer (2019), which focuses on how players construct and participate in fictional worlds. The list also includes "*Narrativas transmedia, literatura y videojuegos en la cultura*" by Daniel Torres, Rodrigo Núñez Pacheco, and Beatriz López (2018), which examines the role of transmedia storytelling in contemporary culture.
5. Under the Multi-Dimensional Characters dimension, the list includes "*Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*," edited by José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (2018), which examines various aspects of RPGs, including character development and representation. Also listed is "*Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds*" by Joseph P. Laycock (2015), which studies the cultural and religious factors that contributed to fears about the influence of games on youth.
6. Under the Contextual History/Other dimension, the list includes "*The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games*" by Michael J. Tresca (2011), which provides a historical survey of the development of RPGs with a focus on the fantasy genre. Also listed is "*Designers & Dragons: The 70s: A History of the Role-playing Game Industry*" by Shannon Appelcline (2014), which provides a historical survey of the RPG industry during the 1970s. Lastly, "*Secrets of Blackmoor: The True History of Dungeons & Dragons*" directed by Griffin M. Morgan and David L. Graves (2019), is a documentary film that explores the origins of the RPG Dungeons & Dragons and its connections to the early History of computer gaming and wargaming.

Identifying Common Factors in Campaigns for TTRPG

For several reasons, identifying the common factors in campaigns for tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) is crucial. Firstly, it helps game designers, game masters, and players understand the key elements contributing to successful campaigns. By identifying these factors, they can create and structure their campaigns to maximize enjoyment, engagement, and overall player satisfaction. Secondly, recognizing the *common factors* allows for developing best practices and guidelines that can be shared within the TTRPG community. This knowledge exchange promotes the growth and

improvement of TTRPGs, fostering a collective understanding of what makes a campaign compelling and memorable. Lastly, identifying common factors enables researchers to study and analyze the impact of these elements on player experiences, providing insights that can inform future game design, theory development, and academic discourse surrounding TTRPGs.

On Conflict, Cooperation, Ritual, and Narrative

Conflict, Cooperation, ritual, and Narrative are integral elements of TTRPGs that contribute to the gaming experience. Conflict and Cooperation provide players with challenges and opportunities to work together, while ritual and Narrative create a sense of immersion and help to build the story.

- **Conflict** can take many forms in TTRPGs, including combat, puzzles, and social challenges. It can also create character development and growth opportunities as players confront difficult situations.
- **Cooperation** is essential for success in TTRPGs, as players must work together to overcome challenges and achieve their goals. This can include teamwork in combat, problem-solving, and strategic planning.
- **Rituals**, such as character creation and game preparation, help to establish a sense of routine and structure in TTRPGs. These rituals can also enhance immersion and create a connection between players and their characters.
- **The narrative** is the backbone of TTRPGs, as it provides the story and context for the game. A well-crafted description can draw players in and keep them engaged while allowing for character development and exploration.



Figure 6: Recovered from Odin – Watercolor Commission – Process, Leo Luján, 2018, Artstation, Argentina. 2018 by Leo Luján is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

The Importance of “Multi-Dimensional Characters”

One crucial factor in successful TTRPG campaigns is the creation of multi-dimensional characters. These characters are more than just a set of stats and abilities – they have complex personalities, motivations, and backstories that contribute to the overall Narrative and gameplay. Multi-dimensional characters can create more engaging role-playing experiences, as players can explore their characters’ thoughts, feelings, and relationships with other characters. They can also create opportunities for character growth and development throughout a campaign.

Players can create multi-dimensional characters by considering their character’s personality traits, flaws, goals, and relationships with other characters. By giving their characters depth and complexity, players can enhance the overall storytelling experience and create more memorable campaigns.

Results

What makes a successful campaign? How are components of successful Campaigns operationalized to provide a clear definition and classification of Mega-campaigns, and how do they contribute to player engagement and satisfaction?”

The researchers utilized the results of the SLR combined with their analysis of TTRPG campaigns to identify the key components contributing to a successful campaign. These components have been operationalized to provide a clear definition and classification of Mega-campaigns, and they play a significant role in enhancing player engagement and satisfaction.

Components of a successful campaign include:

- Well-constructed and engaging storylines: A compelling narrative that captivates players and keeps them invested throughout the campaign.
- Consistent and detailed setting: A well-defined world with rich lore and a coherent framework that enhances immersion.
- Balance of combat, exploration, and social interaction: Providing various gameplay elements to cater to player preferences and create a well-rounded experience.
- Clear and fair rules: A transparent system ensures fairness, consistency, and smooth gameplay.
- A diverse cast of characters: Including various exciting and dynamic characters that players can interact with, fostering depth and diversity within the game world.
- Strong player engagement and investment: Encouraging players to actively participate, contribute to the story, and develop their characters.
- Collaboration and communication between players and the game master: A cooperative, interactive relationship that promotes teamwork, problem-solving, and compelling storytelling.

Definition of Mega-Campaigns

Mega-campaigns in TTRPGs surpass the conventional structure of connected adventures or campaigns. They are characterized by the following:

- Extensive duration: Mega-campaigns span a significant period, often months or years, allowing for long-term character development and complex narratives.
- Intricate complexity and interconnectivity: These campaigns feature complex plotlines, multiple story arcs, and interwoven elements that create a cohesive and expansive gaming experience.
- Collaboration and shared mythology: Players and game masters collaborate to establish a shared mythology within the campaign, fostering a collective storytelling experience.

- In-game and out-of-game rituals: Rituals such as character creation, game preparation, and in-game ceremonies enhance immersion, establish a routine, and strengthen community among players.
- Multi-dimensional characters: Characters with intricate backgrounds, motivations, and relationships contribute to the depth and richness of the Mega-Campaign.
- Conflict and Cooperation: Mega-campaigns incorporate significant elements of conflict and Cooperation, creating a world of tension and peril where players must work together to overcome challenges and shape the Narrative.

Contribution to Player Engagement and Satisfaction

The identified components of successful campaigns, including those specific to Mega-campaigns, significantly contribute to player engagement and satisfaction. A well-constructed and engaging campaign with a compelling narrative and immersive setting captures players' interest and investment. The balance of different gameplay elements provides variety and caters to diverse player preferences. Transparent and fair rules ensure a smooth and enjoyable experience—the presence of a diverse cast of characters and opportunities for player engagement foster emotional connection and investment. Collaboration and communication between players and the game master promote teamwork, problem-solving, and compelling storytelling. With their extended duration, complexity, and interconnectivity, Mega-campaigns provide players with a deep and immersive experience, allowing for character development, intricate narratives, and shared mythology. These elements collectively contribute to player engagement and satisfaction, creating memorable and fulfilling TTRPG campaigns.



Figure 7: Recovered from Quetzalcoatl's golden egg, Leo Luján, 2018, Artstation, Argentina. Quetzalcoatl's golden egg © 2018 by Leo Luján is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

What is a Mega-Campaign?

Mega-campaigns in TTRPGs surpass the conventional structure of connected adventures or campaigns. They are distinguished by their extensive duration, intricate complexity, and interconnectivity. Mega-campaigns involve multiple game masters and players, typically.

A key characteristic of Mega-campaigns is the high level of collaboration between players and game masters. These campaigns aim to establish a shared mythology featuring complex narrative arcs, recurring themes and motifs, and a rich in-game history of events. Furthermore, players and game masters work together to construct a believable and captivating game world, complete with multiple factions and characters that engage with each other in meaningful ways.

In-game and out-of-game Rituals also play a significant role in Mega-campaigns. These rituals can encompass specific dice rolls or the creation of elaborate backstories for characters. In addition, rituals contribute to fostering a sense of community among players and game masters and cultivating a shared language and understanding of the game world.

Another defining aspect of Mega-campaigns is the inclusion of multi-dimensional characters. Players are encouraged to develop characters with intricate backgrounds, personalities, and motivations. These characters are not static but evolve and change throughout the campaign, fostering player investment in their storylines and enhancing overall engagement with the campaign narrative.

Lastly, conflict and Cooperation are central elements of Mega-campaigns. Players and game masters collaborate to shape a world of tension and peril. Conflict can arise between various factions or characters within the game world and among players. However, Cooperation is also essential, as players and game masters work together to surmount challenges and achieve their shared objectives.

Classification of Mega-Campaigns

Mega-campaigns can be classified into four broad categories based on their structure and organization: linear, branching, sandbox, and transcendental. We can draw a parallel between the classification of Mega-campaigns and four well-known *mythoi* (comedy, tragedy, romance/epic, irony), aligning with the structural level of narrative in the context of tabletop RPGs.

Linear Mega-campaigns follow a predetermined story arc that players and game masters adhere to. While some flexibility may exist in how players accomplish their goals, the overall narrative trajectory is predetermined. As a result, these campaigns prioritize storytelling and character development over open-world exploration.

Linear Mega-campaigns correspond to the *mythoi* where heroes begin relatively well, face a threatening difficulty, and ultimately triumph. This structure aligns with the comedy archetype, where the narrative starts on a positive note, encounters challenges, and concludes positively. In tabletop RPGs, linear Mega-campaigns provide a predetermined narrative trajectory, emphasizing storytelling and character development while offering players a sense of coherence and direction.

Branching Mega-campaigns feature multiple story arcs that players can choose to pursue. Game masters create various paths for players to follow, allowing them to select their desired direction. These campaigns emphasize open-world exploration and discovery.

Branching Mega-campaigns mirror the opposite narrative structure, where the heroes begin at their peak as leaders but undergo isolation and potential sacrifice. This archetype aligns with the concept of tragedy, where the protagonists, initially in a favorable position, face challenges that lead to a downward spiral. In tabletop RPGs, branching Mega-campaigns offer players choices and multiple story arcs to explore, fostering open-world exploration and the exercise of free will.

Sandbox Mega-campaigns lack a predefined story arc. Instead, players and game masters collaborate in crafting a world, and players are free to explore and interact with that world in any way they wish. Consequently, these campaigns prioritize open-world exploration and discovery rather than storytelling.

Sandbox Mega-campaigns defy predefined narrative structures, allowing players and GMs to collaborate in shaping the game world. This concept resonates with the idea of epic narratives where great leaders can emerge but start as individuals who ought to forge their destinies. In tabletop RPGs, sandbox Mega-campaigns prioritize open-world exploration and player-driven storytelling.

Transcendental Mega-campaigns transcend the boundaries of traditional gameplay and immerse players in a transformative and immersive gaming experience. These campaigns delve into philosophical, existential, or metaphysical themes, challenging players to explore profound concepts and contemplate the nature of reality within the game world.

In transcendental Mega-campaigns, the focus shifts from traditional storytelling and open-world exploration to a more reflective and thought-provoking gameplay experience. A journey of self-discovery and personal growth replaces the predetermined narrative trajectory. Instead, game masters create intricate scenarios that encourage players to question their beliefs, confront moral dilemmas, and explore the deeper meanings behind the game's events and challenges.

These campaigns often incorporate symbolism, allegory, and abstract concepts to engage players in a reflective and transformative journey. They may involve non-linear narrative structures, dreamlike sequences, or encounters with otherworldly beings. The emphasis is on creating a transcendent experience that challenges players' perceptions and expands their understanding of the game world and themselves.

Transcendental Mega-campaigns offer a unique and unconventional approach to tabletop role-playing games, providing players with an opportunity for intellectual exploration and personal introspection. They cater to individuals who seek a deeper level of engagement and meaning within the gaming experience, inviting them to transcend the boundaries of traditional gameplay and venture into uncharted territories of the mind and soul.

Transcendental Mega-campaigns, while not directly tied to a particular mythos, delve into profound philosophical and existential themes. These campaigns challenge players to explore abstract concepts and the nature of reality within the game world, shifting the focus from traditional storytelling to introspection and personal growth. They represent a unique and unconventional narrative form within tabletop RPGs, inviting players to transcend the boundaries of conventional gameplay and venture into uncharted territories of the mind and soul.

By aligning the archetypal mythoi of narrative structure with the four distinct categories of Mega-campaigns, we unlock a rich and nuanced framework that sheds light on the complex tapestry of storytelling within tabletop RPGs. This synthesis emphasizes the intricate interplay between these archetypal narratives and the diverse campaign structures that tabletop RPG enthusiasts craft, offering a fresh lens through which scholars can analyze the captivating and immersive narratives that unfold within this largely uncharted facet of the gaming world.

Through this approach, scholars and enthusiasts gain new analytical tools to dissect and understand the long, immersive storytelling experiences these Mega-campaigns provide. It allows us to appreciate how the resonance between narrative archetypes and campaign structures influences player engagement, choices, and overall satisfaction. Such insights are invaluable for

comprehending the depth and breadth of tabletop RPGs as a storytelling medium, as they enable us to explore the intricate relationships between narrative traditions and gameplay, contributing to a deeper appreciation of the art of narrative in the context of these dynamic and evolving games. This framework enriches our understanding of tabletop RPGs and paves the way for innovative storytelling and gameplay experiences, inviting further exploration and research into this fascinating realm of interactive storytelling.

Comparing and Contrasting Campaigns and Mega-Campaigns

The concept of a campaign was introduced in the 1970s by Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax, the original creators of the role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*. Their manuals referred to the term "fantasy campaign."²² Traditional campaigns consisted of a series of interconnected but distinct adventures. In contrast, Mega-campaigns represented an ongoing gaming experience that unfolded over months or even years. *Blackmoor* is recognized as the first Mega-Campaign, although it was not explicitly referred to as such.

In Mega-campaigns, players developed characters and guided them through a continuously evolving fantasy world, making decisions that influenced the story and game environment. Additionally, Mega-campaigns allowed players to create their adventures and challenges, offering greater customization and freedom within the game.

Conclusion

The systematic literature review on TTRPG campaigns contributes valuable insights to Analog Game Studies. It sheds light on the essential elements contributing to effective campaigns: Conflict, Cooperation, Ritual, and Narrative. Effective campaigns in TTRPGs are characterized by well-crafted storylines, immersive settings, balanced gameplay mechanics, clear rules, diverse and multi-dimensional characters, and active player engagement. The concepts of conflict and Cooperation within TTRPG campaigns provide players with challenges and opportunities to collaborate and work together towards shared goals. Ritualistic elements and narrative development further enhance the immersive experience and deepen the storytelling aspects of TTRPG campaigns. With their extended duration, intricate complexity, and interconnectivity, Mega-campaigns represent a significant evolution within TTRPG campaigns. These campaigns go beyond the conventions of conventional gameplay, incorporating collaboration, ritualistic elements, multi-dimensional characters, and a strong focus on conflict and Cooperation. By understanding these factors and classifications, game masters and players can create and participate in immersive and captivating TTRPG campaigns. This knowledge opens up possibilities for enhanced player experiences, richer storytelling, and producing engaging and memorable analog game experiences. It also contributes to the broader discussions in the field, offering new insights and perspectives that resonate with scholars and game designers alike.

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Art: Leonardo Lujan, dibujante

²² Arneson and Snider. *The First Fantasy Campaign*.

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