

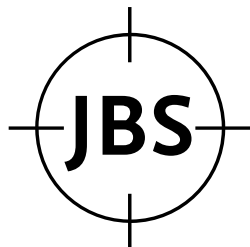
Licenced to Play

Espionage Role-Playing Games in the Late Cold War Era

PHILIP GUERTY

In 1983, game publisher Avalon Hill released *James Bond 007: Role Playing in Her Majesty's Secret Service*. Hoping to ride the wave of role-playing game (RPG) popularity following the success of Tactical Studies Rule's (TSR) *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*) in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the creators of the *James Bond 007* game believed that the Bond world was appealing to gamers in some unique ways. Unlike *D&D*, which was set in a medieval fantasy world, James Bond's world was the present-day. As the game designer Gerry Klug notes, although James Bond's world was fantastic at times, James Bond "operated in the real world" and faced real-world challenges (1983, 94). The heroes were not knights, and the villains were not monsters or wizards. The spaces where these imaginary adventures happened were real places that players could find on a map, watch on television, or read about in magazines.

Geopolitics was the most influential real-world element of the time, especially during the Cold War (Funnell and Dodds 2017; Cordle 2017). Whether in the forefront or the background, the Cold War was always present in the original Fleming novels and in John Gardner's continuation books published throughout the 1980s. It was also prominent in the movies. In *For Your Eyes Only* (1981), Bond races to stop the Automatic Targeting Attack Communicator (ATAC) from falling into the hands of the Soviets; and in *Octopussy* (1983) Bond thwarts a rogue Soviet



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general's plan to explode a nuclear bomb in West Germany. Unsurprisingly, the Cold War influenced the game experience as players could craft adventures behind the Iron Curtain or other places worldwide.

However, the Cold War's influence reached beyond just the narrative setting or as a game device. It provided a symbolic frame through which the game participants could play with more prominent themes such as democracy, authoritarianism, communism, and capitalism. The Cold War atmosphere reached the individual level as tensions that manifested on the global stage impacted people's identities and worldviews. The Cold War profoundly influenced culture at the time (cf. Bryant 2016). Culture, as defined by sociologist Wendy Griswold, "refers to the expressive side of human life – in other words, to behaviour, objects, and ideas that appear to express, or to stand for, something else" (2013, 11). As such, the meaning and manipulation of symbols lies at the heart of culture. In the case of the Cold War, the more prominent geopolitical themes were culturally filtered down to the community level and even to the individual. Espionage role-playing games appealed to young people because they offered them a way to understand and exercise agency in the more significant events they witnessed occurring around them, especially in the first few years of the 1980s when Cold War tensions re-emerged.

This article demonstrates that the *James Bond 007* game and other espionage role-playing games were, to borrow a phrase from Griswold, "cultural objects" that can be analysed as "smaller parts of the interrelated" more extensive culture system of the early 1980s, especially youth culture (12). To understand that more extensive system, however, the totality of parts leading up to the creation of the object also must be analysed. This analysis will be done using Griswold's Cultural Diamond, which includes four main parts: the Social World, Cultural Object, Producers, and Receivers. For this analysis, the Social World component is life during the Cold War, especially throughout the early 1980s, emphasising how the primary receivers, young consumers, viewed this world. The Cultural Object is the *James Bond 007* game and other espionage role-playing games, especially TSR's *Top Secret*. The Producers of the Cultural Object include the writers and publishers, and the Receivers are the young players and the game administrators.

THE SOCIAL WORLD: THE COLD WAR, ESPIONAGE, AND POPULAR CULTURE IN THE EARLY 1980S

Let's dance in style, let's dance for a while
Heaven can wait we're only watching the skies

Hoping for the best, but expecting the worst
Are you gonna drop the bomb or not?

Let us die young, or let us live forever.
We don't have the power, but we never say never.

These lyrics from the song “Forever Young” (1984) by Alphaville capture a young person's experience growing up in the early 1980s when it seemed that at any moment a nuclear war could start. Other songs at the time carried similar messages, including “99 Red Balloons” (1983) by Nena, Modern English's “I Melt with You” (1982), and “Russians” (1985) by Sting. “Enola Gay” (1980) by Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark (OMD) included a very strong, anti-nuclear message. Other famous artists like ABC and The Thompson Twins also released songs with Cold War themes.

From a contemporary perspective, it is easy to minimise the daily mindset of a teenager living during a period of intensifying fear of nuclear war and the apparent escalation of the Cold War during the early 1980s. The coming to power of both Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan led to heightened rhetoric about a conventional and nuclear arms race, including Reagan's use of the phrase “evil empire” when referring to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). In 1983, Reagan's national address introducing his Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) caused even further tensions. In the United States, middle and high school classes often contained units on nuclear winter. The “Protect and Survive” campaign in Great Britain used print advertisements and other media to teach families how to prepare their homes for nuclear war. The Cold War seemed ever-present in popular culture.

Much like music, common themes in movies included war, nuclear war, and espionage. In *Red Dawn* (1984), Soviet and Cuban troops invaded and occupied the United States. *Wargames* (1983), starring Matthew Broderick and Ally Sheedy, was about a computer programme nearly causing a nuclear apocalypse. Other espionage films were released, including *Firefox* (1982), *The Falcon and the Snowman* (1985), and *The Osterman Weekend* (1983). Sylvester Stallone and Chuck Norris starred in the Cold War-themed *Rambo* and the *Missing in Action* series. Rocky Balboa became a Cold War warrior in *Rocky IV* (1985). Post-apocalyptic themes appeared on the screen with *The Terminator* (1984) and the Mad Max trilogy (1979, 1981, 1985).

James Bond movies continued to dominate the box office in the early 1980s as they had in the previous decades. As Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott argue, the early 1980s Bond movies returned to Cold War themes and contained “a much harder and sharper political edge than they had in the 1970s” (1987, 42). In *Octopussy*, for example, Soviet General Orlov attempts to convince members of the Politburo to use conventional methods to invade Western Europe. When his argument fails, he tries to plant a nuclear device on a U.S. army base in West Germany; while Max Zorin, the main villain of *A View to a Kill* (1985), was a genetically engineered ex-KGB agent turned industrialist bent on destroying Silicon Valley.

Cold War and espionage themes appeared on television as well. The miniseries *The Day After* (1983) was about living in the aftermath of a nuclear war. James Bond movies were regularly featured on *ABC Sunday Night Movie*. Several iconic espionage-themed TV shows from the 1960s appeared regularly on television in the 1980s in syndication. These included *The Man from Uncle* (1964-1968), *Mission Impossible* (1966-1973), and *The Avengers* (1961-1969). New shows appeared, such as *Cover Up* (1984-1985), *Airwolf* (1984-1987), *Scarecrow and Mrs King* (1983-1987), and *The Equalizer* (1985-1989).

CULTURE OBJECTS: ESPIONAGE ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

Espionage role-playing games developed in this popular cultural atmosphere of re-emerging Cold War tensions. The first game to be published was *Top Secret* (1980), created by Merle Rasmussen and released by TSR. TSR was founded by Gary Gygax in 1973 and is best known for the widely successful RPG *D&D*. In 1980, Avalon Hill published *James Bond 007: Role-Playing in Her Majesty's Secret Service*, which was designed by Gerry Klug. Avalon Hill was owned by Victory Games, a successful strategy wargaming company. Upon seeing the success of role-playing in general and *Top Secret* in particular, Victory acquired the right to use the world of James Bond. The importance of James Bond cannot be overstated. The world of James Bond was the driving force behind the creation of the games, whether directly – as in James Bond, RPG – or as a significant influence, as with *Top Secret* (Klug 1984). Other espionage-themed role-playing games were published in the early 1980s. Hero Games released *Espionage!* in 1983. Flying Buffalo published *Mercenaries, Spies & Private Eyes* (MSPE). Unlike the other games, MSPE extended beyond Cold War espionage and included the whole twentieth century, not just the 1980s. Though not as successful as *Top Secret* and *James Bond 007*, both games demonstrated the high demand for espionage-

themed games and the publishers believed that the market could sustain multiple products.

Although possessing varying rules and systems, espionage role-playing games had essential commonalities. Each game came with a basic manual that provided directions and the rules for playing. In *Top Secret*, these rules were administered by the Administrator. The same player function in the *James Bond 007* game was called the Gamemaster (GM). Administrators/GMs were provided with complete manuals and materials needed to run the game (Rasmussen and Hammack 1981; Klug 1983). The Administrator/GM played an essential role in the overall gaming experience by overseeing the game setting and asserting some control over its direction. They also enforced the game rules, determined the outcome of the player's actions, and crafted the game narrative. The Administrator/GM took the game's events and ensured that those events resulted in a coherent experience. This experience frequently depended on percentage dice rolls. In both *James Bond 007* and *Top Secret*, players would roll two ten-sided dice or a six-sided dice to determine a wide range of outcomes. In addition to the dice rolls, the Administrator would consult numerous tables and charts to calculate the success or failure of in-game experiences. Firing a gun, picking a lock, or engaging in hand-to-hand combat, along with other actions, were determined by dice rolls. The role of two ten-sided dice resulted in a percent chance of success. *Top Secret* and *James Bond 007* also provided systems for character generation. Players would create characters with specific strengths and weaknesses by rolling dice or choosing numerical values. A player could roll the dice in *Top Secret* to determine characteristic traits like strength, charm, willpower, courage, knowledge, and coordination. These traits would then be used in game situations to determine a player's chance of success or failure at specific tasks. Likewise, in *James Bond 007*, players were given an allotment of points which were then allocated by players to characteristics, including strength, dexterity, willpower, perception, and intelligence. Both games gave players character skills like evasion, lock-picking, stealth, and disguise. The more missions a player's character completed, the stronger the characteristics and skills.

In *James Bond 007*, with more experience, players could acquire Hero Points. These points helped the character avoid difficult situations or accomplish seemingly impossible tasks. Bond's knack for escaping danger through sheer luck in the movies and novels was translated into the game through the player's use of Hero Points. For example, in the game setting, Bond's success in convincing Goldfinger to shut off the laser about to cut Bond in half was determined by a

combination of dice rolls and the application of Hero Points. *Top Secret* had a similar system whereby characters could attain Fame and Fortune Points. Rasmussen reminisced in an interview in 2014 that his addition of Fame and Fortune points to *Top Secret* was a crucial moment in the game's development because it linked it closely to James Bond ("The Rasmussen File" 2014).

The game publishers also created missions and other print supplements. Victory Games produced game modules corresponding to the Bond movies and novels. The modules included *Goldfinger* (1983), *Octopussy* (1983), *Dr. No* (1984), *You Only Live Twice* (1984), *Live and Let Die* (1984), *The Man with the Golden Gun* (1985), *A View to a Kill* (1985), and *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (1987). Original storylines were published as *Goldfinger II* (1985) and *You Only Live Twice II* (1986). In addition, several supplements were released, including the *Q Manual* (1983), *Villains* (1986), and *Thrilling Locations* (1985), by Robert Kern and Michael Moore. The *Q Manual* by Greg Gorden and Gerry Klug contained much of the technology, gadgets, and weapons popularised by the movies, as well as new items. *Villains* introduced new non-player character adversaries and included SMERSH-themed information and a mission. Non-Player Characters (NPCs) were characters in the game that the Gamemaster controlled. *Thrilling Locations* provided Gamemasters with information about and maps of cities worldwide to be used in game settings. TSR also published a series of missions and supplements for *Top Secret*, including *Operation: Lady in Distress* (1982), set during a terrorist attack on a cruise ship, and *Operation: Orient Express* (1983) about spy craft on the famous train. It also released *Operation: Rapidstrike!* (1982), *Operation: Fastpass* (1983), and *Operation: Ace of Clubs* (1984).

PRODUCERS: THE GAME DESIGNERS OF TSR AND VICTORY GAMES

Griswold emphasised analysing the creators' role when examining a cultural product's impact. This suggestion is important because the creators are, according to Griswold, the "first to articulate and communicate" the ideas that become the object, though they do not have a monopoly on those ideas (14). Like the cultural object, the producers are attached to the social world. In the case of espionage role-playing games, that social world was that of the Cold War and James Bond.

Top Secret was created in 1975 by game designer Merle Rasmussen while he was an eighteen-year-old student at Iowa State University. He got the initial idea for the game after his friend, James Thompson, introduced him to *D&D*. Specifically, he liked that *D&D* was built around playing a single character "in a world of adventure, instead of pushing a cardboard infantry division across a map" (Ras-

mussen 1980, 38). Even though he liked *D&D*, with its emphasis on individual role-playing, he called it the “Halloween game” because of its focus on monsters and fantasy (“The Rasmussen File”). He wanted to create a game set in the present-day world of the Cold War. As he noted in *Dragon* in 1980, “Since childhood, the clandestine lifestyle and adventures of espionage agents held my interest”, having grown up and been influenced by spy novels, movies, and television shows (1980, 38). He purposely designed the game to be very Bond-like, even consulting the novels while creating the game elements (“The Rasmussen File”). The resulting game emphasised adventure, exotic settings, danger, weapons and gadgets, and even seduction.

In 1976, Rasmussen sent the first draft of the game to Gary Gygax at TSR. After a series of revisions – including changing the name from *Spy World* to *Top Secret* – it was published in 1980. The game was packaged as a boxed set containing the manual and dice. It also had an introductory mission module, *Operation: Sprechenhaltestelle* (1980), set in a fictitious European town that was a hotbed of East-West espionage. The cover art for the box and the manual displayed a Beretta pistol, foreign currencies, passports, and other travel documents, emphasising the danger and excitement of the espionage world. The first pages of the manual played upon the real-world setting, noting, “In the last several years there have been quite a few role-playing games produced, covering subjects as diverse as bunnies and bugbears [...] No one had yet come up with rules for a modern role-playing game, set not in the hazy future or dim past, but in the crystal-clear world of the here and now” (Rasmussen and Hammack 1981, 1). It also linked the game to the world of James Bond, “a world in which every move could be your last, and so you live fast and die hard. Secret agents drive sports cars, escort beautiful women, and gamble away fortunes” (ibid.). *Top Secret* was a financial success, selling over 200,000 copies (“The Rasmussen File”). It opened the door for the other espionage games.

Like *Top Secret*, *James Bond 007* shipped as a boxed set that included the game manual, an introductory adventure, *Dr. No*, and dice. The cover art depicted a generic James Bond – who looked like a combination of Sean Connery and George Lazenby – next to a woman in a pose reminiscent of the movie poster for *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977). The box invited players to “Experience the life of a secret agent [...] work for MI6, the British Secret Service, or assume the role of the most famous agent of all [...] prepare yourself for endless thrills, high living, and danger”. Game designers Gerry Klug and Bob Kern wanted to create the James Bond role-playing game for various reasons. They saw *Top Secret*

as too technical and wedded to the wargaming tradition. Klug and fellow designer Bob Kern discussed “the way most role-playing games were written by wargame designers who were accustomed to having their rules pored over by individuals who had nothing better to do than examine in minute detail every last clause” (Klug 1984, 15). To them, *Top Secret*’s gaming system, with its many charts and rules, took away from the flow of the gaming system and, by extension, limited the imagination. As game reviewers noted, *Top Secret* had too many rules and tables to be referenced for every game situation. The hand-to-hand combat rules were highly criticised.

They also saw *Top Secret* as too generic and wanted to make a game set in the world of Bond. As Klug noted, “we decided to base a game on the only spy character really worth doing – James Bond” (ibid.). Klug and Kern also wanted to capture what Kingsley Amis called the “Fleming Effect” (Amis 1965, 100; Klug 1984, 15). To Klug, this meant creating a gaming experience that drew players into the world they loved through novels and films. As Klug noted, “I believed that the people who played the game would be a mix of the fans of the books, fans of the movies, and fans of role-playing” (1984, 15). From a gaming point of view, this meant quantifying geopolitics, danger, adventure, exoticism and globality, combat, and romance but, at the same time, not allowing the charts and rules to overwhelm the emotional experience. The solution was to create a game system emphasising Bond themes and prioritising game-play efficiency. They accomplished this efficiency by reducing the number of dice rolls needed to complete tasks and limiting the number of reference charts.

Klug studied the Fleming novels and watched and rewatched the movies to prepare for writing the game. As he did, he made a record of all the elements that would translate into role-playing and evoke the feel of a Bond experience. The result was a mix of both the novels and films. Because Klug was a fan of the books and knew that many of the players would be as well, Bond’s game abilities and the game system were patterned after the books. He used the movies to inspire the other characters, backgrounds, and plots. This hybrid approach, Klug thought, would satisfy both Eon Productions – which wanted the game to emphasise the movies – and the young players who were the target audience and who would be familiar with both the novels and films. As Klug remarked in *Heroes Magazine* in 1984, young players “would be the ones who would buy the game in the beginning and make or break the game in the long run” (ibid.).

Klug also saw in the “Fleming Effect” a chance to fundamentally change the nature of role-playing games by moving the game toward collaborative storytelling. He viewed gameplay as a kind of improvisational theatre where the di-

rector was the GM and the players were the actors, playing characters that differed from themselves in many ways. The GM controlled the script, but it was only a general story outline and events. As Klug noted, an “improvisational piece is flexible for it allows the actors, through the choices they make, to alter the plot lines of the script. Only through playing the game can they see the outcome” (1983, 5). Unlike the role-playing games from the wargaming tradition, *James Bond 007* emphasised the players’ agency and involvement.

Daniel Mackay (2001) and Sarah Lynn Bowman (2015) have also identified the link between role-playing and theatre. To MacKay, RPGs were a new type of performance art where players chose and played roles in front of each other; while Bowman argued that much like actors, players are immersed in the roles of their characters and must learn to think like their characters. This immersion blurs the line between the player and the character. Collaborative storytelling, however, posed a dilemma for game designers because players would expect the missions to be just like they were in the movies and that the NPCs in the game would act predictably. As game designer Neill Randall noted, whereas the novels, movies, and game missions all had plots, characters, and settings, the books and movies were “fixed, while the [game] adventure changed according to the whim of the players and the Gamemaster” (1984b, 14). The designers saw this complexity as an advantage because it would allow for variation and unpredictability.

The game version of *Octopussy* differs in many ways from the movie. Unlike in the film, a miniature neutron bomb is hidden by General Orlov inside a Fabergé egg displayed at the Octopussy circus. The bomb is set to explode when the circus is in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. Orlov planned to use the explosion to claim that the United States was “smuggling neutron bombs into Eastern Europe” (Randall and Klug 1984b, 6). His ultimate plan was to make the United States appear to be the villain, heightening tensions in Yugoslavia and further disrupting and weakening the NATO alliance. In the movie, the nuclear bomb is hidden in a cannon used in the human cannonball finale of the Octopussy circus performed on a US airbase in West Germany. Orlov hoped the explosion would be seen as an accident, causing denuclearisation in Western Europe and, as a result, leaving it vulnerable to Soviet conventional forces.

According to the game designers, the main reason the movies and the game modules differed was to provide a unique experience. If players knew what was going to happen and exactly how NPCs were going to act, that would limit the possibilities and originality of the game. Furthermore, whereas the film’s story moves linearly from one part to the next, in the game, the settings and plot

twists are discreet segments of the whole that can be moved around and unfold differently depending on what the players decide through their characters' actions. Designer Bob Kern described these discreet segments as "Situational Modules" (1984, 12). The GM is empowered to change the plot as needed. To help GMs, each game module also had a section called "Altering the Basic Scenario," with suggestions for moving the plot elements around in response to players' decisions or to keep the adventure fresh if played again.

In summary, the social world of the Cold War in the early 1980s increased Cold War-related popular culture objects. For teenagers, one of these objects was espionage role-playing games. *Top Secret* and *James Bond 007: Role Playing in Her Majesty's Secret Service* were the two most successful games. These cultural objects were the product of the work of game designers, such as Merle Rasmussen and Gerry Klug. In creating the games, they drew on shared symbols, themes, and influences in popular culture from the time in which they lived, especially the world of James Bond and the Western view of the Cold War and the USSR. The last component of Griswold's cultural diamond is the receivers, who were the game players and administrators.

RECEIVERS: ADMINISTRATORS AND PLAYERS

Espionage role-players were a distinct subgroup of the larger community of role-players that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although the games and modules recommended that players be twelve years old or older, most were teenagers. Rasmussen surveyed *Top Secret* players at Gen Con XIII in 1980 and he discovered that most players were "single, teenage males who earned less than \$5,000 a year" (1981b, 28). They spent significant money on gaming, owning at least twenty games. The information collected about the espionage role-playing community by Rasmussen lines up with the data from fantasy role-playing magazine readership surveys and other sources analysed by Gary Allan Fine (1983).

The demographic similarities among players were solidified culturally through the shared experience of the game-playing session. Like *D&D*, the games were played on a tabletop and involved several common elements. Players sat around a table with the administrator at one end. The administrator usually used a screen that shielded their vital information from the players. The screen also had quick reference charts, tables, and formulas. In *James Bond 007*, the Gamemaster's Screen had charts and tables for Ease Factor, Wound Level, Weapons List, Vehicle List, Interrogation Chart, and even a chart for determining seduction. The table would also be used to display maps and other supplemental materials. These materials could include props like NPC photographs, cards, offi-

cial mission briefings, and other related items. In addition to props, miniature lead or cardboard cutout figures could represent characters and NPCs.

The tabletop gaming experience brought players together in several key ways, especially through collaboration. Because each character – and player – was unique, each brought different skills and perspectives to the table. In *Top Secret*, a character's skills determined which bureau the characters worked for in a spy agency. The bureaus were administration, investigation, confiscation, technical, operations, and assassination. A mission included characters from different bureaus equipped to excel at specific tasks. In *Top Secret* and *James Bond 007*, the characters had fields of expertise ranging from the more practical, like medicine or firearms, to intellectual domains like fine arts. For a mission to be successful, the players needed to combine their characters' expertise and work as a team.

Gaming magazines allowed role players to maintain a growing and dynamic community beyond the tabletop. TSR published *Dragon* to support players of *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Top Secret*, *Boot Hill*, *Gamma World*, and its many other games. It also published *Polyhedron* as a joint venture with the Role-Playing Gamers Association. In 1984, Victory Games started producing *Heroes* for players of *James Bond*, *Lords of Creation*, *Powers & Perils*, and *RuneQuest*. These magazines often included content that was aimed at espionage role-players. Rasmussen, for example, wrote a regular column in *Dragon* called the "Rasmussen Files," where he answered questions from players, clarified rules, and offered suggestions for better gameplay. *Dragon* was also used to provide extra content for players, like character data for new NPCs – including James Bond, Emma Peel from *The Avengers*, and Napoleon Solo from *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* – and to introduce new weapons, gadgets, and technology. It also provided players with new missions, including "The Missile Mission", "Dr. Yes" (clearly modelled after *Dr. No*), and the "Jaded Temple". The magazines were also filled with advertisements for other games, figures, and accessories.

Heroes served the same function for the James Bond sub-community. Klug wrote about the motivations for creating *James Bond 007* and used the magazine to answer questions from players about the gaming system. Other *James Bond 007* game designers shared their experiences designing game modules and offered advice to gamemasters. In the second issue, Robert Kern discussed writing *Goldfinger* and the challenges of bringing the iconic story to the level of gaming. Likewise, Neil Randall, the designer of *Octopussy*, talked about the difficulty of creating the game when he had only received a seven-page story outline from Eon to guide him instead of being able to view the film. Other articles coached

players on the rules for gambling, language skills, and Q gadgets. Conventions were another critical way that the community of role-players was maintained. The largest convention was GenCon, started by Gary Gygax in 1968. GenCon, and other conventions like it, provided a space where players from around the country could come together, meet, and play. Designers could interact with players and administrators and have a chance to get face-to-face feedback about the games. In addition to national conventions, there were regional and local conventions.

James Bond novels and films gave the espionage role-playing community a foundation of shared knowledge. In this sense, the world of James Bond served the same function as the works of J.R.R. Tolkien did for *D&D*. This shared knowledge of Tolkien and other fantasy literature had many essential elements. The players had a shared set of symbols and reference points and, as such, shared meaning and framing. Furthermore, this shared knowledge allowed for a way of communicating that everyone in the group understood and those outside the group did not. The “Fleming Effect” worked not only to immerse players in the world of Bond but also to bring them together and provide knowledge and framing. This knowledge was multi-layered, and the narrative in Fleming’s novels acted like a game “with a set of rules, the pieces, and the moves” (Umberto Eco qtd. in Denning 2014, 97); the players knew the assumptions and components. For instance, James Bond was always the hero, and SMERSH or Blofeld was always evil. The movies also included this basic framework. As a result, game players were familiar with the themes and understood how the game functioned.

CULTURE AND ESPIONAGE ROLE-PLAYING

Griswold’s Cultural Diamond reveals the cultural meanings at the intersection of the four components: the Social World, Cultural Objects, Producers, and Receivers. It exposes the links, for example, between fantasy and reality. Although happening in the imagination, players were drawn to what they saw as “real-world” elements and the ability to play in a Cold War setting. In creating *Top Secret*, Rasmussen noted that he was motivated by playing a game in the real world and that “leading a pack mule underground with a bunch of greedy, blood-thirsty humanoids just didn’t excite me too much at four in the morning. I wanted something I could relate to” (1981a, 12). In Rasmussen’s GenCon survey, respondents had similar ideas that *Top Secret* was more “realistic and logical” than *D&D* (1981b, 28). One respondent noted that “technology replaces magic in TS, and NPCs are often more valuable alive than dead. Guards don’t hide in dimly lit

rooms along a passageway without food or water, waiting for agents to break in, attack, and take away their treasure” (ibid.).

The goal of game designers, as a result, was to create an air of reality or verisimilitude. Bob Kern, the designer of the game module *Goldfinger*, considered verisimilitude to be one of the most important goals of the game for a couple of reasons. First, the hallmark of Fleming’s style of writing was detailed descriptions of people, places, and even food. Capturing the “Fleming Effect” meant writing the game modules similarly. Second, this style conveyed believability. Kern spent hours researching before sitting down to write a module section. For *Goldfinger*, for instance, he spent significant time studying the refining process of gold so that the section on Auric Mining would be very descriptive and based on “actual techniques” (Kern 1984, 39).

The game also emphasised the real world through in-depth background information about the NPCs. Unlike in movies where characters are primarily defined through their on-screen actions, much more information is presented to the administrator and the characters in the game. One of the most memorable scenes from the movie *Goldfinger* (1964) is when the seemingly sweet older lady watching the gate at Auric Enterprises suddenly wields an MP-40 submachine gun. Everything that the audience knows about the character comes from that brief appearance. In the game module, much more information is given to players. Her name is Marta Krimmins, and she became an employee of Goldfinger after he was able to save her son from a prison sentence for drug smuggling. She is fiercely loyal to Goldfinger. Kern felt that the character “needed some sort of background since it was possible the characters may corner and question her” (1984, 6): “If her actions in the adventure were the same as the movie”, he explained, “I had to come up with a history that explained why this woman was at Auric Enterprises and why she would open fire” (ibid.). If the narrative did not flow the same as in the movie, then the GM would need background information to improvise an encounter between the NPC and the players that seemed real and plausible.

Props also added to this sense of verisimilitude. According to Kern, the “idea that the players would be able to really see and touch what their characters saw and touched would enhance the verisimilitude of the adventure and give the players a chance to extract clues” (ibid., 39). In *Goldfinger*, players are presented with information throughout the game that helps the investigation. These props included a letter from the Johannesburg Chamber of Mines asking to be able to inspect Goldfinger’s mine, a reply letter from Goldfinger, a shipping manifest

from Auric Enterprises for electronic equipment that was sent to Kentucky, a telegram from Colonel Martin Smithers, a director of the Bank of England, and an MI6 character briefing about Auric Goldfinger on MI6 letterhead. The props made the players feel active and engaged.

The geographical information in the game modules also showed this desire to play in the real world. *Thrilling Locations* provided a wide range of real-world settings (Kern and Moore 1985). Information is provided about casinos, hotels, restaurants, and airports. Pictures, background information, and floor-plans are included for the Casino de Monte Carlo, The Mandarin Hotel in Hong Kong, the MGM Grand Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, and many other places. It also had information about famous restaurants and provided extensive details about the Tavern on the Green and Maxwell's Plum in New York City. There was even information about the menus and wine selections. While supplemental information concentrated on real-world details, it also acted as a way of categorising and exoticising the world. In the game module *Octopussy*, the section on street encounters in Udaipur, India, was very similar to the movie's exoticised depiction of Indian street life. The gamemaster is given descriptions of musicians, dancers, sword swallowers, jugglers, snake charmers, and a fakir laying on a bed of nails. As a result, Udaipur is depicted as wild and carnivalesque. As Lisa Funnell and Klaus Dodds noted about the movie, this depiction allowed players to assert a type of "colonial authority" over imagined, localised spaces (2017, 119). Unlike the movie, however, the game was much more dynamic and unfolded through the interaction of the gamemaster and players. The gamemaster could, for instance, create a backstory and details about the street performers in the same way that the old lady with the machine gun is turned into Marta Krimmins, a character with depth and plausibility. Likewise, the players in *Octopussy* could interact with the Indian NPCs. This interaction could force the game narrative away from colonial overtones and stereotypes.

Although the players and game designers were drawn to the "real-world" nature of espionage games, they also acknowledged that the worlds they played in were a product of their imaginations. In *Cover Stories: Narrative and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller*, Michael Denning argued that the "realism" of the spy genre was in not creating a "real" world for accuracy's sake; Instead, it was only "feigned realism" to support a "magical figure, the secret agent, who has agency in a world where individuals do not" (29). The realism and exactness of *Top Secret* and *James Bond 007* existed not so much to replicate the world as it was but rather to present a world where players could assert control through their characters. Jennifer Grouling Cover came to a similar conclusion about all role-playing

games – that the fantasy world was used to make sense of the real world (2010). This need for sense-making was especially true of life during the Cold War, when events seemed distant and powerful, especially for teenagers.

A vital part of this empowerment was derived from asserting individual agency and reinforcing the power of the individual. The creation and control of characters, abilities, and missions created a sense of importance and authority amidst a reality in which agency seemed irrelevant. In a world where teenagers had little direction over events that seemed so far above them, they could imagine a world in which they were essential. Denning explained that power was particularly significant in the spy genre, where the “secret agent returns human agency to a world which seems less and less the product of human action” (14). Specifically, he argued that the “spy thriller transforms an incomprehensible political situation [...] into the ethical categories of masculine romance, the battle of hero and villain becoming one between good and evil, the forces of light and the forces of darkness” (ibid.). Players of *Top Secret* and *James Bond 007* were doing just this: imagining control over a complex world.

Unlike the “real” world, however, with its shades of grey, espionage role-playing was built and functioned through dichotomy, especially good versus evil. For example, the Cold War plays a more significant, tenser role in the game where there are definite right and wrong sides. In the game version of *For Your Eyes Only*, there is no *détente* moment at St. Cyril’s monastery like in the movie. This cinematic moment humanises Soviet General Gogol and offers hope during Cold War tensions. As Jeremy Black notes, “Gogol himself looks like a good old uncle and appears reasonable” (2017, 125). The game module, on the contrary, ends on a much harsher tone with a final battle at Soviet-allied villain Kristatos’s warehouse.

These heightened Cold War tensions and villainising of the Soviets created a dichotomy between good and evil that did not exist in the film. On the other side of the spectrum, Klug noted in the game manual that “MI6 and the Player Characters will always be working for the good of the free world” (1983, 93). The NPC character M always acts with integrity. The simplified versions of reality in movies and role-playing games of the 1970s were nostalgic attempts to recapture the perceived simplicity of a previous time. For teenagers, the game world was much easier to understand than the real world. Another prominent cultural theme in espionage games is the role of chance. Tim Bryant demonstrated that much of the outcome of a role-playing game depends on luck and dice rolling. This emphasis on chance gained a particular meaning for many of these role-

playing teenagers at a time when it seemed that, because of the ever-present threat of nuclear war, whether they lived or died depended on luck. The games, though, could temper that reality. Specifically, Bryant noted that games “of the Cold War era adapted technologies and tropes of the nuclear age to invest in their players joined senses of contingency and agency” (2016, 73). The whole structure of role-playing games gives players options and the ability to choose the direction of the narrative. Unlike in the real world, where geopolitical events seemed to limit choices and options, the players had power and control in a game.

Chance is often countered in the game by the role of heroes and heroism. *James Bond 007* allowed characters to play Bond if they wanted to, becoming the ultimate hero. Bond disarms nuclear bombs, defeats SMERSH, and saves the world. He embodies the power of an individual during the Cold War. Players could take this further by creating their characters and adopting heroic identities. As Bowman notes, role-playing “games provide a forum for the emulation of alternate identities, and these identities combine age-old [Jungian] archetypes with individually imbued characteristics” (2010, 144). One of the oldest archetypes is the hero, who overcomes all challenges and defeats evil.

Top Secret and *James Bond 007* quantify heroism by building it into the gaming system. Fortune Points and Hero Points could be used to control a situation and transcend the percentage dice rolls that led to bad outcomes. With these points, players could control their own fate. As *James Bond 007* game designer Neil Randall explained, with Hero Points, “a character can make things happen the way he wants. If he shoots and misses, he can use his Hero Points to change the result to a hit or even a kill. If he falls while mountain-climbing, he can spend a Hero Point and reach the top without damage” (1984a, 44). Hero Points translated the real-world experiences of the Cold War into the world of James Bond and that of the players.

Espionage role-playing games often reinforced 1980s gender stereotypes. Male players designed their characters to have hypermasculine qualities like superior strength and attractiveness. Fine observed that “these personas have attributes many players believe they lack: strength, social poise, rugged good looks, wisdom, and chivalric skills” (1983, 60). Through their characters, however, teenage boys could imagine themselves like James Bond, who embodied all these qualities. Like the books and movies, *James Bond 007* linked sex and masculinity. In keeping with the “Fleming Effect,” female NPCs were almost always attractive, even categorised at times as “beautiful foils” who provided “romantic interludes” for the mission (Kern and Moore 1985, 5). The game system also included tables

for seduction. For a player to seduce an NPC, the player needed to roll higher than the NPC's Willpower roll. In *Top Secret*, "Sexpionage" was a specialised skill that characters could acquire through training (Rasmussen 1981b, 31). The potential problem of encouraging teenagers to role-play sex, however, was not lost on the game designers. Rasmussen warned administrators to be mindful of the influence that role-playing sexual encounters could have on teenagers (ibid.). As with role-playing in general, however, what transpired in the game was beyond the designers' control.

Masculinity was also defined through a heavy emphasis on armed and unarmed combat. This emphasis reinforced the idea that masculinity was characterised by aggression and the ability to fight. The *Top Secret* and *James Bond 007* game manuals had chapters and specific systems devoted to fighting and using weapons. There was even supplemental material about weaponry. The *Q Manual* gave *James Bond 007* players information on handguns, rifles, submachine guns, shotguns, and other weapons of war like flame throwers, rocket launchers, and grenades. The manual also included the gadgetry from the movies. Articles in *Dragon* and *Heroes* were frequently about weapons. In the case of *James Bond 007*, the use of violence is a combination of replicating the world of James Bond while also coming to terms with the violent nature of the Cold War world. To players and game designers, the violence in the game was not senseless. They believed that Bond and player characters made in his mould used violence out of necessity to protect the world from evil or to promote democracy and liberalism. This shared framing of violence was reinforced through the novels and movies, creating unwritten rules of play.

Rasmussen was more concerned about the use of violence in *Top Secret*. Unlike *James Bond 007*, where there was a direct connection to a world that players tried to replicate with agreed-upon norms, the rules of behaviour in *Top Secret* were more ambiguous. As game designer John Terra observed, "[t]he *Top Secret* game has no such ethical limitations, which can be a blessing, but sometimes it opens the game up to some bad practices" (1986, 67). Rasmussen commented explicitly on the potential for senseless violence in several articles about *Top Secret* published in *Dragon*. He advised players and administrators to use weapons primarily for defensive purposes and that "gunning down innocent bystanders and defenceless civilians for fun or experience is inexcusable" (1981c, 49). He also suggested that administrators penalise players by deducting points or even involving NPC police or other law enforcement agencies to punish players for unnecessary violence within the game setting.

Although focused on violence, the games also embraced humour. Because the real world was so tense, the game often acted as a way of maintaining perspective through comedy. As such, Rasmussen always made sure to include comical aspects to missions. To him, this made the game in line with the Bond movies. Roger Moore's Bond, for instance, was known for his one-liners and *double entendres*, something absent in Fleming's Bond. Klug also emphasised humour, calling it "one of the most vital ingredients of Bond adventures" and encouraging Gamemasters to give extra experience points to players for "keeping a sense of the sardonic" when facing danger (1983, 96). Both games also play on the Bond tradition of having funny and quirky NPCs; for example, the movie characters Sheriff J.W. Pepper and Mary Goodnight in the module *The Man with the Golden Gun*. Like the movie, the NPCs could provide the game with comic relief.

Rasmussen once remarked that one of *Top Secret*'s most important cultural aspects was that it gave teenagers a chance to play with identities. On a personal level, he created *Top Secret* as a freshman in college when he was still figuring out his identity. He noted that

As a young person, you try out different roles to find out who you are in life [...] you try on different hats [...] I was an intellectual, a rowdy kid [...] a good boy, a good student or not. The point is that you're trying to find yourself. You play different roles all the time". (qtd. in "The Rasmussen File")

Top Secret was an extension of this process. Role-playing particularly appealed to adolescents for this reason – they were in the process of constructing self-identities. MacKay argued that character construction in a game could help the players solidify their notion of self, and that after "going through the process of creating a cohesive character from various fragments and bits, players can carry this experience over to their own life" (156). Character creation involves many identity markers, from physical characteristics like strength and dexterity to hair and eye colour. Bowman argued that identity play is one of the most critical functions of role-playing games, claiming that "role-playing offers participants a safe space to enact alternate personas through a process known as identity alteration" (2010, 1). Adolescents could assert agency in a game and explore alternative roles and identities other than those forced on them by the conventions of the "real world".

CONCLUSION

The late 1980s were significantly different from the earlier decade. The Cold War tensions that characterised the first half of the 1980s began to decrease. Ronald

Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev's summit in Geneva in 1985 led to a noticeable thaw in U.S.-Soviet relations and a decrease in harsh rhetoric. Two years later, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty was signed. By 1989, the Berlin Wall had fallen, and the Soviet Union began to fragment. Even James Bond seemed to disappear. Unlike *The Living Daylights* (1987), where Soviet characters were central to the plot, *Licence to Kill* (1989) strayed away from Cold War themes and Bond would not appear on screen again until *GoldenEye* in 1995.

By the late 1980s, consumer demand for espionage role-playing games had also waned. *James Bond 007* ceased publication in 1987. That same year, the original *Top Secret* was abandoned by TSR for a revised, less real-world-centred version called *Top Secret/SI*. Douglas Niles replaced Rasmussen as the designer, and the game began to introduce more fantasy and science fiction elements. This falling demand for espionage games could have been caused by their diminishing novelty and adolescent gamers leaving for other genres. The introduction of a new generation of video game consoles and cheap computer games could have also been a factor. It is more likely that this decline was linked to shifting geopolitics and subsequent changes in popular culture; now-dated Cold War espionage games could not help game designers and teenage players understand the complexity of a post-Cold War world.

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