Tabletop Role Playing Games and the Horatian Platitude

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Abstract
In the Ars Poetica, the lyric poet Horace states that poetry is most effective when it is both
interesting and informative. The following essay uses this premise as a lens through which to view
the unique, and at times difficult to classify, vocabulary found in rulebooks for table-top role-
playing games. By exploring rulebooks and manuals from this perspective, this essay is intended to
present insightful considerations for game designers to contemplate and apply during the
development of similar written material. It is concluded that rulebooks for table-top role-playing
games accurately encapsulate the considerations presented in the “Horatian platitude”, and lists two
reasons why this perspective may be important for game designers to consider.
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Introduction

Rulebooks for games have always fascinated me. As a child, I would paw over the manuals for Liquid Entertainment's Battle Realms (2001), and Zipper Interactive's Mechwarrior 3 (1999), immersing myself in fictitious history, and pondering insightful quotes from the in-game units. I would spend long hours marveling at the gorgeous illustrations in The Bestiary (Brown and Horner 1998), a supplementary guide for the Dragonlance book series, and I could impress my friends with a seemingly endless knowledge of creatures that, incidentally, did not actually exist.

Now older, I still enjoy pursuing my collection of rulebooks – I still immerse myself in fictitious history, and I still ponder quotes from characters who haven't aged a day. But as I begun to develop my own games, and inevitably, began to write my own rulebooks, I noticed a quality found within game rulebooks that is immensely under-appreciated. So – let's go on an adventure.

The famed lyric poet Horace sums up this quality most articulately:

“

[One] Who can blend usefulness and sweetness wins every Vote,
at once delighting and teaching the reader.
That's the book that earns the Sosii money, crosses
The seas, and wins its author fame throughout the ages.
“


As noted by Horace, literature should inspire and instruct, and writers that follow this premise will earn fame and fortune “throughout the ages”. The suggestion that literature must be enjoyable, yet informative has been referred to as the “Horatian platitude” (Leitch and Cain 2010, 121), and one may apply the premise of this concept to the discipline of game design. In particular, the design and writing of rulebooks for table-top role-playing games, where the application of this concept is already demonstratively prevalent.

A table-top role-playing game (TRPG) is a form of game where the participants develop characters based on certain rules, and are responsible for deciding how those characters act over the course of a game. (Cover 2010, 6) The participants verbally describe these actions to a neutral observer of the game state; the performance of these actions may require an element of chance.
Regardless of the player-character’s success or failure of these actions, the neutral observer (sometimes called a game master, or a dungeon master) may then describe how the actions of the players has affected the game state, and may consult the rulebook of their chosen game to resolve further conflict. However, one may observe that many rulebooks and manuals, such as those produced by White Wolf Publishing, Wizards Of The Coast, or Games Workshop convey more than just systems or rules: they seek to establish mood, setting, and intrigue, and often discuss fictional topics in great detail, such as magic or fantastical creatures. In the context of this essay, these components of a TRPG rulebook will be referred to as “narrative material”.

This essay therefore aims to investigate whether the supplementary narrative material found in table-top game rulebooks contributes to the ideal development of the “Horatian platitude” in game manuals. Furthermore, we will examine how non-rule and non-system aspects of game rulebooks may contribute to the unique “emotional tone” of a given work. These research topics will be achieved by performing a concise, qualitative analysis of a rulebook for a popular TRPG, with examinations into rulebooks that share similar subject matter.

Before we begin, it may be noted that the investigations presented in this thesis are not intended to form objective frameworks from which to improve the development of table-top role-playing games. Instead, the arguments proposed in the following sections are intended to provide unique considerations for game designers to contemplate, and to assist designers in articulating the qualities they wish to develop in their games. As such, the “Horatian platitude” can be seen as a lens or perspective to view game design through, rather than as a framework to be applied. For this reason, this essay has intentionally moved away from the fields of traditional design theory, and from user experience design, to present a perspective on game rulebook design that is uncommon, and it is hoped that this perspective will provoke insightful, unique discourse on this field.
Identifying The Horatian Platitude

One may assume that the considerations of the “Horatian platitude” are shallow or overly broad, due to the use of the word “platitude”. However, the grand breadth of this advice presents our investigation with a simple, holistic design consideration that may be applied to the development of writing in games; further establishing formal discourse on this under-appreciated quality in game rulebooks and manuals.

In *Ars Poetica*, the statements made by Horace are directed towards the writing and development of poetry, as made evident by the original context of the work. However, it is misleading to assume that the considerations presented in the *Ars Poetica* may only be applied to the development of poetry, as the “Horatian platitude” has been applied to a variety of fields, including literature, art or even sports. (Hughes 2010; Carroll 2005; Wendt 2017)

Furthermore, it is misleading to assume that the following arguments presented in this essay may apply only to the design of rulebooks for TRPGs, as the duality of provoking delight and instruction may be found in a wide variety of material from various fields in game design. The manual for the 1998 computer role-playing game *Baldur’s Gate* (Bioware 1998) features a “traveller’s guide” to the world of the game, punctuated with humorous annotations; likewise, the manual for *Darklands* (MPS Labs 1992) serves as a historically accurate account of society in 15th century Gothic Germany, complete with bibliography. The original design document for *Planescape: Torment* (Black Isle Studios 1999) features heavy comic relief narration from a playable character, who openly mocks the developers and the design choices of the game-in-development. (Black Isle Studios 1997) These examples present the possibility that the conclusions drawn in this essay may apply to fields outside of the design of TRPGs, and that any intellectual developments made regarding the application of the “Horatian platitude” may not necessarily be exclusive to the study of game design.

However, in the context of table-top role-playing, the considerations that the “Horatian platitude” presents for writing rulebooks are immediately observable. Consider the following passage on “dramatic failures”, from the 2004 publication of the World of Darkness rulebook:

“Sometimes actions go catastrophically wrong. Your character has the best of intentions, but he slips, makes a mistake, something gets in the way or an environment change leads to tragedy. These developments are called dramatic failures. A dramatic failure occurs only when you’re
reduced to making a chance roll and you get a one. [...] When one of these horrific developments occurs, your character loses control of his own fate. The story teller\textsuperscript{1} decides how your character's action goes terribly wrong. Maybe something goes wrong regarding your character's weapon or tool. His baseball bat cracks, or his computer locks up.” (Bridges and White Wolf Game Studio 2004, 125–26)

This passage can be seen as a literal interpretation of the considerations suggested by “Horatian platitude”, as it is intended to be inspirational and enjoyable to read, while also attempting to directly instruct the reader on the systems of the game. The excerpt above presents a process for resolving “dramatic failures” - a term used to describe the specific process undertaken when the player naturally rolls a “1” when rolling only one die i.e. “a chance roll”. (2004) However, instead of simply stating the punishment or penalty that must be afforded to the unlucky player, the rulebook provides suggestion to what these circumstances may be.

One may note that in this excerpt, the language used to convey the rules to the player takes on a evocative, allusive tone, and the writers of this rulebook have used phrases such as “catastrophically wrong”, “tragedy”, and “horrific developments”. (2004, 125–26) It is highly likely that these terms are intended to be inspirational to one who intends to write their own World of Darkness game, as they infer the severity of the negative event that the game master must create, while not directly referencing what those events should be.

The ambiguity of this passage may present the theorist with a semantical difficulty – would one consider the World of Darkness rulebook as a piece of technical writing, or as a piece of creative writing? In the context of this essay, this distinction is an important consideration, as it is not clear in Horace's original work whether the conclusions of his “platitude” would apply to technical instructions or direction. It is clear that the World of Darkness rulebook does contain the considerations presented in the “Horatian platitude”, however, the ambiguity of the passages within this book may lead some academics, such as Smith-Worthington and Jefferson, to conclude that it is not a work of technical writing, as “technical writing” should intend to be “unambiguous” and “direct”. (Smith-Worthington and Jefferson 2010, 16) Furthermore, the storyteller's role in forming the scenario of a “dramatic failure” without direction from the rulebook may be considered “creative writing” by Smith-Worthington and Jefferson, who argue that “creative writing” (referred

\textsuperscript{1} In the World of Darkness system, the “story teller” is the “director” of the interactive story told by the players. The story teller “creates the plot and role-plays the characters, both allies and villains, with which the players' characters interact.” (Bridges and White Wolf Game Studio 2004, 37)
to as “imaginative writing”) requires the reader to draw inferences, and come to their own interpretations of the text. (2010, 16)

However, while this distinction may be made, a lengthy discussion on the different applications of the “Horatian platitude” to creative writing and technical writing lies outside of the scope of this essay. Instead, we will continue with the assumption that the 2004 publication of the World of Darkness rulebook constitutes both technical and creative writing, and that the style in which this writing is produced does not negatively affect the application of the considerations that the “Horatian platitude” provokes.

That said, it can be observed that some that passages found in the World of Darkness rulebook are more distinctively weighted towards one side – the stories told before each chapter, or the lengthy introductory stories presented in the prologue (2004, 2) are evidently more “creative” or “imaginative”. Conversely, other passages, such as the character creation guide (2004, 34–35), and the glossary of terms (36–37) are intended as “technical” summaries of rules and terms, and are intended solely as reference material. It can also be noted that some books in the World of Darkness series, such as the supplementary guide on weapons and combat, titled Armory (Oliver, Taylor, and Wendig 2006), are noted for being so heavily based in “technical writing” fields, that they become competent reference material, even outside of the original context of the game. (Richeson 2006)
The Implications of These Observations

While we have briefly identified how a passage of the World of Darkness rulebook displays the considerations presented by the “Horatian platitude”, one may be left to ponder how the acknowledgement of these considerations affects the design of a TRPG. There are several intellectual perspectives from which to view this subject.

The first is presented by Richard Duke, the writing of whom focused on the unique potential of game simulations to increase communication among a group regarding topics that are “complex, future-oriented, [and] of a systems nature.” (1974, 78) Interestingly, Duke directly references the “informative” properties of games, stating that the primary purpose of some games is to “project information”, and that the designers of such games should present a clear “conceptual map, so that the potential user of the game is properly forewarned as to the potential utility of this game.” (1974, 78) This conceptual map may be explicit or implicit, but it is argued that all games contain one (Duke 1974, 87) In the context of rulebooks for TRPGs, one might assume that the nature of the medium (i.e. the fact that the text is a “rulebook”) would present enough of a “conceptual map” for the reader to understand the value of the book to their game. However, if one examines the “creative” narrative material present in some rulebooks, it can be observed that sufficient conceptual groundwork has been laid there as well. The previously mentioned World of Darkness rulebook features extensive, and at times cryptic, stories set in the universe of the game, “forewarning” the player to the thematic material found throughout the rulebook. (Bridges and White Wolf Game Studio 2004) Furthermore, in the rulebook for the table-top war game Warhammer 40000, the reader is introduced to the narrative components of the game through vivid illustrations and fictional history; technical context to the game itself, by displaying pictures of the collectible models in-game; and real-life historical context, through a brief discussion of when and how the Warhammer table-top game was developed – these are all given in an appendix before the extensive rules of the system are given. (Troke, Vetock, and Ward 2012) Duke argues that the unique language of games comprises “the very essence of games” and that the establishment of a “new vernacular” permits an “innovative confrontation with reality.” (1974, 119–20) Duke's interpretation of “language”, which will be taken literally in the context of this essay, informs his later conclusions that the designer's “clear articulation of game-specific language” will “ensure rapid and effective player use.” (Duke and Greenblat 1981, 50) In the context of game rulebook design, one may conclude that the considerations of the “Horatian platitude”, if observed

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2 In the context of his work, Duke's definition of language is broader, referring to any “shared symbol set subject to conventions of use”. (1981, p50)
from Duke's perspective, are effective as they provide context to the work, and if they are presented clearly, these considerations may help to project difficult or complex information to the reader.

An alternative perspective from which to understand how the “Horatian platitude” affects the design of a game is to identify the narrative material of a rulebook as a component of the work’s “tone”. The tone of a work is described as “a perspective or attitude that the author adopts with regards to a specific character, place or development”, and can portray a variety of emotions. (Literary Devices 2010) The applications of this concept to our investigation are best discussed by Lewis Turco, who argues that tone, or “stance”, is a distinctive quality of expression, that the author uses to convey any number of emotions. (Turco 1999, 55) From Turco's perspective, the particular “tone” of a rulebook's narrative material may influence the emotions that are expressed to the reader, and as noted by Damien Walter, the unique emotions presented by different rulebooks become iconic, enjoyable to read, and at times inspirational outside of the context of the game. (Walter 2015)

The emotions conveyed through text are immediately observable when one examines the different tones present in game rulebooks. The tone of the aforementioned World of Darkness series is cynical and dramatic, and as work of horror, attempts to combine tension and mystery with the provocation of fear. This is particularly evident in the stories presented throughout Chapter One (Bridges and White Wolf Game Studio 2004, 14–31) The majority of the 5th Edition Dungeon Master's Guide from the Dungeons & Dragons series is spent conveying the heroic and, at times, whimsical emotions produced by the world of the game. (Mearls and Crawford 2014, chaps. 1–7) The tone of the rulebook for Warhammer 40000 is so distinctive, that the series produced the term “grim-dark” (Roberts 2014) as a means of describing the amoral and violent literary style.

If one assumes that the “emotional tone” of a rulebook translates to the game the text is based on, then one may conclude that providing tonally-relevant narrative material helps to ensure an emotionally consistent interpretation of the text by the participants of the game.
Conclusion
These two theories are just some of the perspectives one may take in order to evaluate how the “Horatian platitude” affects the design of a game. By exploring these concepts, we have provided a new perspective to view table-top role-playing games from – one that accurately captures the unique considerations that rulebooks and manuals present the designer.

It is clear is that the values posed by the “Horatian platitude” are strongly prevalent in rulebooks for table-top role-playing games, and that these considerations may be observed under a wide variety of contexts. These contexts provide the designer of a TRPG with much to consider. However, even without the games they are paired with, game manuals and rulebooks remain a remarkable combination of game design and literature, and it is obvious that the values captured in the “Horatian platitude” facilitate the enjoyment of those who might read rulebooks and manuals – whether young or old.
Bibliography


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Are tabletop role playing games as much fun for the DM as for the players? What is the best Star Wars tabletop RPG system? What are some clever traps to use in a tabletop role playing game? One set of rules that all role-playing games must have is conflict resolution. Players determine their goals and the GM sets obstacles in their path, hindering their ability to achieve their goals; therefore, the rules have to allow for a means to resolve this conflict. Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay takes the focus from a large scale army to a single character, while remaining in the same dark fantasy setting loosely based around the Old World and the Holy Roman Empire. Much like the tabletop RPG’s setting, the game engine is also based on its preceding wargame. The lethal combat allows many foes to die in one or two hits, which seems great aside from the fact this means so do you. For those who prefer a dark fantasy setting with quick and lethal combat, Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay does not disappoint. A tabletop role-playing game (typically abbreviated as TRPG or TTRPG), also known as a pen-and-paper role-playing game, is a form of role-playing game (RPG) in which the participants describe their characters’ actions through speech. Participants determine the actions of their characters based on their characterization, and the actions succeed or fail according to a set formal system of rules and guidelines. Within the rules, players have the freedom to improvise; their choices shape the direction and outcome of the game.