

The Edge of the Edge

Boundary violations, poetry and the play ground

By Keith Hackwood

This month I'd like to explore the experience of the edge, as met through the roleplaying game. Firstly let's acknowledge that there are many types of edge, of course, from the structural (the edge of the game world and the 'real' world) to the mechanics of play (the boundaries of one character relative to another or one player to another) to the aesthetic (campaign world boundaries, the edge of the map...) or the literal (sword edge against axe blade, being on the edge of your seat); the weirdly horrific (a noise, sight, smell, taste, feeling that sets your teeth on edge) differs from the essential (the dice spinning on its edges) by means of an edge. Power-gamers look to get an edge over others by means of their facility with number, GMs hold the edge of uncertainty, party's edge closer to revelatory experience, or inglorious extinction.

Stories may be 'edgy', play may have smooth curves or jagged edges, the flux and flow of game events distil an experience of movement, away from a centre, towards the edge – from that which is known towards that which is not. The edge is the place to be, 'the zone' – with expressions both concrete (as in the 'death zone') and symbolic (as in the psychological 'zone' of focus and concentration, heightened awareness and presence).

If a game involves a shared reality born from imagination, from the 'as if' place, and its edge is defined through agreed rules or behaviours, then what we have is a temporary 'zone' – a bubble within which we have agreed upon certain meanings, certain shapes of experience. The game exists within the wider bubble of the 'real world' but may be very different from it in many ways (the game may allow magic or space travel or superpowers, or may reward ultra-violence with abstracted points) – there is an edge that persists, and gives the bubble its definition. Without it there can be no game, no play. It is an expression of what Dora Kalff called a 'free and protected space', wherein in due course, a Self may emerge. So, in play within our bubble (which becomes the roleplaying 'ground' if you like, upon which can be placed genre specifics – fantasy, sci-fi, horror, or whatever) we bring ourselves and join the others. At which point the bubble becomes a sandbox, malleable and protean – waiting to be scooped and swept into new morphologies and terrains, populated with new figures, lost or heroic, corrupt or doomed, feckless and wise. The holistic space resonates with possibilities, ideas achieve escape velocity, or sink beneath the shifting sands, we breathe life into plans and tactics, watch ourselves dredge up impossible escapes, or blunder into obvious traps. In short, the space becomes animate, we invest it with our 'stuff', which is the plasticene throb of merging imaginations.

This brings us to another edge – for what is it that makes the best in us sing? What stories are we interested in telling? Which possibilities call to us, and which elude us, choosing us now or rejecting us, always from just over the horizon? How do these edges fit, where do they jar or scratch us?

It's worth considering these boundaries, arising as they do from the game we join. They've been noticed and spoken of before – here Richard Garfield (Mr 'Magic: The Gathering') speaks of them as consisting of

What a player brings to a game, what a player takes away from a game, what happens during a game other than the game itself, and what happens between games

Plato speaks of play too

You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation

I suspect anyone who has ever roleplayed would agree! And how would we make the discovery of which he speaks? Through observing the edges and the way a person is able to dance with them, tickle them, rub up against them (or not) – and in particular, by watching for whether a person dares to leap them. Yes, leaping – how does a player (or a PC, on that level, or a GM for that matter) leap? What is their style, their fear, their passion? Are they bold or lame or glued to the spot? I'm using 'leaping' here as Robert Bly uses it, to point at the idea of the imaginal leap (which for him is primarily artistic, or poetic but for our purposes is centrally about the imagination itself; in fact it is an attempt to describe a *process in consciousness*, but that's another story) from the known to the unknown, from the conscious and rational to the unconscious (superconscious) and sublime. So

a poet who is leaping makes a jump from an object soaked in unconscious substance to an object or idea soaked in conscious psychic substance

and back again, we might add. We could go off on a tour of 'wild association' here, and chew on the fat of the theory of 'three brains', but let's content ourselves instead with a flash or two by way of example –

In ancient times, in the "time of inspiration", the poet flew from one world to another, "riding on dragons".... They dragged behind them long tails of dragonsmoke.... This dragonsmoke means that a leap has taken place in the poem

And Bly again -

An image and a picture differ in that the image, being the natural speech of the imagination, cannot be drawn from or inserted back into the real world. It is an animal native to the imagination. Like Bonnefoy's "interior sea lighted by turning eagles," it cannot be seen in real life. A picture, on the other hand, is drawn from the objective "real" world. "Petals on a wet black bough" can actually be seen

The opposite of leaping is of course the linear railroad, the way the tracks follow their parallel to infinity, straight and smooth, mechanistic and efficient. There's nothing wrong with that, per se, but there can be a sense of something lacking, a sense of, well, being railroaded. It can make us passive in our own most valuable places, neglectful of our joy and terror, always looking out of the window at the view, not getting our heart-rate up with the urge to fly upon dragonbacks.

In terms of our theme of the edge, this leaping is all important, as a desire – a place where we can launch ourselves at the intention of world-making, play-making, living vividly through the imagination turned inward in search of the playful Self. My contention is that when we make a leap, whether it 'succeeds' or not (so whether it results in a PC peak experience or a cold character grave, whether it gives rise to a blinding flash of role-playing intensity to be remembered forever, or it falls flat) then we are opening ourselves to the spirit of play, we are collaborating with what the game itself desires. Now for this to happen we need a ground, once again – in order to leap from it or between it -

All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course... The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage,

the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e., forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart (John Huizinga)

And here is where things get more interesting, since from this point of view not only our 'free and protected space' of the roleplaying sandbox equals a play ground, but actually all the surfaces of our life, all the architectures of being, all the places and situations we encounter, offer a similar potential. As we play, so we are. Charles Eisenstein has some intriguing things to say about this, and I'd recommend a look at any of his online writings or freely available books (such as 'the Ascent of Humanity') – in a recent essay on the nature of ritual he observes

Rituals bridge the distinction between symbol and reality: they don't just mean something, they are something. They are actions in themselves.

Now in his terminology, roleplaying is a great example of ritual (if you don't believe me then check your automatic in-game behaviours, dice-related superstitions and how it is you've come to care so much about this hobby...) since it is participatory, story-based (it requires an unfolding of narrative, one way or another), limit-stretching in scope, and collaborative (players don't compete for a victory, as in so many games – though some may try to, of course!) But for it to be ritual in the full sense (as opposed to 'ritual' in inverted commas) it needs the fuel of the leap, the fool's leap, the willingness to assent and give one's gift to the game and the group experience.

This is where the final part of my subtitle rears its head, since its all very well to dance around edges, leap them in the spirit of imagination and ritual, *if*, and only if, we are safely held. No-one leaps unless they're ready to and they're well enough prepared. Part of this preparation is ritual, in the sense of game dynamics and game boundaries (expressed as things like classes or skill based systems), part of it is human (how am I feeling about myself right now? Will I be accepted or judged by my companions for risking something?) part of it is mystery, and another part is based in necessity – my *joy* might depend on leaping now, on risking something memorable, and of myself. There is more than a little of the world of 'erotic transference' to be noticed here – as players, GMs and participants of all sorts we are a little bit in love with our own creations, and we need to feel that they are seen and received, noticed as being special, even (by way of proof, just check out any RPG internet forum and watch what happens when a poster feels that their *magnum opus* or their grand unifying theory has not been seen, understood and accorded due precedence – flames everywhere, narcissism pricked, full-on erotic transference combustion!). This is OK, it's not a problem and its no big deal – actually it shows care, a sense of valuing self and world(s), we bring intensity to the table now, as if *this* matters. We get something, some juice, from these moments – but, I suggest, things need not stop there. This play need not only be a game of pretend or of 'show me yours', it really could grow beyond our wants and desires and develop a relationship to our own individual (and group) needs. That's a rarefied place for any game to get to, and I don't want to pretend that it happens often, since in my experience it is as rare as rocking horse dung, but I do want to acknowledge that in roleplaying games it exists as an horizon of possibility, a place of becoming. Beware the crossing of thresholds, the leaping of boundaries – though come to them we must, there are consequences to leaving the Shire.

The contemporary roleplaying scene is almost impossible to speak of, since it is a plethora of scenes, a spidery cracked mirror-glass, reflecting and distorting anything held up to its surface. Gone are the high Modernist days of orthodox OD&D or the B/X sets or even the retroreflecting and paradigmatic

schisms of AD&D. The arc of creation, fruition and multiplicity of forms has flared and dimmed in cycles at a tremendous pace these past thirty years or so, and scattered much stardust in the process. The external shapes on the roleplaying terrain today are diverse, oppositional, they evoke fanatical loyalty and fundamentalist determinism, but they also pull archetypal forms out of the imaginal insides of their adherents; people care about them and they care because in some way (that may not be your way or my way) they feel touched and connected by them. We are all postmodernists now, at least in that sense. Think of metagaming – a term arising out of the abstract number-language of mathematics, then finding purchase in dubiously meatified game theory and in various ‘philosophical’ games, like Peter Suber’s ‘Nomic’ and the ‘paradox of self-amendment’. In an ultimate sense there is no metagaming, no possible position outside the game itself, life is not a rehearsal, as they say, though it might be a weird kind of holodeck. We are all *Magister Ludi* of our own glass bead game, the trick is to *know* this. But which way do you move to get to your Self, to reach where you already are? Don’t just do something – sit there! Play!

So for every Nash Equilibrium there’s a Norm of Reciprocity, for each wisp of competitive altruism there will be a tragedy of the commons; yet there exists a *mysterium tremendum* in this polymorphous body of forms, from Gamma World to Talislanta, from the Petal Throne to the flesh that must be eaten by our zombie-selves; we are all abroad, at large, on the loose in the Game of Life. Could it be that roleplaying games, whatever else they assume themselves to be, are actually based in the timeless work of ‘soulmaking’, as Keats would have it? When we play, through the thrills and laughs, the arguments over cheap corn-based snacks and fizzing beverages and the raised eyebrows of our peers, as we roll the bones and check the pips, are we not also stepping up to the abyssal edge, checking out the view, preparing perhaps, to leap?

So, in conclusion, rather than this (amusing, and appropriated) trope

"D&D is the ultimate right wing wet dream. A bunch of guys who are better than your average Joe set out into the middle of nowhere where they murder and kill everything they come across in order to stockpile gold and elaborate magical bling. There are no taxes, no state and any poor people that get in your way get their village burned to the ground. It's like Ayn Rand on PCP." - Mr. Analytical

Try this one:

"We are the creators and creatures of each other, causing and bearing each other's burden." Nisargadatta Maharaj

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