

International Journal of Role-Playing

The aim of The International Journal of Role-Playing is to act as a hybrid knowledge network, and bring together the varied interests in role-playing and the associated knowledge networks, e.g. academic research, the games and creative industries, the arts and the strong role-playing communities.

Editorial

The International Journal of Role-Playing is a response to a growing need for a place where the varied and wonderful fields of role-playing research and -development, covering academia, the industry and the arts, can exchange knowledge and research, form networks and communicate.

Anders Drachen
Editorial Board IJRP

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Macquarie University
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J. Tuomas Harviainen
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Editorial

Welcome to the first issue of the IJRP!

The International Journal of Role-Playing is a response to a growing need for a place where the varied and wonderful fields of role-playing research and -development, covering academia, the industry and the arts, can exchange knowledge and research, form networks and communicate.

People have been role-playing for a very long time - exactly how long we do not know but likely from the time when man's ancestors had to teach their children how to hunt and survive. Taking on the role of the adult, of the hunter or the prey, is something ingrained in the process of growing up. What we associate with role-playing today is strongly related to theater, the enacting and telling of folk tales and sagas, various forms of legends and myths. Role-playing is more than theater though - since the release of Dungeons & Dragons in 1974 the concept of the role-playing game has spread like wildfire in popular culture, and today forms one of the key genres of non-digital and digital games.

A massive, global community of knowledge networks, e.g. role-playing gamers, actors, larp'ers, computer game players, artists etc. constitute a vibrant part of mainstream culture, which has given rise to numerous gaming conferences, thousands of role-playing clubs and societies etc. The associated industry is especially significant in the USA and Europe, with Asia and Australia forming other important markets for role-playing associated products. Within the last decade, an entire new field of research focusing on game

studies has arisen, that merges the very diverse interests in games from e.g. sociology, psychology and computer science in a fascinating melting pot where games are viewed in conjunction with traditional fields. Role-playing is at the center of much of this work, as role-playing is at the center of gameplay.

However, despite the presence of the many knowledge networks intersecting with role-playing, there is surprisingly little communication between them. This is why the initiative towards forming the International Journal of Role-Playing was initiated in 2006: To facilitate and promote inter-network communication on role-playing research. This stated goal influences the appearance of the journal, which integrates submissions from the industry, academia and creative arts alike, and peer-reviews them according to the principles of each field.

After two years of planning, the Editorial Board of the IJRP is pleased to present you with the first issue, containing five articles spanning the theoretical to the practical, with a general focus on role-playing games. It is our sincere hope that you will enjoy the first issue of the IJRP.

Do not forget to visit the IJRP website for news and updates: www.journalofroleplaying.org

On behalf of the Editorial Board
Anders Drachen

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The Many Faces of Role-Playing Games

Popular Abstract - Role-playing games have evolved into many forms in their thirty-year history. From the traditional pen-and-paper form, that originated with *Dungeons and Dragons*, with a group of friends playing around a table, to large live-action game, with hundreds of people acting out their assumed roles. The first computer role-playing games appeared over twenty-five years ago and massively multi-player role-playing games, such as *World of Warcraft* are now one of the most popular genres of digital games. Despite this diversity players at least seem to think they know when something is a role-playing game. When players, writers and game designers say "this is a role-playing game" there are no problems, they all seem to know what each other means, what is and is not a role-playing game. Yet there is no commonly accepted definition of the form. Understandable, perhaps, given the diversity, but the implicit agreement about its use means that there may well be some common underlying features shared by the various examples.

Hampering any attempt to understand what makes a game a role-playing game is the subtle divide between role-playing and role-playing game. Role-playing can take in many places, not all of them games (such as ritual, social activities, therapy, etc). This means that definitions of the role-playing activity are not that useful in separating role-playing games from other games. In this paper we start from the position that the players are correct: they know what a role-playing game is. By examining a range of role-playing games some common features of them emerge. This results in a definition that is more successful than previous ones at identifying both what is, and what is not, a role-playing game.

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ABSTRACT

Role-playing games have grown and evolved into a large number of forms in the last thirty years, spanning digital as well as non-digital media. They demonstrate a wide variety in the number of participants, style of play and the formal and informal systems that govern them. Despite this diversity players at least seem to think they know when something is a role-playing game. Yet there is no commonly accepted definition which both captures games generally accepted as role-playing games and distinguishes them from other, similar, games which begs the question, whether role-playing games are united by anything more than a colloquial name. Additionally, research involving these games is hampered by lack of a widely accepted definition of what constitutes a role-playing game, as it is then not even possible to clearly delineate the subject of such research. In

this paper various example of role-playing game are examined in an attempt to identify the defining set of characteristics of these games. On that basis a definition for them is proposed which is hopefully more successful at separating role-playing games from other, similar, game forms.

1.INTRODUCTION

Role-playing games, in their modern form, are generally held to have originated with *Dungeons and Dragons* in the 1970's (Mason 2004). Since then they have evolved into a wide variety of styles and media, including both digital and non-digital examples and with player numbers in an individual game ranging from a single person to the thousands. The differences between these forms can be so extensive that players of one may dismiss another as not being a role-playing game at all (Dormans 2006).

Take, as an example of both the similarities and differences, the current *Dungeons and Dragons* rule set and its embodiment in the *Neverwinter Nights* series of computer games. The two have many elements in common. They share a basic setting (the world of *Neverwinter Nights* being one of the published backgrounds of *Dungeons and Dragons*) and the mechanics of the digital game are a very accurate transfer of the non-digital rules into a digital form. They also differ in fundamental ways, the most obvious being the existence of a graphical interface for the computer game. Less obviously, *Neverwinter Nights*, in common with other digital role-playing games, is unbending in its application of the rules and outcomes. In a non-digital role-playing game there is at least the opportunity for flexibility with (typically) a game master who can choose which rules to use when and whether the results of those rules are to be applied unaltered or moderated in some form. More subjectively there may be argument about whether the play of a given game involves actual "role-playing" or not.

The differences between role-playing game forms are not simply explained by the digital/non-digital divide. For example, "Pen and Paper" and "Live action role-play" are two categories often applied to non-digital role-playing games. The former usually consists of a small group sitting around a table, using verbal description for most of the game play, while the latter can consist of 1000's of players, using both verbal and physical enactment techniques of game play. These are not the only sub-categories that have been used in describing types of role-playing games, others include "freeform", "tabletop", "systemless" and "pervasive". Whether these are truly separate and distinct categories is debatable, but they all enjoy some colloquial use.

Matching this wide variety, researchers have approached role-playing games from a number of perspectives. Some have documented the history of one or more forms of role-playing games, for example Koster (2002), and Mason (MAS04). Mackay (2001) examined them from the performance point of view. Copier (2005) relates non-digital role-playing games to their place in the Dutch fantasy subculture and their relation to ritual. It is also worth noting the use she makes of role-playing games in discussing the concept of the "magic circle", an example of the study of role-playing games being used to examine more general gaming concepts. Fine (1983) uses a participant observation approach to discuss them mainly in the context of the interactions between the players. Montola (2007) describes the application of role-

playing games in pervasive gaming format.

Tychsen et al. (2007) examine the changes in player enjoyment and engagement between some of the various forms of role-playing games. For Dormans (2006) they are an opportunity "to take some theoretical concepts and notions developed for computer games and use them to study role-playing games".

Outside the academic sphere, some members of the role-playing community itself have attempted to analyse these games. Such self-examination has been extensive, for example in the internet venues of *The Forge* and *RPGnet*, but generally lacks connections to wider game theory. It is worth noting though, as Copier (2005, p.4) does that "Some researchers take part in both the academic and the player's discourse on RPG theory". Notable work originating from the role-playing community includes discussions on game play style, for example (Hetland 2004) and (Edwards 2001), and examination of the place of narrative and story-telling in role-playing games, for example (Henry 2003), (Kim 2003) and (Padol 1996), amongst other topics.

While all these studies, and others, are obviously highly varied in their approach to role-playing games, it is notable that they generally take a circumspect and/or highly inclusive approach to defining what it is they are discussing. It is both interesting and understandable that many authors dealing with role-playing games shy away from the question of defining exactly what a role-playing game is. For example, while Copier (2005) offers some discussion of the forms of in which role-playing games exist, the activities involved and the relation between role-playing games and well known definitions of games in general, she does not tackle the question of exactly what is a role-playing game. Instead, the section in her paper entitled "Role-Playing Games" deals with their history, the demographics of Dutch players and the history of the study of role-playing games, without touching on exactly what a role-playing is.

Many authors that do address the question posit deliberately wide definitions. They may define the act of role-playing (as opposed to a role-playing game). Typical of these is (Henriksen 2002, p.44):

"[role-play is] a media, where a person, through immersion into a role and the world of this role, is given the opportunity to participate in and interact with the contents of this world."

A more extreme example is that of Pettersson (2006, p.101), for whom "roleplaying is the art of

experience, and making a roleplaying game means creating experiences". As noted by Stenros and Hakkarainen (2003, p.61) many existing definitions of role-playing and role-playing games "have been largely normative, not descriptive". This is not to say that such efforts are without value. The role-playing *experience* is undoubtedly one in which immersion, the assumption of a role and the involvement of the player are central. The player experience is, however, not the same as the activity in which they partake.

Some authors have taken a more descriptive standpoint, for example (Stenros & Hakkarainen 2003, p.56):

"A role-playing game is what is created in the interaction between players or between player(s) and gamemaster(s) within a specified diegetic framework. ... [A] role-playing game requires four things, a gamemaster, a player, interaction, and a diegetic framework."

Again, this is a rather broad approach to the question. Many games not normally considered role-playing games are covered by it and similar definitions. This arises from the focus of the authors, which can be seen in their statement "We have created a model that includes all activities that we recognize as role-playing". Note that they refer to role-playing, not role-playing *games*. While this inclusivity is commendable when it comes to understanding the general activity of role-playing, it does not help in separating role-playing games from other game types. The same paper, for example, discusses the possibilities of role-playing in *Risk* and *Monopoly*, games not generally regarded as role-playing games.

It could even be argued that, given the extreme variety of form displayed by role-playing games, touched on above, and the possibilities for role-playing outside of role-playing games, that a general definition can either not be arrived at or would be too vague to be useful. However, the extensive use made of the term "role-playing games" by these authors, and many others, implies that it refers to something and that a potentially identifiable object, the role-playing game, exists. Otherwise the use of the term could only be considered confusing at best. As discussed below these proposed definitions have significant shortcomings.

That a certain type of *game* exists which can be labelled "role-playing game" is implied by the widespread use of the term. Players appear to believe they know whether or not a game is a role-

playing game. If the accuracy of such identifications is accepted then a definition of a role-playing game may perhaps be arrived at by analysis of the different forms in an attempt to identify the common features, if any. It is also important to note that role-playing exists outside role-playing games – in various social and cultural arenas, in education, training, etc. The broader activity of role-playing is not the topic being discussed here, instead what is examined is the group of *games* collectively, and colloquially, termed role-playing games. Whether any of these games involve actual "role-playing" is another question, as, in many cases, identifying role-playing is extremely subjective and notoriously difficult to achieve agreement about.

The topic of this paper is role-playing games, not role-playing. Significant discussions exist of the role-playing activity, both in gaming and non-gaming spheres. But as role-playing does not need a gaming context in which to exist, definitions of role-playing do not provide a conclusive answer to what constitutes a role-playing *game*. This paper addresses the latter question by examining the nature of those games, which provide the context for the role-playing that occurs within them.

2. EXISTING DEFINITIONS OF ROLE-PLAYING AND ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

As noted above there have been a number of attempts at defining role-playing and/or role-playing games. While they are, understandably, varied, they can be (roughly) divided into two broad categories – those which focus on the process and experience of role-playing and those which include descriptive elements about the game and game-play itself. These, to an extent, correspond to the normative and descriptive categories identified by Stenros and Hakkarainen (2003), although some of the definitions contain elements of both and their placement here into one of the two categories may be considered arbitrary. Such placement is not intended to be definitive, but instead a means of discussing current efforts at definitions. While space prohibits an exhaustive examination of the definitions offered in the literature, it is worth reviewing a (hopefully) representative sample.

2.1 Process and Experience Based Definitions

One of the earliest definitions of role-playing, from a time when even many role-playing games themselves did not address the question, is that of Lortz (1979), who defines a role-playing game as "any game which allows a number of players to

assume the roles of imaginary characters and operate with some degree of freedom in an imaginary environment". The emphasis here on players assuming roles and the freedom with which they interact with the game world is a theme that later writers would return to in more detail. While it places the player and their experience at the centre of the role-playing activity it only conveys a sketchy impression at best of the games themselves.

This tendency can also be seen in (Padol 1996) where a role-playing game is defined as one that "Allows people to become simultaneously both the artists who create a story and the audience who watches the story unfold. This story has the potential to become a personal myth, shaped to meet the needs of its creators." This is an attractive definition, at least to those who wish their characters to experience interesting stories (which is at the very least a significant minority of role-players) and conveys a useful perspective on the role-playing experience. Its emphasis on story, which is clearly seen by the author as something created in the role-playing activity, but not as the whole of that activity itself, does not tell us a great deal about the context in which those stories are created. Read literally, any game with story elements where the participants have some input into the unfolding of that story, could be said to fit within this definition. It is doubtful that such a simple-minded interpretation is intended, and instead there appears to be an implicit assumption about what a role-playing *game* is, the definition telling us more about what happens in such a game. Its usefulness in separating role-playing games from other game types, on a structural or descriptive basis, is therefore limited.

A more general definition, without the emphasis on story, is that of Henriksen (2002), quoted above. Again, this sidesteps the question of the means by which and limitations upon the interaction that the players have with the game world occurs. This should not be seen as a particular criticism, as role-playing, not role-playing games, are being defined. Role-playing can, and does, occur outside of role-playing games.¹ In fact, one of the earliest definitions of role-playing pre-dates role-playing games by about two decades, that of Mann (1956, p. 227):

"A role-playing situation is here defined as a situation in which an individual is explicitly asked to take a role not normally his own, or

if his own in a setting not normal for the enactment of the role."

As these definitions are not directly addressing role-playing games it is understandable they have limited utility in identifying such games.

One similar definition which does mention games is that of Montola (2007, p.179). Again the attempt is not to define role-playing games, but to offer a definition of the role-playing activity (*italics as in original*):

"I see roleplaying as an *interactive process* of *defining and re-defining* an *imaginary game world*, done by a *group of participants* according to a *recognised structure of power*. One or more or participants are *players*, who portray *anthropomorphic characters* that *delimit the players' power* to define."

While it is almost certainly unfair, given its stated intention, we can examine how useful this definition is in explicitly categorising role-playing games; the word "game" is, after all, included. An "interactive process of defining and re-defining an imaginary game world" could apply to any game, as any game, even the most abstract, has a game world which the participants alter through their game play. The phrase "recognised structure of power" is likely meant to refer to the game master function and the variety of forms that can take, but does not define how power within the game is structured or how it is recognised or indeed whether the power structure may or may not be egalitarian. It should also be noted that software and a player could be considered to form a group of participants, with a power structure, so this covers all digital games. This definition could then cover a range of digital games, for example first person shooters and three-dimensional platform games, as well as board games such as *Talisman* and *Squad Leader* which represent individual characters within the game. It is not likely that this is actually intended and again this definition has much more to say about the role-playing process than role-playing games.

There are other definitions which fit broadly within the category discussed here. For example, that of Pettersson (2006) (quoted above), Pohjola (2004, p. 89): "Role-playing is immediated character immersion", Pohjola (2003, p.34): "Role-playing is immersion to an outside consciousness ("a character") and interacting with its surroundings", Mäkelä et al. (2005, p.207) "role-playing is defined

¹ Indeed, it is debatable whether a role-playing game has to involve role-playing at all.

as any act in which an imaginary reality is concurrently created, added to and observed" and Edwards (2001), which discuss the requirements for the role-playing activity rather than the definition of a role-playing game.

It should be noted that in all these definitions it is role-playing, not role-playing *games*, which occupies the central position. It is understandable then that, while valuable within their chosen scope, they are less useful when it comes to identifying role-playing games as a separate category. As noted in several of them the act of role-playing may occur in a wide range of venues, including games not recognised as role-playing games and even outside a gaming context altogether.

As the focus of the current paper is to arrive at a definition that can identify role-playing games as a category within the broad spectrum of games, not on the role-playing experience, we need to consider other approaches.

2.2 Descriptive Based Definitions

There have been fewer attempts at descriptive definitions of role-playing games than those of the type discussed above. However, a number do exist.

Dormans (2006) gives a definition of role-playing games by categorising them into four types, pen-and-paper, live-action, computer and massively multiplayer, ostensibly on the basis of "medium, means and scale". However, on examination the differences between the categories offered are actually only on medium (pen-and-paper, live-action and computer) and scale (pen-and-paper and computer versus live-action and massively multiplayer). It would be difficult to argue against the proposition that many examples of role-playing games fall into one or another of these categories. However, the proposition that these categories are sufficient is more contentious. There is, for example, an implicit assumption about quantitative measurement and random resolution underlying the arguments presented. This can even be seen even in the article title, which begins "On the Role of the Die" and in the early statement "I will try to expose the role played by dice in these games". Role-playing games exist which do not require random quantitative resolution. In fact, some do not require quantitative elements at all. This is not a reference to the *Amber* diceless system or similar rulesets which involve quantitative assessment of character skills and abilities but not random resolution. A form of role-playing game which does not fit any of Dorman's categories is that known in Australian hobby role-playing

conventions as "systemless". That this form, described below, exists invalidates Dorman's four categories as a complete definition of role-playing games. More fundamentally, Dorman's categorisation has limited usefulness as a complete definition, as no attempt is made to analyse the forms to discover if there is any underlying commonality which could both group them together and separate them from other game types. If there are forms of role-playing game beyond is four categories no guide is given as to how to identify them. The definition therefore relies upon its own a priori completeness.

Tychsen et al. (2006) provides a detailed analysis of multi-player tabletop and digital role-playing games, comparing the two forms. The analysis describes both the process-aspects of play, as well as providing an overview of the features shared between role-playing games in general. While fairly detailed, the discussion is explicitly stated as not being complete. The reader is referred there for the complete overview of the analysis, but in summary it states that role-playing games all share the following features:

- At the heart of role-playing games, there is an element of "storytelling with rules", and each game form provides unique ways of expressing this feature.
- Rules, multiple (at least two) participants and is set in a fictional world, established via the game premise: A shared understanding among the participants of the game setting, rules and similar game framework issues.
- Most of the game participants normally control a character through which they interact with the fictional world
- There is usually a game master (or digital system performing a similar function) responsible for management of those elements of the game and fictional world outside direct control of the players.

Tychsen et al. (2006) also discuss the functions of the game master and mention that the role of the game master may not be fixed, but move amongst the participants, and varies greatly in functionality across role-playing game forms.

The problem with the list of shared features in Tychsen et al. (2006) is that it appears to cover games which are not normally considered role-playing games. If it is allowed that some digital games are role-playing games (which the authors of the current paper do) then consider the first-person shooter. Once role-playing games

are allowed to be digital than it must also be further allowed that software may take on the role of the game master. When looking at the list above, it would appear that e.g. first-person shooters would be considered role-playing games. They have a fictional world, multiple participants (at least one player and the game master/software) and a character through whom the player interacts with the game world. First-person shooters could also be argued to contain or create stories during play, notably games that specifically aim at creating an interesting storyline, e.g. *Deus Ex*, *System Shock II* and *Bioshock*.

It could be argued that the player does not role-play a character in a classical FPS-style digital game, however, it is important to note that the player does have the potential role-play the character – but there would not be an in-game effect of this role-playing (except potentially in affecting some of the choices the player makes). Many contemporary FPS-games include features for solving conflicts in different ways – e.g. violent vs. non-violent solutions to problems in *Bioshock* or *Crysis*. It could be argued that this provides a low-level form of role-playing potential to these games.

Yet such games, with a few exceptions, are rarely considered or termed role-playing games. Some, such as *Deus Ex*, are said to have role-playing elements, but that is not the same as being a role-playing game. Another game type that could be argued to feature the same series of elements are the three-dimensional platform games, such as *Jak and Daxter* and *Ratchet and Clank*, which again are not typically considered role-playing games.

Finally, Tychsen et al. (2006) point to the importance of the role-playing element of role-playing games, but also note that contrary to the name, the act of role-playing is not a feature found in all the games popularly titled role-playing games. For example, digital role-playing games often feature a comparatively limited ability for the player to role-play their character. The authors do not however provide a definition of when a player can be said to be role-playing or not.

An essentially similar, if less detailed, definition is given by Morgan (2002), which in summary, states that players deal with an imaginary world, through the medium of a character, and that there is a game master who: “adjudicates rules disputes”; and: “guide[s] play much as a director would a movie”. It can be seen to also be problematic in terms of identifying what and is not a role-playing game as

it what it covers conflicts with the generally accepted usage of the term.

A slightly different approach is taken Mackay (2001, p. 4) who defines role-playing games as follows (*italics as in original*):

“[A]n *episodic* and *participatory* story-creation system that includes a set of quantified rules that assist a group of *players* and a *gamemaster* in determining how their fictional characters’ spontaneous interactions are resolved.”

It does not mention a fictional world and focuses on story-creation and interaction. It requires quantified rules, which were noted above to be unnecessary. Again, whole classes of digital games not recognised as role-playing games fit the definition. It could also be asked why the game must be “episodic”. Many examples of short games, which can be completed in a single session, are known, particularly at non-digital role-playing conventions. The prominence given to “story-creation” is also debatable, given the arguments around the place of story and narrative within games.

Another, often referenced, definition of a role-playing game is that of Stenros and Hakkarainen (2003), quoted above. In common with some of the other definitions discussed here it mentions players, game masters and interaction. However it eschews mention of a game world in favour of “diegetic framework”, which includes the game world.² The concept of diegesis is an extremely useful in understanding what is happening within a role-playing setting and how players approach the act of role-playing. However, as it can apply generally to any game form it is less useful in separating out role-playing games.

Even the more detailed of the above definitions reduce to a game, set in an imaginary world, played by multiple participants, one or more of whom has a special role, commonly termed the game master, who controls aspects of the game world outside the control of the remainder of the participants, who typically control one or more characters. The presence of a privileged participant who controls aspects of the game world is hardly an identifying element of role-playing games. As well as the digital game forms mentioned above consider for example, referees in competition figure gaming, who may create the terrain upon which battles are fought (i.e. the game world), interpret rules issues and occasionally adjudicate outcomes.

² In the words of [Ste03] “Diegesis is what is true within the game world”

This appears to meet the minimum requirements of a game master, yet such games are not considered role-playing games. Interestingly, though, it was from such games that the original table-top role-playing game, *Dungeons and Dragons*, was derived. Which perhaps goes some way to proving the relationship between the role-playing game master and the figure gaming competition referee and that the mere presence of such a participant is not enough to make a game a role-playing game.

Most, and arguably all, of the definitions discussed in this section are successful in that the games commonly termed role-playing games meet their requirements. Unfortunately, despite their respective advantages, they are insufficiently precise for use in deciding which games are role-playing ones and which are not as they also include within their scope games which are generally not considered to be role-playing games (or, in the case of Dormans (2006) do not cover games which are and give no guidelines for considering undecided cases).

3. ROLE-PLAYING GAME FORMS

From the above discussion it can be seen that we do not currently have a definition of a role-playing game (as opposed to the role-playing activity) that both includes the set of games commonly described as role-playing games, while at the same time separating them out from other game forms. As this has not been the intent of the work cited in the above, this should not be taken as criticism. However, attempting such a definition is useful as it offers a different perspective on role-playing than that offered by previous authors.

The concept of diegesis is extremely useful in understanding what is happening within a role-playing setting and how players approach the act of role-playing. However, as it can apply generally to any game form it is less useful in separating out role-playing games.

A definition which specifically permits the identification of a game as a role-playing game or not, could possibly be developed based on analysis of existing known examples, in an attempt to identify any similarities.

The analysis presented here will consider the following examples of role-playing games:

- Pen-and-paper / table-top
- Systemless
- Live-action role-playing
- Single Player digital
- Massively Multi-Player Online
- Freeform
- Pervasive

This is not intended as an exhaustive list of all forms of role-playing game, nor a claim that each is significantly different to all the others. For example, under some definitions Systemless could be considered a sub-type of pen-and-paper, under others a sub-type of live-action role-playing. For present purposes that some of the above may be closely related is however immaterial, what is important is that the examples in the list, as a whole, have been selected to ensure a coverage across the breath of role-playing games to provide a firm basis for developing a workable definition.

Some of the examples in the list are considerably more widely played than others, but the intent is to arrive at a definition that covers all role-playing games, not simply the more popular ones.

Descriptions of some of the above have been given elsewhere, for example by Dormans (2006), where four of the listed forms are described. For completeness, and ease of analysis, all seven are described below, although some of the following content differs minimally from the existing literature

3.1 Pen-and-Paper/Table-Top

“Pen-and-paper” and “table-top” both refer to the original form of role-playing game from the 1970’s. Players, usually numbering in the single figures, sit around a table or occupy seating in the same room. Typically all players except one play a single character each and use that character to interact with the game world. The remaining player, variously termed dungeon master, game master or storyteller, is responsible for the game world beyond the players’ characters. The power balance between players and game master may vary between examples, and even within a particular game, see Young (2005), and there may sometimes be more than one game master, but the latter is unusual. Play of the game typically involves verbal description, either by the players giving their character’s actions or intentions, or by the game master describing the results of actions or the elements of the game world the players encounter. This form makes extensive use of written materials,

including rules, play aids and the character descriptions. The last, termed a character sheet, usually describes the character in quantitative terms, with perhaps some qualitative description of the character's personality and history, with the latter varying greatly in occurrence and extent. The character sheet gives rise to the term "pen-and-paper", although the information is often written in pencil, not pen, to allow updating as the character evolves. Players may interact with the game world in any way that their characters, as inhabitants of that world, are capable of and play can potentially roam through any part of the game world.

The pen-and-paper form, being the one from which all others has originated, is well known and has been discussed in detail elsewhere, for example by Fine (1983), Mackay (2001) and Dormans (2006). In the interests of space, the form has therefore not been given as extensive an examination as some of the other forms discussed below. A closely related sub-variant, Systemless, is discussed in the next section. This form displays characteristics not highlighted in many previous descriptions of small-group role-playing games.

3.2 Systemless

This game form, arising in the Australian role-playing convention scene and elsewhere, is related to the pen-and-paper form and to psychodrama.³ The number and functions of participants is typically the same as that for pen-and-paper, although the use of multiple game masters with substantial authorial control is more common. In these games characters are described in purely qualitative terms, by giving descriptions of their history and personality. There is no quantitative (or even pseudo-quantitative) definition of a character's attributes or skills. Character development is still possible, but is in terms of personality and emotion rather than the skills, attributes and levels typical of the pen-and-paper form.

In Systemless play emphasis is placed much more on enaction than description, players do not sit around a table, but move around the game space speaking as their character and portraying their characters' actions. The play of the game is the interaction between the players (including the game master) and the development of the characters and story. Actions are resolved based on the decisions of the game master, based purely on

their assessment of the situation, and without reference to any quantitative character or world description or any form of random resolution mechanism. The possible range of player interaction with the game world and the range of play are the same as for the pen-and-paper form, though the means of resolving actions with the game world is markedly different, given the lack of quantitative and random elements which commonly feature in the pen-and-paper forms - often in conjunction with the same means of resolving actions in the game world as Systemless play.

This form appears to fall outside the categories of Dormans (2006), for, as Copier (2005, p.3) says: "Table-top or pen and paper role-play does not involve any form of physical acting." While one could argue that a definition of pen and paper role-play could be given which includes such games, it then becomes a definition simply based on the number of participants, which tells us little, if anything, about the nature of the activity so categorised. Similarly, certain definitions of live-action role-playing appear to include this form of gaming, for example those of Gade (2003, p.67):

"I define a larp as: An interactive medium where one or more participants take on roles. The roles interact with each other, and with the surroundings and the world of the larp."

and Montola (2003, p.86):

"Larp is a role-playing game, where the actual physical reality is used to construct diegeses, in addition to communication, both directly and arbitrarily."

On the other hand some definitions of the border between live-action role-playing and tabletop, such as that of Lynch (2000), leave Systemless on the tabletop side of the divide.

Regardless of whether Systemless is an example of pen-and-paper, live-action or something else, its eschewing of quantitative elements while remaining a role-playing game is informative.

3.3 Live-Action Role-Playing

Live-action role-playing typically involves larger numbers of participants than the preceding forms, ranging from the dozens up to hundreds or even thousands. Emphasis in these games is placed on player enaction of the character's actions (similar to Systemless play, although live-action role-playing can feature rules for player interaction),

³ "psychodrama; a method within group psychotherapy where the participants take roles in improvisational dramatizations of emotionally charged situations", Psychodrama (2007)

costuming, props and setting. Real world locations, such as castles, parklands and warehouses, are used as the settings and are chosen to match the game world setting as closely as possible. As with the previous forms, participants are normally either players or game masters, with the players enacting a single character and the game masters, of whom there must be a considerable number due to the number of players, again controlling those parts of the game world beyond the players' characters. There may also be players who are assisting the game masters by carrying out pre-planned actions, and so are not entirely acting at their own discretion. There are examples, such as some Scandinavian-based games, where attempts have been made to break the traditional game master-player boundary. In these games the relationship between players and game masters is fluid, changing over the course of the game through various game contexts.

Character descriptions can contain quantitative elements similar to the pen-and-paper format, but are usually based on qualitative information (e.g. personality, background) While player enaction is emphasised, formal rule systems are commonly used for determination of the outcome of many character actions, e.g. in the *Minds Eye Theatre* system, White Wolf (2005). The embodied nature of play, together with the emphasis on props and costume, allows players to have their characters interact with the game world in extremely varied and detailed ways. While the use of real world settings may appear to limit the areas of the imaginary game world which characters can inhabit, the game masters are free to extend the scope of play as they see fit.

3.4 Single Player Digital

The single player digital form of role-playing game, Hallford and Hallford (2001) is derived directly from the table-top form, and some examples (such as *Baldur's Gate*, *Neverwinter Nights* and *Knights of the Old Republic*) use digitised versions of pen-and-paper rules. These games rely on quantitative representations of the character, with character development following the quantitative improvement in skills and abilities typical of pen-and-paper games. The most obvious differences between the two forms are there being only a single player, with the software taking on the functions of the game master and the presence of the visual, digital, representation of the game world (Tychsen et al. 2006). A less obvious difference is the strict enforcement of the rules by the game software, whereas a human game master

has the option of which rules to enforce and whether or not alter outcomes mandated by the random resolution mechanism. The digital form also limits the ways players can interact with the game world. In a non-digital form the players can interact with the game world in any way the game master allows, with the game master improvising resolution mechanisms if necessary. Digital forms are limited to the interaction forms implemented prior to play by the game designer. It should be noted, though, that these often provide a comparatively large range of choice compared to other genres of digital games, including combat, interaction with objects and verbal interaction with non-player controlled inhabitants of the game world. Players are likewise limited to those areas of the game world for which the designers have created graphical representations. However, this space often represents a larger portion of the game world than for most character / avatar based digital games (possibly only matched by 3D platformers) and players are generally free to revisit previously encountered portions of the game world, unlike, for example, most first-person shooters, where the player is limited to the current level and cannot revisit areas once the corresponding level is complete.

In a non-digital form the players can interact with the game world in any way the game master allows - with the game master improvising resolution mechanisms if necessary - whereas digital forms are limited to the interaction forms implemented prior to play by the game designer.

Variants of this form exist which allow a small group of players, as in pen-and-paper games, e.g. *Dungeon Siege*. A few examples, such as *Vampire the Masquerade: Redemption* and *Neverwinter Nights* (I and II), even allow a human game master. However, the restrictions on the ways players interact with the world, and the need for pre-existing digital content limiting the accessible areas of game world still apply. While a human game master can allow more flexible action resolution and interaction with the world, this with current digital technology does not exceed what is possible in non-digital forms.

3.5 Massively Multi-Player Online

The most obvious difference between this and the previous category is the number of simultaneous

participants, with typical examples in the thousands, e.g. *Age of Camelot*, *Saga of Ryzom* and *World of Warcraft*. While the basic form of the game is the same, with a graphical interface for current examples (in contrast to the earlier text only versions) and quantitative character development, the sheer number of players gives rise to intricate and varied patterns of play, based around the social interaction possibilities with other human players. They often provide geographically large areas for players to explore, typically larger than in the single player digital form. The range of possible interactions with world the offer is the same as the single player digital, with combat, object interaction and verbal communication with non-player characters standard. However this latter is of course complemented by the communication with player characters, which can obviously be much more extensive and nuanced than the very limited dialogue options offered by software controlled characters., as discussed by, for example, Taylor (2006) and Duchenaut et al. (2006). It is also worth noting that players can have multiple characters in most examples of these games and may play each such character for as long, or longer, than in a typical pen and paper game. There is potential for a much higher degree of attachment to these characters by the players than in the single player digital forms, which typically last 20 to 40 hours.

3.6 Freeform

The freeform style is reasonably well known in The United Kingdom, USA and Australia. In many ways it can be viewed as a specific form of the live-action style, but is usually recognized among the player community as an independent category of role-playing game. Freeform is a form of live-action game with a clearer emphasis on character interaction in a more controlled environment than is possible in large scale live-action games. There is typically limited, if any, emphasis on combat. Normally the number of players involved is much larger than the table-top form, but less than is typical for live-action and also places less emphasis on setting, costume and prop. It tends to rely heavily on inter-player communication and negotiation and less on rules based action resolution. Again multiple game masters are required to handle the larger number of players and while most play is set in a single physical location, represented by the physical play space, the game masters are free to extend this into anywhere in the game world.

3.7 Pervasive

Pervasive and ubiquitous games are typically digital games which extend the game play beyond the computer screen. For example, where player movement in the real world equates to avatar movement in the game world, as in *Botfighters*. Pervasive role-playing is slightly different, in that it does not necessarily include a digital component. Instead it is essentially an extension of the live-action form. In the latter there are usually boundaries (of various strength) defining which parts of the real world are being used to represent the game world. In pervasive role-playing these boundaries are much weaker or even essentially non-existent, to the extent that anything in the real world, even people not playing the game, can take on a significance for the play of the game. As any part of the real world, or anything in it, can potentially be part of the game, it is obvious that the geographical range of, and the possible ways of interacting with, the game world are extensive. In most other ways this form resembles live-action role-playing. For more detail see Montola (2007) and Jonsson (2007).

4. FEATURES OF ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

As can be seen from the above there is significant variation amongst role-playing games, including the mechanisms supporting game play and the play styles that typify them. While this may make it appear unlikely that a useful overarching definition can be found there are also considerable areas of similarity.

4.1 Character

All the examples discussed share a use of player-controlled characters. One of the earliest examples of a role-playing game including a self-definition, Perrin et al. (1980, p.3) focuses on character, defining a fantasy role-playing games as

“A game of character development, simulating the process of personal development commonly called life”

These characters are the primary (in most cases the sole) means by which the players can interact with the game world. The methods by which the characters are defined vary, in some cases being purely quantitative, in others extensively qualitative and in others a mixture of the two, but in all cases the characters are regarded as individuals, with their own unique place in the game world (some experimental Scandinavian-produced role-playing game modules have

experimented with replacing the typical character with e.g. abstract concepts, such as a group of emotions). This contrasts, for example, with the use of characters in simulation based education and training exercises, where characters are more often described by their roles (teacher, medic, etc.) than by reference to their individuality. The players are able to effect, and influence, the development of the game world through actions expressed via their characters.

More than being merely character-based, characters in role-playing games are in the vast majority of cases capable of development, as noted in the definition quoted above. Again this development might be in quantitative, skill and ability, terms or in qualitative personality terms. While the form of the development might vary widely between games it is always subject to at least some player control. There might be skill points which the player chooses to allocate, specialisations to select or decisions made about emotional changes. This separates role-playing games from other games with character development, but where that development is fixed and pre-decided by the game designers, with perhaps some limited choices by the player within a defined framework. Pre-defined development is seen, for example, in games where the character obtains a new ability when a particular point in play is reached, such as is often the case in 3D platformers, or some adventure games, or which demonstrate emotional change in the central character, but where this is again under the developer's, not the player's, control. It might be contended that, in any game that is character-based, the player may imbue their character with a personality and develop that personality over the play of the game. While this is true, a defining feature of role-playing games is that they are *capable of reacting* to changes in the character(s). The game reacts to skill and ability changes. If the game focuses on the personality of a character then when that personality is changed, the game can react, in the shape of the reactions of the other players (and the rest of the game world, as expressed by the game master). Even if the player of, for example, a racing game imbues their character with a personality and then changes that personality the game will not be able to react as it is not designed with this capacity (in fact, it would not be able to react to the initial personality state either).

The above is not to argue that character development *must* occur for a game to be a role-playing game, only that it be possible within the design of the game, offer some control to the player

and that the game will respond, in some manner, to the changes. Character development is not a requirement on every player or character, but is a potential play feature existing within the structure of the game. It is perfectly possible, for example, to "play" *World of Warcraft*, by creating a character, and then merely touring the world without ever acquiring additional equipment or experience points. Similarly, a player of *Monopoly* could simply move their piece around and around the board without ever buying a property. But the intent of development is there, even if ignored in some particular play examples.

4.2 Game Master

While most participants in the games discussed are players controlling a single character, all of the forms also have other participants who control the game world beyond the players' characters. These participants are typically referred to as game masters. The exact duties of the game master vary, with the power relationship between players and game master varying between game to game and even at different points within the same game. Game master functions also vary, making defining them difficult, although some attempts have been made such as Stenros and Hakkarainen (2003) and Tychsen et al. (2005). Whatever their exact nature, the viewpoint of a game master is very different to that of the players. While players are primarily concerned with their particular character, game masters are primarily responsible for presenting the world to the players, elaborating story elements and adjudicating results. This is also the case where the game master is represented by a game engine in a digital role-playing game. Where there is extensive use of props the game masters are responsible for the selection and positioning of these. Even in pervasive games; game masters will often place game objects within the real world, structuring and controlling it according to the needs of the game.

The presence of a game master helps differentiate role-playing games from other forms of character based games, such as board games where a player controls a single character, for example *Zombies!!*, and from children's games, such as cops and robbers. The game master may be called upon to adjudicate outcome of events in the game world, and will rely upon a rule system to do so. However, that rules system does not necessarily include any quantitative representation of characters or game world or include random resolution of any kind.

4.3 Treatment of Space

Role-playing games consistently make use of a fictional game world, and this element is found in many of the definitions discussed in section 2. Yet it can hardly be said that role-playing games are unique in this. Many, if not most, games are set apart from the real world by the placement of their action in a fictional world. However, role-playing games make use of the fictional world in a manner that is consistent and distinctive, although not one which is unique to them. This can be seen both in the parts of the game world encompassed within the game and the means by which characters can interact with that game world.

Most game forms are limited, by their structure, in the amount of the game world that the players can experience. This is true of both digital and non-digital games. A military board game covers a fixed amount of territory. *Asteroids* is set in a small part of an asteroid field. *Cluedo*, in both digital and non-digital forms, is limited to a single house. Play can never proceed beyond these limits. Non-digital role-playing games are under no such fixed restrictions. They offer the promise (if rarely fulfilled) of the ability to go anywhere and do anything within the game world. The players and game master are free to investigate the entirety of their imaginary universe as they please. Even if the play of the game is currently geographically very limited within the game world (perhaps even to a single building or even room) this is a conscious choice of some or all of the participants, not inherent in the structure of the game and could *potentially* change at any moment. This concept is touched upon by Young (2005) in his discussion of game mastering styles, but not investigated there in great depth.

Digital role-playing games are nowhere near as free, being almost always limited to the pre-created game content. Indeed this has lead Schut (2003, p. 10) to suggest: "maybe we should use [Janet] Murray's term and call digital game narratives participatory stories". Even then digital role-playing games tend to encompass a high proportion of the imaginary world, higher than first person shooters, perhaps equalled by adventure games and some 3D platform games, such as *Ratchet and Clank*, *Jax and Daxter* and *Beyond Good and Evil*. Such games closely resemble role-playing games but lack the character development aspect. The need for pre-play preparation of the graphical representation of the accessible areas of the game world should not be considered a hard and fast limit on digital role-playing games. As technology improves the ability to present

interesting, non-pregenerated, space will improve, bringing to the digital the possibilities currently only available in the non-digital. Movement in this direction can be seen in the recently released game *Hellgate: London*.

Not only do role-playing games allow access to relatively large sections of the game world (and in some forms potentially all of it), they also allow extensive choice in how players may explore that space. Players are generally free to choose their path through the world (at least to an extent noticeably greater than many other game forms) and even revisit areas. Again, this is not true of character based games that divide the play area into levels (such as most first-person shooters), where the player is restricted both in their path through the environment and from revisiting completed levels. Adventure games likewise tend to move players through the world a section at a time, limiting the ability to revisit areas. Role-playing games, especially the non-digital forms, then, can be viewed as treating space in a (pseudo-) realistic manner. Characters have choice as where they visit, what order they visit areas and whether they wish to revisit areas, just as the players of such games do in their real lives.

Role-playing games are obviously an example of Murray's (2000) concept of the "tangled rhizome" mode of spatial navigation in games. However, while they allow the choice of direction she posits, they are not alone in this. It is the scope of the choice offered to the player(s) that sets such games apart.

Obviously global or galactic strategy games such as *Civilization* or *Space Empires* offer significant spatial scope (in raw quantity at least) within the game world and flight simulators typically present both expansive areas and free player navigation. However, these games are typically not character based, and the options they present for interacting with the world tend to be more limited than is found in a role-playing game, as discussed in the next section.

4.4 Interaction with the Game World

The previous section dealt with the treatment of the game world on a macro scale. Role-playing games also have a consistent approach to micro-level interactions with the game world.

While all games involve a configurative element role-playing games differ in the potential *scope* of the configuration available to the player from other character based forms. Players of non-digital games can have their character interact with the

game world in any way that is possible within the limits of that world. Even digital games, limited by current technology, tend to offer a wider range of possibilities, usually including combat, dialogue, object interaction, etc, than is found in most games. Adventure games lack the combat option, first-person shooters generally offer less rich dialogue and object interaction, etc.⁴

While role-playing games provide more interaction opportunities, they tend to be generalist rather than specialist in how they allow players to exercise their configurative options. They may allow many different ways of interaction with the world (such as driving, shooting and talking) but do not go into any in as much detail as games dedicated to such activities. Consider a racing game, such as *Formula One Championship Edition*. Interaction with the imaginary world is limited to partaking in races, although this may be covered in exceptional detail. The player cannot stop racing and start flying a plane. Non-digital (and some digital) role-playing games will allow players the opportunity for both (assuming they exist in the game world) and much more, but will typically not cover any activity in as much detail as a game dedicated to that pursuit. While some role-playing games may have extremely detailed coverage of some of these (typically combat and occasionally vehicles) this treatment does not extend to all possible world interactions – any attempt to do so

While the exact relationship between stories and games is still debated, role-playing games demonstrate more story-like elements than many other game forms.

would lead to a game too rules-heavy to be easily playable. In a non-digital game a player may decide to cook, paint or any other possible activity, but the resolution of these actions will be typically handled in a cursory manner. In general role-playing games offer a comparatively wide choice of configurative options, but present many of them in a relatively abstract manner. A particular game or particular group of players, may emphasise one or another (such as vehicle combat) but for every one so detailed, many are handled abstractly.

Another difference between role-playing and other games is that typically role-playing games

(including the digital forms) place a lesser requirement on users to provide continuous input. In digital racing or flying games a player that provides no input for an extended period will likely crash. Most first person shooters require players to be constantly on their guard (at least during times when the game allows player input). Conversely a role-playing game typically allows its player large sections of time when they can choose how much input they will give. Players have at least partial control over the balance between configurative and interpretive in their approach to the game.

4.5 Narrative Backing

Role-playing games typically demonstrate strong narrative influences. While the exact relationship between stories and games is still debated, role-playing games demonstrate more story-like elements than many other game forms. The history of the game world and the narrative support for in-game tasks is more apparent in role-playing games. Making sense of the game play in these games requires an understanding of the wider game world. For example, in *Asteroids* a player is not told, nor do they need to know to play the game, what the social structure of the game world is, how interstellar travel world or what race the pilot of their ship is. In a science fiction role-playing game all these elements are likely to be at least known to the player, and possibly important to the actual game-play, as discussed by Tychsen et al. (2006).

Role-playing games introduce this element as a consequence of their individualisation of the characters and their presentation of events in the game world. In fact it could be argued that the narrative elements in role-playing game are a result of other, defining, elements and that it is a corollary, not a necessary element in itself. In essence, role-playing games cause narratives to emerge on a running basis, they do not contain narratives as such.

Players of role-playing games experience a sequence of (typically) related events. These can be said to form a narrative, of some sort, in much the same way that narratives are formed from real life experience. That the traditional definition of story from narrative theory, for example Bal (1997), may not apply to role-playing games⁵ is beside the point, the “story-like” element is commonly strong in role-playing games. This can be seen both in the

⁴ Of course, the term first-person shooter is not strongly defined either and the games that have that label applied to them vary greatly. Some do offer extensive dialogue choices, etc, but there does not appear to be a game which offers all the features here identified for role-playing games yet is commonly termed a first person shooter.

presentation of events, their reception by players, and in the common provision of supporting material, detailing the game world and events in it.

5. DEFINITION

The above discussion allows for a definition of a role-playing game based on the analysis of existing forms.

1. **Game World:** A role-playing game is a game set in an imaginary world. Players are free to choose how to explore the game world, in terms of the path through the world they take, and may revisit areas previously explored. The amount of the game world *potentially* available for exploration is typically large.
2. **Participants:** The participants in the games are divided between players, who control individual characters, and game masters (who may be represented in software for digital examples) who control the remainder of the game world beyond the player characters. Players affect the evolution of the game world through the actions of their characters.
3. **Characters:** The characters controlled by players may be defined in quantitative and/or qualitative terms and are defined individuals in the game world, not identified only as roles or functions. These characters can potentially develop, for example in terms skills, abilities or personality, the form of this development is at least partially under player control and the game is capable of reacting to the changes.
4. **Game Master:** At least one, but not all, of the participants has control over the game world beyond a single character. A term commonly used for this function is "game master", although many others exist. The balance of power between players and game masters, and the assignment of these roles, can vary, even within the playing of a single game session. Part of the game master function is typically to adjudicate on the rules of the game, although these rules need not be quantitative in any way or rely on any form of random resolution.
5. **Interaction:** Players have a wide range of configurative options for interacting with the game world through their characters,

usually including at least combat, dialogue and object interaction. While the range of options is wide, many are handled in a very abstract fashion. The mode of engagement between player and game can shift relatively freely between configurative and interperative.

6. **Narrative:** Role-playing games portray some sequence of events within the game world, which gives the game a narrative element. However, given the configurative nature of the players' involvement, these elements cannot be termed narrative according to traditional narrative theory

It should be noted that this definition does not provide clear boundaries. Exactly how much of the game world is presented, how wide the choice of interaction possibilities and how much story element is contained vary between the forms of role-playing game and are not amenable to precise quantification. This leads to a blurring of the boundaries between what is and is not a role-playing game. However, the definition provides very clear support for categorising games, as discussed in the next section. The definition specifically focuses on the structure of the games, not on the playing styles employed within them. This can vary greatly, from player to player and moment to moment, ranging from convincing acting to the purely instrumental and beyond.

The definition also, as a consequence, demonstrates that digital role-playing games do not represent the full spectrum of role-playing games. For example, some role-playing games blur or even remove the boundary between player and games master. Digital role-playing games are more restrictive, with the software having a non-negotiable role and rely on quantitative character representation and event resolution, while not allowing purely qualitatively description or arbitrary resolution. They also limit, *in advance*, what portions of the game world the characters can engage. Where a human game master can, on the fly, detail and present any aspect of the game world, this cannot be done in the digital realm, if only through the need to prepare the graphical assets.

6. DISCUSSION

If the definition proposed above is to have use it should at least be able to distinguish role-playing games from similar forms. In this section a number of game forms are examined, highlighting how the

⁵ As it may not apply to any game as suggest, for example, by Juul (2001).

proposed definition distinguished them from role-playing games while previous definitions do not.

First person shooters fulfil the requirements of many existing definitions of role-playing games. They have participants, a game world and a controlling power outside the players. The stereotypical form of a *Dungeons and Dragons* game finds the players involved in a "dungeon-bash". Here they move through a maze of corridors, killing and looting as they go. This is little different to the play of many first person shooters. Yet the dungeon-bash is regarded as a role-playing game and first person shooters are not. Most of the latter lack the character development aspect, which is crucial to role-playing games. They also typically feature a very narrow range of options for interacting with the game world, e.g. the option of communication with dungeon inhabitants which, however rarely exercised, does exist in the table-top form. Even those digital games that do include character development, and are said to have a role-playing aspect, lack some other element covered in the proposed definition. For example, *Deus Ex*, follows the traditional first person shooter treatment of space, dividing it into levels and not allowing players free return to already explored areas. One first person shooter which does allow free exploration and revisitation is *System Shock 2*. It also has player controlled character development and extensive means of interaction with the environment. Where it fails in meeting the definition is that the environmental interaction is not quite what would be found in a role-playing game. In particular, the player has no choice in the interaction with non-player characters – the player is spoken to, but never speaks back. Interacting via dialogue is an important aspect of role-playing games, as noted in the definition.

Adventure games, such as *Monkey Island* or *Syberia*, on the other hand, make extensive use of dialogue interaction including, most importantly, giving the player some choice of dialogue options. These games lack character development as it is found in role-playing games, often limit the player's navigation of space and usually limit interaction with the world to dialogue and certain object interactions.

Other examples can be found of games which are similar to, but not quite, role-playing. Such games fit within various of the existing definitions but are excluded by the one presented here. 3D platformers have been discussed above. Cops and robbers, and other similar children's games, lack a directing influence which could be labelled a game

master. Board games where players take a single character role, such as *Zombies* and *Talisman*, lack a game master, impose strict limits on the areas of the game world that can be visited during play and have limited options for interacting with the game world. The existence of a game master (or equivalent) by itself is not enough to make a game a role-playing game. Consider certain double blind board war games. A double blind game is where players have a copy of the game board on which they manoeuvre their pieces. They have only limited knowledge of the movements of the other player. These games may involve a referee, who adjudicates the action and informs players of events outside their control. In fact in one example, *Flat Top*, the referee is called a game master. Such games have participants, a game world and a game master, yet are clearly not role-playing games. It should also be noted that some of these games, such as variants of *Squad Leader*, place players in control of pieces representing individual people (although admittedly more than one). These games also differ from role-playing games in the type of interaction with the world allowed, being purely combat-focussed.

7. CONCLUSION

Role-playing games, although they exist in a variety of forms, which include great differences in player number and cross the divide between the digital and non-digital, possess a range of common features that allow them to be distinguished from other game types. Existing definitions have typically not captured this distinction, typically being concerned with the aspect of role-playing or specific types of role-playing games. An analysis of various examples of role-playing games in this paper has enabled the identification of a range of characteristics. On that basis a definition for them could be proposed which is much more successful at separating role-playing games from other, similar, game forms.

Much of the outline of the proposed definition is not new, sharing game world, characters and game masters with many existing definitions. However the analysis has shown that not only are these important components of a role-playing game but that such a game includes each in a very specific manner, which together provides a means of identifying this game form. Particularly important to the proposed definition is the treatment of character, space and interaction within a role-playing game. Characters can develop, under player control, within the game world and through them the player is able to interact with that world

in a great variety of ways and throughout the imaginary geography. A cornerstone of role-playing is the range of imagination it encourages. This recognises one aspect of role-playing games, seen in previous definitions, in that they allow players, through their character to do whatever would be possible in the imaginary world of the game. Of course this misses the role of the game master, and other important points, such as character development, but it does highlight the range and depth of interaction possible within the game world. This use of space and the possibilities for players to explore the game world, in both geographic and configurative terms, have been important omissions from previous definitions.

The role-playing format continues to evolve and mutate. The analysis presented here does not attempt to exhaustively cover all the existing forms (for example, mobile-phone based massively multi-player role-playing games were not considered). The definition given above is presented as an advance, not the final word. While our contention is that it covers existing forms it would need to be revisited and possibly revised as new ones emerge.

Having proposed a definition for this idiosyncratic game form it is worth giving some thought to how this relates to definitions of games in general. Role-playing games are identified as a limit case in by Salen and Zimmerman (2004, p.81) in their discussion of the definition of a game (although it should be noted Lindley (2005, figure 2) places them in the middle of the spectrum of games). If role-playing games are accepted as games (as Salen and Zimmerman further state (2004, p.81), to not so accept them would be: "a ridiculous conclusion"), it is necessary to ask what such acceptance means for the definition of a game. While the purpose of this paper is not to enter into a discussion of a broad definition of games, one particular issue arising from the current examination of role-playing games deserves further examination – that of outcomes.

Many definitions of a game include the need for some defined goal or outcome, including those of Parlett (1999), Abt (1970), Suits (1990), Costikyan (1994) and Salen and Zimmerman (2004). The definition of a game proposed by Salen and Zimmerman (2004, p.80), for example, includes a "quantifiable outcome". As we have discussed above quantitative elements are not a requirement for a game to be a role playing game in any sense, outcome included. Even in role-playing games with quantitative aspects, the outcome is generally not subject to exact quantification. Role-playing games are able to proceed indefinitely. Costikyan's

(1994) argument that they have continuous goals is tenuous at best – all human activity can said to have a goal, even something as simple as passing the time. Including this in a definition tells us nothing, as it does not separate games from other activities.

It could be argued, as Juul (2003, p.40) does, that "Pen and paper role-playing games are not normal games because with a human game master, their rules are not fixed beyond discussion." Following this one could further argue that role-playing games are not a useful test for general game definitions such as Juul's (2003, p.35) *classic game model*:

"A game is a rule-based formal system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable."

However, that would almost leave such definitions circular- they are defining the games which meet their definition, and consigning other games to a "half-real" status. That Juul qualified the title of his model with the term "classic" implies that a more general game model may exist. Perhaps that more general model should not have such an emphasis on outcome.

Exactly how such a model is formulated is not of immediate concern here. But what this does demonstrate is the utility of role-playing games in testing more general games theory. Whether they are regard as typical games or not is less important, although limit cases, as they are termed by Salen and Zimmerman (2004) are always a good test of a theory. Their peculiar nature, similar but not the same as other game forms, existing in both the digital and non-digital worlds, the broad scope they give for interacting with the game world, both lends them a fascination for their players and makes them a fertile field for research. In their diversity they display many faces but, to wrench a quote from Campbell perhaps beyond its limit, we may here have started to approach the one face behind the many.

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The Invisible Rules of Role-Playing

The Social Framework of Role-Playing Process

Popular Abstract - This paper looks at the process of role-playing that takes place in various games. Role-play is a social activity, where three elements are always present: An imaginary game world, a power structure and personified player characters. In a nutshell, all role-playing activities about imaginary people acting out in an imaginary environment; the power structure is needed to differentiate these activities from free make-believe and children's play. After the basics, the paper moves on to discuss the various components in detail, going through how rules, goals, worlds, power, information and identity function in role-play. While the paper does not lead to a simple conclusion, it seeks to present a solid foundation for further research.

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a structural framework for role-playing that can be used as a foundation when creating further role-playing theory. The framework is based on assumption that all games are based on rules, and tries to make the implicit rules of role-playing visible by proposing the three rules of role-playing. Compared to regular gaming, role-playing is seen ultimately as a qualitative process rather than a quantitative one, differentiating it from many regular games.

1. INTRODUCTION¹

When studying games, a critical differentiation has to be made separating the study of games as formal systems from study of games as social processes. In the formal system of Texas hold'em Poker the player has quite limited number of legal options influencing her chance of winning a single round – in addition to bidding, she may change some cards or fold right away.

In the social process of gameplay the alternatives are a much wider. Gamers might influence each other in a million ways beginning from bluffing and threatening, with or without the intent of affecting the outcome of the game. Clearly, looking at Poker as a formal system can never fully grasp

the whole essence of the game – the game as it is played is very different from the game on paper.

Role-playing has also been often defined as a game system (e.g. Mackay 2001), though some attempts to look at it as a gaming process (e.g. Hakkarainen & Stenros 2002) have been done as well. Based on Heliö (2004), it can be argued that any formal game system can be used as a basis of role-playing process, provided the players have the proper mindset, and that any formal game system is not necessarily needed. On the other hand it has been noted that any role-playing game – whether we are discussing traditional tabletop role-playing games, larps (live role-playing games) or online role-playing games – can be participated without role-playing. Bartle (2004) for instance decides that online worlds are not games but places, since they lack many qualities of games while having several qualities of places.

Partially due to this confusion, the ludological discussion has been confused on whether role-playing is game playing or not. Typically, the analyses have focused on the role-playing games as rulesets. Role-play has been seen as a borderline case of game for various reasons. Due to game master's influence, role-playing lacks static rules (Juul 2003), and many role-playing systems do not allow the players to rate their characters' success or

¹ This paper was originally written in 2005 and updated in 2008. My two other papers (Montola 2007a, 2007b) already reference it.

failure in the game as “positive” or “negative” thing (Montola 2005).

In this paper I see role-playing mindset as a method of game playing, which can be optionally combined with various game systems. It is not the only distinct gaming mindset. For instance, some games are supposed to be played with mindset of a conspiratorial diplomacy and backstabbing, while others require a honorable sportsmanship or a style prioritizing style over success.

Hakkarainen and Stenros (2002) define role-playing game as that which “is created in the interaction between players or between player(s) and game master(s) within a specified diegetic framework”. This definition approaches role-playing from the angle of communication. If role-playing games are to be studied as games, a more ludological definition is required, one that demonstrates the similar game-like and features of all different forms of role-playing. It must also be understood that Bartle’s notion of persistent worlds being places rather than games is appropriate to all forms of role-playing to certain extent.

To this end, we need to make the implicit rules of role-playing visible. Typically the role-playing contexts such as virtual worlds, tabletop game rulesets and larp events only provide algorithmic rules of the formal system used as a platform for role-playing, but do not explicate the rules of role-playing expression itself. In this paper, I look at the played game as a game, not the game presented in the tabletop role-playing game rulebooks.

The following discussion includes several forms of role-playing, focusing on tabletop role-playing, live-action role-playing and virtual role-playing (see Montola 2003).² Other forms do exist, including freeform role-playing (which combines elements from larp and tabletop role-play) and pervasive role-playing (Montola 2007b), and even more can be invented. Additionally, there is a group of borderline forms of expression and gaming that might constitute role-playing as defined in this paper. These include a forms such as improv, psychodrama and Happenings.³

2. The Invisible Rules

Björk and Holopainen (2003) divide game rules and game goals into endogenous and exogenous categories – the rules and goals defined in the game structure, and the rules and goals brought to the game activity by players to give it meaning. Earlier, Fine (1983) has proposed a three-layered⁴ structure for role-playing, consisting of a primary (social) frame inhabited by people, secondary (game) frame inhabited by players and tertiary (diegetic) frame inhabited by characters.

Combining the approach of Fine with that of Björk and Holopainen, it is clear that endogenous rules are a part of the game frame, while exogenous rules are a part of the social frame. However, we need to add a third category, that of diegetic rules and diegetic goals, for rules and goals existing within the fiction of the role-play (see Montola 2005).

Illustrating Fine’s three frames with examples, this is how they look like:

- “Do not discuss non-game business during the game” – exogenous.
- “A sword does d10 points of damage” – endogenous.
- “Carrying a sword within the city limits is punishable by fine” – diegetic.

In its various forms, role-playing process appears to follow certain endogenous yet implicit rules, making it simultaneously a relatively formal way of expression and a relatively informal kind of a game. These rules have not been explained as rules in the published role-playing games, but rather this implicit information has been conveyed in the sections of the book trying to explain what role-playing is or how a role-play should be conducted.

For all role-playing in general I propose the following three rules, which are the world rule, the power rule and the character rule:

- 1) Role-playing is an interactive process of defining and re-defining the state, properties and contents of an imaginary game world.
- 2) The power to define the game world is allocated to participants of the game. The participants recognize the existence of this power hierarchy.

² Tabletop role-playing is also sometimes called pen ‘n’ paper role-playing. Live-action role-playing is called often larping, and virtual role-playing includes role-playing in persistent on-line worlds such as MUDs and MMORPGs.

³ See e.g. Kaprow 1966 and Boal 2002 for direct sources, and Morton 2007 and Harviainen 2008 for role-play approaches.

⁴ Mackay (2001) has proposed a five-layered version, dividing the diegetic framework into three layers depending on the style of parole used in them. Kellomäki (2004) has a model similar to Mackay’s with four layers of interaction: social, game, narration and characters.

- 3) Player-participants define the game world through personified character constructs, conforming to the state, properties and contents of the game world.

Depending on the platform and methodology used, the possible participant roles include player, game master, actor, live musician, system administrator et cetera. The player role is a special case among these, since presence of a participant in a player role is a logical requirement for a "game". Role-playing as defined in this paper is not possible without any players with personified characters; this distinction is made in order to separate role-playing from various forms of collaborative storytelling.

The rules 1, 2 and 3 also define role-playing: All gaming conducted according to them is role-playing, while the gaming not based on them is not. Thus, it can be said that role-playing is a game of formal make-believe. Though the game world is fluid and undergoing a constant re-definition process, the re-definitions are restricted by the current state of the game world; thus, the process of constant iteration does not allow completely arbitrary or random changes (see also Kellomäki 2004). This iterative nature is necessary for the ludic, gamelike experiences created in role-playing, since it moves the focus from creating fiction externally to acting within it. The existing fiction provides the constraints and opportunities making the experience meaningful as a game. The game master and the character are structures that are used to establish the limits of definitional power in the game. As restrictions of rules give meaning to ordinary gameplay, in role-playing the restrictions of defining power give meaning to acting within the game world. These restrictions also differentiate role-playing from make-believe.

I also present four optional, additional rules that often complement the first three rules. These are not definitional criteria of role-playing, but they are used so commonly that their descriptive value warrants the inclusion here. The possibilities of additional rules are endless, but these are probably the most typical and descriptive of them.

- i) Typically the decisive power to define the decisions made by a free-willed character construct is given to the player of the character.
- ii) The decisive defining power that is not restricted by character constructs is often given to people participating in game master roles.

- iii) The defining process is often governed by a quantitative game ruleset.
- iv) The information regarding the state of the game world is often disseminated hierarchically, in a fashion corresponding with the power structure of the game.

There are infinite ways of dividing the power to define in role-playing games. The ways of doing the division begin from the dictatorial and omnipotent game master, ending in a completely collective system lacking any ultimate authority (see Svanevik 2005). These divisions are sometimes changed during the game, for instance the game master role might move from participant to another, or some participant might be given the decisive defining power within certain areas or events of the game. Player-participants are also often given more power than declared in rule three.

Additionally, these three endogenous rules (based on Lojonen & Montola 2004, Montola 2003) differentiate certain forms of role-playing from each other:

- t1) In tabletop role-playing the game world is defined predominantly in verbal communication.
- l1) In larp the game is superimposed on physical world, which is used as a foundation in defining the game world.
- v1) In virtual role-playing the game is superimposed on a computational virtual reality, which is used as a foundation in defining the game world.

By this definition, role-playing conducted in internet chats, for instance IRC-roleplaying, is usually not virtual role-playing but a form closer to tabletop role-playing. If the chat is a part of a larp staged in physical world, chatting is part of larping, and if it is a part of virtual world, it is part of virtual role-playing. Virtual role-playing requires a computerized virtual representation of reality (typically textual or graphical): It should be noted that due to this, all virtual role-playing games are governed by a quantitative ruleset (iii) to some extent, since all virtual worlds are mathematical rule systems.

While rules 1, 2 and 3 defined role-playing, rules i-iv provide typical, descriptive additions to the first three rules. However, the latter rules are not powerful in defining role-playing. Rules t1, l1 and v1 can be combined with rules 1, 2 and 3 in order to define certain subforms of role-playing, so they are also definitive in nature.

Though game rules are often seen as mathematical, logical or algorithmic systems, the structures of a game can actually be classified into quantitative and qualitative structures, depending on whether they can be reduced into numbers and or not. In sports striving for aesthetic value – such as ski jumping and ice dancing – the qualitative activities are quantified by referee boards who transform the qualitative part of the performance into points.

The rules of role-playing (1, 2, 3) are obviously qualitative and non-algorithmic. In this sense role-playing differs from the majority of games. Sometimes, especially in tabletop role-playing, the game master acts as the quantifying entity, by evaluating characters' actions and determining the dice rolls the players must make in order to have their characters succeed. Character discussions and non-contested actions usually are handled within the qualitative system, while all-out combat is often very quantitative, especially within the rules-oriented tabletop role-playing cultures. Role-playing does not need the quantitative part to work, but performing qualitative actions is necessary for the process of game world definition.

There are infinite ways of dividing the power to define in role-playing games. The ways of doing the division begin from the dictatorial and omnipotent game master, ending in a completely collective system lacking any ultimate authority.

Salen and Zimmerman (2004) differentiate the game rules into three categories: operational rules, constitutive rules and implicit rules. Operational rules tell the players how the game is supposed to be played, while the constitutive rules define the logical and mathematical system underlying the operational rules. Implicit rules are the unwritten social rules governing the play. Just like the social gaming important to a Poker process, the rules of role-playing pose a problem to Salen and Zimmerman's classification system, being constitutive but qualitative, and implicit but still somehow operational.⁵ Using the division of Björk and Holopainen (2003) above, the rulesets used as a basis for role-playing are endogenous rules, as are these rules of role-playing process.

3. Role-Playing and Goals

A layered structure similar to the rules exists for goals as well.⁶ However, role-play typically has no inherent endogenous goals at all. The rules of role-playing only provide the structure for the activity, but give no end condition or an objective. Classical tabletop role-playing rulesets and virtual worlds sometimes implicitly offer some pursuits for players to follow, usually involving character power development or survival. These are rarely true endogenous goals either: as no one can win or lose in role-playing, the emphasis of the action is not even focused on the game frame.

The most central goals that provide role-play with content are defined and accepted within the diegetic frame, by players defining the world and characters. This distinction is one of the key issues in the discussion whether role-playing games should be defined as games or not.

- "I want to have fun in this game" – exogenous.
- "I want to explore Norwegian refugee politics in this game" – exogenous.
- "I want to become the mightiest wizard in the kingdom" – diegetic.
- "I want to play the man tragically failing in his quest of becoming the mightiest wizard in the kingdom" – exogenous.

The contradiction of the goals in different frames is a common gratifying element in role-playing. Just as a spectator enjoys a tragical experience brought to her by actors on the stage, a role-player enjoys creating one for herself.

The endogenous goals made explicit in the written system of a role-playing game only become a meaningful part of the role-playing process, if the players interpret them into the game world as diegetic goals. The most traditional role-playing games intentionally leave the endogenous goals undefined or vague, and even when they are explicated clearly, player troupes often disregard them entirely.

In some exceptional role-playing games there are explicit endogenous goals that are critical for the game as a whole. Examples of these include many "Forge-style" games such as *My Life with Master* (Czege 2003) and *Circle of Death* style larps (Tan 2001) such as *Killer* (Jackson 1981). While *My Life with Master* is intended to follow a certain story arc

⁵ The tacit knowledge of how to play Poker is not communicated in the written game rules, but the players still communicate that social maneuvering is a legitimate and important part of the play.

⁶ I have discussed the role-playing goals in deeper detail in Montola (2005), in the particular context of role-playing within virtual worlds.

practically every time it is played, ending up in the death of the master in the hands of his minions, Killer is a very gamist assassination game where players really try to win the game.⁷ My Life with Master and Killer feature endogenous goals such as the following:

- “When minion’s love for the villagers has grown strong enough, slaying the master becomes her goal” – endogenous.
- “The player whose character kills the most enemy characters is the winner” – endogenous.

As I have discussed earlier (Montola 2005), the endogenous goals dominate the contemporary online role-playing game design culture. The role-playing players occasionally translate the endogenous goals into diegetic goals. The following example is from (the original version of) Star Wars Galaxies.

- “By completing the jedi quests and collecting enough experience points, the character becomes a jedi” – endogenous.

The value of the endogenous goals is derived from the players’ exogenous goals. If a role-player’s aim is to have a good role-playing experience, such an endogenous goal is only valuable if she can translate it into a diegetic goal as well. If it cannot, it might just be ignored.

The goals of the social level vary immensely from one gaming culture to another; sometimes the explicit dissonance of social and diegetic goals is a source of enjoyment, while often diegetic character success is teamed with social pursuit of success in the game. As role-playing does not take place in the domain of ordinary life, tragic experiences can be highly pleasurable.

The exogenous goals are not restricted to entertainment – the normative claim of fun being the only purpose of role-play (e.g. Laws 2002, Duguid 1995) is simply erroneous. In a more constructive approach, Mäkelä & al. (2005) propose a list of six gratifications that warrant further study: entertainment, learning, meaning, aesthetic appreciation and social and physical benefits.

4. THE ELUSIVE GAME WORLD

Ryan (2001, 91) sums up the concept of world with four features, defining it as a connected set of objects and individuals, a habitable environment, a reasonably intelligible totality for external observers and a field of activity for its members. In role-playing the world construction can be seen as a textual⁸ process, where different actors produce elements that are in the process combined into new texts (Aarseth 1997, Kellomäki 2004).

The earlier discussion on the game world of role-playing games has discussed it both with a collective (Hakkarainen & Stenros 2002, Pohjola 1999, Heliö 2004) and a subjective (Montola 2003, Andreasen 2003, Lopenen & Montola 2004) emphasis. In this paper, I call the collective structure a “game world”, as it is ludologically proper term to describe the arena where the game is played, while the subjective structure is “diegesis”, a subjective view created by interpreting input from the other participants and environment, complemented by the participant’s own creative additions.⁹

Player perceptions on the game world are constructed in interpersonal textual interaction. As Ryan (2001) explains, cultural background and

Just as a spectator enjoys a tragical experience brought to her by actors on the stage, a role-player enjoys creating one for herself.

imagination are used in building a world based on textual inputs.

“The idea of textual world presupposes that the reader constructs in imagination a set of language-independent objects, using as a guide to the textual declarations, but building this always incomplete image into a more vivid representation through the import of information provided by internalized cultural knowledge, including knowledge derived from other texts.”

As I have discussed earlier (Montola 2003, Lopenen & Montola 2004) the problems inherent to communication mean that every player has a

⁷ There are many curious similarities between Killer and My Life with Master, despite the fact that Killer can be considered extremely gamist role-playing game while My Life with Master is an explicitly narrativist one. (See Kim 1998 for discussion on gamism, narrativism and simulationism).

⁸ Even though Aarseth (1997) differentiates cybertexts from hypertexts by requiring cybertexts to have a computational element in their creation, he still brings up role-playing activities as “oral cybertexts”.

⁹ What I call game world has also been called a shared imaginary space (SIS). According to Mäkelä & al. (2005) the imagined spaces (IS) of the participants overlap to create the shared imaginary space; Hence, their imaginary

different reading of the game world provided by other players. In addition to the reading of the game world, every player complements her perception of the game world by never-expressed internal ideas and feelings. This internal element combined with the reading constitutes participant's subjective diegesis, which is the end result created by the player in the process of playing: The subjective diegesis is both the primary product created in the role-play and the transient object of aesthetic value.¹⁰ No participant of the process can ever understand the game world completely, as parts of it are inaccessible – created by other players but never voiced aloud.

The interactive process¹¹ of arbitration producing the diegeses and the game world is usually based on negotiation and cooperation rather than on struggle or contest. Usually this arbitration process is implicit, but explicit negotiation is used to reconcile radical differences in player diegeses. Perhaps counter-intuitively, the imaginary and arbitrary nature of the game world is the force guiding the players to cooperate in diegesis

The exogenous goals are not restricted to entertainment – the normative claim of fun being the only purpose of role-play is simply erroneous.

construction. Though conflict is often simulated in the game frame, it stems from the diegetic frame.

Game master¹² and game mechanics are the two central methods created specifically in order to avoid the struggle on the level of form, in order to keep it on the level of game content. Typically the conflict begins from the game world, potentially escalating to game frame and occasionally even to

the social frame. This happens if the players first need rules to solve the conflict between characters, and then if the players begin to argue over the rules as the conflict escalates.

If game world construction is looked as a communication system, it can be seen as an interpretation loop of three basic activities:

1. Interpreting outside input into the subjective diegesis
2. Making changes into the diegesis
3. Communicating the changes to other participants

This cycle of three activities is a theoretical model; in practice all these functions are performed simultaneously. In larp, for instance, player walking on a street constantly changes the diegesis (by moving herself), while getting new input (seeing new things) and communicating the change to other players (who see her moving. In tabletop role-playing this decision-making model appears more clearly, elaborating the continuous cycle of iterative reinterpretation of the world in the communication loop of the game.

To keep up the loop of interpretation the players must be able to understand the world they are defining and re-defining. They have to understand the diegetic laws of nature and the state of the diegetic world in order to uphold the logic of the game world, constructing its future based on its properties, state and history. In order for the game world to work as a place or a space, the world needs not to be “realistic” but sensible; the laws of nature can be very different to ours.¹³ In Juul's (2003, 117) classification of game worlds this means that the game world has to be coherent – which means that there must be nothing that would prevent a person from imagining the world in any detail. Only extremely experimental games can be

space is equivalent to my diegesis. The idea of a shared imaginary space contains an oxymoron, as no imaginary thing can ever be truly shared.

¹⁰ Sandberg (2004) discusses the idea of a “first-person audience”, with the idea that only the role-player can properly understand and appreciate her own subjective creation.

¹¹ My use of term “interaction” denotes that A can affect B's way of affecting A in a non-predetermined and non-trivial fashion, and vice versa (as opposed to Costikyan's (2002) trivial definition). Indeed, this decision excludes the single-player computer games: This paper discusses role-playing as a social process, requiring two sentient participants.

¹² Game master's role originated from the role of a wargame referee. In wargames, the struggle is supposed to take place between gamers on the game level, not between people fighting over rules on the social level – including a referee facilitated this process.

¹³ An innovative example of ruleset portraying the genre of the diegetic world as well as its laws of nature is *Amber: Diceless Role-Playing*. The author Erick Wujcik (2004) emphasized that the game is not diceless due to “some obscure theoretical reason”, but rather to capture the feel of Roger Zelazny's *Amber* books. “In the original books nothing ever happens by chance; every time something seems to happen by chance, it is revealed that someone was manipulating the events behind the scenes. In *Amber* the theme should be the same, hence dice are not needed”. In many cases such as this, the game world physics are mixed with genre elements: reading the rules it is impossible to tell how mechanics of probability work within the world of *Amber*.

made in abstract, iconic or incoherent worlds. It is difficult or even impossible to role-play in worlds such as the ones portrayed in *Super Mario Bros* or *Chess*.¹⁴

It would be a simplification to say that the use of an artefact (such as a virtual space or physical reality) as the basis of game world would restrict the use of player imagination, though the artifact provides fairly strong initial definitions for many diegetic elements. However, as I argue that role-playing is a process of social interaction taking place in an imaginary game world, it should be emphasized that in role-playing process elements explicit in the artifact are often re-defined when they are interpreted into players' diegeses. As Ryan (2001) puts it, the children playing make-believe select an actual object x_1 and agree it represents a virtual object x_2 . Then the players imagine themselves as members of the world in which x_2 is actual. An action is legal when the behavior it entails is appropriate for the class of objects represented by x_2 . A legal action generates a fictional truth.

This re-definition happens in an arbitration process governed by the possible rules and instructions of the game, and is based on the divisions of defining power used in the game. In larp, the player does not need to physically fly in order for his character to do so. By comparison, neither needs the virtual avatar to fly in virtual world for the role-played character represented by the avatar to do so.

These re-definition practices are also cultural. Many role-player communities in virtual worlds habitually pretend to use and handle plot-related make-believe objects that cannot be represented as virtual artefacts by limited game architectures (Montola 2005). Some larpers prefer to have as direct connection between physical reality and diegeses as possible, while others have no problems treating latex swords as metal swords. (See Loponen & Montola 2004 for a semiotic analysis).

Claiming that the role-playing worlds have to be coherent is not to say that the role-playing game world needs to be complete – actually, as fictional worlds they are always incomplete, since it is not possible to define every imaginable piece of

information in a coherent world (Juul 2003, 111). Distinction is certainly theoretical especially regarding larps, since the physical world is always infinitely detailed anyway.

McCloud (1993) discusses the way sequential images of comics are understood though the process of *closure*. While a comic book is composed out of still, juxtaposed images, the reader fills in the lacking elements in the process of reading, creating the impressions of time and movement, also filling in elements not shown in the images. A smiley is closed into a smiling face in a fashion similar to the way a spectator watching a movie closes the room where the characters are discussing. The movie image is not closed with impressions of cameramen and studio equipment, but with walls and landscapes extrapolated from the ones shown on screen.¹⁵ Even without any visual evidence, a spectator uses her earlier experience to assume that the news anchor has two legs, even though they are not shown on the screen.

In role-playing, a semi-conscious closing process is crucial, as players are constantly dealing with an incomplete representation of the game world. In the first phase of the interpretation loop, the players make assumptions on the world, extrapolating and interpolating their diegeses based on the explicit game discourse.

The requirement for a coherent world can be seen in the definition of role-playing by Björk and Holopainen (2005): "Players have characters with at least somewhat fleshed out personalities. The play is centered on making decisions on how these characters would take actions in staged imaginary situations."¹⁶ Unless very significant closures are made by the players, the world of Chess is too incomplete to allow the players to take meaningful actions or make sensible decisions. For most players, the world of Chess is too abstract to even allow logical closures: Even though we know there are bishops and kings, it is hard to know whether priests and princes exist as well.

Due to their nature that is based on arbitration, imagination and closure, the game worlds of role-playing can be very free and complete compared to worlds created in other games or in static media. Every imaginable element can be described in any

¹⁴ Chess can be used with role-playing in several ways. For instance the players might construct diegeses imagining a match between Kasparov and Karpov, or, they might use some pieces as their personalized character constructs. Role-playing within the world of Chess refers to the latter alternative.

¹⁵ Some movies, of course, break this fourth wall by intentionally showing filming crews or by having actors talk directly to the watchers.

¹⁶ Ryan (2001) calls essentially the same thing as mental simulation. According to her, simulation can be described as a form of counterfactual reasoning by which the subject places herself in another person's mind. "If I were such and such, and held beliefs p and q , I would do x and y ", she illustrates.

detail. In a movie the amount of available information regarding the diegetic world is very limited in comparison. Players' possibilities of affecting any of the features of the game world are not restricted by artificial limitations such as the scope of the ruleset or the programming of the virtual space, but all these limitations are purely diegetic.

In rule iii I proposed that the game world defining process is often governed by quantitative ruleset. While one function of the ruleset is to enable players to pursue some interests in the game frame, it is also a valuable method of providing participants with a logical structure for game world re-definition. Juul (2003) claims that while rules are not dependent on fiction of the game, the

Some larpers prefer to have as direct connection between physical reality and diegeses as possible, while others have no problems treating latex swords as metal swords.

fiction is dependent on the rules. Among other methods, rulesets and genre and style conventions are frequently used to provide tangible frameworks for simulating the alternate logic of the game world (see Montola 2003, Stenros 2004, Kim 2006).

5. POWER STRUCTURE

On the Caillois' (1958, 13) continuum ranging from formal play (ludus) to free play (paidia), role-playing resides somewhere in the middle ground. Spontaneous make-believe with little game master moderation is highly paideic, while complicated rule systems allow meticulously formal ludus games as well. This is one reason why discussing role-playing games is sometimes difficult: Many different styles exist.

Just like the rule and goal structures, the power structures of role-playing can be analyzed using the broad division to exogenous, endogenous and diegetic frames. Exogenous power is the participant's power to influence the game from outside of the game; more importantly, the exogenous power is not defined within the game system. Endogenous power is power given to the player by the various rules of the game. Diegetic

power is the power the character has, restricted by the game world. As all endogenous and diegetic rules and goals are subordinate to exogenous rules and goals, endogenous and diegetic power is subordinate to exogenous power. The voluntariness and willfulness of the participants are necessary to create the magic circle of play (Huizinga 1938, Salen & Zimmerman 2003) where the endogenous and diegetic structures exist.

Often the structure of power to influence diegesis is left very implicit and based on cultural conventions. Beginning role-players are often not even aware on the fact that the power structure could be made purposefully different, having often derived their understanding of these conventions from the implicit discourse of role-playing rulesets and local larping communities. One reason for this is that describing the power system in detail is a meticulous task, as has been demonstrated by the attempts to create global role-playing campaigns, where characters could be seamlessly moved from the domain of one game master to another.¹⁷

- These examples illustrate the exogenous, endogenous and diegetic activities that may to exert power over diegeses:
- Proposing a change to the rules of the game – exogenous.
- Showing other players a movie influencing their perceptions of the game world – exogenous.
- Moving a queen two squares diagonally on the game board – endogenous.
- Taking a combat action to swing an enemy with a sword – endogenous.
- Swinging a person with a sword – diegetic.
- A colonel character issuing a military order to her troops – diegetic.

It should be noted that the very same action can be a display of diegetic and endogenous power, depending on how it is conducted in the game. In the fourth example above the power to swing an enemy with a sword is derived from the explicit game system rules, while the fifth example is derived from the diegetic facts that the character has a sword in hand and the target is within her reach. Even the latter case is then perhaps resolved on the endogenous level, but the difference has relevance when we try to analyze the facts that

¹⁷ Organizations like *Camarilla* (White Wolf) and *RPGA* (Wizards of the Coast) have created extremely detailed rule systems for this, utilizing thorough exogenous and endogenous rules to determine who can affect the diegeses and how. They also feature exogenous and endogenous penalties for infractions.

empower the participant to propose a change into the diegeses.

Both the game masters and the players can use exogenous, endogenous and diegetic power to re-define the game world. They both play characters in the world, the both often have rules-based privileges over the diegesis and the both can change the others' understanding of the game world with extra-ludic methods as well.

Endogenously granted powers can be classified to two groups; to power granted by the rules system of the game and to power granted by the rules of the role-playing process. An example for comparison:

- Taking a combat action to swing an enemy with a sword for d10 points of damage – endogenous.
- Game master declaring that it begins to rain – endogenous.

Sometimes the power use in the three layers is contradictory. The larper displays poor sportsmanship by physically outrunning another player whose character should be quicker in the frames of game and diegesis. In tabletop role-playing the same conflict is displayed if one player outwits another player with character of low intelligence score. The endogenous rules of casino Poker are able to cope with the situation where one player walks out of the room in the middle of the game (as she is considered to have taken a break or forfeited the game) but if she cheats by marking the cards, the game encounters a crisis it is unable to solve within its own formal system.¹⁸ The role-players often implicitly consent to giving a game master the social, exogenous authority to reconcile many potential crises (Brenne 2005, Fine 1983).

The recognized division of power to define game world is a key element in giving the touch of game to role-playing. Juul (2003) points out that rules do not only restrict the options players have in game, but they also give meaning to actions conducted within it. The same applies to limitations of defining power: it can be said that limits of the player options – whether they take the form of ruleset or a game masterial authority – make the player choices meaningful.

In tabletop role-playing the power division between participants is rarely exact. Typically the players are mostly restricted to using their characters' diegetic power and a limited, explicitly defined repertoire of endogenous options – but the

scope of this restriction is ambiguous. Sometimes the players are also allowed to define their characters' relatives, friends and property, while a strict gaming culture might restrict their defining power to the conscious decisions made by their characters (see Boss 2006 and Kellomäki 2004). Even the power to define the character's mental activities is sometimes restricted by rules discussing diegetic forces such as fear or telepathy.

One very typical endogenous power division grants the player the ultimate authority on her character's feelings and thoughts, rules-dependent authority on the quantitative attributes of the character, and limited power to define relatively inconsequential stylistic elements related to physical objects in the game world. All these

Spontaneous make-believe with little game master moderation is highly paideic, while complicated rule systems allow meticulously formal ludus games as well.

powers are endogenous, since they are defined on the endogenous level, either explicitly or (usually) implicitly.

On the other hand, in on-line role-playing games the game interface typically gives the player only the power to move his avatar and engage in actions such as chatting, fighting, trading and crafting. However, the role-player communities often grant their participants further diegesis-defining powers, such as making up objects not existing in the game database.

As a diegesis is an imaginary world constructed in collective arbitration process, its contents can be in explicit contradiction with the virtual or real environment used as the foundation in its construction. This means that all diegetic elements need not be represented with virtual artefacts. Just as a larp vampire might control shadows or turn invisible, the virtual role-players deal with non-existent items and intangible actions. A barfight or a sex scene might be staged with emotes, leaving it ontologically unclear if anything actually happened in the virtual reality. Or, a character might act as if she had an ID card though none exists within the game architecture. (Montola 2005.)

¹⁸ Rather, the problem is solved within the social frame or the frame of law.

Defining and restricting the player power is a ubiquitous feature¹⁹ in the field of games, but not in the fields of narrative and performative arts. In the chapter about rules and goals I included the demand that in role-playing the player-participants of the game define the game world through personified character constructs, conforming to the state, properties and contents of the game world. This third rule is critical, since dropping the personified character constructs shifts the activity in the field of regular gaming, and dropping the restrictions in the defining power would change the activity into collaborative storytelling.

6. INFORMATION AND POWER

As role-playing games are seen as communication constructs, information is the basic building block of the imaginary game world. It is trivial that a player cannot incorporate a game element into her diegesis, if she is unaware of its existence. As mentioned above (and in Lopenen & Montola 2004 and Montola 2003), no participant of a role-playing game can have an access to all information present in the game.²⁰

The three-layered division of power addresses the power use based on social frames, which is quite consciously done in the phase two of the interpretation loop. There is still one very significant form of power use in the game: closure.

As discussed above, closure the semi-conscious process of adding detail to the interpretation. I call this process semi-conscious, since we generally do this unconsciously – when we interpret stick figures as people (McCloud 1993) – but can also make creative decisions when doing closures. External input can be interpreted into a diegesis in very different ways, to the extent where role-playing game masters often explain genre expectations and playing style recommendations to the players, in order to manage the filling processes. Making light-hearted interpretations in a horror game²¹ is a perfect example of this kind of

power use – one that is often used passively but can be used willfully as well.

The continuous use of interpretational power occasionally leads into a conflict, which occurs when the participants find that their understandings of the game world contradict each other.²² In those cases an explicit negotiation reconciling the differences in the diegeses is required, typically leading into re-definitions of the diegetic past and present. (See Lopenen & Montola 2004.) Of course all the interpretational differences do not force the game to be halted, though they sometimes disrupt the gameplay seriously. As an example these problems occur commonly when the game participants do not share a common level of historical lore that would be needed to play in a particular historical game setting.

The role of the closure process is critical especially in the traditional tabletop role-playing, where the players have a lot of leeway in interpreting the verbal cues on the state and properties of the game world. However, this process is constantly significant in all the forms of role-playing. Basing game on the actual world or a virtual reality diminishes the need for inventing new game elements. Still, even elements such as character reactions and social developments are created in a closure process.

Using a real (l1) or virtual (v1) world as the basis of diegesis restricts the player choices powerfully: spontaneously making up a café or a person requires disregarding the physical or virtual artifacts by arbitration process (as discussed above). However, the elements not currently present – such as diegetic history or distant places – are commonly improvised and made up during the game. Often this kind of elements are defined or at least approved by game master prior the game, but during the role-play the player may need additional information. In those cases, the players often define (and re-define) the game world by inventing diegetic elements in a fashion very similar to tabletop gaming.

¹⁹ It can be argued that in *Tetris* the player power is not restricted, as the player is allowed to manipulate the blocks as efficiently as possible. However, the computational system of *Tetris* includes a multitude of features disabling the best methods of placing the blocks in neat rows.

²⁰ Fatland (2005) has noted that before a larp is played, the larp game masters' work is to establish a pre-diegesis, a starting point of the larp. This is the final point where any individual may access all the information regarding the game; as soon as this information is given to the players, the unified game world is shattered into as many diegeses as there are people accessing (parts of) the information.

²¹ This kind of interpretational resistance is common in all media consumption. Laughing can be used as a strategy for refuting fear caused by a horror movie.

²² I have earlier (Lopenen & Montola 2004) claimed that as long as the players' subjective diegeses are equifinal – i.e. the diegeses produce indistinguishable consequences – the crisis can be averted. The equifinality is lost when the players notice a contradiction, and the differences must be reconciled. Often this reconciliation is lead by the game master, with exogenous and endogenous power given to her by the players.

While the closure process is a democratic²³ structure in the sense that it forces all the game participants into a mutual arbitration of the diegetic truth, the information management is also commonly used as a power allocation tool. The distribution of information is presented in the fourth optional rule, since it an omni-present variable that is implemented very differently in different games and role-playing cultures. In one end of the scale is the style where the players are only allowed the knowledge their characters have (see Pettersson 2005), while in the other end of the scale the game masters do everything practically possible to provide the participants with all information possible (see Fatland & Wingård 1999). Even in the role-playing styles where flow of information is free between players, the characters are usually only expected to use information that they have acquired diegetically.

The information distribution is a structure that considerably influences the power use by different participants in the game. Especially in tabletop role-playing games the game master is often allowed the privilege of accessing all available game information. This does not mean that game master is omniscient regarding the state of the game world, but she may possess the right to even ask the players to provide hidden information regarding their characters' emotions, plans and reasonings.

Much of the game master's social power in the arbitrations concerning the state of the game world is derived from this information access. As the participants tend to act in the fashion that keeps the diegeses similar and the illusion of a collective game world intact, information is an important requirement for the defining process. If a player cannot be sure on whether someone else has already defined an element of the game world, defining it risks a contradiction. This structure is also problematic in larps, where the players often need to make up things in order to complement their characters' fictional histories during the game.

7. THE PERSONIFIED CHARACTER

It seems that the requirement of character is the lowest common denominator of various definitions

of role-playing (e.g. Björk & Holopainen 2005, Pohjola 2004, Mackay 2001, Fatland & Wingård 1999, Fine 1983); only Hakkarainen and Stenros (2002) leave it outside the core of their definition – and even they rely on it heavily in explanatory sections of their model.

However, the term has many different meanings, so it is often unclear what the authors actually mean with it. A "character" may indicate a group of quantitative attributes within the formal ruleset, a representation of the player in the game world or a fictitious person in the game world.

The first meaning is derived from the wargaming history of role-playing, where the hero characters fought battles along the rank'n'file soldiers with improved, heroic characters. Allegedly the first version of Dungeons & Dragons was a game about how these heroes became heroes in the first place (Pettersson 2005).

The second, representational view is common to virtual world thinking, where the character is used sometimes synonymously with "avatar". Typically the avatar is not perceived as having a distinct personality of its own, but is seen as an extension of the player, the player's body within the game world. Sometimes the avatar is seen to include only the visual and physical aspects of the character, but occasionally the game mechanics are attached to that as well.

The meanings above are not essential for this paper; the first of them needs to be refuted for this discussion because I earlier declared that rule iii is optional, and the latter because specifically personified character constructs are central to role-playing.

This leaves us with the the word "character" meaning a diegetic person; a combination of physical, social and mental properties, as for example Lankoski (2004) has discussed (based on Egri (1965)).

I see the character as player's *diegetic identity*, along the lines drawn by Hakkarainen and Stenros (2002). Their definition draws on the postmodern identity theory²⁴, seeing character as a set of roles bound together by fiction. A role²⁵ is "any subject position within a set discourse, an artificial closure

²³ Democratic in the sense that it tends to give similar amounts of power to all participants. It should be noted that democracy is not necessarily a desirable feature in the aesthetics of role-playing. (cf. Svanevik 2005 and Pohjola 1999.)

²⁴ This kind of an approach has been encouraged within the film and literature studies earlier. Quoting Smith (1995, 20-21): "James Phelan has pointed out that any 'talk about characters as plausible and possible persons presupposes that we know what a person is. But the nature of the human subject is of course a highly contested issue among contemporary thinkers.' While this would be regarded as a truism by most contemporary theorists of film and literature, only a fraction of the voluminous literature on personal identity to which Phelan alludes has been drawn upon."

²⁵ Some Scandinavian authors (Fatland & Wingård 1999, Brenne 2005) occasionally use the word "role" synonymously with "character", due to the linguistic influences of the local languages.

articulating the player within the diegetic frame of the game or in a real-life situation". The character is "a framework of roles through which the player interacts within the game, and for which she constructs an illusion of a continuous and fixed identity, a fictional "story of self" binding the separate, disconnected roles together".

In the postmodernist view of Hakkarainen and Stenros, the role-played character is just as fictitious and non-fictitious as the player's "normal identity". The only difference of character and person is constructed solely by the fact that one is constructed within a frame of game while the other is not. As Hakkarainen and Stenros reject the idea of stable identity, embracing only the shifting roles bound together by personal fiction, they conclude that actions performed by character are actions performed by the player herself, acting within "fiction". The logical consequence of endorsing postmodernism would be that just as character is not a character compared to "real identity", game is also no longer a game compared to non-game. While this relativism can – and should – be questioned, a slightly more modern interpretation of this character model is a viable depiction of how a diegetic identity is constructed.²⁶

The diegetic identity approach essentially equates the character with the player, with the claim that the player creates the character by pretending to be someone else. In this Hakkarainen and Stenros refute the idealistic approach of many idealist immersionists²⁷, who have claimed that the character is a separate and external entity to be adopted for the duration of the game. To say that the character is the player also means that all characters exhibit human thinking; even when the character is a rock, a tree or an ancient elf, it is anthropomorphized for the purposes of the play. A homo sapiens cannot replicate the identity or the thinking of a dog. This approach also refutes the claims of complete or perfect character immersion, as pretension is self-conscious activity somewhat aware of both pretended fiction and the existence outside it; it has been argued that the players essentially pretend to believe that they are their characters (Pohjola 2004).

Harviainen (2005) has proposed a view on the concept of character that can be placed between the idealist immersionist and the one presented by Hakkarainen & Stenros, writing:

"A role-playing character and its player's sense of self exist in a state where each is influenced by the other. The character derives new information from the player and is, when necessary, spontaneously expanded to new directions by him. At the same time, the player experiences new things with the character acting as both a mask enabling events not normally possible for the player and as a filter through which the player experiences only the parts of the game events he deems necessary (or just interesting)" (Harviainen 2005).

In his characterization Harviainen retains some of the immersionist idealism, seeing that the sociocultural mask that is a character provides the player with some genuine agency enabling her to perform actions or accessing information that could not be done without it. Harviainen's approach is not in contradiction with the postmodern character view of Hakkarainen and Stenros, except for the fact that it is based on the modern understanding of an identity.

It is important to understand that a diegetic identity and a movie character are fundamentally different structures. The movie character is an external entity interpreted by the spectator, and thus it can have properties that the watcher could not have invented herself. A movie character may have quicker wits and broader vocabulary than the spectator has. Role-players need to use rule systems and distanced, descriptive playing styles to portray such characters: instead of telling a good joke, a tabletop role-player might just describe that her character tells a good joke, and perhaps even roll a die to justify the goodness of the joke in the game frame.

Another difference is that while characters of the static media are presented in the context of a story world, role-playing characters are presented in the context of a game world. Goldilocks is defined by her adventure: It is difficult to imagine her in another story. The context of the narrative provides Goldilocks with her Goldilocks-like qualities. For the players of role-playing characters, the world full of opportunities and potentials is the significant context, and much more central than the story.²⁸

²⁶ Fine's (1983) view is that players do have a real identity, which is bracketed during the role-play. Whether this experience is illusionary or not is not central to this discussion; the point is that diegetic and "real" identities are constructed in a similar fashion.

²⁷ Such as Pohjola (1999), who later (2004) changed his stance.

²⁸ Paul Czege's (2003) *My Life with Master* is one exception to this rule.

Only in retrospect the narrative context becomes central. When role-players reminisce the careers of their characters afterwards, they do narrativize the played histories. Indeed, often the game masters intentionally plan the intrigue²⁹ in a manner that is likely to produce appealing stories (see Heliö 2004).

Just like the concept of identity in general, the concept of diegetic identity can be seen from various angles. The multiple faces of the character have different functions in the role-playing process.

Looked as a collection of roles bound together by personal fiction, the character acts as a proxy for the player, differentiating the exogenous success of the player from the diegetic success of the character (see Montola 2005). Physical body cannot be entirely excluded from this personal fiction; quite oppositely it is an important foundation in identity building. Even though the diegetic story of self may be a tragedy, the player's exogenous story of self can be a success story. This personified construct serves as the basis of identification within the game, allowing diegetic decision-making, which Björk and Holopainen (2005) characterize as the essential element of role-playing.

Seeing the character as the player's presence in the game world implies that the character acts as the eyes, ears and hands for the player in the game: the character is the focal point of the player's diegesis and a game token she uses to affect her surroundings.

Finally, the character is a measure of player's power being a combination of mental and physical attributes, personal history and social relationships. Defining the character as an archmage or a mafia boss draws quite clear boundaries of actions allowed for the player and what kind of consequences they might have.

8. CONCLUSION

The multitude of role-playing cultures makes defining and describing them very problematic. The differences of, for example, performative, competitive and immersionist role-players are vast. The view presented here is centered to the Nordic scene of tabletop and live role-playing, but my aim has been to accommodate a broader range of role-playing activities.

When role-playing is discussed from the angle of ludology, it is relevant to contemplate the position

of role-playing activities as games. Juul (2003) provides six requirements for what he calls a classic game. They are fixed rules, variable outcome, valorization of outcome, player effort, player attachment to outcome and negotiability of extra-ludic consequences. Based on these criteria, Juul argues that "pen and paper role-playing games are not normal games because, with a human game master, their rules are not fixed beyond discussion". In this paper I have presented the invisible rules of role-playing, which are fixed "beyond discussion". Admittedly, the three rules presented here are very open, and do not make a good game ruleset on their own.

As I have demonstrated earlier (Montola 2005), role-playing does not inherently require valorization of outcomes either. With valorization Juul (2003, 34) means that the outcomes of the game are assigned positive and negative values according to their desirability. In role-playing the typical priority is the diegetic importance of diegetic outcomes, while the valorization of game frame outcomes is highly ambiguous depending on players' exogenous goals. In fact, role-playing mindset usually means that the activities taken in the game frame are far from optimal, which is in contradiction with both valorization of and player attachment to game outcome.

The more important thing to understand how ludological approaches can be successfully used to further the understanding of role-playing games. The intent of this paper is to clarify that if role-playing is a game, what kind of a game it is, and if it is looked at ludologically, what reservations should be applied.

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²⁹ Aarseth (1997) uses "intrigue" to denote "a secret plot in which the user is the innocent, but voluntary, target (victim is too strong a term), with an outcome that is not yet decided – or rather with several possible outcomes that depend on various factors, such as the cleverness and experience of the player". In other words, intrigue is the planned structure of potential plots that might be realized during the game. Fatland's (2005) larp fabula pretty much equals Aarseth's intrigue.

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Roles and Worlds in the Hybrid RPG Game of Oblivion

Popular Abstract - Single player games are now powerful enough to convey the impression of shared worlds with social presence and social agency. Unfortunately, there are few clear definitions of 'world' as it applies to commercial computer games, or as it could be used to help improvements these games. With that in mind, this paper will explore a framework for defining virtual worlds and then apply it to *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Figure 1) in terms of phenomenological, social, and cultural aspects.

Even though it is a single player game, several key features allow *Oblivion* to be considered as a social world. Despite these promising features, *Oblivion* fails as a rich cultural world. It could be further improved as a social world and perhaps even as a cultural world through various techniques

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ABSTRACT

Role-playing is both an important part of cultural learning (Hallford and Hallford 2001 pp231-236), and an important genre in computer games (Tychsen 2006). Roles are intrinsically related to the notion of social worlds, yet exactly how is not clear in the academic literature. There are few grounded theories in computer game studies on how role-playing works in sustaining and augmenting a thematic "world", there are few clear descriptions of what "world" means in this context, and the social versus cultural dimensions of both roles and worlds are seldom delineated. I suggest that the cultural and social dimensions of both real world and virtual world playing are important, and that commercial computer role-playing games (CRPGs) offer more opportunities to support deeper cultural aspects of role-playing.

Secondly, I wish to examine the relation of cultural identity to ownership and social purpose and how role-playing can be more fully and richly rounded out by computer-simulated game play. Thirdly, I'll discuss features for further research agendas to improve *Oblivion* in particular and CRPGs in general for the gaming public, and to explore their use as vehicles for simulated purposes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Can a single player computer game evoke the sense of a social or cultural world? Many critics have discussed multiplayer social worlds, not single player hybrid computer role playing games (CRPGs). However, as a recent example of a single player CRPG, *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* has much to offer in the inter-relationship of world and player, and I will argue that it has further potential in the simulation and affordance of social interaction, communal identity and cultural learning.

Single player games are now powerful enough to convey the impression of shared worlds with social presence and social agency. Unfortunately, there are few clear definitions of 'world' as it applies to commercial computer games, or as it could be used to foster improvements these games. This is particularly significant for role-playing games. If I am correct in suggesting that one dimension of 'world' is how it offers up opportunities to individuals, then if virtual 'worlds' are currently only designed with spatial and social affirmances in mind, the actual role-playing of CRPGs will be severely impacted.



Figure 1: NPC and Player's Avatar in *Oblivion*

With that in mind, this paper will explore a framework for defining virtual worlds especially in terms of environment, society, and culture. Section 2 will examine the relation of roles to worlds. Section 3 examines the game *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Figure 1) in terms of its environmental, social, and cultural aspects. Section 4 outlines some ideas to improve *Oblivion* in particular, and CRPGs in general. Section 5 suggests three potential criticisms of both my approach and its relevance to CRPGs, I then attempt to defend against these counter-claims.

2. ROLES AND VIRTUAL WORLDS

As the real world allows roles to be transfigured, expanded, overtaken or replaced, so should game worlds. Critics have mentioned roles in role-playing games are typically mere affordances, and the games do not involve genuine role-playing (Tychsen 2006). Then what are the features and dimensions of real-world roles and role-playing? I suggest that social roles in our real world do more than distinguish individuals, provide individual purpose in life, or divide up responsibilities according to capabilities and political acumen. While it is true that roles are purposeful and goal-based, and they create and demarcate social identities, they also have a component of cultural curation (preserving and transmitting elements of social mores and values), while allowing for evolution and personalization.

Apart perhaps from the term cultural curation (which I will expand on later), this may seem self-evident. I would argue with that as I suggest that the cultural rather than merely social aspects of roles and role-playing have been downplayed, to the immersive and engaging detriment of CRPGs in general and to a potential use as cultural learning environments in particular. In game studies and virtual environment research, 'culture' and 'society' are two terms that have been used interchangeably, and the term 'world' has been used loosely, and one important if often hidden

aspect of 'world' (to afford, structure and separate personal decision-making), has been downplayed or neglected.

The term "world" has been used as if it is self-explanatory in many recent papers and publications (Celentano 2004; Darken 1996; Okada et al. 2001; Ondrejka 2006). Even in the book entitled *Designing Virtual Worlds*, Bartle (Bartle 2003) avoids a detailed definition of what is a 'virtual world'. Klastrup (Klastrup 2002) also points out the difficulty in clearly defining the phrase. Ondrejka (Ondrejka 2006) appears to see a virtual world as being a persistent virtual environment, that is, elements affected by a user are remembered and kept, even when the user exits the world. However, that also describes an online database.

In what sense these virtual environments move beyond 'cyberspace' towards 'place' is not clear (Johnson 2005). For example, according to Weckström, his thesis on 'worldliness' in VR was inspired by his students, who described virtual environments as "empty and hollow, like stage sets...sterile" (Weckerström 2004 p9). That is not to say that virtual environments cannot be 'worlds' if they do not feature other people. Weckström (Weckerström 2004) wrote that to achieve 'worldliness', a virtual environment must allow for various ways of doing things. Johnson (Johnson 1997; Johnson 2005a; Johnson 2005b) and Steinkuehler (Steinkuehler 2006) have also argued that current massive multiplayer game environments are typically a mixture of vague and clear objectives, people immerse themselves not merely by spatially navigating from point A to point B, but also by exploring the environment as a shifting world of possibility.

Secondly, a game world could have worldliness in terms of its social aspects. In such a game the player may be able to or be forced to choose between a range of self-identifying livelihoods and positions that allow one to develop and maintain social skills and status (Herold 2006). Or, a player could be rewarded or punished depending on how well they interact with other players or imitate appropriate social behaviour.

Thirdly, a game world may involve learning how to translate and disseminate, or even modify or create the language or material value systems of real or digitally simulated inhabitants. In this situation, the game play hinges on how well culturally appropriate information can be learnt and developed by the player or passed on to others. 'Worldliness' in this sense is to what extent

the virtual environment or game can store, display and retrieve information on the encounters of people in places.

In a related fashion, Hocking (Ruberg 2007) has suggested that people explore spatially, explore the game-system or use the game to explore their own identity, values, or inner conflicts. The first sense is aesthetic, and the third is perhaps phenomenological and more externally related than it may first appear. The issue here is the daily conflict between our experiential sense of selfhood and the demands and surprises of the wider world.

Single player games are now powerful enough to convey the impression of shared worlds with social presence and social agency.

To paraphrase the philosopher Husserl (Kim 1976), this is the conflict between the dynamic perspectival relation of the situation-horizon, (my view of my “situational perspective of interest and involvement in my own world”), versus the world-horizon, (that which persists outside of my or your own situational perspective). There is of course also the potential for social conflict, between my perceived role and my role (and fitness for that role) as perceived by others.

How does this tie in with role-playing? The three broad aspects of ‘worlds’ have corollaries in role-playing. In full role-play and in richly explorative worlds the player experiences a varied and rich gamut of choices, meaningful decisions, and complex consequences. Not only is there possible selection of various roles, there is some degree of freedom in how one interprets and performs that role. So a world made for role-playing should capture some of that freedom of choice, individuality, and complex fate. An important part of role-play is role-selection and a world rich in such affordances would allow a multitude of possible paths.

The second aspect of a world tailor-made for role-play is its ability to adopt, adapt, fuse or fight the social identity and position of various roles in relation to others. Roles are social, and while designed by society to avoid conflict (where everyone knows their place) somehow creates more conflict. The vaguely shared understandings of roles often create dissent and sometimes lead to open conflict. Roles are continually socially defined and their parameter are continually re-interpreted, identified with, or identified against. Hence the

polemical tendencies of real-world RPGs that Tychsen et al. (Tychsen et al. 2005) have considered a weakness, I consider a strength. For the conflicts between players and the game master are remembered and reflected upon, not the roll of the die.

The third aspect of a world tailor-made for role-play is not so obvious and the impetus for my writing this journal article. I suggest that in role-play not only are we negotiating our interpretation of the role against practical everyday issues, not only are we interpreting and communicating roles in terms of others around us, as role-players we are curators of tradition. For role-playing allows society to carry forward its goals, values, structure, and messages.

In fulfilling a role we are given some responsibility in filling out that role, consolidating the important parts through habit and ritual and ignoring accidental features. The way in which society is preserved and passed on is due in no small manner to the way in which roles are interpreted, inhabited, and disseminated by the role “keepers”. So in a sense role-play is curatorial, we choose which aspects of culture are worth keeping and the rest of the information we discard. In the next section I will give an example (using a currently popular CRPG) why distinguishing between cultural and social aspects of virtual world design is important.

2.1 The Environmental Aspects of ‘World’

Material culture theory argues that human interaction is between humans, humans and the environment (and externs), between humans and artefacts, from humans to humans via artefacts and so on. The concept of extern has been defined as “phenomena that arise independently of people, like sunlight and clouds, wild plants and animals, rocks and minerals, and landforms” (Schiffer and Miller 1999 pp12-13). Externs are larger environment objects and processes that are not artefacts. This is a useful term as interaction in a virtual environment seldom makes the distinction between that inherent in the environment and that triggered by a user.

Extern does not only have relevance to archaeology. The notion of extern can be both an aesthetic and phenomenological issue. In terms of aesthetics, encountering externs in a virtual world may evoke a sense of awe and wonder. Such an effect could happen independently of people or events. The size, scale and inevitability of simulated externs as aspects of ‘world’ may cause

us to stop and reflect on how the mundane small details of our lives can or should mesh with the world beyond. Ideally, a virtual world would contain moments where it can either transfix us through its aesthetic qualities, or cause us to question and reflect on our existence and relation to the world.

2.2 The Social Aspects of 'World'

Society defines who we are, how we communicate, and the values that we strive towards. Consider Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument (Wittgenstein 1963), sometimes rephrased as the Robinson Crusoe example. Imagine a human born alone on a desert island, could that person develop his or her own private language? If this person was abandoned at birth on a deserted island, without defined rules or human contact, he or she is unlikely to attempt self-expression through modification or collection of any artefacts left from the wreckage of past civilizations. So society is indeed necessary for culture to take place, it is perhaps even necessary for individual expression. Thus adherence to cultural rules and mores are ultimately socially governed, without social motivation, culture is merely a pile of objects.

It is the acceptance or condemnation of other people in a society that separates cultural behaviour from individual habits. Even on a desert island, a human who was once part of society would endeavour to live according to his or her previous mores, in case people returned. Humans seek social affirmation and culture continues the values and identities that help mediate social behaviour even if other social agents are not currently present.

Deliberately or subconsciously moderating one's external behaviour in response or anticipation of the opinions or actions of others while in a computer game is a sign that it is functioning as a social world. However, a single player game is less likely to bind the player to social rules or laws, as players do not have social affirmation or condemnation to guide their social behaviour. We could also argue that a single player game is less likely to compel a rich, expansive, and creative experiencing of cultural learning and behaviour, as there is no sentient audience to act as cultural arbiters.

"Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artefacts; the

essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action." (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952 p357).

An important point in the above quote is that culture is not simply passive, but it is also a storehouse of values, aspirations, and identities. Culture can be viewed as being a material embodiment of social structure, mediating the relation between the individual and the community, and expressing (as well as protecting) the sacred from the profane. Culture also provides instructions on how habits can become intrinsically meaningful and socially ordered through the practice of ritual (Dormans 2006).

In many papers, articles and blogs that focus on virtual environments and game worlds, I see a conflation between the cultural and the social. In Presence research for example, an important thread is to understand social presence in virtual environments. However, much of the literature that has 'culture' in the title does not clearly distinguish cultural presence from social presence (Bartle 2003; Riva et al. 2004; Riva et al. 2002; Rozak 2006; Schroeder 2002).

So in a sense role-play is curatorial, we choose which aspects of culture are worth keeping and the rest of the information we discard.

It is not clear that we can say social presence is a group of people aware of each other while in a virtual environment (or computer game), because the general and more specific meaning of a society is that people who belong to it have shared values, beliefs, and/or identity. Even if social presence means the feeling another sentient human being is in the same virtual environment and capable of social interaction or at least capable of displaying social behaviour, this does not mean social presence corresponds directly with cultural presence.

In this weaker sense, people in a chat room may well be experiencing human co-presence, without feeling that they are experiencing a strong sense or level of cultural presence.

Culture is created by people but it can exist in some form without the creators. To quote Agnew (Agnew 1999, p90): "...all people live in cultural worlds that

are made and re-made through their everyday activities.”

If a virtual environment or computer game contains a collection of artefacts that can be observed, interpreted, or understood as a coherent materialization by intelligent beings of a shared social system, this may be considered passive cultural presence. We can see culture, but we either cannot participate in it or with it due to a lack of culturally constrained creative understanding, or because the originators have long since passed away.

There may also be more than one group of originators. A virtual environment can thus be a palimpsest (‘products of action’), where past social interactions are layered, echoed, and carved into the fabric of the environment. In other words, an environment that allows us to breathe in the past. The premise that visitors require other real people in the virtual environment in order to feel cultural presence is thus unsubstantiated and highly problematic. Cultural presence, albeit in a weakened form, is thus possible in the absence of social presence. This is important for designers who wish to convey a sense of cultural presence but do not have the technology to simulate believable and authentic NPCs (Non Playing Characters), and avatars as cultural agents.

For Crang, culture is a collection of “sets of beliefs or values that give meaning to ways of life and produce (and are reproduced through) material and symbolic forms” (Crang 1998, p57). Crang extended Sauer’s early writings and remarks that landscape is a palimpsest. I agree with Crang that culture is spatially and temporally embedded. Culture is an intangible connection and rejection of perceived patterns over space and time. How cultures are spread over space and how cultures make sense of space is thus interdependent. A visitor perceives space as place, place ‘perpetuates culture’ (frames it, embeds it, erodes it) and thus influences the inhabitant.

While place modifies culture, culture is heavily affected by society, it is socially created, defined and managed. Culture is expressed via language, sounds, and artefacts, physical objects that decay, and so culture is vaguely bounded, open to interpretation, and liable to shift over time due to both the vagueness of its boundaries and the fragility of shared memories. To demarcate the boundaries of culture clearly and accurately is thus highly problematic.

Being able to observe a distinct cultural presence does not necessarily indicate a great amount of

cultural learning has taken place. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of cultural learning there needs to be a measure of the cultural ‘immersivity’ of a virtual environment. For want of a better term, I suggest hermeneutic richness, the depth and vividness of a medium that allows for interpretation of different cultural and social perspectives as judged from an emic or etic viewpoint.

Hermeneutic richness does not mean photo-realism, or social presence. If cultural presence is a measure of how deeply a cultural force is perceived to imprint or ingrain itself on its surroundings;

If a virtual environment or computer game contains a collection of artefacts that can be observed, interpreted, or understood as a coherent materialization by intelligent beings of a shared social system, this may be considered passive cultural presence.

hermeneutic richness may be the depth of affordance that a virtual environment gives to the interpretation of a natively residing culture in that virtual environment.

The ability of an artefact to convey a sense of that creator’s agency is a reflection of its ‘hermeneutic richness’ (akin to the archaeological notion of the ‘trace’). The perceived sense of that creator’s agency through an artefact is itself cultural agency. For an artefact is itself a cipher, a mark of cultural agency.

In order to evoke cultural learning of a historic nature, this passive ‘hermeneutic richness’ is the elusive and intangible quality one should aspire towards. Hermeneutic richness also exists in two distinct ways. On the one hand, this type of virtual environment might act as a symbolically projected identity, dynamically customised by us as the visitor to reflect our social and individual values and outlook. On the other hand, a virtual environment might be hermeneutic when it affords meaningful interpretations of its shareholders (clients and subjects) to those that visit it.

For example, many fantasy role-playing games portray previous cultures or cultural beliefs, real or imaginary. The games may feature named characters, treasure, 3D objects, goals and so forth, but they often lack distinctly cultural places, and this is perhaps because there are no identifiers as to how to behave in another culture.

3. OBLIVION AS A VIRTUAL WORLD

It may appear that computer games do not afford a sense of cultural presence unless they are multiplayer environments that allow human players to create and leave artefacts that represent their cultural perspectives. Recently, however, a new computer game, *Oblivion*, has encouraged me to change some of my views on the paucity of inhabited social or cultural worlds, despite its single-player nature, and some gameplay shortcomings. I count at least half-a dozen features of lived-world creation, not common to most computer games, but I have suggestions on how to also further improve them in order to create the illusion of *Oblivion* becoming not just a social world, but also a cultural one.

If cultural presence is a measure of how deeply a cultural force is perceived to imprint or ingrain itself on its surroundings; hermeneutic richness may be the depth of affordance that a virtual environment gives to the interpretation of a natively residing culture in that virtual environment.

3.1 Environmental Presence in Oblivion

Rozak has written on the careful balancing of procedural and hand-designed objects that form the *Oblivion* landscape (Nareyek 2007; Rozak 2006). In terms of how a physical sense of world is afforded, *Oblivion* features animals ranging from butterflies to bears, sheep and deer that graze and move independently of the player, and plants that grow back seasonally after being picked by the player.

The flora also appears to have a geophysical relationship to the landscape. There are also attempts to symbolically convey colder, hotter or more humid microclimates. Rain, fog, and changes between night and day are major aspects of the landscape, and done so well that independent game designers have remarked they have travelled the virtual landscape purely to watch sunsets (Ruberg 2007).

Hocking is correct that *Oblivion* affords a rich sense of “self-motivated exploration” and there is also the sense of physical immersion. One can drown, be burnt, frozen or electrocuted, due to extreme

climates, bodies of water, hidden traps, or the weapons of enemies (humans, demons, monsters, and animals).

There are several avatar animations to learn beyond the typical game mechanics of aiming and strafing, such as sitting, special movements with weapons, opening locks, and shifting between first and third person viewpoints (with the added vanity option of circling one’s own avatar via a third person camera). The skin, facial features, age, gender, body shape, race, profession, birth sign and other aspects of the avatar can be chosen and changed while in the first level of the game, but with one notable exception, (being transformed into a vampire), these features are fixed after level one.

Objects can be picked up and collected or stored (or even transferred to NPCs), and they weigh down the avatar in terms of speed. Heavier objects make noise when they move or fall down steep inclines or are accidentally knocked from tables, and the heavier the object picked up, the more likely a player is spotted. NPCs can be bumped out of the way, but can also hear or see people in good conditions within a certain range. So the sensory and spatially explorative aspects of the game are powerful and rich, but *Oblivion* seems to struggle with the second type of world, the social one, it lacks expressive agents (Mateas 2003).

3.2 Social Presence in Oblivion

However, there are both resolvable and less resolvable social presence issues and limitations with *Oblivion*. There are a few minor glitches such as monsters level up with players, the dialogue dialects do not appear related to the races or towns, and the same character can have different voices for different dialogue, but there are also major design areas where I believe *Oblivion* can be more engaging and enriched as a game world (if not as a game); namely, through player embodiment, object possession, social stigma, persuasive interaction, and gossip.



Figure 2: Auto-close Up For Conversation

The first striking social behaviour feature of *Oblivion* is that of constricted and automatic gaze-directed physical co-presence. The player and inhabitants automatically have their gaze directed to each other within a certain sight-range (Figure 2), and their bodies twist (even when seated), to look at you (Figure 3). This is a form of alterity, otherness, but also awareness of this otherness.



Figure 3: Gaze

Experienced with online virtual environments, which lack this automatic head-following of other avatars, I initially found this technique conveyed a powerful sense of presence, but it begins to lose its impact with ongoing familiarization. In the current version the default head movement seems to be a universally standard convention. If the movement and speed were tied to how excitable or excited is the NPC that may add to individual character development and to the current dramatic tension. The alacrity, speed of movement, and range of movement could be related directly to the health of the player's avatar or to its stamina, or to how many enemies have recently attacked it.

Conversely, actions such as fighting and spell casting currently require deliberate action on the part of the player, which means that the player's avatar is really a three-dimensional placeholder

rather than a defined and distinctive personality (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Spells Require Conscious Selection

In a genuine RPG the player is more of a puppet master, perhaps there could be an option allowing the player's avatar (the hero) to take on common player actions and decisions as default behaviour. The game could also allow the hero to become more self-directed when enchanted or tired, or become more self-directed when the situation is directly related to the quest, and the player has been single-minded in solving quests one by one rather than by skipping between them at various stages of completion.



Figure 5: Player's Avatar (Hero)

I remarked above that the player's avatar, the hero (although anti-hero or villain can also be chosen), also has a default head swivel when NPCs walk past. This is useful to remind the player of other avatars in the area but it could also be more expressively tied into the gameplay. As the hero can act slightly independently of the player (entering a room, the hero automatically glances at other people), why not when the hero is enchanted or for some other situational or event-based reason, increase the auto-behaviour of the hero independently of the player's intentions? Perhaps

unknown animations or skills of the hero could be triggered when passing near certain key objects, phobias or environmental conditions, or would this break immersion.

There are character attributes, which help the hero to sneak past hostile NPCs, depending on what they are wearing, the size of any object being picked up, and how dark it is. The detection factor is apparently directly related to how observant the NPCs individually are, but this factor could be enriched by also considering how much the hero is carrying, and how reflective their armour is. Interestingly, the hero can increase their sneak skill, but only when NPCs are nearby, and the hero's sneak skill also increases with successful pick pocketing (Anonymous 2006).

Sneaking is one of the most polished of *Oblivion's* game mechanics, so I am only tentatively suggesting tweaks. If the hero could create diversions and deflections while sneaking, and if the music could gradually change (slow down or stop playing) this may also add to the sneaking experience. When people sneak in real-life, their relative speed is so slow that everything in fast motion appears even quicker, perhaps game engines could also make use of this psychological phenomenon. As an aside, if moving quietly underwater perhaps breathing could slow down if the swimmer moves very slowly.

The AI can also be modified, dramatizing the NPCs' spatially triggered and event-held adherence to perceived feelings of possession and privacy, and the ways in which they react in terms of physical action and facial expression to the hero, history, and appearance. For example, when you (as the hero) enter a house, especially if you have picked the lock, the NPC may run towards you and tell you to leave.

Unfortunately the possessive behaviour of the NPCs seems hard-coded, so far as I can see, there are no interesting variants or hero related variables to this behaviour, and NPCs do not seem worried about the hero making a mess or eating fruit or affecting other objects.



Figure 6: Dropping valuables is perfectly safe

Although rooms have many artefacts that can be moved, picked up, pick pocketed or stolen, the ways in which they are handled is not satisfactory. For example, a hero can enter a smithery or armourer's workshop, bump into everything which then falls on the floor, and the inhabitant, (trader, smith, armourer), is oblivious to this accidental or deliberate vandalism of their shop. The artefacts are usually just empty props (although carrying them can slow down the player's character or augment the character's attributes).

The player can also buy a house in many of the towns but cannot lock it. Dynamic vandalism by the NPCs would however create an interesting dilemma for players who like to both hoard artefacts and to wander. The player can just drop objects (Figure 6) and then return to them later. Nobody steals the player's possessions even though the towns and the Imperial City are full of thieves and beggars, and bandits roam the countryside.

In the guide to *Oblivion* (Bethesda Softworks 2006), the player is warned that unsheathing a weapon can draw a hostile social reception from the NPCs, but I only managed a few scowls from the guards, it did not seem to affect gameplay. Although NPCs automatically watch the hero walking past, the type of clothing or armour the hero chooses to wear (with one exception, Necromancer robes), does not draw attention. Hence, a hero in nothing but a loincloth can walk into a church with no comments from the local clergy.

If a hero exits from the sewers under the imperial city, or has not slept for many days, there are no adverse comments from the NPCs. Since *Oblivion* has quests where environmental extremes such as frost and fire can affect the hero, and as one of the hero's character attributes is their charm, it seems remiss to not have a 'cleanliness to uncleanness'

feature. The appearance of the human player only draws distinctive NPC responses in extreme cases, such as when the player is wittingly or unwittingly turned into a vampire, (many NPCs refuse to trade or converse if this happens). Conjuring also creates a few comments from NPCs (Figure 7), but does not seem to affect gameplay.



Figure 7: Some Activities Cause Adverse Comments

The NPCs may have information that would help a human player solve a quest, but they need to be charmed or bribed to feel friendly enough towards the player before they will divulge this information (Figure 8). Many players have criticized this feature for being clunky and breaking the player's immersion. Although the idea is good, the implementation (at least on the PC), is let down by the ugliness of the procedural facial animation, and by the non-intuitiveness of the spinning 'bribe wheel' (my term, not *Oblivion's*!)

We don't see our own avatar, there is no body language, and the psychological mapping of the interface is unnatural. Perhaps if there were interfaces allowing players to guess the timing of jokes via breath or pitch or stress on individual words, this would appear more realistic. The NPC's face could lean forward or backwards; or the sound of their breathing changed as we coaxed, bribed or joked with them. To gauge bribes on the appearance, race, or professional class of the NPC, or how close NPCs are to guards, or the shabbiness of the area the NPC is currently in, may also help improve the believability. *Oblivion* lacks emotionally expressive avatars that according to Fabri et al. (Fabri et al. 2002) and Mateas (Mateas 2003) augment social immersion.



Figure 8: Persuasive Interaction

The NPCs wander around on their own daily and weekly 'beats' (paths), but they also meet up and talk to each other. I emphasized talk to rather than talk with, as it becomes very clear to the player that this chatting shows itself to be monologues randomly set, and rarely reveals meaningful information to the hero. Along with more appropriate tips on the loading screens, the gossip could be more dynamically adjusted to the progress and developing back story of the hero.

As the player has many options in developing their hero's attributes, the game could track the personalization tendencies of the player and offer helpful hints. For example, if the player tends to level up via agility rather than via luck, the NPCs could drop hints as to where agility-enhancing quests or artefacts are located. As *Oblivion* is hampered by the NPCs having set voices, perhaps there could be NPC travelling bards who mimic both the information and the voices of people they have met, the NPCs could talk in their sleep or in a trance (i.e. while possessed by spirits), or the information could be written down as fading overlaid notes on top of books (although now we are approaching a notion of a cultural world).

3.3 Cultural Presence in Oblivion

I believe *Oblivion* fails as a cultural world. Part of the blame may lie with the points system. Evolving from the traditional RPG game, the points system may make sense for such clear and measurable qualities such as strength or speed, but it starts to lose believability in terms of intelligence and personality and seems downright stupid in terms of varying races and cultures. For example, there are references to past histories (that could be told by or for any race), and while NPCs make references to racial or cultural characteristics, the differences between the races (or species), seem to be merely how many more points they tend to have in specific character attributes.

NPCs remember failure or success of individual quests, but the actions of the player do not really impact on the main world (apart from the main quest of destroying the gates of *Oblivion* and protecting Martin). Because there are no real cultural affinities to landscape or to artefacts, and as the races are found in the same towns and ruins, cultural differences primarily show up in character animations, scales, and weaknesses to frost or fire. Despite being a fantasy similar in genre to, say, the epic *Lord of the Rings* by Tolkien, *Oblivion* does not open up the sense of a self-supporting cultural world. It does not make us believe the races have a perceived cultural destiny, that knowledge is lost to them or that it is protected, or that they each speak dialects or idiolects or share symbols incomprehensible or alien to other cultures.

The other potential cultural aspect of *Oblivion*, the many books found throughout the settlements and ruins, are really for entertainment only, although occasionally providing tactical advice, they do not really expose the inner workings of different cultural values or ideals. As the game engine uses dynamic three-dimensional modelling and texturing, as well as shader-generated screenshots, it would have been possible to create graphic overlays over the books that dynamically personalise them with the quests or physical appearance of the player's avatar.

I can however give one example of real world related cultural knowledge. One can learn how to pick flowers, plants and mushrooms in order to create potions with varying effects (Figure 9). Each type of plant will cease to exist if picked incorrectly (each plant differs in its 'picking spot', which is typically the stem or edge or centre). As specific plants are required for certain potions (which may in turn be required by specific quests), learning to identify the correct plants and how and where to collect them, becomes an acquired skill. If there were social challenges where the hero was quizzed on which ingredients are which (say in order to advance in the Mages guild), this could add to the depth of the game.



Figure 9: Pick Up Ingredients Correctly

Unfortunately but understandably, *Oblivion* already has so many options it does not force the player to learn all the correct symbols; the player only needs how to access the menu. If there was an option to force the player to learn symbols in order to survive (a form of 'twitch knowledge') this may add to the feeling that genuine skill and knowledge is developed by immersion in the game.

Early virtual environments and early virtual worlds were considered sterile and empty. *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* is superior to its predecessor *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* in fleshing out a simulated sensorial environment featuring both procedural and handmade texturing (Rozak 2006). This richness of place qualia is not only due to the detailed NPCs, buildings, and artefacts but also to the rich and dynamic environmental processes that occur independently of the player, (such as climate, weather, flora and fauna). In the sense of a world as a meta-set of environmental externs, *Oblivion* is very impressive.

Secondly, *Oblivion* also appears to be a rich social world, in the way the NPCs appear to exist independently of the player and the player quests, through their daily rituals and a sense of property ownership, but also in how they glance or look at the player. *Oblivion* also features social conversation, sneaking, target maps, inspiration and repel features, automatic close-ups and the ability to pick up and move objects.

Yet *Oblivion* is arguably weak on role-playing. If we could use Dorman's three criteria (Dormans 2006) of a good role-playing game, (narrative, social and ludic), *Oblivion* fails on the social sphere. For example, the stories embedded inside books may further remind the player how much social creativity is not actually within the game, the roles and attributes one chooses seem rather arbitrary and independent of the external environment (but

not combat situations), and the NPCs that the player deals with only in rare cases affects the player's social standing with others. In short, the actual role-playing is weak.

There are also more technical design flaws. The gossip is not meaningful, the mapping and observation is not subtle, and the bribe-style function is clumsy, but these issues can be resolved. I would further punish players for being careless, for knocking over objects or bumping into NPCs, or for dressing inappropriately.

Until these flaws and omissions are rectified, *Oblivion* does not go far enough as a social world, let alone as a cultural one. And even if some writers such as Rozak (Rozak 2006) when discussing *Oblivion* seem to conflate the cultural and the social, there are important reasons to distinguish between the two. However, its extensive modding ability does at least promise to extend the notion of a virtual world as interconnected socially controlled realms rather than as a static and ubiquitous virtual environment.

4. IMPROVING OBLIVION

4.1 Improved Embodiment

Oblivion has a mild form of spatial detection, it is possible to be directly behind an NPC and attack repeatedly without being detected, but generally the NPCs find attackers from the direction they were attacked from, and NPCs can be bumped from observing special areas without them noticing who bumped them! However *Oblivion* lacks a social understanding in this spatial awareness. Social worlds often feature attempts at natural language processing (Perlin 2005), understanding a player's keyboard inputted questions and answers. Of course that misses the tone and stressing of verbal dialogue but a great deal of real world social understanding is also acquired through viewing the gestural, facial and postural expressiveness and habits of other members of a community.

In designing a social world, a believable NPC should have some idea of how a human player's avatar feels inside the space, their intentional state and affinity to objects, and how they behave in the space according to perceived role and social status. Creating a believable emotionally expressive actor (NPC) is difficult (Fabri et al. 2002) but the problem also involves giving the NPC enough information about the player behind the hero character (Perlin 2005).

If head tracking (via commercially available sensors attached to caps or similar), eye-gaze tracking (via a webcam or similar) and biofeedback data were fed directly into the NPC's AI, the NPC could make more player-related choices. Tracking head movement and gaze direction and perhaps postural changes could allow the NPC more ability to relate directly to the intentional and focused state of the player, and it could also help the ability of the player to mimic roles of NPCs in the game (see next section for elaboration of this point).

Andrew Dekker and I have connected biofeedback to games, for example using *Half life 2*'s Source game engine (Dekker and Champion 2007), we fed GSR (galvanic skin response) from the player into the game to change the zombie spawning and shaders of a horror level mod in direct response to the 'excited' level of a player (Figure 10). Using biofeedback creates more problems, one is whether and how to inform the player of their biofeedback and how it affects the gameplay. Communicating this biofeedback via NPCs could increase the immersivity of the game but it could also enhance the apparent intelligence of the NPC.



Figure 10: Biofeedback driving Source game engine Shaders

However, this biofeedback should also be communicated indirectly back to the player through triggered or default behaviours of their avatar. Perhaps the avatar becomes jumpy when the player's GSR goes up; perhaps when the player's heartbeat or breathing slows down their avatar does not visually scan so often. *Oblivion* allows the player to switch between first person and third person view, but biofeedback could automatically override this, when the player becomes excited. When music suggests a nearby enemy, the field of view could automatically widen and the view could switch to first person.

4.2 Dynamic External Cognitive Artefacts

Sterelny traced the ancestors of the map (cave paintings) back over 30 000 years:

“With the invention and elaboration of pictorial representation, humans came to be makers of specialised epistemic artefacts. It is very difficult to date the first appearance of specialised epistemic artefacts, but unmistakable, superbly executed paintings are over 30,000 years old (Mithen 1998). In Mithen's view, the use and elaboration of epistemic artefacts explains the extraordinary acceleration in both the richness and the variability of human cultures over the last 50,000 years or so. He thinks our archaeological record shows the marks of a cognitive breakthrough.” (Sterelny 2004)

Sterelny further wrote that maps are “tools for thinking”. That means maps are epistemic artefacts, they are items that structure our knowledge outside of our minds. They are not just external to us but also portable, designed to function as representational resources.

How could a game-orientated social world use this idea? Consider a floor map in *Oblivion* (Figure 11), it shows where the hero is located, and where the quest object or person is (but gets confused by different floors). Imagine an overlay of faint footsteps reminding the player where their hero character has looked in previous visits. Perhaps the translucency of floor areas and wall outlines become more opaque the more the player's character has used or approached them. Using biofeedback, maps of pre-visited areas could perhaps have overlay colours relating to the level of excitement the player experienced when last visiting the area.



Figure 11: *Oblivion* interior map

We could also apply this strategy to artefacts. Boess (Boess 2008) has noted that role-playing in design

education is greatly helped augmented by the use of props while Dornan (Dornan 2007) has noted the lack of ritual in computer games. It is true that in *Oblivion* weapons and other artefacts are damaged by continual use, or are more effective against certain other artefacts, and their effectiveness is also modified by the skills of the player's avatar. Yet this is not role-playing. How well the player fills or innovates a role does not directly affect the artefacts.

If artefacts were so affected and recorded their time in use, where and how they were used, and against or for certain types of roles, might help develop more nuanced and compelling role-play. Consider a multi-player game where the more often used artefacts could have more faded textures as well; popularity fades the objects in question or conversely makes them more prevalent. For significant quest objects, snapshots of previous encounters could be triggered when the hero picks up the object. With biofeedback the popular or significant artefact or building could glow according to its popularity or impact on previous players. As for artefacts that are used for rituals, perhaps they could only be employed effectively when external conditions are more peaceful (less active), and the hero's speed and gaze direction is slow and consistent.

4.3 Social Role Playing Mimicry

I have outlined in another paper this idea (and there I called it a reverse Turing test (Champion 2005)). I mention it here as it has specific significance for CRPGs even though it would require elaborate spatial awareness, hero expressivity and natural language processing. Essentially the idea is to convey cultural knowledge is through an impostor-style game where the hero has to adopt, steal or change (via a spell) their appearance and try to infiltrate a local community through effectively imitating certain professions, races or individuals. Unfortunately, *Oblivion* currently does not clearly and consistently distinguish between NPCs in terms of race, locality, profession or voice, and it would require more spatial awareness to allow for a rich role-playing experience.

4.4 Multi-player Staggered Quests

Oblivion is not multi-player (Bethesda Softworks 2006), and the company has stated it will remain that way (Onyett 2006) but there is a community mod currently allowing two players (and in future up to eight players) to visit the same game world

(Atomic Staff Writers 2006; Paulsen 2006). If *Oblivion* could successfully handle multi-player (and the Gambryo game engine itself can), perhaps there could be added staggered quests to increase the sense of a lived-in world with characters that have full social agency. Fans of the game have designed voluntary role-playing activities, so there does appear to be interest in more social role-playing (Agnew 1999). This may take the burden of believability off the polygonal shoulders of the NPCs. Currently NPCs are NQCs (non-questing characters), which means they become far too predictable.

With a quest that is too difficult for one player on a certain level, the quest could allow for the player to wait until another player appears and helps them solve it, or they have to wait until another player solves a related quest before they can complete theirs. Or, depending on their race and profession, players could meet other players on different quests. If a player finds someone else has solved a quest such as stealing a magical stone, perhaps their own quest could then change to bringing back the magical stone.

Currently the single player travels through the game world, solves quests, perhaps buys houses and fills them with acquired weapons, clothing, books and artefacts, but that is the limit of inhabitation. If there were multiple players entering the game world at different times, and engaging in different quests, they could decide to settle in a town, learn a local role and slowly try to fit into the local AI-directed culture. When these 'settled' players discover human-directed characters they could decide to enrich or divert their world-knowledge, or play an elaborate game of confusing them as to whether they are an NPC or not.

4.5 Learning Tools

Using *Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, a group of students created an archaeological learning tool: the player develops Egyptian god-like powers through exploring and decoding Egyptian hieroglyphs while avoiding the rather grumpy skeletons (Figure 12). The construction set that is included with *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* allows for even more powerful and accessible modding and scripting.



Figure 12: Egyptian Archaeology using *Morrowind*

However, to create genuine cultural worlds, such games need to afford the sensation that the NPCs are inscribing the game world with their social agency, or their social beliefs are made material, or players need to be able to express their socially held beliefs in the game world in a way that is remembered and interpretable.

5. POTENTIAL CRITICISMS

It could be objected that the cultural is but an aspect of the social and hence it is not significant to highlight differences. However, in virtual heritage environments the lack of cultural presence despite obvious social presence, suggests to me that the same issue could affect a rich and deep experience of thematic 'world' as it is experienced through role-playing in a CRPG. The experience that one is not alone does not logically necessitate that one has the sense of being in a distinct and invigorating culture.

When these 'settled' players discover human-directed characters they could decide to enrich or divert their world-knowledge, or play an elaborate game of confusing them as to whether they are an NPC or not.

Secondly, perhaps using *Oblivion* as a case study is mistaken, after all, it is not multi-player. Yet this is what makes its shortcomings and opportunities so interesting. I suggest that even though it is a single player game, turning it into a multiplayer game does not automatically answer the issues I raised. Yet some features of *Oblivion* could be easily adopted to help create a sense of 'role' and 'world' as they relate to not just to social identity but also to cultural emergence, while other features are still to be explored, and it is worthwhile to do so. So I am not attempting to review a game, I aim to develop a theory that can be tested against commercial CRPGs and *Oblivion* has enough traits of the genre and enough sheer size and scale to act as a test scenario.

That said, I agree that the issue of how a computer can take the place of a human judge is truly difficult (so much of role-play in the real world requires another social agent of human intelligence as judge and co-actor). Yet exploring how a computer program (or in this case, game), can act as a social judge is still a bona fide research question (Tychsen et al. 2005). For such an investigation may also illuminate how human actors perform and judge social roles, and which aspects can be simulated or are inimical.

Thirdly, one may object that the above theory is not relevant to commercial game developers. Yet if I am correct to suggest there is a paucity of CRPGs that allow genuine curatorial role-playing, and if curatorial role-play encourages players to remain in the virtual world, surely this is of great benefit to commercial interests? This aspect of role-play may also help improve game-play and user testing through the player actively developing and enriching both the features and the challenges of sustaining and establishing social roles.

I also have a second audience in mind, those interested in using games and game editors to immerse and educate students and the public in virtual learning environments (Figure 13). A single player game has some advantages here, for example, it does not need to worry about students or unwanted visitors distracting other students from authentic situated learning. Secondly it is easier to design, distribute and maintain in relation to specific learning outcomes. *Oblivion* has a great deal of potential in this regard (Greeff and Lalioti 2001), especially compared to other commercial games that feature editors. It is relatively straightforward to import 3D assets, and to script events, and has a built in terrain and weather system.

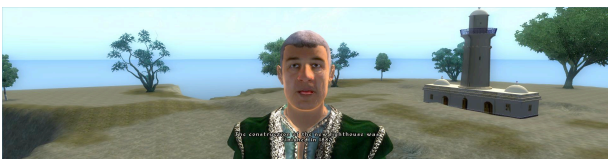


Figure 13: Macquarie Lighthouse Heritage Project

6. CONCLUSION

I have suggested three components of role-play that need to be incorporated into a rich role-playing game, and three aspects of virtual worlds that may help enhance role-playing. I also suggested three dimensions of presence that all help virtual worlds afford a sense of role-play. With environmental presence the individual affects and is affected by the outside world. If there is social

presence we affect others in a virtual world. If there is cultural presence we should be able to detect a distinctly situated sense of inhabitation, of social values and behaviours preserved and transmitted through ritual, artefact, and inscription.

I also noted that social presence does not necessarily require multiple players (although single-player social presence is definitely much more difficult), and that cultural presence does not have to be alive (active). One thing that is required is hermeneutic richness, the depth of interpretation available to understanding oneself or others through artefacts and other cultural remains.

What of *Oblivion*? Even though it is a single player game, several key features allow *Oblivion* to be considered as a social world. Despite these promising features, *Oblivion* fails as a rich cultural world. Roles are designed for game-balance, and act more as initial affordances and concrete templates than as social profiles that allow and record differences between social expectations and individual behaviour. In other words, while certain performances can lead to expulsion from guilds, there is little if any curatorial responsibility, roles are really attribute parameters, they are not made, they are followed and maximised.

One may argue the above limitations are the inevitable consequences of single-player computer games. I do however believe that *Oblivion* (and CRPGs in general) could be further improved as a social world and perhaps even as a cultural world. The suggestions included enhancing the sense of embodiment, incorporating differences between active and reactive player and hero behaviour (perhaps through biofeedback), creating dynamic cognitive artefacts, allowing for social role mimicry, and (if multiplayer), staggered questing. It is my hope that the issues I raised will help designers understand how cultural presence is much more difficult to attain than social presence, but that it is a valuable pursuit. Also, if these issues can be remedied, CRPGs (and their in-game editors) can be employed more effectively as a learning tool for educators in history, heritage, and cultural studies.

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Seeking Fulfillment: Comparing Role-Play In Table-top Gaming and World of Warcraft

Popular Abstract - In the midst of the massive growth in the numbers of people participating in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), study of the role-playing within these games is increasingly marginalized, as role-playing servers are developed to segregate player bases and as scholars increasingly focus on the non-role-playing aspects of online game play. We seek to address that disconnection by studying relative levels of fulfillment and frequency of tabletop and online role-playing for *World of Warcraft* (WoW) subscribers.

Finally, demographic information taken from the players themselves aids in guiding future research about which type of role-play gamers are more likely to participate in and find fulfilling. By looking at the age, location, and gender of players the relative merits of each type of role-playing is discussed, pointing to strategies to capitalize on the strengths and minimize the failings of each venue for role-playing. This study aids both the online and offline gaming industry in better understanding their target role-playing audiences, while providing a grounded study of avid role-players to support

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ABSTRACT

Through ethnographic research and a survey of *World of Warcraft* (WoW) players, this study assesses the relative fulfillment and frequency of online and offline role-playing for WoW players. Although players were divided on the issue of fulfillment, they overwhelmingly engaged in role-playing online more often because of the logistical complications of offline role-playing. Ultimately, we found that role-players' preferences for on or offline play were driven by a preference for the open-ended design of tabletop role-playing and a desire to meet a critical mass of role-players online at their own convenience.

1. INTRODUCTION

After swilling down a few beers at Bruuk's, Gordrum straightens his uniform and prepares to form up with the rest of his regiment. Moments later, he's marching in file out of Ironforge shouting his company's battle cry: "Do or Die! Axes High! Mithril Shield HUIZZAH!" Gordrum swells with pride as he marches stoutly past

the numerous onlookers greatly admiring their formation. Then, just after reaching the city limits of his race's greatest city, Gordrum and the rest of his regiment break ranks and double-time en masse toward the airfield to the north. As Gordrum calls his trusty bear companion to his side, he thinks of his comrades-in-arms. The bear's fierce loyalty to him is not unlike his own devotion toward to his unit – the Ironforge Regiment. They train and fight alongside one another in order to rid the land of the loathsome Horde. As Gordrum's legs begin to tire from miles of the tedious and relentless motion, he pushes himself onward remembering two things. First, he recalls his sworn promise to his Dwarven King, that he would not stop fighting until he has seen either the Horde's destruction or, light forbid, the end of his days amidst this war-torn world – whichever comes first. The other thing that surfaces in Gordrum's mind is that, after the Ironforge Regiment conducts their scheduled drill at the airfield, Gordrum is in line for a promotion. Life is good.

Throughout history, people have played games that transport them to different worlds. Today, we

play games in new and evolving ways. We continually discover new ways to connect, communicate, interact, and play games with one another via technology like the internet. According to Internet World Statistics (Anonymous 2007), there are currently over 212 million internet users in the United States. At the turn of the millennium, 8% of all non-adolescent Americans claimed that they played games, and by 2003 that number rose to 37% and rises to this day (Williams et al. 2006). Although this research was conducted nearly three years ago, the numbers speak for themselves. The fact is simple; more than a third of the U.S. population communicates online.

We approach this subject because we are, in fact, two of the growing percentage of people who play online video games. The above account is a narrative retelling of one of Jason's experiences playing as his character, Gordrum, within the online game, *World of Warcraft* (WoW). This tale is one of many accrued in our experiences from playing role-playing games (RPGs¹) and is representative of a sub-group of WoW players, those who actively role-play their character experiences while playing WoW. As technology has progressed, role-players are no longer limited to offline role-playing and are now faced with multiple potential outlets for game play, as online RPGs offer a viable competitor to offline role-playing experiences. The changing context of gaming, and the increasing focus on analyzing synthetic worlds, led us to analyze how developments in online gaming change the context of role-playing.

1.1 The Social Benefits of Online Gaming

Many communication scholars believe we should study video games. Dmitri Williams (Williams 2006) states, "We should study games now because these networked social games are a wholly new form of community, social interaction, and social phenomenon." Some prior scholarly discussions of technological and online communication from scholars like Ray Oldenburg (Oldenburg 1989) and Robert Putnam (Putnam 2000) claim that technology has corrupted social institutions and destroyed social interaction entirely. However, communication scholars like Constance Steinkuehler and Dmitri Williams (Steinkuehler and Williams 2006) claim that such previous social research incorrectly views contemporary media as "a root cause for the decline of civic and social life

in the United States rather than a mechanism for its maintenance (if not restoration)."

Through computer-mediated communication we are capable of communicating with one another like never before. Now, we are able to communicate by instantaneously leaping around the world (Murray 1997). This technology, allowing instantaneous communication over thousands of miles, changes the ways in which people connect with one another socially. Social spaces are being moved online because it is exponentially quicker and easier for people to find and communicate among a particular niche of society when they are online. The previous bars, bowling alleys, and clubs that Oldenburg (Oldenburg 1989) refers to as "third places" are now available via the internet. Role-players are no longer limited to a table-top game with friends, as they may pursue a similar group through any number of online outlets. As Steinkuehler and Williams note, our social spaces are not lost; they have moved online and are mediated by computers (Steinkuehler and Williams 2006).

Some prior scholarly discussions of technological and online communication from scholars claim that technology has corrupted social institutions and destroyed social interaction entirely. However, Through computer-mediated communication we are capable of communicating with one another like never before.

By connecting over the internet we are provided the opportunity to bond to others with similar interests and values, without the limitation of geographic proximity. This allows us to build new cyber-worlds that, in turn, harvest countless online communities that substitute for our former "third places." Gurak (Gurak 2003) states, "As in all communities, participants... [are] linked by... common values, yet in the virtual world, these links... [are] not limited by physical distance or time." The internet has, in fact, increased our capacity to connect with others like ourselves. This new ability not only fosters new social connections, but also strengthens previously existing ones. Similarly, Sherry Turkle (Turkle 1995) claims, "We

¹A role-playing game is defined by www.dictionary.com as: "a game in which participants adopt the roles of imaginary characters in an adventure under the direction of a Game Master." This is perhaps one of many similar definitions of role-playing available.

join virtual communities that exist only among people communicating on computer networks as well as communities in which we are physically present." Overall, the internet has greatly increased the number of virtual communities that function like offline social institutions.

Role-play is also fostered by the anonymity that typifies most online communication. Gurak (Gurak 2003) claims, "The power of the computer to mask identity, gender, and other features has been discussed since the early days of computing." Because we are able to reinvent our personalities, interests, gender, and countless other aspects of ourselves online, there are role-playing possibilities online that simply are not matched by table-top role-play. Turkle (Turkle 1995) observes the power of anonymity in MUDs² claiming, "As players participate, they become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction."

As people roam through virtual communities they create versions of themselves that can become as real as their own lives. This is role-playing; the creation of a character that inhabits a world separate from its creator. What many people accomplish with an anonymous blog, a clever email pseudonym, or a unique online nickname is nearly identical to what role-players achieve when they create and play a character. As the online personality one can create may be very similar to the creator, it not surprising that the lines between the person and the character can occasionally blur. Turkle comments on role-playing via MUDs,

"When people can play at having different genders and different lives, it isn't surprising that for some this play has become as real as what we conventionally think of as their lives, although for them this is no longer a valid distinction." (Turkle 1995)

This is not to say that role-players are crazy, unless they are as insane as the person who employs hides his/her real life identity when posting a public online journal. Anonymity encourages interactivity in the online space by allowing people a significant amount of privacy, access, and presence (Gurak 2003), which for role-play means an unparalleled level of immersion into a "game."

1.2 The Importance of WoW

Online role-playing dates back to the 1970s and the original MUD, but the development of massive multiplayer online games (MMOs) has redefined online gaming. With increasingly immersive graphics, persistent worlds and player bases – ranging from the hundreds to the millions – role-players have living, graphically rich worlds they can choose as settings for their role-play. Currently, the most popular MMO is Blizzard's *World of Warcraft* (WoW).³ In fact, according to Blizzard (Blizzard 2007), in July of 2007 WoW set a new benchmark for an MMO player base with over nine million subscribers. The sheer number of players interacting and communicating in one game sparks interest in many scholars. Many of these scholars (Krzywinska 2006; Mortensen 2006; Taylor 2006; Williams 2006; etc.) argue that studying WoW is one of the best ways to obtain both a working knowledge of the social structure within online communities and a better understanding of game studies as a whole.

1.3 The Purpose of Role-Play

Two scholars delve deeply into the study and purpose of role-play – specifically the table-top genre. First, Fine believes that, when role-playing, people actually become the characters they create through the acceptance of rules and envelopment of self into the created character (Fine 1983). Fine states that people tend to blur the line between self and created self. Second, Dormans (Dormans 2006) claims,

"Like all games they [RPGs] consist of rules that operate within virtual game worlds. One has to learn these rules to be able to play the game ... as many rulebooks stress, there are no winners and losers in a roleplaying [sic] game. Neither is there a fixed goal."

Role-playing games seem to depend more on "playing" than on "gaming." According to Dormans, the purpose of role-play is not to achieve some sort of win condition, but instead to simply interact with others in the same virtual world. If Dormans is correct, then it is the interaction among players and their characters that becomes the most important aspect of role-play.

²A MUD is a Multi-User Dungeon or Multi-User Domain. MUDs are considered the first multiplayer online role-playing games. For more information see chapters one and two of Turkle (Turkle 1995).

³Blizzard Entertainment, founded in 1991, is a division of Vivendi Games and headquartered in Irvine, CA. Blizzard released its first Warcraft game "Warcraft: Orcs and Humans" in 1994. Since then, the company has released numerous other titles including multiple games continuing the Warcraft mythos. Blizzard launched WoW in 2004 and its expansion "The Burning Crusade" in 2007. Currently WoW has more than nine million subscribers. For more information see the company's profile: <http://www.blizzard.com/inblizz/profile.shtml>

Coupling this idea with Fine's allows an interesting connection. Many people simply like pretending to be someone else. This particular idea is traceable through the later MUDs and into modern role-play occurring in games like WoW. If the views of Fine (Fine 1983) and Dormans (Dormans 2006) on role-play fall in line with the concepts that Turkle (Turkle 1995) and Gurak (Gurak 2003) apply to online communication then the overlap between the two suggests that computer-mediated communication, in many ways, facilitates role-playing. Role-play depends on interaction and anonymity – at least while a player is acting the role of character – two aspects inherent to online communication according to Gurak (Gurak 2003). Likewise, the speed and reach (Gurak 2003) of computer-mediated communication via the internet facilitates social interactions like role-playing by providing players easier ways to assemble.

1.4 The Differences Between WoW and Table-Top Role-Play

The study of online gaming – particularly in WoW – is a worthwhile endeavor. One understudied aspect of WoW (Williams et al. 2006) is the characteristic of role-play most prevalent on role-play servers.⁴ The concept of role-play, that games like WoW have adopted, is not new, but the practices of role-playing are distinct enough from general online gaming practices to warrant study in their own right. As Markus Montola argues, "role-playing can be perceived as a game playing motivated with narrative desires, focused on creating imaginary worlds and based on making decisions on how personified characters act in imaginary situations" (Montola 2005). Not only did role-play exist online in the days of the MUDs, but it also thrived in basements and around dining room tables all across America through the distribution of role-playing materials from companies like TSR.⁵ Since the mid-1970s there have been table-top or pen and paper role-playing games that gave birth to the genre itself. These games facilitate role-play among players much like their online descendents, but in the case of these original games interaction among players occurred face-to-face. WoW, on the other hand, provides

role-play in a fundamentally different way because the communication is mediated by a computer.

As the motives of role-players are generally different than the rest of the gaming population, role-playing within WoW is subject to limitations that are not present in offline role-playing. Montola argues that there are several factors that impact role-playing within an online game, including the persistence of online worlds, the lore surrounding the online game, and need to disregard "unsuitable game elements," which are often the actions of other players (Montola 2005). As WoW is a game played by millions of other players, role-players must adapt their role-playing to an existing, limited computer program, certain aspects of offline role-playing are undercut, most notably the role of the game master, or GM.

In table-top role-play, the fictitious world within which players interact exists solely in the players' imaginations. This imaginary world is first created and arbitrated by one of the players who does not play, but instead controls the game play. This particular player is known as the GM. The GM typically follows a set of rules laid out in a predetermined role-playing game book. In WoW role-play, the players and the world are not only presented visually via a computer screen, but the actions and physics of both are also controlled by the game's programming. In the case of a game like WoW, programming enacts many of the roles of the table-top GM and mediates almost all in-game interactions. One underlying difference between the two mediums is that, in table-top role-play, the fictional world is continually co-created by interactions between the players and the GM. This leaves room for the human imagination to fundamentally alter the fictional universe in any number of ways. One example might be a GM overlooking a rule in the game's rulebook in favor of a better role-play experience. A table-top GM can also introduce and develop new characters or fundamentally redefine the world in which players are role-playing. However, in WoW role-play, the decisions of the players and the very world itself is cemented within the programming that Blizzard has created (Mortensen 2006). In a computer game

⁴ There are four types of servers within WoW: Player versus Environment (PvE), Player versus Player (PvP), and Role-Play (RP), Role-Play Player versus Player (RP-PvP). PvE concentrates on combat between the players and the world within WoW. PvP centers on player versus player combat. RP focuses on role-play within WoW while pitting the players versus the world in WoW. RP-PvP concentrates on role-play within WoW while simultaneously placing the focus on player versus player combat. My guild, the Ironforge Regiment, was on a RP-PvP server.

⁵ Tactical Studies Rules (TSR) was originally formed in 1973 by Gary Gygax and Don Kaye. The company was the first to publish the popular Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) RPG. After going through many changes over the years involving names, logos, and partners, the company was finally bought out by Wizards of the Coast (WotC) in 1997. Currently WotC publishes the - still popular - D&D and other RPGs.

like WoW, the fictitious world and all it contains is limited to the game's programming, whereas the contents of world in a table-top game is limited only to the players' imaginations. This is not to say that Azeroth does not change; in fact, the programmers at Blizzard continually add updates to the game. But these updates do not foster role-play the same way a human GM can look at his players and make a game-altering decision.⁶

Although WoW and other games have retained the title of GM for their game masters, the role of GMs in an online game is typically far different from table-top GMs. Instead of dynamically creating and adapting the world to players, online gaming GMs are far more likely to facilitate answers to basic questions and remedy minor problems (Blizzard 2008). To this end, Blizzard's GM position is advertised as "customer service," rather than as a position in game design (Blizzard Entertainment 2008). In other games, like

Players can certainly create events and dynamic content within online games, but, unlike table-top, they are subject to strictures inherent to a computer program-as-GM paradigm.

EverQuest and A Tale in the Desert, GMs are often players who have been given the title "GM" to either help out new players or solve minor in-game issues (ATITD Wiki 2008). Players can certainly create events and dynamic content within online games, but, unlike table-top, they are subject to strictures inherent to a computer program-as-GM paradigm. Specifically because of the programming of WoW, a dwarf cannot role-play deserting the Alliance to become a member of the Horde, a troll would find it quite difficult turn his back on the orcs of Ogrimmar, and players cannot even change their hair cut or other core elements of their appearance. Automating the role of the GM certainly decreases the number of people needed to administrate an MMORPG, but it does so at a cost to the narrative freedom within which role-playing storylines can be developed.

With the ability to build communities online, the immersion provided by graphics, and other aspects of online communication combined with the

increasing number of people colonizing synthetic worlds (Castronova 2006), role-players are offered a choice: do they play online, offline, or both? In order to evaluate this choice, this case study will look (primarily) at two things: which type of role-play players find more fulfilling and which type of role-play players participate in more often. Answering these two questions will provide a better understanding of how this subgroup of players goes about their role-playing and traits of those who favor each type of role-playing.

2. METHOD

2.1 Participants

Role-players that participate in both role-playing within WoW and table-top were the target participants for this study. We combined qualitative and quantitative research methods by coupling autoethnography and survey data. The autoethnography was designed to add depth to the research, while the survey work offered a more representative sample of the role-playing population of WoW and point to areas where our autoethnographic observations could be generalized. Our survey sample size is small, but conforms to our autoethnographic results. Despite the small sample, our survey, in combination with our autoethnography, demonstrates clear findings about the differences between table-top and online role-playing. Although both members of the research team have logged hundreds of hours playing WoW, the autoethnographic observations in this essay are from Jason's experiences playing as Gordrum, a member of the Ironforge Regiment.

2.2 Measures and Procedure

2.2.1 Autoethnography

Ellis and Bochner (Ellis and Bochner 2000) claim, "Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural." Additionally, one goal of autoethnography "is to use your life experience to generalize to a larger group or culture" (Ellis and Bochner 2000). If our goal is to compare the level of fulfillment gamers receive by role-playing through WoW versus their experiences within offline table-top role-playing, then using our own experiences

⁶ A human GM, for example, could look at his players and decide based on the group's interactions, whether or not to alter an encounter. As a GM, one can lengthen or shorten a combat scenario in order to draw out or appease the group. Jason, as a GM, has often given an enemy that the players are fighting more hit points (making the enemy live longer in the encounter) and causing the players to worry more for their survival. At the same time, as table-top GM can instantly kill an enemy in order to satisfy a players frustration with rolling poorly. A computer program cannot adapt to its players this quickly and thus cannot provide the same sort of game for its players as a human GM can.

would be a crucial part of understanding and interpreting the overall results of the research project. We feel that our table-top role-playing experience more than qualifies our use of autoethnography. Jason has table-top role-played for over six years and is currently one of only seven RPGA⁷ approved GMs in Huntsville; Christopher has more limited table-top role-playing experience, but has played WoW since its launch and has previous experience in other online role-playing games. Autoethnography is a solid fit for research in role-playing, as both authors are active members of an understudied online group. This type of study offers a depth of research that shares details about an understudied community to better understand it. We also believe that autoethnography is a sound option for online gaming research, as the belief that researchers should play the game they study is being adopted by other online game researchers (Williams and Skoric 2005). Much like Nick Yee's (Yee 2006) analysis seeks to counterbalance qualitative research with quantitative survey analysis, we feel that autoethnography balances survey results with deep, detailed experiences to help better understand online gaming in general and role-playing in particular. Ultimately, autoethnography leverages a depth of research and detail in analysis to understand the complicated narrative practices and behaviors of role-players in WoW.

2.2.2 Survey

In addition to autoethnography, we employed the use of a survey to collect a snowball sample. As in previous research done within WoW (Williams et al. 2006), survey results provide breadth to support analysis of game dynamics. Building from Nick Yee's quantitative analysis of "the myriad motivations of play among MMO players," and "exploration of how these motivational factors can provide us with analytical tools to describe and understand the preference for and effects of game-

play for different kinds of players," we sought to better generalize our experiences on why a person would prefer one type of role-playing over another via surveys of WoW players (Yee 2006). In order to obtain survey results on something like role-playing we compiled a number of questions concerning how people identify themselves and find fulfillment as role-players in WoW and in table-top role-playing games. Our survey included questions involving basic demographic information and general familiarity with online and offline gaming, role-playing, and WoW. However, we also included two open-ended questions: Which type of role-play do you find more fulfilling and which have you participated in more often in the last month?

Jason distributed the survey by posting it on the twenty-two WoW role-playing realm forums. The plan was to allow anyone checking the forums to complete the survey and email it to the address given. The reason the WoW role-playing realm forums were chosen was that the people most likely to check these forums would be the specific participants we were looking for. After posting the survey and waiting for initial responses, we reposted the survey on the Blizzard forums and were suspended by Blizzard, which entails a temporary ban from posting and a deletion of all threads that we started, resulting in substantial loss of data.⁸ After being suspended from the Blizzard forums for spamming, we decided that the next best way to receive more participants would be to post the survey on the forums of WoW role-playing guilds. This time, the survey was posted without fear of being banned, and we received the bulk of our usable responses.

⁷ The Role Playing Gamers Association (RPGA) is a free organization owned and operated by Wizards of the Coast (WotC). The group is dedicated to providing organized play opportunities and support for D&D and other WotC RPGs. For more information, see the official RPGA website at: <http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=rpga/welcome>

⁸ Unfortunately, Blizzard Entertainment was no help whatsoever in our endeavor to get more respondents. In fact, when Jason reposted the survey on the role-playing forums to (hopefully) achieve more participants he was banned by the Blizzard forum moderators for spamming. This meant that the original posts were stricken from the forums and he was not allowed to post anything again for thirty-six hours, plus all of the threads he had started were deleted. After receiving notification of this, he appealed our cause by sending them a letter asking that our survey be allowed to be reposted and remain for the sake of research. Unfortunately, we never received a response and this experience only confirmed what previous research indicates (Williams et al. 2006) – that Blizzard does not aid in the research of WoW. Blizzard, and other game publishers, could fundamentally change the face of research about online gaming if they would only aid in such endeavors. Game publishers have access to fantastic tools for research and, should they open up more data and access to scholars, we would likely all benefit from those research findings.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Autoethnography⁹

Jason researched guild websites and scoured the WoW forums until he stumbled upon a guild that not only suited our role-playing interests, but that also went above and beyond the call of average role-playing. This guild, the Ironforge Regiment, attracted our attention by identifying themselves through a player created system on the WoW role-playing forums. This system involves a forum thread where role-playing guilds are asked to post their level of interest and involvement by rating three aspects of WoW game play as either low, moderate, or heavy: role-playing (RP), player versus player combat (PvP), and player versus environmental combat (PvE). In the case of the guild we chose, these ratings were: "heavy RP, heavy PvP, and moderate PvE." This ranking system told us that the Ironforge Regiment was more interested in role-playing and player-versus-player combat than in any other aspects of WoW. These rankings also meant that this guild focused more on inter-player interactions than on leveling.

However, as important as the above information was in factoring into our decision, we choose this particular guild because of a few additional features they included into their guild's role-playing experience. First, the Regiment required a character to be both a dwarf and at least tenth level before they could even request to join. These standards are not unlike some standards that other guilds – no matter the server – might require and are a strong example of how WoW role-players craft narrative space within the bounds of the computer program. However, Ironforge Regiment took things a bit further by requiring all communication within the game – with only a few exceptions – to be in character. This meant that, as a member of this guild, Jason's character had to speak and act like dwarf whenever he played WoW. In broader terms, Ironforge Regiment demanded a level of constant role-play from their members. Having little online role-playing experience prior to this, it is clear to me that Williams et al. (Williams et al. 2006) are not kidding when they state, "[it is] abundantly clear ... that people on RP servers are playing another game entirely." There was, and still is, no doubt in our mind that these online gamers take their role-playing very seriously.

However, this behavior is not very different from offline role-players. In our experiences with table-top role-play, a player must make it abundantly clear to the GM when s/he is speaking in or out of character. Often, in our experience, a table-top role-player has some sort of unique accent or diction exclusive to the character, thus allowing a clear distinction between types of communication. In the Ironforge Regiment, Jason's character Gordrum had to speak like a dwarf. This caused him to have to type the phonetic equivalent of dwarven English, which involved misspelling and incorrect grammar. He discovered that quick and effective online communication in dwarven English is extremely difficult until it becomes a learned behavior. He had to practice this aspect of online role-play in order to successfully participate as a member of the guild. As unusual as communicating in online dwarven English may seem it is fundamentally the same as a table-top gamer speaking to his fellow players with dwarven diction while using a dwarven accent. The fact that the members of Ironforge Regiment enforce the use of dwarven English in their online role-play

The fact that the members of Ironforge Regiment enforce the use of dwarven English in their online role-play demonstrates their devotion to a specific feature of table-top role-play that is otherwise absent in WoW.

demonstrates their devotion to a specific feature of table-top role-play that is otherwise absent in WoW. This example depicts how players seek fulfillment through online role-play in ways previously exclusive to table-top settings.

Jason had two particular experiences within the guild that both represent the intense level of role-playing that takes place within WoW while shedding some light on how role-players within WoW find online role-play fulfilling. The first is the interview he had to participate in to gain entrance into the guild. After meeting the guild's level and race requirements, he tracked down a member of the guild asking how Gordrum could join. It was not until then that he received an invitation to participate in an interview. According to the guild members he spoke with, after this interview – if Gordrum passed – he would gain official entry into the guild. As it turns out, the

⁹Jason's experiences with the Ironforge Regiment were documented through a combination of note-taking and screen captures. For the purposes of our analysis, material within quotation marks are direct quotes substantiated in screen captures and all other material are retellings of Gordrum's experiences in WoW from notes.

purpose of this interview process was to weed through applicants by discovering their role-playing ability and their motives for wanting to join. The personnel officer, Irontoe, told Jason later, after he was accepted, that the guild had instituted the interview as a way to prevent issues they had had in the past. The two primary concerns for the guild were excluding poor role-players and spies from the opposing faction who attempt to track the guild's movements and gain an advantage in PvP. Interviewing became a means by which Ironforge Regiment sought to protect their role-playing environment, likely increasing the fulfillment they received from WoW-based role-play.

The interview was short and focused primarily on Gordrum's motives. The interview process allowed Irontoe to gain some insight into Jason's motivations as a player and his ability to role-play: the two primary concerns of the guild. By concentrating the interview on Gordrum, the interviewer quickly deciphered Jason's online role-playing ability. Irontoe began by asking Gordrum to meet him at Bruuk's, a bar in the military ward of Ironforge – the dwarven capital city. Upon arrival, Irontoe began asking me why Gordrum wanted to join. Having accurately predicted this question Jason responded with a quick fictional background concerning Gordrum's considerably lonely life without his recently deceased wife. But, before he could break the surface of my tale and begin detailing Gordrum's new-found desire to join the war against the Horde, Irontoe began grilling Gordrum on the history of the dwarves in Azeroth¹⁰. Not being prepared for such unique questions only caused me to type frantically and misspell the words he was already trying to misspell in an attempt to sound like a dwarf through a keyboard. Irontoe then became impatient and jumped on the table and began shouting and calling Gordrum a spy. However, at the same time, the player behind Irontoe sent me a private message asking Jason if everything was okay. Jason responded that it was, but that he was slow at typing dwarven-speak. So, as Irontoe continued shouting at Gordrum, Irontoe's player encouraged Jason, as a player, to continue trying to role-play under pressure. The way in which the interview and the interactions as a whole took place allowed Irontoe's player to better evaluate

my performance with respect to the two foci of the guild: the motivations and role-play ability of applicants.

Jason's second cornerstone experience with Ironforge Regiment was a guild-specific role-play event in which Gordrum participated. The Regiment organizes a "formation and drill" on a semi-regular basis. The purpose of these events is to retain and reward a standard of discipline among the guild members. In order to take part in this event each character had to be "in uniform." In other words, players have to track down a number of specific clothing items that comprised the guild's uniform. The Regiment met at Bruuk's at a designated time. After carousing and drinking in character for a few minutes, members formed up into a straight line and marched out of the city. Along the way, players were instructed to shout company-specific battle cries. Each member of the guild, including recruits, was assigned to one of four companies that had different, individual leaders who provided a level of role-play beyond the average WoW experience. This again demonstrates how online players seek fulfillment by adding elements of table-top role-play to WoW that are not part of the game's original design.

After reaching the city limits we broke formation, ran to another location, and had a player created tournament involving steam tonks¹¹ that Irontoe handed out. In order to be fully utilized, these tonks require at least one other player simultaneously controlling a tonk in the same area. By having a tournament built on character interaction within the game, we helped amplify the level of role-play we, as players, experienced within WoW. Finally, as the steam tonk tournament wrapped up, we lined up in a horizontal line and prepared for a promotion ceremony. Then, one by one, Irontoe – the official personnel officer – came by and recognized each of us as good guild members and, in turn, promoted those who were deserving of rank. Gordrum was promoted from recruit to private because he met the necessary standards: Gordrum was wearing the prescribed uniform, Jason knew the platoon's battle cry, and Gordrum had now completed an official guild drill. All the while, Jason, as Gordrum's player, had not forsaken any of the role-play standards (e.g. speaking or acting out of

¹⁰ Azeroth is the fictional world that Blizzard created where the events in the Warcraft saga have taken place. Essentially, it is the world of *Warcraft*.

¹¹ Steam tonks are a type of player created item built into WoW. They function much like a remote control tank would in real life. They are a fascinating study though because one tonk is worthless without another for it to interact with, forcing social interaction. Additionally, the tonks, when in number, act as a game inside a game – just another interesting aspect of WoW.

character) that Ironforge Regiment had in place. Overall, Jason found it to be quite a fulfilling experience to be a part of a group that independently created a number of ways in which role-playing traditions could be integrated into WoW, making online space more like the table-top spaces that Jason was more familiar with prior to this study.

3.2 Survey¹²

There are three key areas to consider in a review of our data: fulfillment from each kind of role-playing, frequency of each kind of role-playing, and demographic characteristics of the people role-playing.

When asked which form of role-playing people found more fulfilling, either table-top role-playing or role-playing within WoW, the results were split evenly. A third of the respondents choose table-top role-playing, largely because of character interaction. These gamers felt that their characters and their character's actions significantly affected the in-game world more than the world within WoW. According to these respondents, a live person acting as the GM can better react to the spontaneous and often unpredictable actions of the players. One respondent claims, "They [table-top sessions] feel more social and feel more like a cooperative, interactive story." Another feels that WoW impedes his imagination, "I like to have most of my role-play [sic] left up to the imagination, which is often hard in the game of *World of Warcraft*." For the most part, the responses concerning table-top role-playing can be summed up with this respondent's statement: "It varies from session to session and arc to arc. For the most part I honestly prefer tabletop RPGs because there's far more freedom of creativity, it's easier to express actions, I'm more involved in the actual mechanics, and the settings are dynamic."

However, the third that chose role-playing within WoW as being more fulfilling did so mostly because of the visual elements in the game. Many participants referenced how much more engaging the role-playing felt when they could see their character interact within WoW. One respondent claims, "I find it easier and more enjoyable to type out your character's actions and words." Another

claims, "It's good to sit around a table with a few friends and share some fun and snacks, but RP in a virtual environment [sic] can be done at any time and can be more immersive." Overall, the quote from the next respondent bluntly sums up a number of the other responses, "Computer RP for convenience and the obvious visual representation for when my imagination is lazy." Respondents also chose WoW because of the ease of game play. In online role-play, there is no need for one player to run the entire world, instead all the players can play, but at the cost of the game acting as the GM. A final reason to prefer WoW was articulated by a shy respondent, who wrote

Role playing within Wow [is more fulfilling], because my character actually looks like itself, can interact with other characters in a more immersive way, and since I am shy I find the distance a computer interface puts between me and the other person removes some of my inhibitions to speaking or acting.

Beyond the visual advantages of WoW, the ability to refrain from exposing yourself in real life is a clear advantage some role-players realize through playing games online.

The final third of our survey contended that they found both kinds of role-play equally fulfilling, frequently pointing out how they saw benefits in both the convenience of WoW and in the immersiveness of a world that they co-create with their friends around a table.

Looking more closely at the kinds of people who find specific kinds of role-play more fulfilling, two trends stood out. First, location had a strong correlation with fulfillment, as shown in the table below.

Table 1. Location and Role-Playing Fulfillment

	WoW	TT	Both
Rural	100%	0%	0%
Suburban	40%	60%	0%
Urban	10%	30%	60%

Rural residents exclusively preferred WoW, likely because of the difficulty of getting a table-top

¹² There were a total of 27 respondents. However, for the purposes of the tables involving fulfillment: we threw out eight responses due to their lack of table-top gaming experience and one for an insufficient response to the question. Similarly, for the tables involving frequency, we threw out the same eight responses for reasons of no table-top experience. However, we left the one other response because although the respondent did not sufficiently answer the fulfillment question, the participant both adequately answered the frequency question and had table-top experience. Finally, for the gender table we threw out one additional response due to a lack of a gender designation from the respondent.

group together offline. In this vein, WoW may offer those who could not role-play offline a venue within which to congregate with likeminded people. Counter to the claims of those who decry online spaces as detracting from offline interactions, rural residents are able to construct common social spaces online that are not available to them offline. The second trend had to do with age.

Table 2. Age and Role-Playing Fulfillment

	WoW	TT	Both
> 20	50%	25%	25%
21-25	17%	50%	33%
26 <	37.50%	25%	37.50%

In this case, WoW seems to be the preferred outlet for the young, while table-top is preferred by late-college age people. This may have something to do with younger people's lack of exposure to table-top role-playing, more young surveys had to be thrown out because of a lack of table-top experience than any other age group.

When asked which form of role-playing people participated in more frequently, the results heavily favored WoW. Although a handful of people responded that they played both equally (32%), almost twice as many played WoW more often (63%), and only 5% played table-top more often than WoW. Across demographic groups there was a clear preference for WoW, but once again location provided interesting results.

Table 3. Location and Role-Playing Frequency

	WoW	TT	Both
Rural	100%	0	0
Suburban	80%	20%	0
Urban	45%	0	55%

Although WoW is played most frequently in this table as well, the dominance of the "both" category for urban residents is interesting. The proximity of houses and the ease of meeting other people who role-play, owing to the density of urban populations, gives certain people the opportunity to pursue table-top role-play. As one respondent states:

"The main reason I play WoW is because it is easier. I have no car to go to the house of people I know who play table top games, and the hours they decide to run those

games make it impossible for me to get there, get back, get home, and take care of my child—I am a single mom."

Effectively, this respondent points out one of the primary advantages to online communication, that when it comes to leisure WoW can be played in doses and likeminded people can be found online much more rapidly than offline. As those interested in role-playing take on additional responsibilities, long periods of leisure time are likely harder to find. This respondent's observation is further illustrated by sorting frequency of play by the age of participants.

Table 4. Age and Role-Playing Frequency

	WoW	TT	Both
> 20	75%	0	25%
21-25	50%	17%	33%
26 <	67%	0	33%

The young and the oldest members of our survey offer the most distinctive responses, as both groups clearly play WoW more often than they meet a group offline. Although additional responsibilities may help explain why older people play WoW more often, the youngest participants in our survey have not only grown up with high-speed internet connections, but some are in the position where their parents are still needed to help them get from place to place.

The final piece of the survey results is how demographic information beyond age factored into the survey. Matching Yee's findings (Yee 2006) we found that although the stereotype of a young male living in his parent's basement may dominate characterizations of both video game players and role-players, this was not borne out by the survey. 60% of the survey self-identified as male, with 40% female, a difference, but not an overpowering one. Results for fulfillment and gender offered similar trends for both men and women, but sorting by frequency gives an interesting difference between respondents.

Table 5. Gender and Role-Playing Frequency

	WoW	TT	Both
> 20	73%	0	27%
21-25	43%	14%	43%

Men were far more likely to play WoW more frequently than to play both, while women's role-playing time was evenly split across the board and included the only respondents who role-played offline more often than online. Our survey population also skewed older than one may expect, with 48% claiming to be over 26, 26% from 21-25, and 26% under 20. Finally, it is important to note that our survey population was overwhelmingly white, with 93% of respondents identifying as white or Caucasian. Although the population is largely older than one might expect and more gender balanced, role-playing seems to be an overwhelmingly white hobby.

4. CONCLUSION

Although the sample of the study was small and targeted only toward WoW players with previous table-top experience, the consistency of the results from the survey points to a number of key dynamics about role-playing that supported our autoethnographic analysis, demonstrating the validity and reliability of our observations. The emergence of large-scale online games offers role-players a viable and convenient means by which to role-play. The ease of connection is a huge advantage of online gaming, an advantage that is most clearly realized for those with lives that prevent them from blocking off large amounts of time to meet with people offline. However, the imagination and open-endedness of table-top role-play is a dynamic that is often stifled in WoW. Although the table-top GMing chores of creating and administering a game world are largely absent from online role-playing, the freedom that comes with having human co-creation of a complete gaming environment is also lost. By performing tasks of the GM, WoW's programming relieves an enormous amount of work from the human GM. Typically, in table-top role-play, the human GM creates and manages an entire populated world filled with people, places, and things. When players permit an online game like WoW to act as the GM it allows them all to participate in the world more leisurely, but at the cost of allowing the game's programming to specify key parts of the world's narrative environment. Players sacrifice the freedom of limitless interaction when they allow a game to GM their world. However, by giving up this control, a group of players can play without the need for one of them to sit aside controlling and adjudicating everything, effectively allowing everyone to enjoy the fruits of the computer program's labors. Online gaming makes role-

playing more viable when people do not know of a table-top group in their immediate area, cannot leave the house to meet with others, or only have small chunks of time to devote to role-play.

Location seems to have a strong correlation with frequency of role-playing, as those who live farther away from others are more likely to turn online to role-play. Granted, online role-play requires far more money (internet connection, computer, programs) than table-top, but if the limiting factor for role-playing is time, rather than money, then WoW proves to be a solid option for gamers.

Online games may be able to take a lesson from the table-top and include features that increase the personalization of the world, which was a dominant theme in critiquing WoW for those who preferred table-top role-play. Gamers want to feel like they have an impact on their imaginary world and integrating features that accomplish this may

Rural residents exclusively preferred WoW, likely because of the difficulty of getting a table-top group together offline. In this vein, WoW may offer those who could not role-play offline a venue within which to congregate with likeminded people.

blend some of the table-top advantages into online play. This is the primary issue we also saw when we role-play in WoW. Although online game play offered tremendous advantages, ownership of the role-play in WoW was mitigated because the players are not fully in control of the world. This may be one of the benefits of online gaming, as the online game performs many of the maintenance tasks that would be left up to a person offline, but finding more ways to facilitate player's control in the world may minimize these issues. Table-top groups may need to find ways in which to ease concerns about time and effort in meeting in real-life or it is likely to remain a hobby that is relegated to a kind of gaming performed at a particular time for a particular group of people, rather than as a competitor to online gaming. Moving out of the dorm and having a busier offline world seem to have strong negative impacts on the ability to role-play offline.

Future research on such a topic as role-play should most likely continue to focus on the move to online communication and how it impacts role-playing. It would be interesting to explore these findings on a larger scale or look at whether or not games like

WoW lead to more time role-playing or if time spent playing WoW is mostly time taken away from offline role-playing.

The development of large-scale, immersive online role-playing worlds offers those interested in role-playing an opportunity to easily and quickly find people with whom to role-play. However, online gaming comes with the notable cost of losing complete control of the game world, which increases ease of play, but dramatically decreases feelings of ownership about game play. Both our survey and our ethnographic experience demonstrated the benefits of both kinds of role-play, with online gaming offering convenience that becomes increasingly necessary for those who lead busy lives or who happen to live in areas where they do not have a convenient real-life role-playing group with whom to play.

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A Hermeneutical Approach to Role-Playing Analysis

Popular Abstract - This is an article about viewing role-playing games and role-playing game theory from a hermeneutical standpoint. In other words, it presents one view on how a role-playing situation can be seen as a set of texts. That view also includes the idea of not only analyzing those texts, but also addressing the way game participants interpret those texts. On the side of role-playing theory, this article uses material from various schools of thought, from the post-Forge community to Nordic larp theory.

On the side of hermeneutics, emphasis is on Paul Ricoeur's idea of meaningful actions as texts. Those are the texts that people performing or observing that activity appropriate and interpret. The result of this article is one potential bridge between various schools of thought on looking at role-playing, including a translation platform capable of enabling the move of theories and research results from one role-playing culture to the next.

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces a way of viewing role-playing games and role-playing game theory from a hermeneutical standpoint. It presents the necessary basics of analyzing role-playing phenomena and processes as a set of texts. On the side of role-playing theory, this article uses material from various schools of thought, from the post-Forge community to Nordic larp theory. On the side of hermeneutics, emphasis is on Paul Ricoeur's idea of analyzing meaningful actions as texts that are then appropriated by people performing or observing that activity. The result is one potential bridge between various schools of thought on looking at role-playing, including a translation platform capable of enabling the move of theories and research results from one role-playing culture to the next.

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of role-playing is currently at a problematic stage: It has reached a basic level of academic acceptance, but exists in a state of chaos. The three main reasons for the situation are the lack of general, shared research guidelines, the corruption of discourse tools, and subjective bias

on the field concerning both practitioners and outsiders studying role-playing.

The purpose of this article is to suggest one answer for the first problem and to bring attention to the second. The current situation can be likened to that of early analysis of cinematography: the subject itself is seen more often as a collection of pre-existing methodology and art forms, not as a separate phenomenon connected to those elements. (For more on this analogy, see Laws 1995.) This means that role-playing is currently studied as a semi-valid subject by experts of the connected fields, such as game studies, drama or text analysis, with the methods and perceptual limits of those fields. It is essential to note the progress that has been made by this set of approaches, but even more imperative to recognize the need to move beyond that level.

As one solution, I propose the construction and delineation of a core system of hermeneutics, an adapted version of traditional hermeneutics, for the purpose of further analysis of role-playing. "Hermeneutics" is the art of interpretation. In its most limited form, it is used as a reference to textual analysis of sacred scripture, but is more commonly seen as a general word for textual

interpretation (Palmer 1969). A few scholars have opted to extend this frame to include phenomenology, or even occasionally to refer solely to religious phenomenology (Phillips 2001). I have chosen to use the widest interpretative frame, the one covering text analysis, phenomenology and sociological aspects. Essentially, it is the reduction of an event or an experience into a text, the interpretation (or meaning) of which is then studied through text and symbol analysis.

What makes religious hermeneutics an especially suitable choice as a basis for more diverse forms of role-playing studies is the fact that it is one of the very few academic disciplines that deals with the entirety of the field on at least some levels. It covers things such as analysis of textual material and the study of personal, hard-to-communicate experiences without seeing them as a problem that needs to be corrected.

Before discussing the hermeneutical adaptations needed to studying role-playing phenomena, though, a brief look at the key phenomena themselves is necessary.

2. DEFINING ROLE-PLAYING GAMES IN GENERAL

For the sake of practicality, it is possible to categorize the basic premises of role-playing game analysis into three general types. There is an observable correlation between these approaches and the gaming types from which they originate, as well as with the types of role-playing preferences defined by John Kim and Ron Edwards (Kim 1998 and Edwards 2001) as Gamists, Narrativists and Simulationists (or GNS, as a collective term).

Definitions based on other forms of game analysis, especially that of digital games, focus on the elements of challenge and struggle that are to be overcome by the player in order to succeed in the game. By these definitions, role-playing games do not necessarily qualify as "games" because they lack a winning condition, or are classified as "limit case" games (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, Heliö 2004), despite containing game-like competitive elements.

Narration-oriented theory favors the storytelling aspect, usually paying special attention to game elements that support or hinder narrative and intrigue, such as systems (including, but not limited to, rules) and a game's internal and

external time-structure. This also includes analysis of role-playing games as performance, storytelling and/or discourse, such as Lancaster 1999 and Mackay 2001.

The Process Model of Role-playing defines the phenomenon as "any act in which an imaginary reality is concurrently created, added to and observed, in such a manner that these component acts feed each other" (Mäkelä et al. 2005). The Manifesto of the Turku School (Pohjola 1999) uses the words "immersion ... to an outside consciousness ("a character") and interacting with its surroundings." These exemplify a game presence-based idea.¹

Merely by looking at these outlines, it is quite easy to predict what the corresponding theories based on these particular premises will look like. This is a key point where the predisposition of role-playing analysts is at its most obvious. Therefore, in the interests of analytic objectivity, any definition of role-playing should also be seen as a conclusion of the respective author or as an analytic base assumption, not only as a discourse tool without bias.²

Most of the role-playing theory presented in this paper draws from the two major schools of thought on non-digital role-playing. The so-called Nordic larp theory circle, which, as the name implies, deals mostly with live-action role-playing, is the first one. It has an approach that fuses arts and academic research, often in an incompatible manner. The second one was originally centered on The Forge, a U.S. based community built around the works of Ron Edwards and with a favoritism (but not bias) towards tabletop-centric theory, especially design (as opposed to speculative theory). Since a restructuring of the site towards an even stronger emphasis on game design in December 2005, much of the theory-related discussions originating there have moved on to a loose community of blogs and small websites. Many of the theorists are still the same, as is the terminology they use. They are therefore still usually referred to as Forge-based, whether they agree on this view or not (for more on Forge theory, see Boss 2008).

For the purposes of presentation, this article uses a combination of the general elements of role-playing definitions and Baker's so-called Lumpley Principle ("system (including but not limited to

¹ Pohjola has later revised his position, and this out-dated view is here solely for exemplary purposes, not as a representation of Pohjola's current position (Pohjola 2004).

² Heliö 2004 offers a comprehensive look at differing forms of role-playing game definitions, and should provide a good starting point for those interested in pursuing this issue further.

“the rules”) is defined as the means by which the group agrees to imagined elements during play”, 2002), and treats role-playing as a process based on a social contract (as per Huizinga 1939 and Goffman 1961) where people create and modify a joint transitional reality through the use of agreed-upon tools. This social contract is constructed and enforced similarly to other social contracts, meaning that it is rarely made explicit (see Montola 2005), and is enforced only by social pressure.

“[I]n agreeing to draw up the contract, the people seem to possess already that which the contract was supposed to create. Further, the very notion of a contract presupposes an agreement about its sense. We can see that it is not the contract which makes possible that agreement, but an agreement in understanding which makes contracts possible. And that agreement is not based on a contract, since it is not an agreement which people decide to come to. Rather, it is an agreement which shows itself in their common reactions.” (Phillips 2001)

A factor affecting all basic interpretation on role-playing analysis is the formation of normative role-playing paradigms. They are local cultural preferences on what is to be considered as valid or good role-playing, as the basic requirements of role-playing or as valid study of role-playing. A paradigm can be just the size of a single playing group, or cover several countries. Role-playing theories are seldom directly applicable over paradigm lines, and require more adaptation the further the differences between paradigms are. What must be recognized, though, is that when a theory does not seem at all functional in a different paradigm, this may be due to the prejudices inherent to that receiving paradigm, faults in the theory, or a combination of both.

For example, any attempt to directly apply Edwards’ and Kim’s GNS-categories on a Nordic experientialist larp is impossible, due to that paradigm considering competitive play problem behavior rather than good role-playing. In essence, one part of the model would not be observable at all at play, whether it existed or not. Extrapolating from this that the model could not possibly be accurate on, say, some types of tabletop role-play would nevertheless be a glaring error of judgment and an act of prejudice. A similar case is Nephew’s (2003) view on role-playing as a manifestation of male sexual fantasies, which, while possibly accurate on North-American males, is quite incompatible with the fact that in some Nordic areas female larpers are a clear majority (Fatland

2005a). Yet another illuminating example can be seen by comparing the larp descriptions of Koljonen (2004) and Tan (2003).

One special case of paradigm is what I call the “anti-intellectualist movement on role-playing”. It is a loose, completely informal international school of thought that emphasizes the “simple fun” aspect of role-playing – adventuring, killing monsters, looting treasure and so on. (For an example, see Vuorela 2003-.) Its members’ reception of any role-playing theory, especially of the non-design kind, is generally very negative.

One’s native playing paradigm thus usually forms the interpretative basis, resulting in a biased

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analysis of both role-playing and role-playing theory. This, however, can be at least partially bypassed through the use of hermeneutical methods.

3. BASIC HERMENEUTIC ADAPTATIONS FOR ROLE-PLAYING ANALYSIS

“The evolution of author from distinct to aggregate has encompassed not only fiction writers and the original creators of the RPG genre, but also subsequent designers who borrow from material from each other, the editors and publishers of these games, the hobby’s fan community, GMs and players who reinterpret texts for their own purposes, and the social environment in which they are created. In this way it becomes apparent that the roleplaying experience is inherently the result of multiple subjectivities, breaking the illusion of a purely objective meaning.” (Nephew 2003)

In trying to understand a subject of study, be it text or a phenomenon, we are already using a set of pre-understandings. We are aware of some of those. Others are sub-conscious. Both nevertheless affect our understanding of the subject at hand, leading to a predilection towards an interpretation closer to those expectations than the subject would actually warrant. One of the key ideas of hermeneutics is the deconstruction and illustration of such pre-understandings, leading into either a

more objective state of interpretation, or a clarity of the true meaning, of what is being studied.

We do, however, simultaneously need the pre-understandings, as they are what gives us the initial approaches we need to start interpreting. So what happens is not the direct abolishment of prejudices, but rather a refinement and relinquishing of them as needed, the closer we get to our subject of analysis. This phenomenon, combined with the need to understand a whole in context to its parts, and parts of a whole in context to that whole, is called the Hermeneutical Circle. (Jeanrond 1997)

What opposes the process is the need of an interpreter to hang on to his previous beliefs, to defend his own particular interpretation. This is usually caused by ideological reasons, but in the case of role-playing analysis, a secondary, nearly as important cause is a phenomenon I call "theory canonization". Theory canonization happens when a singular interpretation gains a position of dominance within a gaming paradigm. It is a predilection to use the discourse tools of that dominant interpretative frame to explain and appraise new games and new theoretical material, both from within the native paradigm and coming from outsiders. It is initially born as a beneficial effect, allowing the translation of concepts between paradigms into a more easily understood form.

Yet build-up of using only the terminology of one paradigm eventually starts imposing the dominant theory's parameters on the process of interpretation, leading to appraisal on the basis of how well the new material fits to the dominant ("canonized") model. A curious part of this is that the phenomenon mostly affects people who produce material ancillary or complementary to the dominant theory. The authors of the dominant theories themselves are usually more resistant to this pattern of thought, but are naturally affected by what they see as criticism of their own work, which in turn reinforces the effect. This is most easily visible, in relatively mild form, in the forum archives of the Forge³, but the phenomenon exists in all game analysis communities. The process is not a prejudice, and should be seen as an unintentional corruption of discourse tools instead. The risk of misinterpretation escalates further when material created using one paradigm's corrupted tools is analyzed with those of another.⁴

³ www.indie-rpgs.com

⁴ A good example of the first level of this transformation can be found by analyzing Lehrich 2004. Another effective example is the thread "Something I cooked up, a model if you like" on the Forge (<http://www.indie-rpgs.com/viewtopic.php?t=9690&start=0>). For criticism within and on the Nordic sphere of theory, see Harviainen 2004.

The pre-understanding affects not only reception but also the presentation of findings, up to and including the language used. Assessing the scope of this problem in the study of role-playing is problematic in itself, since there's a significant risk of ending up in ad hominem criticism, and certainly even higher risk that even constructive commentary is interpreted as an ad hominem attack. A further obstacle is created by the "mandatory respect of others' viewpoints" policies of U.S.-based forums, as well as the art studies – based approaches of many Nordic theories. Both of these lead to any questioning of interpretative motives being seen as a breach of the code of conduct and/or a personal attack.

All findings, potential theory and new methods must therefore be either acknowledged as having a limited view by their authors themselves or presented in such a manner that all possible interpretations are taken into account. The first option can be accomplished by statements such as "this model is designed using tabletop role-playing material, and has not been tested on other platforms". The system presented here is intended as a tool enabling the addressing of the latter.

From a hermeneutic perspective, role-playing games consist of the intentional evocation of artificial experiences through the use of fictional characters as masks/identities/personas (for more on the play-theory ideas this view is based upon, see Huizinga 1939). The evocation is autotelic by nature, i.e. enjoyment-creating by itself – as long as the game is good, at least (Harviainen 2006). In addition, through their experientiality and autotelicity role-playing games convey new information and create new correspondences between existing social and mental connections. Role-playing is a form of heuristic fiction. It is a metamorphosis that creates simultaneously a selection of characters/figures and a transformation into a new state of temporary "true" being. In that new state, everything follows an internal (diegetic, i.e. "true within the context of the story") system where everything works directly upon indexical and symbolic concepts (as per Lopenen & Montola 2004), transforming basic representations into a fantasy reality. (For variables on what types of realities are constructed and how, see Montola 2003).

The only level of in-game interpretation is that of *imaginatio*, which works on similarity. There is no need for *intellectio*, thought based on sameness (as per Ricoeur 1975). Essentially, role-playing functions by participants imagining things in a reasonably compatible manner (Montola 2003). Within the *diegesis* there may of course be elements that in some sense require the player's or character's *intellectio*, such as objectives or puzzles, but the lack of precisely defined elements means that those too belong, in this case, rather to the realm of *imaginatio*. In this sense, the Process Model's definition of the totality of the event field in a role-playing game as a "Shared Space of Imagining" is actually a very correct term (Mäkelä, et al. 2005).

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In this, role-playing follows Gadamer's theory on play (Gadamer 1972). The core nature of the gaming experience is still different, even when the outward forms are the same. A similar border can be drawn on other connections as well, which in turn gives us an apophatic ("what it is not") definition of the field we are studying. These affirmations through negation have been, and will be, subjected to heavy debate, as their criteria may vary from person to person. For example, the question on whether role-playing is a form of art or has the potential for being art has more to do with each commentator's own concepts for what constitutes art than with any intrinsic trait of the activity of role-playing (Mackay 2001). In this, the debate very much resembles the one that was had about a very similar phenomenon, *avant-garde* performance / concept art of groups such as the Fluxus movement and the no-audience Activities in the 1960's (Kaprow 1966, Kirby 1987 and Harviainen 2008). Again, these factors constitute a part of the general pre-understanding.

In extremely simple apophatic terms, ones that are undergoing constant criticism (also from the author of this article), role-playing in its live form is not "proper" theatre because there is no audience (as per Kirby 1987; see also Flood 2006). Nor is it

psychodrama, as it lacks a narrative matrix directly tied to a desired function (Flood 2006; Sonesson 2000).⁵ In no platform is it normally traditional gaming, as there is no winning condition included, even though some players may perceive it to contain one (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, Heliö 2004 and Edwards 2003). The one exception to this exists in the form of certain intentionally competitive games, a phenomenon thoroughly described by Tan (2003). There is a conscious, pre-planned structure that differentiates it from child's play, despite potentially sharing similar concepts of space and methods of arbitration. (See also Morton 2006 for further debate on defining role-playing on these terms.)

Role-playing may resemble certain rituals very closely (Lehrich 2004), but is again a separate phenomenon by virtue of it not having "unyieldable material" (such as Articles of Faith) that must at all times be taken into account. What also separates it is that it in many cases only provides liminoid, but not truly liminal, experiences. It removes the participants to a different temporary reality, but usually not completely. The liminoidity is in the case of role-playing games nevertheless far closer in nature to actual ritual liminality than it is to "common" liminoid phenomena such as following a football match (Lieberoth & Harviainen 2008). Thus, in some sense, it could just as well be described as a low-intensity liminal experience, if one wants to follow another set of ritual theory terminology. It takes place in a state continuous with mundane reality, but separated from it.

There is a strongly interpretative, semiotic and textual side to all role-playing games, yet to treat a role-playing situation solely as a singular text removes a part of the game experience from the equation. (For more on the question of reduction into text and the subsequent loss of experiential elements, see Aarseth 1997.) And role-playing is never a state of pure imagining, because the player is always connected simultaneously to both the *diegesis* and the real world. Contrary arguments by players who support a divisive character view (Harviainen 2006) exist, but no data has been provided in support of them. On some levels the player is purely imagining, on others completely in the real world. And this is the key to approaching role-playing as a whole from a hermeneutic perspective: the reduction into text can be made, by

⁵ Sonesson's text is very superficial and somewhat prejudiced on the scope and history of role-playing, but is nevertheless a useful tool on differentiating the limit-case activities with which (especially live-action) role-playing is often compared.

understanding that there is more than one text to reduce to.

Given the dual level of mental presence in a role-playing game, it is not possible to apply the normal methods of either hermeneutics or phenomenology on that experience. The role-playing Dasein (a person's summary existence in the historical continuity) is on several levels an artificial one, and therefore looks as if it has to be analyzed in context to the diegetic reality. Likewise, diegetic elements, or ephemera in Edwards' terminology (2004), seem to make complete sense only when interpreted through the diegetic whole. It would thus be very tempting to apply Durkheim's (1895) idea of social things only being possible to explain through other social things. Were all role-players totally immersive and using solely the divisive character state (i.e. totally committed to their fictional personas) while in-game, this would apply. However, as several theorists have suspected, and occasionally shown (Harviainen 2006), all are not. As player motivations of various kinds, as well as their relationship to ephemera, form another important part of the pre-understanding, some discussion of them is necessary here.

For example, according to Edwards (2001-, based on Kim 1998), players can be classified according to their Creative Agendas (CA) as Gamist, Narrativist or Simulationist, with each of these types having a favored form of playing that gives them the most enjoyment. The CAs consist of several levels of motivation, but focus mainly on the in-game expectations of the players.

In general, role-playing game motives can be further divided into three categories. External participant motivations (EPM, "why do I play") contain reasons such as having fun, escapism and social contact. Internal participant motivations (IPM, "what do I want to experience in the game") may be both diegetic and non-diegetic motives, such as conflict, drama, sense of triumph. And Character Motivations (CM), which include every desire a character has, are completely diegetic (Harviainen 2005). In these terms, Edwards' Creative Agendas represent IPM that are affected by EPM concerns and manifest through both CM and arbitration on the collective diegesis. On the interaction of these intents are built the interpretative frames and overall narrative choices that the game participants make. Platform changes affect the player/CA relationship – a player who is always highly gamist in any tabletop or online role-playing game can nevertheless be a simulationist in a larp environment. Reasons for

this potential change arise from both local game paradigms and the intrinsic game presence differences of the platforms themselves.

A parallel system to deconstructing role-playing into exogenous (player-brought), endogenous (inherent to game) and diegetic (in-game) goals also exists (for this division system, see Montola 2005). As the motivator system concentrates on the types of goals while the e/e/d system concentrates on the origin points of goals, and as both systems are fully compatible and may produce synergetic results, I have noted both factors at points of analysis where they coincide.

The completely exogenous EPM factors are the primary framework of Fine's interpretation of role-playing (Fine 1983). They exist on a social, real-world level. In contrast to them, the completely artificial CM factors are fully diegetic. A borderline exists somewhere on the point of IPM factors, which are partially or fully exogenous. Their effects are nevertheless always articulated into the diegesis in peridiegetic discourse, i.e. spoken as external descriptions that create or alter diegetic elements and events.

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It is, however, quite obvious that a degree of peridiegetic manipulation (i.e. manipulation reaching from a frame of play outside the diegesis into that diegesis) exists. Outside influences intrude on play, and vice versa. The exogenous EPM expectations and at least partially non-diegetic IPM expectations of players intrude on narration, and on the endogenous motives defined above as diegetic IPM and CM. In this regard, they indeed form Agendas, as Edwards has observed. These agendas affect the in-game choices, both narrative and character, and distort the theoretically diegetic logic. Thus it is possible for ephemera to make sense on a purely diegetic level (an example of this would be a joke the characters would get but the players would not.), peridiegetically (as tools of external descriptions that create or alter diegetic elements and events) or purely non-diegetically. The last of these three types, it must be noted, contains both "bad

playing" in the sense of actions that a player likes but make no sense in the game's continuity, as well as the addition of seemingly illogical ephemera in the interests of enhancing the game. Thus it should not be discounted, as it too is occasionally a proper, beneficial form of playing.

Ephemera cannot therefore be reliably analyzed in a vacuum, or on purely diegetic or non-diegetic grounds. It is possible to treat them that way in the context of certain kinds of role-playing studies, such as when making a reading of a game session or studying the game as a singular narrative. (Kellomäki 2003 is a good example of this method.) In those cases, this is a valid approach, but must be acknowledged as not telling the whole truth. In relation to this, it is also worth noting that post-game reports by players have a tendency to eventually transmute into dominantly diegesis-based reasoning, even if this were not actually the truth. A player-competitive choice may later on be explained as "logical for the character", regardless of whether it actually was, for example. In hindsight most actions are reported as having been influenced by in-game reasons only. This is in no way contradictory with the idea of also emphasizing the "everyone should have fun" aspect of games, and perceptions on what the "best way to play" is are usually a mixture of these criteria. Digital role-playing games are an exception to this rule. They are often directly opposite to it, in fact: most actions are stated as originating because of meta-level concerns (see Yee 2006 for details).

Within the game's internal reality, ephemera must always make sense. Within, and only within, the configurational properties of the artificial diegetic reality which they belong to do they function perfectly. In other words, for the characters the ephemera are always real and always follow the natural laws of their reality. Taken out of that context, ephemera lose their inherent perfection and must be treated as analogies, often dysfunctional ones. When introduced into a diegesis for purely external reasons, ephemera may not be diegetically logical, but are nevertheless a working – or at least tolerable – part of the continuity. If they are not, the game breaks, and an arbitration process is undergone to solve the problem.

The complexity of analytic permutations in role-playing is vast, yet very simple. Through one reductionist approach, game elements can be confined to a single level of actuation for the purposes of study. This is what has often actually been done in role-playing studies thus far, but

mainly without acknowledging the fact. The next step is to relinquish the absurd idea of being able to directly extrapolate from one game platform to the next, from diegetic level to another or from one game element to others. Larp and online role-playing, for instance, may share many traits, but they are not identical experiences. By analyzing their inherent texts, however, we can see where the play-experiences differ (as opposed to the easily observable physical differences of the mediums). Without accepting existing limitations, even useful, parametric research is rendered invalid – not in content, but at the point of reception. When a researcher acknowledges the limits and deals with them accordingly, he is then able to draw in factors from other actuation levels (for an exemplary example of such work, see Faaborg 2005).

A completely different, highly profitable line of research is the analysis of role-playing games as a form of other phenomena. While seemingly contradictory to the apophatic approach described above, it is actually complementary. Through looking at role-playing games as text, ritual, game or theatre, it is possible to see where they differ from their counterparts, and where they are identical. This is the process used in most of current-day role-playing analysis. It is partially caused by the different and often almost incompatible academic and scientific backgrounds of the analysts, and partially due to the simple fact that in a field with no analytic tradition of its own, the best methods are usually found in the fields it overlaps. Through the use of hermeneutics, even these methods can be combined with apophatic and reductionist approaches.

There is one common risk in using the non-apophatic approach: exclusion by definition, which is another type of discourse tool corruption. By defining that role-playing is something, researchers may close their results off from being compatible with others (Harviainen 2008). For example, there is a strong difference between an analysis saying "role-playing is performance" and analyzing role-playing "as a performance. The latter can be combined with other approaches, the former solely either approved or refuted.

4. REDUCTION BY LAYERS

The second reductionist approach seeks to treat role-playing games according to Ricoeur's idea of "meaningful action as text", due to the similarity of Ricoeur's idea of "appropriation" and the interpretative system used in role-playing. A form of activity is treated as if it were a metaphor-filled

story, which the performers and observers of that activity then interpret from their own perspective.

“My claim is that action itself, action as meaningful, may become an object of science, without losing its character of meaningfulness, through a kind of objectification similar to the fixation which occurs in writing. By this objectification, action is no longer a transaction to which the discourse of action would still belong. It constitutes a delineated pattern which has to be interpreted according to its inner connections. This objectification is made possible by some inner traits of the action which are similar to the structure of the speech-act and which make doing a kind of utterance. In the same way as the fixation by writing is made possible by a dialectic of intentional exteriorisation immanent to the speech-act itself, a similar dialectic within the process of transaction prepares the detachment of the meaning of the action from the event of the action.” (Ricoeur 1981)

To that text we then pose Ricoeur’s “properly hermeneutical question”: “what does the text say to me and what do I say to the text”. This is done from both the perspective of the analyst and the perspective of game participants.

As a role-playing game exists on several layers at once, all layers must be deconstructed if one wants to find a holistic interpretation of a gaming experience. For this we need both hermeneutic tools and knowledge of the things briefly discussed in the preceding chapters. Through knowing how a diegesis is constructed and how a player potentially perceives it, we can transfigure both the diegesis and the perception into texts. Essentially this means “backtracking” them to a base set of texts that has never actually existed! Yet by creating these artificial “originals”, we can see the interpretative processes at work in a game.

Furthermore, by understanding which parts of these processes other role-playing theories assess, and to which parts we can apply theories from other fields, we have access to the tools earlier research has created and the ability to use them as synergic parts of the holistic analysis. Or, as an equally valuable option, the wisdom to see how to concentrate on analyzing just one or two layers without drawing too far-reaching generalizations from that analysis.

Each layer has some key traits that need to be addressed in a hermeneutical context. Counting inward, the layers discussed here are: 1. the

completely exogenous level where participants’ social interaction and external motivators (EPM) exist; 2. the level of exogenous internal motivators (IPM) and meta-game dialogue, 3. the level of subjective diegeses and their interplay, and finally 4. the world the characters live in. Note that this categorization has been selected for typological reasons only, and is based on motivator theory (as per Harviainen, 2005) with some extensions being influenced by Kellomäki’s (2003) four layers. This is due to levels such as rules not being assessable by themselves as text, meaning they are subsumed into other categories so that they can exist in an interpretative context. In contrast, Fine (1983) uses a system of three frames, while Mackay (2001) uses five. Fine’s and Mackay’s categorizations, rather than the one here, may actually be more appropriate for research concentrating on a single layer of the role-playing experience. (On Fine’s frameworks’ correspondence with the e/e/d system, see Montola 2005.)

All of these layers (and many other potential ones), regardless of definition systems, normally exist simultaneously in a game. Game breaks are moments when activity on certain levels is temporarily frozen so that participants can concentrate on discussing events more thoroughly on a level closer to the real world. The layers always freeze in order, starting from the world of the characters and proceeding to the level needed. A break in all layers means the game has been completely suspended or ended.

The basic building blocks of the layers are discourse and imagination. The former produces material for the latter and dictates the ways in which it changes. The discourse itself is fleeting, but it creates ongoing texts that create the whole role-playing experience. It is realized as event but understood as meaning (Ricoeur 1981). Thus each temporary social frame (as per Goffman 1974) in a role-playing game can essentially be read as a layer of text.

On the first level, all activity happens in the real world. Players are motivated by real-world concerns only, and their presence in the world’s continuity (Dasein) is subject to normal rules. Ethical choices are made from a real-world perspective. On this layer, the text exists in the interplay between participant choices, as expressed by their motives. The diegesis does not exist on this level at all, but may be discussed in general terms nevertheless.

On the second level, meta-dialogue about the game appears. For much role-playing analysis, it is this

level that is considered the most important. The meta-dialogue is formed of the events on the diegetic level, IPM factors the participants bring with them (including their Creative Agendas, genre conventions, etc.) and semi-random interruptions coming from the first (social) layer. This is the level of the structure of the game, and that is its primary text. The participants interpret the interplay and use it as a basis for the construction of their subjective diegeses. On this level, choices take on narrative qualities inspired by fabula (story seeds, as per Fatland 2005b) and ethical views become relativist, adaptive to the needs of the game. Pre-understanding about the game's style and conventions becomes manifest, and is openly discussed. On this level players are in connection to the diegesis, but their discourse takes place outside it.

The third level consists of IPM factors being transformed into character motivations (CM), the actualization of fabula and ephemera, and the interaction between the way players imagine the transitional space. It is also the level on which the players' views intermingle through intericonicity and create a roughly equifinal whole. ("Every participants' mental image of the sword is sufficiently similar", as per Adelsten 2002 and Lojonen & Montola 2004). Each subjective diegesis is a text by itself, built according to personal preferences, platform requirements and narrative needs. Much of what was discussed in the previous chapters is aimed at understanding what happens on this level. Players build the texts (analogous to but not the same as their subjective diegeses) they work with through those methods. Note that all this is still only a "text" as per the confines of "meaningful action as text", even if recorded. Depending on the character relationship of the particular players, their primary Dasein is either the artificial based on the assumed collective diegesis, or a mixture of their real continuity presence and the artificial one.

The second and third layers are about role-players appropriating material that the other participants introduce to the game, and then applying it to the present game situation. An element of distancing transfigures the material into the players' own when it is processed in between appropriation and application.

"[I]nterpretation 'brings together', 'equalises', renders 'contemporary and similar', thus genuinely making one's own what was initially alien." (Ricoeur 1981)

Therefore a game participant does not actually understand the complete meaning of the material, but rather transforms it into his own interpretation, in which form it is injected back into the diegesis and/or meta-game – and then possibly appropriated by the others again, creating a feedback cycle.

The fourth level is the world in which the characters "actually exist". It is the only layer that would be real for them, and in which events would proceed in an order and manner completely logical within the diegetic frame. The players may speak of this level, but they never actually come in contact with it. It is a theoretical construct that does not actually even exist, but it must nevertheless be treated as "real" for the purposes of analyzing the game as a whole.

Within the fourth layer, the characters have a Dasein that is completely artificial yet diegetically logical, and all ethical choices are based on diegetic reasons. This level is pure diegesis. It is also a pure, singular text – one story – and can thus be subjected to all traditional literary analysis. In other words, the diegetic events that are never truly reachable by game participants or analysts, elements that would be real to the characters, can theoretically be reduced into a singular story consisting of the personal stories of each character. This so-called Lehrskovian reduction takes the events of the game and treats them as if they were something that was intended to happen – the events are handled as if they were meant to form a pre-written story (corresponding with the concept of Chance in art, as per Kaprow 1966). Those events of that one story (or each one of the characters' stories, for that matter, should those be chosen) could then be analyzed like any other story, and be subjected to the methods of story-theorists like Auerbach, Bettelheim or Campbell, in order to determine the influences that created it. While the story is not truly accessible, reliable approximations of that story can nevertheless be constructed by game participants for this purpose, or for the purpose of entertainment (Lehrskov 2007).

Though the fourth layer may contain observable properties from player motivations, genre conventions, etc., those elements are simply "that which happened" from the perspective of the characters. The characters experience things from levels one to three, but only as they extend to the fourth layer (game systems as natural laws of the universe, or luck, etc.)

So on one hand, phenomenological analysis of the diegetic world is impossible, but on the other hand the phenomena in it can be fixed into a singular factual nature, if the players all agree upon them on the second layer. Everything happening in the fourth layer is an emergent property of the three other layers, a phenomenon that makes adapting hermeneutics to analyzing role-playing diegesis itself easy.

“[W]hat must be interpreted in a text is a proposed world which I could inhabit and wherein I could project one of my ownmost possibilities. That is what I call the world of the text, the world proper to this unique text.” (Ricoeur 1981)

Following this template, an immersive player empathizes so strongly with her image of the fourth layer that she suppresses her awareness of the other layers. In reality, however, her primary “self” is on the third layer and is affected by meta-level concerns. The fourth layer is never reached by participants during the game. It is an idealization. In contrast, a competitive player’s primary activity layer is the first or the second, depending on whether he prefers triumphs over other players or over in-game obstacles created by the game master. Highly story-oriented players mostly favor the second and third layers, the former providing the necessary narrative clues and the latter being the place where those are actualized. In these terms, the turn-of-the-millennium Nordic experientialist ideal means that players are expected to see their characters as filters through which they experience the third layer and have that experience reflected all the way to the first layer.

For hermeneutic game analysis, all this means that each game has a number of sets of texts and their corresponding interpretations, in the example case of this article four sets. By knowing those origin points and end results, the gaming process itself can be treated as interpretation done by the participants, and analyzed as such. This reveals to us how a player experiences her game and what elements affected that experiencing process, the personal hermeneutic circle the player used for the duration of the game. That part can be subjected to all normal analytical methods, and will produce a reliable picture of what happened during a game on all levels. Furthermore, it will lead to an understanding of the underlying matrix of the role-playing process, and the recognition of dependent variables its structure is based upon – including, but not limited to, social, cultural and language influences that affect all ritual activities. (For more on dependent variables, see Goodman 1988, and

for role-playing as ritual, see Lehrich 2004 and Lieberoth & Harviainen 2008.) By nature the texts role-playing deals with are not autonomous and can thus provide a way to analyze their basis.

“To understand an author better than he understood himself is to unfold the revelatory power implicit in his discourse, beyond the limited horizon of his own existential situation.” (Ricoeur 1981)

From the perspective of traditional hermeneutics all this is of course problematic. The base text is not truly accessible and the interpretations will be subjective and incomplete if and when they are explicated to a researcher. That, however, is an unavoidable trait of all academic interpretation. Analyzing role-playing in this manner does provide a positive contribution to hermeneutics, though: by refining this approach, it will eventually be possible to use it to conduct test-runs into methodology. Role-playing provides a way to know to a greater than normal extent the text and the interpretation, the available information at play, as long as the fabula are observed in advance and ephemera introduced in a controlled manner (Harviainen 2007). Therefore it can be used to measure whether certain analytic forms reveal traits that are known to exist, something that is usually impossible in relation to a static text. In using hermeneutics to analyze role-playing, one should always adhere to Gadamer’s validity principle on hermeneutics: if you can apply the theory to the subject at hand, you will have to call it valid until you are proven otherwise (Gadamer 1972, adapted here from Adelsten’s (2002) application of the principle to studying visual arts).

Overcoming the problems of the first part of pre-understanding, that of seeing role-playing games as something or other in advance, is relatively easy. The second part, the ability to assimilate the work done on the field by others without defaulting to one’s own work as the primary measuring stick, that is the true testing point of whether role-playing studies can rise to an academic level. Until that point of interpretative understanding is reached, all studies on role-playing are just personal opinions of their authors, existing in vacuums. They may be correct beyond their bounds, but there is absolutely no way of knowing for sure.

That an individual theorist’s apparently successful work can be traced back to his or her theories is good, but not enough without the potential for further adaptation to other paradigms and/or platforms. Good examples of such single-platform

vectors can be observed in the correlation between Edwards' theories and the games he has published, and in the theories and game descriptions present in the Nordic larp yearbooks. Valid models and findings that cannot cross cultural barriers are not valid research on role-playing itself, they are valid research on a particular type or way of role-playing.

This is where the hermeneutic circle comes in again: as noted, pre-understanding is needed for the interpretation to begin. The trick to doing the work completely is in knowing how the pre-understanding limits one's work, and making the correct extrapolations thereof. Research on small points of the gaming experience are not only welcome, they're absolutely necessary for the wider work. They are the steps the road to understanding the complexity of the phenomenon are based upon – so long as those steps are not inflated into walls obstructing further progress.

Thus the need to seek ways to translate findings, theories and models into forms in which they can be compared and possibly combined, exists. The hermeneutic approach will not solve the problem, but it will allow a deeper comprehension of how the patterns interlink. In many cases it is not a research tool, but rather a complementary tool – showing for example how the frames of play documented by Fine, Kellomäki and Mackay form and function as personal texts, thus making them truly compatible with what has been said about player preferences. Without that understanding, regardless of from which methodology it comes, they are just descriptions of play behavior without any deeper meaning.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has presented a view of role-playing games as a set of interactive texts interconnected with frames, the interpretation of which is in itself enjoyable to the game participants. The interpretation takes place in a particularly strong liminoid state resembling a ritual, or a ritual state. Some of the discourse layers are imaginary, others are solidly grounded on real-world issues. A game's structure is built from the interaction of the participants' interpretations and the arbitration of conflicts the differing interpretations cause.

As a whole, a role-playing event is an interactive text in which the current situational context – including both the diegetic and the exogenous situation in their entirety – creates the primary frame in which the interpretation process takes place. In essence, the game is a convergent

medium, a focal point of shared interpretations done for the sake of mutual enjoyment.

Participants inject elements into the diegesis based on their non-diegetic desires, and reap medial, autotelic benefits if they do it well.

These texts and the participants' interpretations can be used as a basis for analyzing role-playing as if it were a special form of metaphoric reading. For the analysis to be possible, the processes through which role-players interpret the game texts must be

In essence, the game is a convergent medium, a focal point of shared interpretations done for the sake of mutual enjoyment.

understood. The same goes for the analytic tools currently in use. When that understanding is reached, it is possible to also translate other research on role-playing into a semiohermeneutic form through which a new potential for combining seemingly incompatible findings and theories becomes available. In my opinion this is the closest we can get to understanding role-players' actual experiences – at least until scientifically valid clinical psychological tests can be made. And even then, this approach will have provided data that can be used to know what to look for.

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