# Defining Role-Playing Games as Language-Games

**Popular Abstract** - Role-playing games are a diverse phenomenon, ranging from digital games to live action role-playing. Finding a definition that suits them all is hard, but attempts have been many. All of the definitions emphasize some aspects of role-playing games like rules, the role of players or the story. Many definitions do not describe role-playing games as such, but the activity that is role-playing. This paper looks at one of the latest attempts to define role-playing games, by Hitchens and Drachen (2009), and shows some potential problems with it. As an answer to these problems another definition is proposed, consisting of a game world, participants, shared narrative power and interaction. This definition is given only after discussing the nature of definitions in general. By drawing from the work of Wittgenstein, it is shown that definitions are by their nature bound to language in a way Wittgenstein calls language-games. Language is constantly changing, as the culture surrounding it changes. There are no final definitions for role-playing games, only definitions suited better or worse to a certain historical understanding of role-playing games. However, this does not mean that role-playing games should not be defined, as the definitions given can advance our understanding of what role-playing games are and could be. This paper takes part in the ongoing process of definition.

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## ABSTRACT

Finding a definition of role-playing games that is both representative and unambiguous is not simple. The differences among tabletop role-playing games, live-action role-playing and digital role-playing games are remarkable, yet they are all considered role-playing games. Hitchens and Drachen (2009) have proposed a definition of role-playing games comprising of all these types in an attempt to find a definition that could be "commonly accepted". This paper expands upon this definition, exploring its strengths and weaknesses, its relation to digital games and finally suggests an alternative approach. This alternative approach is based on Wittgenstein's works on the nature of language, and the hermeneutic tradition's conception of truth. This should be understood as a continuation of the discussion on defining role-playing games, not as an attempt to end the discussion in some conclusive way. Some general remarks on the problems of exclusive definitions are also presented.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As Hitchens and Drachen (2009) show through an in-depth study, the approaches to defining role-playing are diverse and many. They list a broad catalog of different definitions, arranging them according to the target of the definition: is the definition aimed at defining role-playing as activity or role-playing as a game. They also make an important note that not all role-playing is tied to role-playing games. A considerable amount of role-playing, probably most of it, is done outside the sphere of role-playing games.

It is also possible to play role-playing games as regular games, as Montola (2007) notes. This is particularly true of digital role-playing games. The act of defining role-playing games is then separate from defining role-playing as action. In fact, the first instances of defining role-playing predate role-playing games by several decades. The term 'role-playing' was presumably coined by a Viennese psychiatrist, Jacob L. Moreno, in the 1920's, and was related to his conception of theatrical

psychodrama (Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology 2001; Morton 2007). There is also a strong tradition in sociology of studying social interaction through the roles, role-taking, and role-playing involved in everyday social life (Fine 1995). The works of the Erving Goffman in particular have been used in role-playing study (e.g. Fine 1983; Choy 2004; Stenros 2008).

Despite this wide-ranging research on playing roles, the research of role-playing *games* is far more limited. Hitchens and Drachen (2009) show that definitions given in role-playing games research on role-playing in general are not applicable in defining role-playing games. This could probably also be shown on the more wide-ranging sociological and social psychological literature on role-playing in social interaction.

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Although researchers of role-playing games have tended to concentrate on role-playing as a process, there is also the possibility of looking at role-playing game*s as separate entities. This is regardless of whether one considers role-playing games as the physical objects that are used during the play, or as the fictitious and social products of that process of playing. Role-playing games can perhaps be compared to works of art, as products of the brush-strokes that make them, but separate from the hand that holds the paintbrush. Role-playing games create a fictitious world comparable to the one created in works of literature, although different from it in some ways (Fine 1983). In some sense, there is a role-playing game, but it may also be foolish to look for one too ferociously. It is also possible that there is no single object, "a role-playing game", but several, and making all games fit a single mold would do them injustice.

However, this is not grounds for ending the search for a definition of role-playing games. Defining role-playing games furthers the understanding of what the hobby, craft and art is, and can be. Definitions are mirrors of the actual games in the sense that definitions mirror the actual games played. But the reflection is twofold, as definitions shape how these games are played. Definitions can highlight aspects of games and serve in creating new ways of playing. But games can also show how definitions are flawed or lacking, by breaking them. For these reasons, definitions are useful as long as role-playing games are studied.

## 2. DEFINITION BY HITCHENS AND DRACHEN

Hitchens and Drachen discuss in length how role-playing games have been and should be defined. They end up giving the following definition, which is paraphrased here for ease of reference. The definition is as follows (Hitchens and Drachen 2009, p.16):

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 games masters (who may be drepresented 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 action of their characters.

3. **Characters:** The characters controlled by the 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 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."

When discussing this definition, one must note that the authors (2009, p.16) remind us that "this definition does not provide clear boundaries" and that the line between what are and what are not role-playing games is a blurry one. However, they do hold that "the definition provides very clear support for categorising games" (Hitchens and Drachen 2009, p.16).

In addition to the elements found in their definition Hitchens and Drachen (2009) discuss, and then dismiss, several elements or alternatives commonly found in definitions of role-playing. These include at least: immersion, diegetic framework, adopting roles, structures of power, role-playing, and episodic structure. Some of these are discussed in more length later in this paper.

As Suits (1980, p.41) remarks, the easiest way for a definition to fail is by being either too broad or too narrow. Hitchens and Drachen (2009) hold that earlier definitions are successful in recognizing role-playing games, but they fail the first criterion: they also include games that are not role-playing games. Usually at least some forms of first-person shooter games are easily included, often also other forms of computer games that are not usually regarded as role-playing games. The definitions influenced by theater typically include anything that contain a narrative, and are thus unable to separate role-playing games from other forms of narrative fiction. An example of this is the definition given by Mackay (2001, pp.4-5):

> "I define the role-playing game as an 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."

In addition to presuming that all games are episodic, this definition places emphasis on the creation of a story. It also takes for granted that all role-playing games include "a set of quantified rules", a claim that is very easily falsified by taking a brief look at different role-playing games and ways of role-playing.

Hitchens and Drachen list (2009) different forms of role-playing, naming pen-and-paper/tabletop, systemless, live-action role-playing, single player digital, massively multi-player online, freeform and pervasive role-playing. This list could be extended with such examples as Jeepform (Wrigstad 2008). There are also styles of play subordinate to the classes given, but significantly different in style from other, similar types of role-play. An example of this would be the Dogma 99 style of live-action role-playing, with its strong ideological separation from tabletop role-playing (Fatland and Wingård 2003). The Dogma 99 style of live-action role-playing strongly favors games with an egalitarian power structure.

## 3. CRITIQUE OF HITCHENS AND DRACHEN

While the definition Hitchens and Drachen (2009) end up with is a very useful one, it is not entirely unproblematic. They start with examining different types of role-playing games, and looking at features they consider central to role-playing games.

While most of the definition they give is quite accurate, the demand that all role-playing games have a game master, and a game master defined in a particular way, is questionable. Inclusion of a game master in the definition assumes that all role-playing games have game masters, all players are not game masters, and the role of the game master is in some sense uniform. This criterion of separation is also closely tied to what they say about participants. While this is in no way controversial (cf. Hakkarainen and Stenros 2002), it may still be debatable.

What is most problematic about the two criteria is that according to them there must be two types of people participating in role-playing games – players and game masters – and that they must be separated from each other. This blunt binary either-or division

1. seems to exclude those games where the narrative power is evenly divided, and
2. is questionable where the division between game master(s) and players is more complex than presumed here.

An example of the first one is any instance of a live action role-playing game that has been co-written. If all players participate in writing the game collaboratively, then there is no separation between players and game masters, as all participants are both. This is something that is normally thought of as a role-playing game, yet it seems to be excluded by the definition given.

There are actual examples of games written collaboratively, like *#kotikatu*, a live-action role-playing game set in a near future sci-fi-setting, and written collaboratively among the eight participants (Harviainen 2006). A single person handled the necessary tasks of an administrator, but did not control the fictional world or the narrative. In other words, there was no game master. There is also a guide by Martine Svanevik (2005) for organizing live-action role-playing games "with a flat power structure", as she calls it. She lists three "commandments" for organizing collective live-action role-playing games (Svanevik 2005, pp.182-183):

1. *Everyone is responsible for the larp*
2. *There is no organizer*
3. *There are no limits*

The second problem with the binary division of players and game masters occurs with any game, where players have more narrative power than assumed here. It is not enough to note that "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". This paints an overtly simplified picture of the *structures of power* within role-playing games. If the definition is to include games that have a non-traditional role for the game master, then the initial inclusion of the requirement for a game master may be misleading.

For an actual role-playing game that has a power structure not properly described by this definition, one could look at the indie tabletop role-playing game *The Mountain Witch*. In *The Mountain Witch* there is a traditional division between the players and the game master: one of the participants is a game master, the rest portray a single character each. There is no re-assignment of these roles over the course of the game. Even so, all of the players have control over the game world beyond their characters, with player narrative control actually more definitive than the game master's. The players have the narrative power to add anything relevant to their characters fate to the game, even overriding something the game master has defined. The game master is supposed to create the background for the story, but the players themselves tell the actual story. Thus, *The Mountain Witch* cannot be successfully captured within the definition by a simple division between players and a game master. The use of actual narrative power is more complex.

An alternative way of looking at the role of narrative power in role-playing games is hinted at by Hitchens and Drachen (2009, p.6) when they quote Montola (2007, p.179):

> "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."

Instead of talking about the role of game master in role-playing games Montola (2007, p.179) explicitly talks about "a recognised structure of power." This formulation is more flexible, although the definition Montola gives is more ambiguous when used in defining role-playing games than the simple referral to a game master, and thus not as useful in separating role-playing games from other games (Hitchens and Drachen 2009, p.6). This is partly because Montola does not try to define role-playing games, but role-playing. Nevertheless, Montola's conception can be used in analyzing the power structures present in role-playing games. Montola (2007, p.178) expands upon this mention of a structure of power by continuing:

> "[A]ll role-playing is based on a power structure that governs the process of defining. In tabletop games and larps it's especially critical to establish the limitations of each participant's power: The environment is classically controlled by one player (the game master), while the others take over individual persons within the environment [...]. Often some power is allocated to a ruleset or a digital virtual environment, but even in the virtual worlds the players can utilize make-believe techniques to redefine the game world."

Montola's account of the structures of power within role-playing games includes the classic role of a game master, but expands it to include other possibilities, some of which are mentioned earlier. The traditional structure is a binary division into a game master and players, but this is by no means the only possibility. Even this simple relation may contain complex ways in which the narrative power is divided among the participants, as in *The Mountain Witch*. Recognizing that there is a game master may not tell us much about the game. Like Hitchens and Drachen (2009) note, this recognition is not even enough to separate role-playing games

from other games, as many war games typically have a referee comparable to a game master.

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The separation of role-playing games from other games is not entirely unambiguous. As can be seen from Hitchens and Drachen's (2009) definition, such elements as the size of the playing area, and the typical (or possible) forms of interaction with the game world constitute a part of the definition. Here another of Montola's (2009) concepts can be applied to clarify the situation. He separates the defining characteristics of role-playing games from those that are typical to them. This separation helps in finding those elements that are essential to the definition, and separating them from those that are only coincidentally true. Not separating defining characteristics from typical ones introduces ambiguity into any definition.

## 4. CAN DIGITAL GAMES BE ROLE-PLAYING GAMES?

Digital role-playing games form a non-uniform group. There are great many similarities between single player digital games and massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG). They are also both recognized as role-playing games in a more general sense, as being alike and sharing qualities for example with tabletop role-playing. Yet there are enough differences that Hitchens and Drachen (2009, p.16) conclude them to "not represent the full spectrum of role-playing games". They continue (Hitchens and Drachen 2009 p.16):

> "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."

It is certainly true that digital role-playing games have a qualitative difference from tabletop role-playing games, but the same could be said of tabletop role-playing games and live-action role-playing games. All types of role-playing games have limitations that are hard to overcome within the media, for example:

1. When compared to for example larp and digital role-playing games, tabletop role-playing cannot as effectively convey visual cues, because it depends on verbal discourse.
2. The area of play is necessarily limited in live-action role-playing, where the physical surroundings are part of the play. This is not similarly true in digital role-playing games, where the space is virtual, or tabletop role-playing games where the space is verbally created and imaginary.
3. Online text-based role-playing is limited by lacking the possibility of conveying emotions through facial expressions.[1] This applies also to graphical online games without video-feeds, since the player has to communicate through his or her avatar.

These comments should not be understood as critiques of these forms of playing, but simply as an acknowledgement of the fact that the media through which play happens affects the playing itself (McLuhan 1964). Neither are these observations comprehensive in covering all of the distinctions between forms of play, as such a question is extensive enough to merit it's own discussion.

The line between single player digital role-playing games and other digital games is blurry. Of the six qualities used by Hitchens and Drachen (2009) to define role-playing games, three are particularly useful in separating digital role-playing games from other digital games. These are:

1. Game World,
2. Interaction,
3. Narrative.

Digital role-playing games typically have a large, open game world, which the player may quite freely explore. There are typically more types of

[1] A reviewer pointed out that this may be (and often is) compensated for by using emotes. This is certainly true. It simply takes more conscious effort from the player.

interaction available than in other digital games, and not just limited to a single category of fighting, driving, etc. Role-playing games also often create a much more detailed and meaningful narrative than other digital games (Hitchens and Drachen 2009).

The rest of the three qualities – participants, characters and game master – are not as effective in separating digital role-playing games from other digital games. There tend to be at least two participants in all digital games, the player and the machine operating the game. The machine controls the simulation where the game takes place, effectively handling the duties of the game master. The characters in typical digital games, though not in all digital games, are defined as individuals rather than roles. The existence of individual, potentially developing characters does not separate digital role-playing games from other digital games.

While it is true that digital role-playing games tend to have a large area of possible exploration, using this as a defining quality imposes problems, as it is also typical for genres apart from role-playing games. Games such as the *Far Cry* series include both large areas for exploration, and the possibility to retrace one's steps, which is a quality typical of role-playing games. It may however be that area does not really qualify as a defining characteristic; strategy games typically have a larger area represented in the game, although the scale is different. However, they do not typically include a single anthropomorphic character for the player to play, so the risk of confusion with role-playing games is a minimal one. It is thus probable that it is not the area itself that is important, but rather the possibility of exploration of that area through a single character. It can probably be concluded that the existence of a large area possible for exploration is a typical quality of role-playing games, but it probably should not be included as a defining quality.

One of the qualities typical for role-playing games is the large amount of different types of interaction possible to the players. This is especially useful in separating digital role-playing games from other digital games. One can use this as a separating criterion when showing why the *Far Cry* series is not a series of role-playing games, but a series of FPS-games. The only type of interaction available to the player are forms of combat. There is dialogue present in the game, but the protagonist is mute. The only interaction presented during the dialogue is the possibility of either rejecting or accepting the missions offered. It is perhaps more fitting then to call it monologue rather than dialogue. It does not qualify as meaningful interaction. This is true of most digital games; the types of interaction available is heavily limited by the genre of the game, but this should not be surprising. Games are usually limited to certain types of game play. This is also true of role-playing games, although the types available are typically more varied.

All games can be said to contain narrative elements due to containing consecutive sequences of events given meaning to by the player.[2] It would not then be informative to state that there are narrative elements in role-playing games, unless that is refined to separate role-playing games from other games in some substantial way. According to the definition, the narratives present in role-playing games are not traditional, but that is probably true of all interactive media. The narrative structures are probably especially similar between role-playing games and other games.

A game like *Super Mario Bros* does tell a story of a courageous plumber rescuing a kidnapped princess, although it is probably true that it is not a very complex one as stories go. But the complexity of the story cannot be a deciding factor. Even role-playing games with substandard (whatever the standard may be) narratives are still role-playing games, although not necessarily good ones, and the same probably applies to other forms of games. Other games may have other, redeeming qualities that make them good games regardless of the quality of the narrative. There are also games other than role-playing games with strong narrative elements, like the *Half-Life* series. It can then be said that, in terms of narrative, the difference between role-playing games, especially digital role-playing games, and digital games is not that great.

While there are certainly other examples, *Far Cry* and *Half-Life* are good examples because FPS-games are usually not considered role-playing games yet they seem to fulfill most of the criteria set for role-playing games. The line is especially blurry with *Mass Effect*, which is generally thought to be a role-playing game, but includes elements from FPS-games as well, like real-time FPS-style combat. The question is not if *Mass Effect* is a role-playing game, but what makes games that have

[2] Jesper Juul (2001) has argued that while games and narratives share some structural elements, games and narratives share some structural elements, games and stories do not translate very successfully into each other.

most of the elements employed in *Mass Effect* something other than role-playing games. It would seem that adding very small changes to games like *Half-Life* would make them role-playing games.

For example, *Far Cry* seems to do quite well in meeting the requirements of being a role-playing game:

1. It has a large, imaginary game world.
2. It has the necessary participants, if the platform (computer, console etc.) counts as a participant.
3. The player controls a character that is an individual rather than a role.
4. The player does not have control over the environment, but the platform does, being therefore the game master.
5. There is interaction through combat and rudimentary dialogue.
6. The game creates and delivers a narrative.

While *Far Cry* to passes some of these requirements without problems, some of the others are more doubtful:

1. The player cannot control the development of his character in any meaningful way.
2. The game cannot react to changes in the character, at least to those not already included in the game in development.
3. There is really no interaction outside combat, as the dialogue is more of a monologue.

But these elements are not outside the range of possibilities. The next game in *Far Cry* series could include a system for dialogue that matches or exceeds those used in digital role-playing games. That alone would seem to make it a role-playing game, as the demand for character development is not an absolute requirement for something to be a role-playing game. Other FPS-games, such as the *Call of Duty* series, already include partially player-controlled development.

Is it a problem that FPS-games can be easily altered to match the requirements of role-playing games? Not really, if one is willing to accept that there will always be limit cases to defining role-playing games, and games in general. Salen and Zimmerman (2004; cf. Juul 2003) consider role-playing games to be limit case games; maybe (at least some) FPS-games can be considered limit case role-playing games.

## 5. DEFINING ROLE-PLAYING GAMES AS LANGUAGE-GAMES

In defining role-playing games, it is enlightening to take a brief look at the traditional theory of definition (Cohen 2008; Kneale and Kneale 1991). The most basic part of the theory of definition is the twofold division into *nominal definitions* and *real definitions*. Nominal definitions are verbal agreements about the use of terms, or suggestions to use an expression in a certain way. These are social definitions, depending on the use of language and the predominant social conventions. Because nominal definitions are verbal agreements, they cannot be true or false, but they may be more or less useful. Real definitions aim not just to tell us about the way words are used, but also to find some attributes that are essential to the object being defined. Should one wish to avoid essentialism in defining real attributes, one could choose minimal factual relations between physical attributes, allowing any of them to be chosen as a point of comparison.

There is difference in trying to identify the discourses surrounding role-playing games, and thus trying to find the current social (nominal) definition, and analyzing the structure of role-playing games and identifying shared attributes (real definition). These might not be mutually exclusive goals, but making this difference explicit will help in understanding a definition.

If a definition attempts to cover role-playing as a real definition, it should attempt – at least in theory – to cover all possible forms of role-playing games. Another possibility is delimiting a real definition to certain forms of role-playing. A nominal definition on the other hand will change over time as the discourses around the definition shift. A real definition can also change over time, but this change is a correction of a previous error in defining the object.

There is also an argument against searching for essential (real) definitions in general. It comes from Wittgenstein (1999), in *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (1953). Instead of searching for essential definitions for concepts, he suggests that concepts should be understood as sharing *family resemblances*. The analogy is the resemblance of family members between each other. The father may not resemble the mother much, but they both share characteristics with their children. There are similarities with their physical characteristics: faces, color of their eyes, and with the way they

walk, but also with their temperament. The same way we understand types of numbers as being similar. There is a direct affinity with the other kinds of things we are used to calling numbers. There are also non-direct similarities to the things we have formerly called "numbers", and so we consider any new examples of number-like-objects numbers. What makes them number-like may differ from one instance to another, just like the attributes differed when comparing children to their mother and father. The children may be blond, like their father, and have brown eyes, like their mother. These shared concepts are meaningful only in a certain type of commonly shared way of speaking about things, Wittgenstein (1999) interestingly calls *language-games*. Language-games are thus ways of understanding concepts, differing from culture to another, but also in smaller scales, like from a field of researcher to another.

From Wittgenstein's (1999) conception follows that there are no core attributes that could be used in separating role-playing games from other phenomena. If Wittgenstein (1999) is indeed right, then there may be no single definition for role-playing games. Instead of having a common core of attributes, role-playing games share attributes as family resemblances that may vary from one instance to another, forming a continuum rather than a single "potentially identifiable object" (Hitchens and Drachen 2009, p.5). The resemblances would probably be stronger between live-action role-playing games and pen-and-paper role-playing games than live-action role-playing games and single player digital role-playing games. Different types of role-playing games could then be understood as a continuum with pen-and-paper role-playing games near the center[3]. The act of defining role-playing games would then be a language-game in itself, and the question not what are role-playing games, but what elements are considered important when we identify role-playing games in this language-game.

Wittgenstein also claims that games cannot be defined, and that family resemblances are the only possible way of identifying games. Not everyone agrees (Suits 1980; Juul 2003). Suits (1980) has criticized Wittgenstein for not following his own advice of actually looking at games and seeing if there are similarities between them, rather than assuming there are none. According to Suits (1980), Wittgenstein seems to assume that there are none, when he should have looked, and found, some.

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It is therefore not the lesson that games are undefinable that is to be learned from Wittgenstein (1999). Simply stating that games are undefinable is counterproductive to their research (cf. Suits 1980). Another possibility is to understand Wittgenstein's conception of games as a *hermeneutic* one (Connolly 1986). A hermeneutic conception means that each definition is understood as a new starting point for a new act of defining, or in other terms, as a pre-understanding for a more complete understanding (Gadamer 2004). This would make the process of definition basically endless, as it may be continued eternally without reaching any form of finality. However, this endlessness is not a surrendering to a completely relativistic point of view (Weberman 2000). Rather, it is a contextual understanding of the truth. There may be no final truth, but an understanding may be more or less suitable for a context.

What does this mean in defining role-playing games? If defining is understood like Wittgenstein (1999) does, it follows that:

1. **Language-games resemble context:** Larp is discussed with theater analogies, digital games with computer analogies, and tabletop role-playing games with war-gaming analogies.
2. **Language-games are separate:** Different language-games are used in discussing digital role-playing games and tabletop role-playing games. There is overlapping in these language-games, but they are distinct.

[3] Or perhaps any other style of role-playing at the center? Pen-and-paper role-playing games are generally thought to be the "basic" form of role-playing games, but this is probably mostly because they are the first type of role-playing to be recognized as such. This excludes Happenings (Harviainen 2008), therapeutic role-playing, pedagogic simulations (Crookall, Oxford and Saunders 1987), social play and role-taking rituals, which all easily predate pen-and-paper role-playing (Morton 2007).

3. **Language-games may not be compatible:** Larp is difficult to discuss using terminology suitable in analyzing shooter computer games, while this is notably easier with digital role-playing games.

The context-sensitive, different language-games are what Wittgenstein (1999) had in mind when he called language-games *forms of life*. A language-game is associated with a certain way of being in the world and these ways of being in the world are different forms of life. Forms of life are cultural differences, but in addition they are differences on a smaller scale. Forms of life are the different ways of relating to the world depending on social, cultural and economic status and context. For example, when a fisherman talks about knowing where the best places to fish are, he probably uses the word 'know' in a different way than a philosopher who specializes in epistemology (the theory of knowledge). The fisherman and the philosopher live in different forms of life, where the word 'know' is useful in different ways and thus they participate in different language-games.

Similarly, there are related but different forms of life surrounding different forms of role-playing games. This is true even if we exclude from the discussion such things as culture differences. Live-action role-playing is discussed in different terms than digital role-playing. The use of different terms stems from the different cultural and social contexts these activities are associated with.

The language-games around different forms of role-playing are separate and may diverge from one another, especially over time. An example of this could be the Knutepunkt-tradition of role-playing game theory, which deals almost exclusively with larp (currently encompassing 10 books and several other works, see Larsson 2010, for an example). The Knutepunkt-tradition could be understood as its own language-game, with a connected form of life. This form of life would be the Nordic live-action role-playing culture and its related discussions. Language-games are as dynamic and mutable as the forms of life they surround. Unless there is interaction between different forms of life, the language-games surrounding them may also separate.

But this is only one way of looking at the situation. There is also the language-game of role-playing games that encompasses all of the forms of role-playing usually considered role-playing games. This language-game is part of the form of life that is role-playing, and all the social characteristics typical to it. An example of this would be the knowledge of fantasy and science-fiction literature typically considered relevant to role-playing games, like cyberpunk, the works of Tolkien and the Cthulhu-mythos. Language-games exist in nested hierarchies with porous boundaries. Choosing which level of language-games to employ is a strategic decision. This decision affects questions of inclusion and exclusion.

**There is also the language-game of role-playing games that encompasses all of the forms of role-playing usually considered role-playing games.**

There is also the possibility of using several definitions simultaneously in a field of research. An example of this is the way genes are understood in biology (Moss 2004). Instead of giving a single definition variable over time, the alternative would be using several at the same time. There are requirements on the definitions if they are to be used simultaneously: they cannot be completely mutually exclusive, lest they end up defining different phenomena. Additionally, only one definition can be used in one study, to adhere to the demands of coherency. The definitions can vary only between different discussions, which could end up being completely different language-games.

There is also the possibility that the search for a "commonly accepted definition" (Hitchens and Drachen 2009, p.3) is not a meaningful one, at least yet. One is hard pressed to find a commonly accepted definition for such widely used terms as "culture", "structure" (Rubinstein 2001) or "game". These things are defined and redefined all the time as part of new research, creating new approaches, problems and answers along the way. This probably should not be viewed as a lack in research, but as a consequence of the nature of the things being defined. Our understanding of cultural phenomena is constantly changing, at least partly because those phenomena are also changing, and partly because our cultural perspective is changing.

Wittgenstein's (1999) way of defining things is essentially nominal. It means that his way of defining things does not try to find a definition that

can be compared to reality, but to discourses[4], ways of speaking about things (Mills 2004). As shown before, the key benefits to using a nominal definition are:

1. **Avoiding essentialism.** If definitions are limited to ways of speaking about things, then none of the qualities of the object being defined are taken for granted. All of the qualities are subject to definition and re-definition, highlighting the social nature of these qualities.
2. **Flexibility.** Nominal definitions are by their nature sensitive to change and context.

However, there are drawbacks to nominal definitions, namely:

1. **Endlessness of definition.** There are no final nominal definitions as the discourses surrounding things are subject to historical change.
2. **Difficulty of comparison.** If definitions are ways of speaking about things, it is difficult to critique a definition.
3. **Correspondence to reality.** Discourses are distinct from the reality they portray, and it may be possible that a discourse does not reflect the nature of reality very accurately.

The flexibility inherent to nominal definitions stems from the fact nominal definitions are under constant re-definition. This re-definition is the result of the changes in the form of life the definition is part of. Because of this sensitivity to historical change nominal definitions are more useful in defining cultural objects than they are in defining for example objects studied by natural science, which are more resistant to historical re-definition.

As nominal definitions are part of a discourse, they cannot be verified accurately or judged outside this discourse. This prevents forming nominal definitions that are verifiable separately from the discussion the definitions are used in. Comparing the value of nominal definitions can be difficult, as not only the definitions themselves, but also the surrounding discourses must be evaluated. This leads to a situation where the definitions are not judged by their merits, but on the merits of the discourses in which they are situated.

Nominal definitions are defined as verbal agreements that cannot be truth or false. They may be more or less useful in a situation, but they cannot be evaluated as true or false. This may be considered an unfavorable quality when building a theory-base for a new discipline, like role-playing game theory.

Additionally, Cohen (2008, p.232) remarks that:

> "We have drawn a sharp distinction between verbal [nominal] and real definitions. In practice, however, the distinction is never so sharp, and even in definitions which seem altogether verbal there is generally some reference to the analysis of what the words stand for."

## 6. DISCUSSION

The definition given by Hitchens and Drachen (2009) is a useful one, but it may not be the only useful one, especially if one is interested in different aspects of the game than they are. For example, there is no mention of immersion (or engrossment, cf. Fine 1983) in their definition. This is considered by many to be an important part role-playing games, and could be part of an alternative definition, one probably more interested in the process of role-playing (e.g. Mäkelä et al. 2005).

The process of role-playing is easier to identify and define than role-playing games, as shown by the plurality of process-definitions and relative lack of role-playing games definitions. This is partly because the question of defining role-playing games is a normative one. Defining role-playing games enables making normative decisions about concrete publications that are considered role-playing games. Including and excluding some phenomena from a definition is an act of power: it has political (in a wide sense of the term) and normative consequences. Language-games can be seen as expressions of this power: choices about the way terms are used change the way these terms are defined and how they related to each other. Cohen (2008, p.233) remarks the following on the ways religion has been discussed:

> "Religion, for example, has sometimes been defined in terms of some dogma, sometime in terms of a social organization and ritual, and sometimes in terms of emotional

[4] 'Discourse' is used in this context as a non-technical term, roughly synonymous with language-game. This corresponds loosely with Foucault's use of discourse as "individualizable group of statements" (Foucault 1972, p.80 cited in Mills 2004, p.6).

> experiences. The resulting conflicts over the meaning or essence of religion have been regarded, perhaps not without some justice, as conflicts over words. But this is only a half-truth. For the disputants frequently have their eye on a concrete phenomenon which presents all these aspects. The quarrels over the right definition of religion are attempts to locate the fundamental features of a social phenomenon."

There is a concrete phenomenon at the heart of these discussions, but the definitions given on religion pick out only parts of it. These parts are emphasized as ways of enhancing arguments about the nature of the subject.

Similarly, it is a question of power who gets to decide what games actually are role-playing games. There is power in being able to say: "That is no role-playing game, this is!" It can also be useful to publishers of games to be able to market some games as "role-playing games", even if the connection to role-playing is a tenuous one at best.

It is analytically useful to be able to exclude some things from role-playing games, but what those things happen to be depends at least partly on the purpose of the definition. When one sets out to find a definition that is better able to separate role-playing games from other games, it follows that the definition will be an exclusive one. Exactly how exclusive it is depends, in addition to the findings of the analysis, on the implicit goals of the definition. As an example, *Dungeons & Dragons* is the first published fantasy role-playing game (Fine 1983), and a model for countless others, but regardless of the fact some people could criticize it for not being a particularly good *role-playing* game. This criticism must stem from a conception of role-playing games that excludes things present in *Dungeons & Dragons*, and includes things not present in it. This should not be understood as a critique of *Dungeons & Dragons*, but as an acknowledgement that tastes differ, as do the criteria used for counting something a role-playing game.

It is perhaps because of these problems with exclusion that Sutton-Smith (1997) calls for inclusive definitions on a related phenomenon: play. There is not a clear enough consensus of what to call play that exclusive definitions should be created, and start ruling things out too harshly (Sutton-Smith 1997). An example of exclusion probably not based on analytical grounds is the famous play theorist Roger Caillois' (2001) view on gambling. Caillois (2001) holds that gambling is not a type of play, but a corruption of play. He claims that gambling leads to debts, and other social problems. This may be true, but it does not rule out the possibility that gambling is play. Caillois' view might be interpreted as not something stemming from play itself, but from a bias on his part.

A more inclusive concept of play would include gambling regardless of its social effects. Perhaps we should for similar reasons use inclusive definitions of role-playing games. Even if an inclusive definition is not adopted, there are different ways definitions could be formulated. These alternative definitions depend on the viewpoint used and the language-games surrounding the phenomenon under discussion, as shown by Wittgenstein (1999). An example of theoretical plurality among role-playing theory is the difference between academic role-playing theory and the theory created on The Forge Forums, often called the Forge theory (Boss 2008).

The problem with talking about language-games instead of definitions is the apparent relativism implied. If instead of searching for a perfect definition it is conceded that there may be no perfect definition, and that there may be many different definitions, it seems that there are no ways of criticizing these definitions. They are different, and that is all. But this is a mistaken notion: some language-games are better suited for talking about some phenomena than others, and they may be evaluated based on how well they are suited to the problem at hand. However, this is different from trying to find a single, perfect definition. A definition is always a tool: definitions are used trying to answer certain questions, and depending on those questions, different definitions may be better suited to the problem at hand. It is a tool also in the sense that unless definition is necessary, it tends not to be given.

This approach can be understood as a hermeneutic approach (Gadamer 2004). In addition to having intrinsic attributes, cultural phenomena also have relative attributes, which change over time and in different contexts (Weberman 2000). This makes truth a context-dependent concept, when talking about historical and cultural objects. This applies in the larger cultural context, where history slowly changes the conditions in which objects are evaluated. But it also applies on a more specific level where individual studies are conducted.

Earlier in this paper there has been a critique of the various aspects of the definition given by Hitchens and Drachen (2009). Analysis shows that some of its aspects are more problematic than others. But simply removing parts of the definition do not make it better. A definition that aims to rectify the problematic parts is presented next. This definition aims to encompass the whole phenomenon of role-playing, so it is situated on the language-game level of role-playing in general. Suggestion for a definition modeled after Hitchens and Drachen (2009):

1. **Game World:** There is a game world, which is defined at least partially in the act of role-playing. This game world is at least partially separate from the players ordinary life, and exists within a magic circle of play.
2. **Participants:** There are more than one participant, which may include computers.
3. **Shared Narrative Power:** More than one player can alter the narrative, or it is not role-playing, but storytelling. Shared narrative power implies narrative.
4. **Interaction:** There are varying modes of interaction with the game world. Conventions of play influence these forms of interaction, limiting the scope (What can I change in the game world?) and modes (How can I change it?) of interaction.

Role-playing games happen in a world "outside 'ordinary' life" (Huizinga 1949, p.13), in an imaginary world that exists within a limited realm of its own (Salen and Zimmerman 2004). However, this separation is not complete in the sense that "ordinary" life could not influence the game; this is even truer in the case of pervasive games[5] (Montola 2005). Nevertheless, there is a game world created during play that is separate from the reality of the players (Hakkarainen and Stenros 2003).

**This makes truth a context-dependent concept, when talking about historical and cultural objects.**

The imagined world of play is constructed (more or less) in unison with several participants (Fine 1983). This makes role-playing games social. In the case of digital games, the participants creating the world are the game itself (or the computer running the game), with its pre-programmed rules of simulation, and the player interacting with these rules. This need for (at least) two participants separates role-playing games from works of fiction, such as books, where typically, but not necessarily, a single person creates the narrative. The narrative power is shared between participants in various ways, depending on the system of rules used and the social rules surrounding the play. The structure of power can be anything from egalitarian to autocratic, and can change according to rules of the game or due to changes in the surrounding social relations.

Mackay (2001, p.134) states that "the role-playing game, like hypertext, consists of description, narration, and ergodics". He studies role-playing from a performative point of view, so the difference between description and narration is important for his study. In the definition being formulated here those two are essentially the same thing, as they are both participants using their shared narrative power to shape the game world. The important part is what Mackay (2001, p.134) calls "ergodics". This is Aarseth's (1997) term for interactive literature, where the reader must participate in creating the text. In this sense, role-playing games are deeply ergodic. The interaction of different participants is needed to create the "text" of role-playing narrative. The text in question is not the printed text of the rulebook, but the narrative that is created during play. Aarseth (1997, p.64) lists four modes of interaction:

1. Interpretative
2. Explorative
3. Configurative
4. Textonic

All texts have the interpretative function, which is the possibility of the reader to make different interpretations of the text. In the explorative function the user must choose which path to take through the text. In the configurative function the user can make changes to the text during the reading, but can make no permanent changes to the text. If permanent changes can be made – which carry over to subsequent readers – the function is textonic. Like all texts, role-playing games contain the interpretative function. In order for something to be a role-playing game, it must

[5] Pervasive games are defined by Montola (2005, p.3) as follows: "Pervasive game is a game that has one or more salient features that expand the contractual magic circle of play socially, spatially or temporally".

additionally contain at least the explorative mode of interaction. This is to say that role-playing games must be interactive. If one would like to create more exclusive definitions, one could also require that at least the configurative mode of interaction would be present. If the participants cannot change anything within the game, it could be argued that it is not properly a role-playing game, as the narrative power is not shared.

Elements not included in this definition, but part of the definition it is modeled after (Hitchens and Drachen 2009) are:

1. Game Master
2. Characters
3. Narrative

Game master is replaced with shared narrative power, as a more flexible expression of the structures of power within role-playing games. The definition given in this paper does not define characters as required qualities of role-playing games. However, they are as common in role-playing as they are in narratives in general. It is just this commonality that makes them not qualities of role-playing, but of all things narrative. Characters, therefore, cannot be effectively used in separating role-playing games from others forms of narrative. If characters are not deemed necessary, it blurs the line between shared storytelling and role-playing. This may be a disadvantage in the definition given here, if studying elements in role-playing games more related to characters, like engrossment (cf. Fine 1983). Narrative is not defined here as a quality of role-playing games; however, it is implied by shared narrative power.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Role-playing has been defined in a multitude of ways. All of these perform a function in an ongoing discourse on role-playing, and role-playing games. Different definitions are better in different functions; there is no final definition, applicable to all possible situations, and in all contexts (Wittgenstein 1999; Weberman 2000). This is due to our changing historical and cultural context of playing, creating and researching role-playing games. However, there are ways of speaking about role-playing games better or worse suited to those contexts. This non-objective, but ultimately also non-relativistic conception of truth could be described as hermeneutic (cf. Harviainen 2009).

Regardless of this impossibility of a final definition, the definition given by Hitchens and Drachen (2009) performs well as general view on role-playing. It aims to be exclusive, and succeeds in this. However, exclusive definitions do have their problems (Sutton-Smith 1997). If one sets out to find a "commonly accepted definition" (Hitchens and Drachen 2009, p.3) it is highly unlikely that this is possible with an exclusive approach. The definition given by Hitchens and Drachen (2009) includes elements that could be described as typical, rather than defining (Montola 2009). Examples of these kinds of elements is the potential area of the playing world and character development. Most problematic of these is the inclusion of game master in the definition. Analysis shows that rather than a game master, role-playing games necessarily contain a structure of power (Montola 2007). A structure of power covers the different possible ways that power may be divided among the participants in a game.

Role-playing is deeply social in its nature (Fine 1983). It is defined in the social contexts where it is played. There is no "pure" role-playing that the theorist can find and then rule out other forms of role-playing as less pure. What we consider role-playing is the product of historical and social happenstance. But this does not mean that anything can be called role-playing, as it is a very distinct historical and social process that has formed a certain understanding of role-playing.

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