

## A Coin with Two Sides: Role-Playing Games as Symbolic Devices

**Popular abstract:** Role-playing games (RPGs) undeniably possess common elements with rituals and myths. The study of these elements remains a timely issue because it unveils the possibility of archetypal engagement. However, it is often overlooked that rituals and myths are fundamentally the two possible exegeses of the symbol. In this work, I propose a new perspective to study these features in RPGs by drawing ideas from philosophy and departing from the concept of RPGs as symbolic devices. Here, a symbol is understood both as an archetypal figure and as a special object characterized by its autonomy, synthetic power, and tautegoricity, i.e., the identity between meaning and being.

Under this perspective, I revisit RPG ritual aspects, such as the magic circle, liminality, and collective immersion. A particular advantage of the symbolic standpoint is that we can integrate these elements into a broader scope, as philosophy reveals a deep kinship between symbols, art, and organisms, areas that otherwise would seem unrelated. Thus, RPGs cannot be merely reduced to either rituals or myths. Instead, they constitute a perfect combination (undifferentiated balance) of mythic narrative and ritual interpretation, organic and autonomous objects we create to connect ourselves to our cultural roots. This proposal aims to develop a complementary theoretical approach that paves the way in the current understanding of how RPG players interact with the archetypal domain, not only in the psychic, social, and cultural realms but also in the religious and metaphysical ones. Also, this proposal explores RPGs as apt tools that profoundly transform our subjectivities and re-enchant our worlds with new mythologies.

**Keywords:** ritual, myth, liminality, role-playing games, symbol, archetypes

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Role-playing games (RPGs) certainly share common features with rituals and myths (Bowman 2010; Laycock 2015). Their suspension of the ordinary world and collective creation of meaning resemble the ritual separation between the profane and the sacred and the depth of mythic narrative. RPGs have been historically misjudged by the prejudice of considering their practice a kind of cult, which has scourged the RPG community in past decades, for example, claiming they produce a dissociation from reality or the rejection of traditional values (Laycock 2015).

Then, the study of the mythic and ritual dimension in RPGs remains thus a timely issue, not only to redeem them from misconceptions but also to pave the way for exploring their power to create meaning and transform all our worlds, the imaginary, the fictional, and the real ones. It is often overlooked that rituals and myths are *fundamentally* the two possible exegeses of the *symbol* (Frank 1982). This suggests we treat RPGs' ritual and mythic nature on the same footing. In this work, I aim to develop a unifying perspective for studying these traits by drawing ideas from philosophy and departing from the concept of RPGs as *symbols*. Hence, RPGs are recognized as a perfect combination (undifferentiated balance) of mythic narrative and ritual interpretation. Neither RPGs can be merely reduced to rituals nor myths. Despite this balance, it should be noted that one side could be intensified, leading to a taxonomy of RPGs from a symbolic perspective. While tabletop RPGs have a predominance of verbal description to support game dynamics, instead, larp fosters the dramatical embodiment of actions (Zagal and Deterding 2018).

## 2. MYTHS AND RITUALS

Defining myth and ritual is a titanic task, and I will restrict myself to pointing out their main features. Since the dawn of Western philosophy, rationalism has tried to vanish myths from our intellectual scenario by stripping them of any pretension of truth. The idea of the “progress of spirit” claims that myth and its related domains—ritual, magic, religion, etc.—were proper to the primitive world. So, they must gradually yield via a process known as *disenchantment* (Weber 1978). In a disenchanted world, reason would stand as the absolute judge, vanishing all those fields of our culture where imagination, lacking unambiguous quantitative certainty, plays a significant role. Then, both concepts have struggled in Modern times. In particular, the interpretation and delimitation of myth have constantly been subjected to confusion and exaggeration (Duch 1998). However, nowadays, it is clear that the disenchantment project cannot be completed, and an ultimate process of de-mythologization (or de-ritualization) is impossible. Not only did the magico-religious grounds of our world go into hiding to avoid destruction (from where they could return repressed), but also Modernity has become a *disenchanted enchantment* (Saler 2012): the illusion of vanishing myths has posited them in the center of reason. Nevertheless, the project has had important effects like the loss of sensibility in our societies and a condition of isolation and mutism in the world.

Myths are usually identified because of four traits: their narrative character (as stories), the use of fantasy in their creation, their synthetic power, and their connection to the sacred (and the divine) (Frank 1982). Also, because of their *social function*: to legitimate and constitute our individual and communal existence by posing a supreme value. Myths bring truth to our lives, but in a way, we can bear it. A life mythically undressed, i.e., without stories, will be impossible. Only something that can be actual in any era, in any place, can be interpreted from contingent, biographical conditions of individuals and collectivities alike; such a thing can offer us a sensible way to endure the becoming and the massive weight of the world. Contrastingly, rituals are less complicated to grasp because they are experienced in the form of ceremonies. They have three major features: a *magic circle*, a *liminal character*, and *collective effervescence*. Thus, one can define a ritual as a suspension of everyday life to establish a temporary, transient, and liminal spatiotemporal experience where a new set of rules emerge to support the creation of meaning and the redefinition of objects, words, and actions. As a result, participants who abide by those rules return socially transformed to their ordinary lives (Turner 1995). Likewise, rituals have a social function: to strengthen social bonds and foster the creation of a community by positing a common ground where a strong cohesion emerges, whether the context is secular or religious (Durkheim 1995).

## 3. THE SYMBOLIC APPROACH

The central thesis of this work is that myths and rituals find each other in the symbol. Here, I will understand the symbol in metaphysical terms as the *romantic symbol*, a notion developed during the *Goethezeit* in the XIX century (Halmi 2007), and by drawing ideas from the German idealist F. W. J. Schelling. According to him, the imagination produces three types of representations: schemata, allegories, and symbols (Schelling 1989). They can be “dialectically” organized in terms of oppositions: meaning against being and universality against particularity. A schema is a representation where being is subordinated to meaning and the particular to the universal. For example, a device’s sketch is a concept containing an infinity of variations of concrete implementations that imagination can actively build. Conversely, allegories are representations where meaning serves being and particularity rules over

universality. A concrete element, such as a metaphor or emblem points to complex objects, typically non-empirical ones like values and ideas.

The symbol constitutes the third moment of representation that exhibits the perfect balance or absolute indifference between meaning and being, universality and particularity, or even freedom and necessity. Symbols find their *telos* (finality) in themselves, like archetypes and divine figures. This means that the symbol is not only a unique representation (sign) of human imagination (Durand 1968), but all together can be regarded as an archetypal figure of our culture and psyche (Jung 1980) or even an element with which we can understand the metaphysical dynamics of reality as a whole (Schelling 1989). Note that, in this framework, concepts are an extreme case of schemas, so symbols are not concepts (Whistler 2013). They possess three properties: autonomy, *syntheticism* (the synthetic power able to reunite opposites), and tautegoricity, i.e., the identity of meaning and being (Whistler 2013). Symbols *are* while they *mean* and *mean* what they *are*. When a symbol loses content, it ceases to exist for us. This also means that it is almost impossible to capture the symbolic completely because any approximation is always inadequate: symbols become incarnate in the archetypal figures that give rise to our culture, and we constantly change our relationship with them by re-signifying them.

In the symbolic, an idea can become an image when it reaches sensible completion, in other words, when it exhausts its representation. Thus, the symbol is an immediate, inexhaustible, irreplaceable testimony. However spiritually powerful they are, we access them only through mediation. We establish a relationship with them via their two possible exegeses. The symbol expresses itself either linguistically as a myth or dramatically as a ritual (Frank 1982). From this perspective, rituals and myths are defined as symbolic acts and word systems, respectively (Duch 1998). Thus, the symbol can be considered the perfect balance of myth and ritual (narrative and drama).

#### 4. RITUAL FEATURES OF RPGS

To exhibit the symbolic character of RPGs, I will show that they balance the two oppositions: universality versus particularity (schema versus allegory) and word versus action (myth versus ritual). Before, describing those features that make RPGs rituals and myths is necessary. Because of extension, I will focus on the ritual domain only and leave the mythic dimension, tied to the world-building discourse (Page 2014) for later work. To the extent RPGs are games, they possess a ritual dimension, given that they are functions full of meaning and exist in a special spatiotemporal framework where they evolve under their own rules (Huizinga 1949; Caillois 2001). The idea that RPGs are a modern form of ritual and myth is not new (Lehrich 2005; Bowman 2010; Harviainen 2012). In *Dangerous Games*, J. P. Laycock (2015) asserts explicitly that “Fantasy role-playing games, then, can be thought of as modern forms of ritual and myth. Although they do not have the same status as ritual and myth in world religions, these games are powerful because they utilize humanity’s most primal faculties of meaning production” (185).

Rituals rely on a boundary that guarantees the separation between an ordinary (primary) reality and a created (secondary) one. This barrier is called the *magic circle*, a term coined by Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* (1949) and later adapted to game studies by Salen and Zimmerman (2003). The applicability of the concept has been disputed in the study of games and RPGs (Copier 2005; Calleja 2011; Stenros 2012; Schalleger 2018) because, in rituals, the magic circle is usually thought of as a blunt separation of the profane from the sacred; for games, a strict division between everyday life and the gaming world is, in general, impossible because exchanging information between the game participants and their environment would be hindered (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003). To circumvent this, the idea that the

game's domain is a pure space (Caillois, 2001) and call upon the specific permeability of the magic circle. Such is the case of the RPGs' magic circle.

On the one hand, it must be open (to some degree) to supporting the *metagame*, i.e., the information flow from the players to their characters, which is forbidden in some gaming groups but encouraged in others. This information flow is necessary for players to continuously draw content as the game sustains itself, thanks to improvisation, and thus keep the existence of characters within the shared narrative. On the other hand, it must be somewhat closed. Otherwise, the distinction between the player and the character may be dissolved. This permeability points out several lines of investigation, such as Beltrán's *ego bleed* (2013; Bowman 2015).

A second ritual feature in RPGs is *liminality*. Proposed by van Gennep and later developed by Victor Turner to explore its social consequences (Turner 1995), it denotes the state where one cannot decide, not even relatively, if one is on the profane side or the sacred one. There is no absolute sacred place but only a *pivotment* between them (van Gennep 1960). Liminality allows transient and neutral ritual zones to exist, common grounds where the participant can transform their roles, making possible social cohesion in both secular and religious contexts. The onset of the liminal state in RPGs is evident. Laycock (2015) claims:

Within this state of ritualized play, players are able to achieve a form of liminality. As their characters, players have temporarily escaped the structure of their ordinary social roles. Within the small body of scholarly literature on role-playing games, it now goes almost without saying that role-playing games are a form of liminal experience. (183)

Liminality in RPGs allows for the active creation of meaning strengthened by the shared narrative as a communal negotiated process (Schallegger 2018, 195). Unlike other rituals, RPGs become unique neutral spaces where one can play as a character with a completely different idiosyncrasy than that we own in everyday life or even an entirely fictitious one, thanks to the interplay of active imagination.

Lastly, we have what Émile Durkheim coined as *collective effervescence*, i.e., the fervor that arises in the ritual action that excites the participants toward ecstasy and unifies them (Durkheim 1995). For games, this is intimately related to *immersion*, i.e., the intensity of involvement of the player with the game (Calleja 2011; Bowman 2012; Lehrich 2005; Bowman 2018). The more a player gets involved, the subjective distance concerning the game reduces, fostering ludic continuity. RPGs are particularly special in this regard. Their ludic experience is more vivid as players interact with a co-created, *alive* narrative. As Mark Silcox and Jonathan Cox (2012, 131) remark, "The game hardly ever allows players to view things in the game world purely as objects of contemplation. Rather, it always requires us to immerse ourselves in the world that the DM envisages, via the first-person perspective of a fictional character." In any ritual, the experience is intensified by the presence of witnesses. This happens in games, too, and probably with the highest intensity in RPGs because the fictional world collaboratively built recognizes the presence of the player (Calleja 2011). Playing an RPG is living stories "in the flesh" of the characters, reinforcing the liminal state. "Thus, the 'audience' of a role-playing game invents the narrative as well as experiences it" (Bowman 2010, 13). We can conclude alongside Schallegger that "The immersive nature of the secondary reality produced and its performative procedural creation using elements of appropriated pre-texts clearly link ritual and RPG" (2018, 193).

## 5. THE SYMBOLIC APPROACH OF RPGs

Once we have revisited RPGs as rituals, we can explore them as symbols. We know that RPGs depend on a set of rules due to their ludic character. Since Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, RPG writers have designed adventures that groups worldwide can enact on their own terms. The extensive rulebooks and variety of *props* (miniatures, maps, screens, costumes) and *system elements* that support the ludic character of RPGs serve as the schematic side. They constitute a general draft that can lead to infinite personal realizations (general to particular). Inversely, RPGs possess an allegoric, metaphoric character because what has been collaboratively narrated points to a fictional world even though it exists, in principle, only during a single session. Each session is an allegory (a window) to a fictional world that can be built and stands on itself (general to particular) (Ehrett and Worth 2012). Players and game directors often get involved in worldbuilding that develops into large campaigns lasting for years. Unlike other games, RPGs *simultaneously* support the intimacy of the personal, co-created world and the transcendental conditions for others to visit. This means that RPGs' gamist (schematic) and narrative (allegoric) characters are balanced even if they seem irreconcilable.

Now, let us turn to the opposition of RPGs' narrative (myth) and dramatic (ritual) dimensions. Generally, narrating something is not equivalent to immediately experiencing what is told. Rituals help to save this distance by creating a direct experience (Duch 1998). But RPGs constitute an exceptional case because, as we discussed before, one genuinely experiences the fictional world when one plays it. Narrative and drama are deeply intertwined. So, the performative act of taking the role of characters, actively pretending what they think, sustains the continuity of the narration; simultaneously, it is the narration that directs the action. In other words, one would say that in RPGs, the ritual side creates a space for the narrative to flourish in a mythic way, while the shared story preserves the ritual as a ludic activity. As Schalleger claims, "If RPGs are performative narrative processes, they are therefore also ritualistic narrative spaces, as the experiences concerned are repeated" (2018, 196). Thus, RPGs cannot be merely reduced to either rituals or myths; they work in the two levels and constitute a perfect combination (undifferentiated balance) of mythic narrative and ritual interpretation. In this sense, RPGs would be an example of what Rusch (2018) calls a *mythical game* where:

the boundaries between myth and ritual are blurrier. In games, you are not just told a myth. You perform a myth. The actions you take – even your moment-to-moment core mechanics – become part of the myth, and the way to experience the myth is through enactment. (7)

Moreover, the myth-ritual axis unfolds a spectrum where either the narrative or dramatic features can be intensified. Thus, we can locate tabletop RPGs as an intensification of narrative and myth due to their verbal dependence and larp as that of drama and ritual thanks to their specific eidetic reduction (Harviainen 2006) resulting from their physical embodiment and interpretation. Nevertheless, all RPG expressions would still be symbolic.

## 6. SYMBOLIC DEVICES

Tautegoricity helps us to exhibit the advantage of the symbolic standpoint: to the extent that RPGs are symbols, they can also be thought of as organisms and works of art. Following Schelling's philosophical ideas, these two share a deep metaphysical kinship with symbols (Schelling 1989). Art and organisms are not only tautegoric but autonomous, i.e., they should not be judged as mechanisms, i.e., according to a *telos* outside them (Kant 2007). They stand by themselves and serve no other purpose than keeping

themselves *alive*. We have already recognized this autonomous and living character of RPGs. They are not mere mechanisms serving only a ludic purpose, even though they have a schematic side. According to Pete Wolfendale and Tim Franklin (2012, 221), these traits make them a unique form of art, “It also gives this world a kind of *autonomy* from us, letting us experience the world as if it is unfolding *itself*, even though all its elements are contributed by us.”

RPG fictitious worlds are larger than the players and allow us to interact with them as if they were independent of us: “only role-playing mimics the friction we encounter in bumping up against an autonomous reality” (Wolfendale and Franklin 2012). RPG worlds resist us, and the deepness of this interaction is reflected in the intense immersion and liminality, even though it is not a fully independent world as its substance is made of our subjectivity and imagination. From the symbolic perspective, I would define that RPGs are living mythic rituals and the art of the (ironic and collaborative) imagination (Bateman 2012; Saler 2012).

I deem RPGs as *symbolic devices* (because we employ them) and *symbols themselves* (because they gain autonomy) (Bastarrachea 2017). To live and grow, they feed upon the cultural elements that participants bring to the table, what Daniel MacKay calls *fictive blocks* (2001). When active, in the liminal state, the shared narrative takes those elements from the players and reconfigures them to create new meaning at the *symbolic level*. Laycock (2015, 183) expresses that in RPGs, “The normally fixed order of things becomes fluid, and symbols and people can be infused with new meaning.” From this point of view, RPGs imply direct engagement with the archetypes because they are symbolic.

Thus, playing an RPG is an “easy way” to enter a symbolic domain, where we directly interact with symbols without mediation, connecting ourselves to our cultural roots with the gifts and dangers that come along. Our psychic, spiritual and metaphysical relation to the roots of our culture is refurbished in the mythic-ritual space of RPGs, easing the constellation of the archetypes (Jung 2010). We cannot create symbols out of the blue, but we can allow them to be embodied in new incarnations and, thus, live and mean differently. As a result, not only fictive blocks are transformed, but our whole subjectivity. In this regard, tabletop RPGs and larp pose as complementary options for archetypal engagement and subjectivity transformation as they would be located at different points in the spectrum of symbolic exegesis.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS: ANSWERING THE MODERN CONDITION

Once a game session has finished, the RPG -- as an autonomous organism and ephemeral work of art -- either dies or goes dormant. Then, we are left only with the testimony of the experience in the form of personal mythology (Larsen 1996). Not every RPG session would reach the symbolic level, only those with an onset of this lingering, anecdotic experience. Hence, RPGs have the potential to create mythological meaning and spaces where we can heal the harmful effects of the disenchantment project. As Bowman claims, (2010, 15) “Role-playing games fulfill the need for a modern-day ritual, cultivating the archetypal symbols of myth and providing a co-created social activity for the enactment of meaningful narratives.” Even though the manifestation of symbols is not exclusive to our times, we could claim that RPGs are a necessary result of imagination’s evolution in Modern times. Maybe RPGs are a unique device that emerged in postmodern times as an answer to the disenchantment project by providing a balance of rationalization (conceptual, schematic) and enchantment (imaginal, allegoric) (Mizer 2019), an equilibrium proper, again, of the symbolic. A timely opportunity considering the Modern acute discomfort in a secular, fragmented, and globalized world demands the creation of spaces and experiences based on mutual interests to foster social cohesion (Bowman 2010).

Games evolve because imagination does so (Saler 2012). The traditional perspective where games capture a fundamental aspect of our culture may be accurate. Still, it seems insufficient to grasp all the complexity of evolved and postmodern games like RPGs, which continue to grow in both the indie and most commercial scenarios as we speak. My proposal strives to unify theoretical dichotomies in role-playing game studies and pave the way in the current understanding of how RPG players interact with the archetypal domain, not only in the psychic, social, and cultural realms but also in the religious and metaphysical ones.

The remaining question is: how to harness this power to design games that improve their symbolic reach, i.e., to explore them as capable devices that profoundly transform our subjectivities and re-enchant our worlds? Archetypes are always there (so myths and rituals); RPGs offer a chance to renegotiate our relationship with them. People need stories, people need a community, and RPGs provide both. Schalleger (2018, 196) points out, “This revitalization of the individual will in turn lead to a revitalization of the society it reintegrates with.” Even though my approach to the symbolic dimension of RPGs has been philosophical, it may be complemented with an approach from psychology, necessary for the exploration of symbolic, archetypal, and mythic engagements (Beltrán 2013; Rusch 2018), shadow work (Beltrán 2013) and soul guiding (Rusch and Phelps 2020), as well as the dangers of affirming social inequalities due to their ritual character (Lehrich 2005). Finally, a detailed discussion that recognizes the symbolic (and mythic) features proper to different RPG expressions, such as tabletop RPG and larp, as well as their ritualization (Hoover et al. 2018), would be necessary for the future.

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