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Role-Playing: A Narrative Experience and a Mindset

The author introduces arguments about the relationship between games and narratives, and goes on to discuss their implications for role-playing games. Her main argument is that role-playing games present a particular type of games with strong narrative aspirations, as the games are being 'narrativised' in various ways. This leads to the idea of role-playing as a mindset that can be imported into playing other types of games as well.

In the beginning of the 1990s it would have been unbelievable to say that one could be studying popular games in academia, at least in any other sense than sociological study. But due to the research in digital arts and cultures, and growing interest in hypertext and other interactive narratives, more and more game-like texts and even papers about games began to make appearances in international conferences. In 2001, Norwegian professor of literature and the author of the book *Cybertext*, Espen Aarseth launched a scientific journal called *Game Studies*[1] with his international colleagues, and it, with some conferences, was a beginning for game studies as a discipline. Their research agenda has been to study games as games, mainly focusing in digital games, due to the history of game studies and the fact that digital games are the most rapidly growing entertainment form in the world, with very little research available.

Role-playing games are obviously making their way to the academia and into critical discussions, but the actual amount of papers has been even smaller than regarding digital games at the moment. It's somewhat odd because role-playing games were the starting point for computer games as well[2], so it could be imagined that there should be more studies of them. Maybe the lack of study is due to the fact that digital games are a bigger business and nowadays their image is maybe also less nerdy. Within the last few years there has been a wildly growing interest to study role-playing games as well – especially in the Nordic countries (where game studies also started a few years ago).

[1] www.gamestudies.org

[2] See Brad King and John Borland (ed) (2003): *Dungeons and Dreamers: The Rise of Computer Game Culture from Geek to Chick.*

Defining a Game

The term 'role-playing game' has the word game in it. What, then, makes a role-playing game a game, or is it a form of game at all? In game studies, there have been several more and more specific models for defining a game:

> [A game is] an interactive structure of endogenous meaning that requires players to struggle toward a goal. (Costikyan 2002.)

> A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome. (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, 80.)

> A game is a closed formal system that subjectively represents subset of reality. (Crawford 1982.)

In addition, French anthropologist Roger Caillois (1961, 6–7) describes the pleasure of game play as follows:

> The game consists of the need to find or continue at once a response *which is free within the limits set by the rules*. This latitude of the player, this margin accorded to his action is essential to the game and partly explains the pleasure which it excites.

Most definitions of 'game' have rules, temporal structures, winning conditions, conflict, and goals as their central building blocks. All of these, except winning conditions, can be easily found from role-playing games, so role-playing games would seem to qualify as games by definition. I will divide role-playing games into a number of forms of role-playing that all have several traits in common: They all are games, which consist of strategic and simulation-based actions in a fictitious world, where structures of conflict are strongly both encouraged and supported by the design of the game, i.e. the game master and/or the game system. (On means to support conflict through character design, see Lankoski & Heliö 2002 and Lankoski, Heliö & Ekman 2003.) Players play these games usually through a point of view of a character, whose life they are supposed to immerse themselves into. The conflict in a game can be internal or external, i.e. character-based or group-based opposed to world-based, and it can be used as a starting point, motivator or dynamic element in the game.

Role-playing games are usually divided into three categories: First, there are tabletop (or pen and paper) role-playing games, which are usually played around the table where players perform their characters in a more or less immersed manner. Second, there are live-action role-playing games, where players dress up as their characters and act them out in surroundings simulating the game world. Finally, there are computer and video role-playing games where the medium is the digital game. In these, the core of the role-playing is often similar to the tabletop type, and sometimes more restricted due to the communicational forms of the game. These last ones are the only ones where there is a single player role-playing, as paradoxical as this arrangement sometimes is.

In the family of role-playing games there are also a whole bunch of other game types and game-like activities that can be included or excluded, like the collectible card games (such as *Magic: The Gathering*) and board and strategy games (like *Warhammer 40.000*), or different forms of theatrical and larp-like combinations, such as fate-play. The action of role-playing is usually somehow present in these game forms, but the focus can be more either in the competitive nature of the game (MtG, Warhammer), or in the immersive performance (as in fate-play), than in role-playing itself.

Some game theorists claim that role-playing games shouldn't be classified as games at all, due to the fact that most of them lack the winning condition or fixed rules. Game scholar Jesper Juul and game designers Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen comment that these games could be seen as "limit case" games, or borderline cases (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, 81–82; Juul 2003, 39). In any case, they are not considered 'proper' games. Still, role-playing games continue to maintain their ambivalent position and great variety in styles of playing. To really understand the phenomena, we must see how they function and what traits they have in common with other games, and what makes them special. Now that we know that role-playing game as a category is a very strongly game-oriented borderline case, we should examine, what is the role of their supposed narrativity. Are role-playing games stories, and if so, then what kind of stories are they?

Telling Stories?

Theories on interactive narratives and their relationship to games have often romanticised the subject. The same attitude can be found also in some of the theories regarding role-playing games. For example, Murray (1999, 152) writes: "Perhaps the next Shakespeare of this world will be a great live-action role-playing GM who is also an expert computer scientist" (see also Mackay 2001).

To counter-argument this romanticism, Danish game researcher Jesper Juul has examined some of the fallacies regarding games and narratives in his article *Games Telling Stories?* Juul presents an approach that within game studies has been called 'ludology'. The term was originally coined by another game researcher and designer, Uruguyan Gonzalo Frasca. The essence of this approach was to study games as games, on their own merits, and to question the efforts to interpret games as narrative, cinematic, etc. (see Frasca 2000).

I find this ludological approach very refreshing and lucid. According to Juul, there are at least three common arguments for seeing games and narratives as equals: 1) We use narratives for everything. 2) Most games feature narrative introductions and back-stories. 3) Games share some traits with narratives. Juul then explores three important reasons for understanding games as non-narrative phenomena: 1) Games are not a part of the narrative media ecology formed by movies, novels, and theatre. 2) Time in games works differently than in narratives. 3) The relation between the reader or the viewer

and the story world is different than the relation between the player and the game world. (Juul 2001.)

To get to the roots of the games vs. narratives debate, one should look into the study of narratives and narration. This discipline is called narratology, and under its wings, literature and film scholars have established a number of definitions for the key concepts. For instance, 'story' has been defined like this:

> Story is the event and characters "Text" is a spoken or written discourse, which undertakes the telling. Text is what we read.
> Since the text is spoken or written it implies someone who speaks or writes it. The act or process of production is the third aspect – "narration". (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 3.)

To sum up: narration always requires a narrator and someone for whom the story is narrated. In games this is not the case. But in role-playing games it could be said that all players participate in the action of the narration, and also form the audience at the same time. A theorist on interactive narratives, Janet Murray writes:

> Role-playing games are theatrical in a non-traditional but thrilling way. Players are both actors and audience for one another, and the events they portray have the immediacy of personal experience. (Murray 1999, 42.)

This does not, however, turn the game into a story, much less a narrative. In role-playing games the players have the plot elements, the actions forming the story, the game master's power guiding the game and the written background materials in a way of a scriptwriter. However, the actual actions of a game do not make it a story. We can tell stories about life, but that does not make our lives, as they happen, stories as such: the story of one's life is always subordinate to the life actually lived. (Cf. Juul 2001.)

Narrative Experiences

In role-playing games the narrator and the narratee are both quite lacking; there is no one for whom the story is told to, and neither is there a storyteller. We can of course assume that the game master and the players reconstruct the story by playing the game – which is even partially true. Still, we must note that there is no actual story in the game of the role-playing game, though there are events, characters and structures of narrativity giving the players the basis for interpreting it *as* a narrative. We have many partially open structures that we may fulfil with our imagination during the course of the game – within its limitations. We also have the ability to follow different kinds of narrative premises and structures as well as imitate them for ourselves to create more authentic and suitable narrative experiences. We have the 'narrative desire' to make pieces we interpret to relate to each other fit in, to construct the plot from recurring and parallel elements (Brooks 1984). This effort in games has been discussed as a form of 'intrigue', a secret plot with several different possible outcomes (Aarseth 1997, 112).

As I have argued before, the narrative desire can be 'fed' with specific game design solutions: e.g., ideas of dramatic writing can be used as a basis for character design (Lankoski & Heliö 2002). Also, it is possible to guide the player's interpretations with similar means (Lankoski, Heliö & Ekman 2003).

It now seems obvious that games aren't stories, and that they only share some similar elements.However, the careful structure of the process of role-playing and the silent intention of narration, as well as the intention to create narrative experiences for the players, are what makes role-playing games so interesting.

This makes us realise how important it is for us to interpret sequences of events as stories, and tell in them about things we consider important. The narrative desire becomes evident at these moments. It doesn't make the games themselves stories, nor does it make the events in them stories. It is our interpretations and experiences that can be strongly narrative seeking, and this becomes even more evident in the way we put the experiences into words after having played. In Finnish larps, the debrief session offers opportunities for the individual players to 'narrativise' their experiences in the game. By verbalising their actions in the game, the players make a story out of the game.

This is my core point here. Role-playing game is a specific type of game with strong narrative aspirations, which implicate telling stories and creating narrative experiences out of games. So in a sense, role-playing games constitute a type of narrative games, but the theoretical standpoint is different from the ones where most games and story-like experiences are considered alike.

Role-playing games rely on communication. Due to this fact we start making up stories, we start verbalising, and thus narrativising the experience. There are some strong structures in these games that support narrativity and make it possible to experience these games as narratives. Also, a strong terminological background exists to support our narrativised "readings" of the games. For instance, terms like 'drama points' and 'a storyteller' are often used creating the feeling of a story emerging during the game (see, e.g., *Vampire: The Masquerade*).

Usually it is the aim of a role-playing game to produce a narrative experience, or an interpretation of the game's events. These turn into an emotional experience that can vary from a lighter "Yey, we had ourselves an adventure!" to the more serious "Oh, now I understand what a complex phenomenon war is". The typical position from which to attain these kinds of experiences is the character that one plays, i.e. the one the player identifies with, and her point of view to the events. However, the immersion giving birth to the emotional experience is not restricted to the player's own character, the other characters and their behaviour, other players' emotions and experiences, the game world, and the game events and outcomes affect an individual player's experience and serve as its point of origin.

All role-playing games have in common also the use of popular culture and especially certain of its genres. For instance, fantasy genre is very strongly linked to all role-playing games due to the fact that the first role-playing games were developed with J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-Earth in mind. Nowadays, not only epics and fantasy short

stories influence the structures of role-playing games, but the story formats familiar from television series and serials give shape to games (see, e.g., *Buffy the Vampire Slayer Roleplaying Game*) and influence the ways they are interpreted and experienced. For instance, exploration and combat are themes found in epics and in present-day television drama, organised into episodes – and similar themes and structures can be found in role-playing campaigns. (On the usage of pop culture in role-playing games, see Mackay 2001, 29–33.) Recognizable pop-cultural and genre elements and structures have also been argued of being useful in maintaining a coherent diegesis of the game (see Montola 2003, 80–87, Stenros 2004 and Hakkarainen & Stenros 2003, 56–63).

Petri Lankoski (2003, 15–19) writes about narrative interpretations and the ways of using our narrative schemes to support the interpretations. I see these kinds of actions (introductions of settings and characters, initiating events, outcomes, etc.) as vital for role-playing, as in this way we can truly start building the narrative experience out of what we have played and experienced, performed and felt during the role-playing session. Lankoski uses ideas from film studies (Edward Brannigan) and cognitive psychology (Jean Matter Mandler). With the help of these theories he creates a model where the operation of these kinds of schemes is explained, and goes on to discuss how narrative interpretations can be supported by adopting certain scriptwriting solutions.

The Mindset

In addition, role-playing games are interesting in the sense that even though it is a game genre, and has its own subgenres, it can also be considered as a manner of playing that can be adapted to playing any kind of game. All games require the players to make a certain kind of contract with the game – to submit to the rules and to play along. Moreover, all games require the use of imagination, and especially in role-playing games the existence of a make-believe world and the shared use of imagination are emphasised. Naturally, an off-game object does not actually transform into the object it is imagined as being in-game: for instance, if an airplane in the sky becomes a dragon in some larpers' imaginations, it does not actually turn into a dragon – and even the players do not actually think so. The group of players have a common contract stating how to behave in the situation, because they willingly share the game's make-believe world. In order to sustain the agreed immersion, the 'dragon's' airplaneness' should not in any case be directly voiced aloud.

As this kind of method of using one's imagination for dramatic and playful purposes is at the heart of role-playing practices, it is possible to adopt a similar attitude into playing other kinds of games. For example, this mindset allows the player to perceive seemingly insignificant events significant for the sake of narrative. With narrative desire, throwing dice (a device bringing randomness to the game) can be perceived as a meaningful, dramatic event. This mindset can be used in role-playing games to achieve

better immersion, but it does not equal an immersive playing technique per se, as it can be taken advantage in relation to other kinds of game play as well.

So, one may role-play strategy games and roulette as well as shoot 'em up video games. Even football can be played with this mindset; it doesn't necessarily constitute a role-playing game if the players take the roles of famous footballers, but if the player roles are complemented with role-specific rules, the shift towards role-playing game has begun. In role-played football there could be rules concerning the chances of different players to score in different situations.

It is crucial to know the mechanics of the mindset and have the will to use one's imagination. Even if a game does not support active role-playing, as most of the massive multi-player online role-playing games fail to do (*Dark Age of Camelot* and others), experienced role-players may adopt the mindset and take advantage of the game's communication functionalities, and start to role-play. This, however, requires the willing support or at least acceptance of the other players – any one of us can act like a prince, but if the others won't play along, it does not constitute role-playing. In order for role-playing game to emerge, the role should have some relation to the game's rules. Often these relationships might exist only as implied ones, but the player should at least be able to verbalise them.

The benefit of the role-playing attitude and mindset is that it can be used to renew experiences of playing other games by attaching a promise of narrative experience alongside them. Even if the mindset can be taken advantage of in playing games, I argue that a game becomes a role-playing game only when it qualifies with some of the traits an RPG should, by definition, have. These include a rule set, multiple players with characters, and a game master.

Conclusions

My point in introducing this model is to define role-playing games in a fashion that would highlight the variety that exists in concrete forms of role-playing games, and to understand them better. Games can be more "game-like", more action-oriented or more narrative-oriented, which depends on the participants and the game system itself. It is possible to expand role-playing to other kinds of games, and to gain narrative experiences through the role-playing mindset, even with seemingly non-role-play games. Role-playing games function according to the storytelling principle, where the premise of the narrative experience is written into the game concept as a starting point for the game master, and as motivation for the players to play the game.

As a summary: the role-playing mindset can be used when the player wants to embed narrative motives into game play, no matter what kind of a game is being played. However, this mindset does not change the game into a role-playing game, because they have, by definition, also formal traits that should be shared among the players before the game counts as a role-playing game. These traits include such things as a rule set

that is, first, used to structure the game itself, and, second, used to simulate the game world. This rule set gets activated within the game's shared diegesis by the players and the game master, and the degree to which the rule set gets negotiated depends on the flexibility of the game system – for instance, digital game systems usually do not allow such negotiation regarding either rules or game mechanics, and to my experience this varies considerably with human-driven game systems as well.

Third, the game also requires that the players play the game, in order for it to function. Therefore, in role-playing games there should be two or more independent entities. One of them is a game system that varies from a human game master to game engines in digital role-playing games, and to rule sets in one-player book-based adventures. The number of the other entities equal the number of players taking part in the game: the maximum number of participants varies from one to the approximately one to ten in table-top games, possibly expanding to tens or hundreds in larps, and thousands in MMORPGS.

Role-playing games themselves are different from other types of games in the sense that they pursue narrative experiences and storytelling. Mostly this gets actualised after the game has been played, as players verbalise their actions in informal or formal manner. Formal practices include larp debrief sessions, where typically every player has few minutes to summarise their character's actions. Game reports or diaries are another practice, used in long campaigns, where players brief the game masters about their actions so that they stay informed of the game's events. An example of the more informal practice is the usual post-game discussion about game events and character actions.

These forms of verbalisation support the narrativity in role-playing games and also the implied storytelling surrounding them. The need to narrativise played-out actions is a fundamental structure of role-playing games. It is a trait that makes role-playing games particular when compared to other games: RPGs are games that offer implied motivation for creating narrative experiences and encouraging players to tell stories about them.

I consider this kind of model necessary because for me role-playing games are not just about simulations of possible worlds or about calculating experience points, neither are they all about storytelling communities or creating narratives. I want to see role-playing as a way of playing games that can be adapted into various kinds of games and gaming concepts. The role-playing dimension can also be analysed, developed and designed in several different ways depending on one's motives. In my view, exclusive definitions of role-playing that consider it either as a form of storytelling or just a game, do not give the form the credit it deserves as a diverse and complex set of phenomena. I hope this model introduces a perspective to role-playing games that is useful when developing theories of role-playing games.

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