

International Journal of Role-Playing

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

Editorial

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

Markus Montola
Editorial Board IJRP

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Defining Role-Playing Games as Language-Games

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.

Jonne Arjoranta
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Playing House in a World of Night: Discursive Trajectories of Masculinity in a Tabletop Role-Playing Game

This study uses excerpts from the transcript of a tabletop role-playing game (RPG) session to examine how male players enact ideas about masculinity. The game is a non-traditional, small-press "indie" game called Ganakaqok designed by the author; in the game, the characters are men and women from a quasi-Inuit culture living on an island of ice in a world lit only by starlight.

William J. White
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Immersion as a Prerequisite of the Didactical Potential of Role-Playing

The article deals with the relation of immersion and the didactical potential of role-playing. It fathoms the extent to which role-playing games without a didactical goal still have didactical potential, as well as the extent to which this potential is being exploited.

Myriel Balzer
Philipps-Universität Marburg
Germany

32-43

Stereotypes and Individual Differences in Role-playing Games

Because of the endurance of stereotypes about role-playing gamers, much research has been carried out which provides evidence to contradict the stereotype's prevailing misconceptions. This paper aims to investigate this existing research into the individual differences in those who play role-playing games and provide a comprehensive review of research in the areas of demographics, interests, personality and identity as they pertain to gamers.

Noirin Curran
University College Cork
Ireland

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Sadomasochist Role-Playing as Live-Action Role-Playing: A Trait-Descriptive Analysis

This article describes sadomasochist role-playing which is physically performed by its participants. All sadomasochist activities have a role-playing component to them. It is a form of role-playing where people consensually take on dominant and submissive roles, for the purpose of inflicting things such as pain and humiliation, in order to create pleasure for all participants.

J. Tuomas Harviainen
University of Tampere
Finland

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Editorial

Welcome to the IJRP!

The mission of the *International Journal of Role-Playing* is to be a publication venue for the top-class articles discussing role-playing and role-playing games. The scope of the journal is broad, being inclusive for relevant submissions from a number of fields. Due to our ambition, the road from the first issue, published in 2008, has been a long one. It is our sincere hope that you, the reader, will enjoy the fruits of our quest for quality scholarship, presented in the five articles included in this issue.

Quite a bit has happened on the topic of role-playing research since we published our inaugural issue. For instance, on the topic of recreational tabletop role-playing, McFarland alone has published three notable monographs: Sarah Lynne Bowman's *The Functions of Role-Playing Games* (2010), Jennifer Grouling Cover's *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (2010) and Michael J. Tresca's *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games* (2011). Other interesting works include the peer-reviewed collection *Think Larp*, published in Knudepunkt 2011, and the artbook *Nordic Larp*, that documents a cross-section of 30 notable Nordic live-action role-playing games.

In this environment, the role of the *International Journal of Role-Playing* is to bring together the divergent threads of scholarship. What can creation of narrative in tabletop role-playing games contribute to our understanding of online role-play? How can Nordic larp researchers contribute on the discussion on functions of role-playing? Psychologists have been onto role-playing since the 1920s, psychodrama should have a lot to contribute to the way game studies understands role-playing. After all, the very act of role-playing stays fundamentally same, even when the specifics vary depending on the medium.

The diverse background of the *IJRP* editors and reviewers allows for a broad view and tight scrutiny on what is considered "relevant" earlier work, hopefully bridging the gaps of the researchers of tabletop role-playing games, larps, MMORPGs, educational role-playing, interactive drama, training simulations and so forth.

For this reason, I'm particularly happy to present a diverse assortment of five articles: Jonne Arjoranta takes a philosophical angle on the discussion on definitions of the first issue. Bill White discusses masculinity and tabletop role-playing through an analysis of texts produced in a play session of *Ganakagok*, a game of his own devising. Myriel Balzer discusses the relevance of immersion for the didactical potential of role-playing. Noirin Curran looks at role-playing as a social and cultural phenomenon, revisiting the stereotypical image of a role-player in light of quantitative studies. Finally, J. Tuomas Harviainen broadens the scope of what we perceive as role-playing, by studying the similarities of role-playing and sadomasochistic play.

On behalf of the Editorial Board, I sincerely hope you enjoy the second issue of the *IJRP*,

Markus Montola

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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.

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.

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 represented in software for digital examples) who control the remainder of the game world beyond the player characters. Players affect the evolution of the game world through the 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 interpretive.
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.

The traditional structure is a binary division into a game master and players, but this is by no means the only possibility.

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* 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 center³. 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.

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”.

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 discourses⁴, 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.

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).

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

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 games⁵ (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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Playing House in a World of Night: Discursive Trajectories of Masculinity in a Tabletop Role-Playing Game

Popular Abstract - This study uses excerpts from the transcript of a tabletop role-playing game (RPG) session to examine how male players enact ideas about masculinity. The game is a non-traditional, small-press “indie” game called *Ganakagok* designed by the author; in the game, the characters are men and women from a quasi-Inuit culture living on an island of ice in a world lit only by starlight. As the game begins, the imminent arrival of the Sun is announced, and game-play is about how the people of this culture deal with the approaching dawn. In one such game, the players of three male characters went through interesting character arcs in their interactions with each other and with female players; those arcs seemed to depict movement among different models of masculine identity. One implication of the study is that RPGs afford a fruitful site for reflecting upon ideas in discourse, and so it is possible for role-playing to serve as an aesthetic as well as an expressive medium—as art as well as play, in other words.

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ABSTRACT

The study of table-top role-playing games (RPGs) can serve as a useful adjunct to game studies more broadly in that it allows the constitution of games as performance (rather than as text, rules, or medium) to be acknowledged. This domain of inquiry may thus provide a way of connecting games in general to the study of active-audience participatory culture. To that end, the place of gender in table-top role-playing is considered, and the extent to which broader cultural changes may be reflected in how people play these games. Noting that fantasy RPGs have been identified as fundamentally misogynistic, this study explores the gender ideologies enacted by male players as male characters in a small-press “indie” tabletop RPG designed by the author. The transcript produced by play was examined in order to extract moments that seemed to illustrate the enactment of gender ideologies. Interestingly, the gender ideologies enacted in play seemed to describe “trajectories” of movement between ideal-type semantic poles that served as models of masculinity. In one instance, that movement amounted to self-conscious rejection of a persona adopted for parodic reasons. The study concludes

with the observation that the reflexive distance between player and character may be sufficient to allow role-playing games to serve an aesthetic or artistic as well as expressive or playful function.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the field of game studies, *role-playing* is an undertheorized concept. Game studies scholars sometimes find themselves tolerantly bemused when they discover that their conceptual definitions of *digital gaming* encompass the tabletop role-playing game or RPG (e.g., Aarseth 2006) as well as the digital fictions, video games, and other technologically mediated forms of play in which they are more interested, even as they nod to *Dungeons & Dragons* as historical precursor or progenitor of many of those forms (see, e.g., Steinkuehler and Williams 2006). Conceptually, role-playing encompasses activities related to game-play as performance: adopting a fictional persona and acting discursively in response to diegetic events (Montola 2008).

The game-studies idea that comes closest to seeing game-play as performance is perhaps the concept of *ergodic text* (Aarseth 1997), characterized as it is

by the requirement that the reader *work through* the text in some way (e.g., by the casting the yarrow stalks of the *I Ching* and consulting the resulting oracle) in order to fully experience it, although this tends to bracket off the activity of the reader in favor of the algorithmic processuality of the ergodic text itself. Similarly, the notion of digital games as *procedural rhetoric* (Bogost 2007) offers a possible point of entry to game-as-performance, but to a certain degree it remains focused on the expressive agency of a game's creator rather than of its players.

But role-playing *per se* is not often the topic of digital gaming investigations—perhaps because, despite *rapprochement* between the narratological and ludological approaches to the field (Frasca 2003), there is still a tendency to theorize the object of study as being either *constituted in text, like a story* (e.g., Atkins 2003, Jones 2008) or *constituted in rules, like a game* (e.g., Juul 2005, Wardrip-Fruin 2009). Role-playing games—constituted as they are in enactment, like a play—fall into the gap between those two perspectives. And because of their reliance on face-to-face interaction, they are typically regarded as outside the purview of mass communication-based research, which investigates digital games as a technological medium (Vorderer 2009).

The conception of role-playing adopted herein emphasizes its performative character, which can be overlooked if the textuality of games is overemphasized. For example, Mackay's (2001) definition sees RPGs as systems for turning spontaneous in-game interactions into stories—the role-playing is the spontaneous interaction, rather than the story-creation *per se*. And when Hammer (2007) refers to role-players as “tertiary authors” of RPG texts, it is important to recognize that it is the exercise of agency rather than the production of a textual artifact that is the sense in which we want to read her notion of authorship. See Montola's (2008) description of role-playing as a social activity involving an imaginary setting and imaginary characters manipulated via structures of power as well as White's (2009c) discussion of the interaction of social and diegetic frames for more detailed conceptual accounts of the activity of role-playing.

But it may be the case role-playing in the strictest sense is only part of a larger suite or repertoire of activities involved in digital gaming and may seem to be least among them, even within its eponymous type, regardless of medium. The mere

instrumentality of one's avatar in massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) play (Taylor 2006) is prefigured by Fine's (1983) participant observation of a tabletop RPG session, in which he noted a “strain between role-playing and game-playing” (p. 212), at one point even being told by an informant, “The one person who ever [played his character as a character rather than as an extension of self] was you in the first few games [you played with us]” (p. 264, n. 3). The tabletop RPG design theorists of the Forge (Edwards and Baker 1999) have discussed how different “stances” (relations between player and character) and “creative agenda” (orientations toward the play experience) affect the expectations that players bring to the game and their behavior at the table (for a summary of “Forge theory,” see Boss 2008). “Being in character” in an immersive kind of way may be the central or fundamental element of role-playing only in certain live action or larp games (Jarl 2009).

Nonetheless, accounts of what it is like to play a character in a tabletop game (Mackay 2001) or larp (Brenne 2005), inhabit an avatar in online play (Bessiere et al. 2007, Taylor 2006), or author a persona in a shared fictional world (Jenkins 2008) point to their essential similarity within the broader framework of “participatory culture,” in which the role of the audience rises to the level of epitextual co-production (Jenkins 1992). This being the case, it is clear that examining role-playing as an activity can provide insight into the character of participatory culture as a whole.

However, before the investigation of role-playing can contribute to a more general account of participatory culture, the way in which gender is enacted in RPGs requires some attention. This is because the generally male-oriented character of gaming culture makes it different from some other forms of fandom (e.g., “media fan writing,” in which women predominate—see Jenkins 2006), and because this gender orientation is a matter of interest and concern to scholars, activists, and game manufacturers (Carr 2007, Cassell and Jenkins 1998, Schott and Horrell 2000). This study contributes to the understanding of gender in RPGs by looking at the enactment of masculinity in a tabletop game.

2. TABLETOP ROLE-PLAYING AS A GENDERED SPACE

Beginning with Fine's (1983) seminal ethnography, the literature on RPGs has noted the extent to

which it is a gendered—i.e., male-dominated—activity. Fine suggests that this partly due to (a) the emergence of role-playing from the overwhelmingly male hobby of tabletop miniatures wargaming and (b) the differences in male and female play preferences, such that RPGs represent a “male-type” hobby by virtue of their longer duration, larger group size, and age-heterogeneity of participants (p. 63). However, Fine also describes the reactions of male gamers to female players and female characters, and while he doesn’t actually use the word “misogynistic” there is no doubt that this is the thrust of his depiction. “While it is not inevitable that the games will express male sexual fears and fantasies,” Fine concludes, “they are structured so that these expressions are legitimate” (p. 70).

More recently, Nephew (2006) has described the role-playing sub-culture as “pre-dominantly white, well-educated, middle-class males in their late teens to early twenties” (p. 127). And while the “dominant culture” in the U.S. feminizes and desexualizes this group, presenting them as “awkward, aging boys with *Dungeons & Dragons* t-shirts stretched taut against their bellies, holding up their prized custom-painted fantasy miniatures for the camera” (p. 128), its male-oriented settings “are in direct contrast to the impotency that society forces on male gamers” (p. 128). Nephew asserts that “by drawing on fantasy tropes, pseudo-historical background, and the work of biased writers like H.P. Lovecraft,” RPGs “disempower women either by masculinizing them or by positioning them in the roles of devalued and extraneous non-player characters (NPCs),” such that the “dominance of the male adventurers is consistently foregrounded... and an outlet for the male players’ erotic desires is provided by the misogyny common to role-playing” (p. 132).

Novitz (1996) similarly recognizes the way in which RPGs serve a specifically masculine function, although he is less scornful of that function than Nephew is. In what almost seems to be a father’s belated apology to his role-playing gamer son, he situates the development of role-playing games within the broader social context of the 1970s.

The rise of second-wave feminism[...] while timely and important, posed particular difficulties for young middle-class boys. Many

were exposed to a highly rhetorical debate in the home and elsewhere about male inadequacies. Males were explicitly associated with almost everything that was wrong with society, and the determination of well-meaning parents not to replicate those tendencies in their sons led to an adult intrusion into boys’ lives that, if we except the proscription on Barbie dolls, found no direct parallel in the lives of girls. While new opportunities were being opened for girls[...] boys were at times made to assume the psychological burden of responsibility for states of affairs that were not of their making. One effect of all of this [...] was to encourage boys to look elsewhere not just for their play and entertainment, but also for the freedom, support, and approval that were not always available to them in the classroom, at home, or in the media. What they developed was a space beyond the reach of adult condemnation; a space in which the growing adolescent desire for freedom and control would in some measure be met. (pp. 158-9)

If role-playing gaming is a site of male identity expression, then we might imagine that it is responsive to broader cultural shifts in masculinity, as Novitz implies. To imagine this, we must rely on a notion of gender that sees it as a discursive performance that positions individuals as men or women. “Manhood[...] is a continual, dynamic process” which “creates ‘men’ by linking male genital anatomy to a male identity” and then links “both anatomy and identity to particular arrangements of authority and power” (Bederman

1995, pp. 7-8). This process is one of “constant contradiction, change, and renegotiation” (Bederman 1995, p. 11) the effects of which may include alterations to cultural meanings of manhood, manliness, and masculinity in the face of changing historical circumstances. Further, conceptions of masculinity are tied to particular social settings and enacted discursively (Philipsen 1975).

If role-playing gaming is a site of male identity expression, we might imagine that it is responsive to broader cultural shifts in masculinity.

Given the fluidity of gender ideologies over time and space, it is possible that (*pace* Nephew) the gendered discourse enacted in RPGs has changed since the days of Fine’s pioneering study. Certainly gaming itself has changed. Today, women role-players represent about 20% of those who play at least monthly (Dancey 2000) versus the 5-10% described by Fine (1983), and are an increasingly vocal segment of the hobby (Boss 2009).

Additionally, male gender ideologies in the broader culture have shifted as well, at least among the population of young men who represent the bulk of gamers. Siegel (2000) describes the “glass-slipper boys and ruby-slipper girls” she encountered as part of her project to understand the gender ideologies of the millenials (i.e., the generation born in the late 70s and early to mid-80s). This generation rejects assumptions about male-female relations advanced by “majoritist academic feminism,” according to Siegel. Women are assumed to be both sexually adventurous and justifiably angry (requiring placating by men) while men are assumed to be moved by romantic impulses. “Almost all the young people with whom I spoke believed that misogyny was outdated and unhip,” Siegel (2000, p. 103) says.

To explore this further, it will be helpful to look at the “text” of an RPG; that is, the transcript of a role-playing game session. Much of the scholarship of table-top play relies on sociologist Erving Goffman’s (1974) notion of the “frame,” or the definition of the social situation that shapes and gives sense to people’s interactions within them. Noting that Goffman stipulates the possibility of multiple frames pertaining in any given situation, role-playing scholarship seeks to describe how role-

players shift among those frames to accomplish their in-game ends (see, e.g., Brenne 2005, Hendricks 2003, Hendricks 2006, Waskul and Lust 2004, White 2009c). In other words, what role-players do when they play is not so much *take on a role* but rather orient themselves toward the diegetic and ludic frames—an imaginary world and the rules for articulating it, in other words—in which they are participants.

3. FOREVER HAVE THE PEOPLE LIVED IN STARLIGHT COLD...

Ganakagok (White 2009a) is a pen-and-paper fantasy role-playing game designed by the author. It was originally written for a game design competition (Holmes 2004) and later printed as a small-press publication, making it one of a number of games similarly developed by an Internet-enabled “indie game design” community (Costikyan 2007).

“*Ganakagok*” is the name of the eponymous game setting, a gigantic island of ice floating in a starlit sea upon which the sun has never risen: in this world of ice, it has always been night! The player-characters (PCs) belong to the tribe of hunter-gatherers who live upon *Ganakagok*. Every game begins with the same situation: the people have begun to realize that, after centuries of night, the sun will soon rise. There is no pre-scripted plot, however; instead, the actions and reactions of the players in response to the given circumstances develop the on-going situation. Dealing with the approach of this inexorable change is the point of play, which tends to produce accounts that read like myths, fables, or just-so stories.

A recent game of *Ganakagok*, run and recorded in the summer of 2009 at a gaming convention in central New Jersey, had a more mundane or practical tone, however (White 2009b). With two women and three men as players (plus a male Game Master, or GM, who was also the game’s designer), in-game events revolved around details of domestic life within the village. The “metaplot” of the rising of the sun remained in the background as characters dealt with relationship issues and family troubles in their day-to-day lives. After briefly describing the initial situation and the characters involved in that situation, this analysis focuses on one moment within the game that seemed particularly interesting as an instance of reflection of and reflection upon gender.

3.1 The Situation of the World and the People

A game of *Ganakagok* begins with a short introduction of the setting by the GM: an island of

ice in eternal darkness inhabited by a tribal people to which intimations of sunrise have come. A tarot-like deck of playing cards is used to prompt descriptions of diegetic situations and to guide narrations of in-game consequences of character action. Each card has a label, a motif, and a meaning that can be drawn upon to inform player interpretations. For example, after the GM's setting description, he facilitates the group's determination of the overall "Situation of the World" by drawing two cards from the deck—in this case, the Ancient of Stars (*Beluga Whale*, "to celebrate; to feel joy and express it without reserve"; see Figure 1) and the Three of Storms (*Hole in the Ice*, "to have one's efforts produce results")—and inviting the players to interpret them. Keying in on the cards' *meanings* rather than their more concrete *motifs*, the players agree that those cards signify "increased bounty from the sea," perhaps as a result of the approach of the dawn. From that point, a second pair of cards produces the agreement that the people in general have grown "corpulent and lazy and selfish" as well as materialistic, desiring things of which they once had no need. At the same time, some among the people want a return to the purity of traditional ways.

What role-players do when they play is not so much *take on a role* but rather orient themselves toward the diegetic and ludic frames—an imaginary world and the rules for articulating it, in other words—in which they are participants.

3.2 Player and Character in Role-Playing

Having made these determinations, the players are ready to create their characters; to begin, in other words, their engagement with the diegetic frame through the instrument of role-playing. Ganakagok cards are used to prompt each player to come up with a "truth-vision," "change-hope," and "change-fear"—that is, a small narrative about how the character came to believe that change is coming, and what the character hopes and fears the outcome of that change will be. The following paragraphs summarize the players' self-generated character identities and pre-play backstories. In all cases, the gender of the character is the same as the gender of the player.

The Traditionalist Loremaster. Hokmuish has seen the younger generations fall into fads and fashions,

and hopes that he can lead them to return to the traditional ways. He fears that, instead, the adaptability of the young to the changing conditions of Ganakagok will make him and those of his age group dependent upon them.

The Noble Male. The survival of Kibaka's paraplegic twin sister made him realize that the Ancestors will always provide for the people, but he is afraid that this solicitude will make the people weak, like women. "This guy's a complete ass," said the player of his own character.

The Tormented Ice-Fisher. Karatoq realized that something had changed in the world when he was so weak-willed and greedy that he stole something. Uncaught and unwilling to confess, he nonetheless hopes that he will be found out and punished for his crime. His deep fear is that he will not be punished but instead will be called upon to serve as a leader of the people.

The Caring Flamekeeper. Telakrak dreamed that she married a mysterious figure, but read that dream as a sign that she should bring peace back to the people. She is afraid that her good intentions will alienate her from the tribe.

The Skilled Crafter. Nakelniq had a vision of an approaching time of upheaval. She hopes that the people will prove worthy throughout this trial, but fears that they will destroy themselves or the world instead.

The players thus begin the game with a sense of who their characters are and what motivates them to act. Additional game-mechanical procedures are employed to connect the characters in relationships with each other and with non-player characters (NPCs) as well as to give the characters "gifts" and "burdens" that are invoked in play to move the narration along different lines.

Interestingly, the three male characters seem to occupy diegetic positions that can be equated with three of the four common normative ideal types of masculinity typically encountered in discourses of gender (Schut 2006; see Figure 2). Hokmuish the traditional loremaster is practically a neolithic Puritan, his adherence to tradition underscored by his distaste for the faddishness and fashions of the younger generation; in this sense, his player has positioned him as an example of "respectable manliness": sober, serious-minded, and self-controlled. Kibaka the noble male, conversely, seems located within a paradigm of "rough

masculinity.” Although similarly suspicious of the new, in contrast to the traditional loremaster, he is constructed around an ideal of virile machismo, to the point that the player identified as one of Kibaka’s “gifts” or possessions a preserved bear-penis totem. Finally, Karatoq the tormented ice-fisher is defined by his desire to evade the patriarchal responsibilities of respectable manliness, a desire that initially might seem to position the character within “eternal boyhood,” but when coupled with Karatoq’s guilty regret over his youthful peccadillo signify instead the sort of sensitive introspection and self-appraisal characteristic of “liberated manhood,” self-consciously seeking a new model of masculinity that avoids the odious elements of the other three: inflexibility, insensitivity, and fecklessness, respectively.

These initial character descriptions may be regarded as proffering suggestions as to the stories their players would find interesting to explore. The nature of the game is such that it invites players to interrogate their conception of their characters: will they stay true to their initial conception, or will they change in some way as a result of the narrative co-constructed by the players? It is clear, by the way, that at this stage of the game, the players are *authoring* their characters, and in so doing striving for a kind of authorial detachment or ironic distance from the character (Bakhtin 1990). Kibaka’s player, for instance, issues a kind of authorial judgment upon the character by burdening him with sexual impotence as an in-game weakness—this is a move that invites the GM to invoke that burden in play as *something that matters* to the story; more importantly, it severely undercuts the line of macho virility that the player anticipates Kibaka presenting in the fiction.

Once character creation is complete, play begins. *Ganakagok* is structured such that each player has a “spotlight turn” in which the narrative revolves around his or her character’s choices, decisions, and reactions, regardless of the broader diegetic context. The player’s turn begins with the draw of a Ganakagok card that is interpreted by the GM as the character’s “initial situation.” The player then

describes or acts out the character’s response to that situation until a crucial point is reached; this “crux” is recognizable as the character’s commitment to a particular course of action:

Learning to identify the crux is an important skill for Ganakagok GMs, but one way of thinking about it is that when you reach a point in the narration when you don’t know what’s going to happen next, and it’s important that you don’t just pick one or the other, you’re probably at the crux. For example, suppose it’s been established that a character is out on the ice, hunting. That’s all we know. The situation card is thrown: *Child of Stars* (Reflected Image: to meditate or think introspectively). “You realize,” says the GM, “that as you have been stalking a small herd of reindeer, something has been stalking you.” Now suppose the player says, “I try to lose ‘em.” For some GMs (and some players), that will be enough, and play can progress to the next step (White 2009a, p. 44).



Figure 1.
A *Ganakagok* card.

This next step involves rolling a handful of six-sided dice and sorting them according to their value, with the results tentatively indicating (a) which of the GM or player will get to narrate the outcome of the character’s action, (b) the distribution of immediate consequences of that action in the form of “gifts” and “burdens” to those characters involved in the scene, and (c) the impact on the longer-term fortunes of the world, the people, and the individual characters in the form of a game-mechanical currency called Medicine (more Good Medicine than Bad results in a happy ending; otherwise, a tragic one).

However, these initial results can be modified by the reactions of the characters on the scene, as their

players describe those reactions as narrative justifications for the invocation of gifts, burdens, and other pre-established situational factors that could plausibly affect the final outcome. Thus, play includes both a *tactical* element and a *narrative* one. Players are concerned with manipulating the distribution of gifts and burdens and the distribution of Good and Bad Medicine as well as enacting and reacting to the on-going story in a satisfying way.

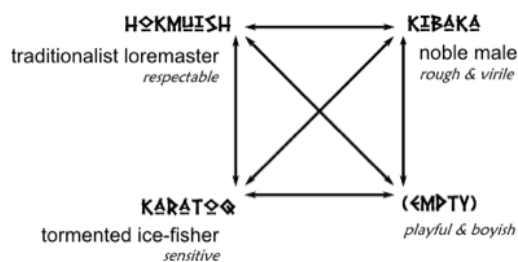


Figure 2. Modes of masculinity among three male characters.

3.4 Narratives of Masculinity

The story that has been collaboratively produced in play by the participants in this particular game can be seen as a set of trajectories within the discursive space of masculine identity—a space of contradiction, change, and renegotiation, to be sure. For example, in one scene, Hokmuish the traditional loremaster found himself faced with having to take charge of caring for his newborn daughter while his (NPC) wife recuperated from delivery. At the end of his turn, having won the right to narrate the outcome along with sufficient gifts to give that narration game-mechanical weight, Hokmuish's player changed his identity to "loving father" from "traditional loremaster," thus moving the character from the *respectable* pole toward the *sensitive* one; later, he would invoke that changed identity in play to justify his character's acquiescence to changes in the village occasioned by the dawn, on the grounds that he would want his daughter to live in the world as it will be rather than as it was. Conversely, on his turn, Karatoq the tormented ice-fisher abandons his introspective stance to call the people together and advocate a new cultural order; his player at one point stipulating that he was *lecturing at* rather than *debating with* the other villagers—a course of action more redolent of the patriarchal sensibilities of respectable manliness than consonant with the self-scrutiny of liberated and sensitive manhood.

3.5 The Tale of Kibaka and Telakrak

These summaries of the narrative have been kept brief in order to leave room for the story of Kibaka

the noble male and his interaction with his fiance Telakrak the caring flamekeeper, because of the pointedness with which issues of gender appeared in play during their turns. It is worth recounting the specific discursive moves used to articulate this story in order to more fully appreciate how role-playing achieves it affects. As Kibaka's turn opens, the GM asks his player (Frank) what Kibaka is doing at the start of the scene.

(1) FRANK (Kibaka): I think he's proselytizing the people. We must stick to our traditional ways. I think every man should go on a hunt today.

Notice the use of "free indirect style" of narration, in which no clear distinction is made between the voice of the narrator and that of the character: this is a tool that enables irony (Wood 2008). The GM (Bill) throws and interprets a Ganakagok card (Path: to look back fondly, without regret) as indicating that there is some reluctance on the part of young hunters to undertake the rigors of the hunt, but that they by and large accede to his blandishments.

(2) BILL (GM): Do you want to give us a little bit of what you're doing, what you're saying as you muster them to get ready, just to give us a little sense as we head into the consequence phase?

(3) FRANK (Kibaka): "Of course the sea has been plentiful, and we've been fortunate, but we've also become fat, like a seal on all this. We must be strong, like the bear. We must go out and hunt our food even if it's willing to throw itself into our mouths." [Others laugh]

(4) ANDREW (Karatoq): Uh, wow. That was a Gandalf moment, clearly—

Andrew's popular culture reference could be taken as an *incorporative discourse strategy* of that type (Hendricks 2006) were it not manifest sarcasm—but Andrew is indeed signaling his appreciation of Frank's straight-faced self-parody. Frank's enactment of Kibaka serves as a mocking self-deprecation of his own character, in other words. The crux of the scene occurs when some young

hunters grow discouraged and want to go back. Kibaka, brandishing the bear-penis, urges them to emulate his manliness. In the end, some of those young hunters return to the village, but a die-hard cadre remains out on the ice. The rules allow Frank to describe some positive consequences eventuating from this outcome.

(5) BILL (GM): Three points worth of Gifts.

(6) FRANK (Kibaka):
Alright, uh, Gifts.

(7) ANDREW (Karatoq):
Obviously a token of the hunt, like the skull of the great beast you killed or something, or the fangs of the beast or something.

(8) FRANK (Kibaka): Mm hm... Who am I going to lay this gift on? We manage to—so little predators out here.

(9) ANDREW (Karatoq):
Bears, sea lions, cannibal ghouls, wolves—

(10) FRANK (Kibaka):
Wolves! Thank you! We bring the skull of the arctic wolf—one of the least useful animals for us to have killed—and give it to our chief, our...

(11) BILL (GM): ...
loremaster?

(12) FRANK (Kibaka): —
because why would we give trophies to a priestess?
[Others laugh]

(13) FRANK (Kibaka):
That's one. Two, I want a *name* for our *group*—the hunters.

(14) ANDREW (Karatoq): So
you can put it on the map
you mean?

(15) FRANK (Kibaka): The
True—What's the name of
our tribe?

(16) BILL (GM): The Nitu.

(17) FRANK (Kibaka): The
True Nitu.

(18) ANDREW (Karatoq):
Oh, I hate you so much
[Others laugh].

(19) FRANK (Kibaka): I will
make some—[to Krista, as
Telakrak, who has been
identified as Kibaka's fiancé;
the players are
acquaintances only] Here's
some fat, cook it for dinner.

The preceding segment, which ended Kibaka's turn, opened in a straightforward way. Andrew and Bill in lines (5) through (11) are trying to help Frank introduce new in-game elements that are thematically consistent with the ice-world setting and with what has previously been established. Frank accepts their help, but his contribution ultimately continues his sardonic portrayal of Kibaka: he undercuts the character's self-importance by mocking the fruits of the hunt in lines (10) and (19), and he uses free indirect narration in line (12) to signal Kibaka's unself-conscious misogyny. In lines (13) through (17), Frank devises a way to show us Kibaka's exclusionary intolerance of those who have adopted or advocate change—a device that elicits a ruefully appreciative response from Andrew in line (18) in recognition of how it handicaps his designs for his own character.

Krista's turn follows immediately. Her situation card is called *Hunting Camp*, and the GM begins by offering a candidate interpretation that draws upon this imagery in line (20); this is immediately accepted in line (21).

(20) BILL (GM): Do you pay
a visit to the hunting camp,
is that what that means?

(21) KRISTA (Telakrak):
Yeah! I'm visiting my honey.
[Others laugh]

(22) ANDREW (Karatoq):
Oh, it's so *great* that you
have these guys out here;
I'm going to *come in*, and I'm
going to *take care of you*.

(23) KRISTA (Telakrak): "I
think it's so great that we're
going back to the old ways, I
think that's really what we
need, and I'm just so proud
of you..."

(24) KARIN (Nakelniq):

We're having male bonding here; get outta here!

(25) BILL (GM): So tell me what happens in the hunting camp. [Others laugh]

(26) FRANK (Kibaka): Loo—Lucy... [Others laugh]

(27) KRISTA (Telakrak): I think—I think we get into an argument because I'm butting in to the ways of the men.

The turns of talk show between lines (21) and (27) show the players working to underscore the somewhat comedic or even farcical aspect of the interaction between Kibaka and Telakrak. Krista draws upon a light-hearted register in agreeing that her situation involves a visit to her “honey,” and Andrew follows up in line (22) by modeling what a breezy Telakrak sweeping in to the hunting camp might say; Krista's in-character speech in line (23) takes Andrew's line as its sub-text. Karin in line (24) and Frank in line (26) model Kibaka's likely response to Telakrak's arrival—Frank with an allusion to *I Love Lucy*, the American situation comedy of the 1950s in which the husband would often find himself bemused and exasperated by his wife's little schemes. Krista in line (27) again accepts the sense of other players' offerings. Following the GM's prompt in line (28) below, Frank and Krista engage in an *in-character exchange* that affirms and enacts the previously established communal sense of what is happening.

(28) BILL (GM): All right, a little bit of the argument, and then we'll go to the consequence of the argument. Like, what's the fight about?

(29) FRANK (Kibaka): “What are you doing here?”

(30) KRISTA (Telakrak): “I figured I'd just come and give you support!”

(31) FRANK (Kibaka): “This is for *men*. This is for the men of our tribe, to save our tribe from becoming—”

(32) ANDREW (Karatoq): Weak.

(33) FRANK (Kibaka): “—weak.”

(34) KRISTA (Telakrak): “And who was the one who gave you advice on how to get those men rallied to even *become* hunters?”

(35) FRANK (Kibaka): “I knew what I was doing.” [Others laugh]

(36) BILL (GM): Good. Let's throw the consequence card and we'll continue this fight.

The turn proceeds to the reaction phase, wherein each player is able to bring in previously established narrative elements to affect the outcome of the turn. Krista describes how Telakrak brings up that she was the one who helped get the hunt started, and that without her help Kibaka wouldn't even have this gotten “this measly wolf fat” to give her. Soon it is Frank's turn to react, but he wonders if he should merely hold his peace.

(37) BILL (GM): Frank?

(38) FRANK (Kibaka): So, realistically, could I stay out of this and just take it?

(39) ANDREW (Karatoq): Yeah.

(40) BILL (GM): You can just take it. You can pass if you want. Just be a man—man up and take what's coming to you. [Others laugh]

(41) FRANK (Kibaka): Really.

(42) ANDREW (Karatoq): Used your in-game stuff as out-of-game smack talk: that was great.

(43) FRANK (Kibaka): I'm going to be uh—I'm going to take the first stage of this being “women just need to take—blow off steam”; I'm not going to fight that—

(44) BILL (GM): So you're passing?

(45) FRANK (Kibaka): —I understand. I'm passing.

Ironically, Frank seems to lack the courage of Kibaka's convictions; that is, he is unwilling to engage in the fight with Talakrak. This could be a tactical decision—since opposing her would mean working against the group as a whole in the larger game—or a character-driven one: it is clear that Frank thinks Kibaka is a hypocrite. He provides an in-character rationalization for his reticence in line (43). Krista, on the other hand, does not hesitate to assert her character. In what is rather a *tour de force*, she enumerates the in-game elements that justify her influence upon the situation (lines 47 through 51).

(46) BILL (GM): Krista, back to you—anything?

(47) KRISTA (Telakrak): Yep. I've got plenty. So I didn't bring in my change-hope, so I did, just arguing "I just wanted to come here and give my support because I thought that what you were doing was great for our tribe," and things like that. My presence: I'm there—

(48) BILL (GM): Because you've been arguing, sure.

(49) KRISTA (Telakrak): And then you know I have my *caring* flamekeeper and this is a part of me caring—

(50) BILL (GM): You're caring for the whole tribe, absolutely.

(51) KRISTA (Telakrak): You know what? "I just came here because *I love you* and I wanted to give my support," so that's four.

(52) FRANK (Kibaka): I feel so bad.

(53) ANDREW (Karatoq): It's so like a real argument.

(54) FRANK (Kibaka): It really is. I'm completely whipped in every possible way.

(55) ANDREW (Karatoq): No wonder you're so like, "Ah, let's be men, arr-ahh, because *I really just want to know how to be a man...*"

Frank and Andrew respond playfully, but their playfulness evinces a modicum of discomfort that acknowledges the power of Krista's discursive move and at the same time fully articulates the hypocrisy of Kibaka's machismo, which is revealed in the interaction to be a mere pose: Kibaka is a hollow man who, despite his bluster, "just wants to know how to be a man." Later, when Krista is awarding gifts, Frank suggests that she use one to remove Kibaka's erectile dysfunction; she is unconvinced.

(56) KRISTA (Telakrak): I was thinking about getting rid of my pride.

(57) FRANK (Kibaka): To be perfectly honest, that would make a nice little—That means she had the *world's best argument*. She came in yelling at me, and I'm like, "Yee-ah, all right, I'm liking this. Not only don't I hate you anymore, but I think I may love you."

(58) KRISTA (Telakrak): Unfortunately for your poor guy, I'm taking away my pride.

When the GM adds insult to injury by giving Kibaka the additional burden of being "cowed by Telakrak," Frank is non-plussed, but the female players are delighted at the character's comeuppance.

(59) FRANK (Kibaka): My God, this guy is never coming back from the brink.

(60) KRISTA (Telakrak): That's why your ED didn't go away.

(61) FRANK (Kibaka): Yes.

(62) KARIN (Nakelniq): You were too humiliated, that you were put in your place by a *woman*.

(63) FRANK (Kibaka): I deserve that so much, for bowing out twice in a row in something I really should have been screaming, [waving the] bear penis, "You don't control me when I'm hanging out with my

friends"—sorry—"when I'm hanging out with my friends!"

3.6 Dawn Comes to the Island of Ice

This extended recounting of a segment of play of a game of *Ganakagok* shows the extent to which role-playing as a discourse is highly *metacommunicative*—it is a *strategic dialogue* (White 2008; see also Calvino 1974) characterized by discursive modeling (often exaggerated for humorous effect), intertextual allusivity, and self-consciously ironical free indirect narration, all of which has the effect of enabling players to articulate and contest their shared diegesis. Furthermore, in this specific instance, it demonstrates the discursive processuality of manhood (Bederman 1995). It is not the case, in other words, that the masculine ideologies displayed by the players via their characters were adopted at the time of character creation and then merely applied prescriptively to shape character action in play; rather, they were enacted in play dynamically, in response to the exigencies of the fiction and in a recursive or reflexive fashion such that the character was the medium as well as the instrument of that enactment, changing in response to each player's play. To a certain extent, the semantic structuring of masculinity served as a discursive resource, enabling players to play with different forms of masculine identity and their transformations—Hokmuish the traditionalist loremaster was able to move from respectability to sensitivity, while Karatoq the tormented ice-fisher moved in the opposite direction. Interestingly, Frank-as-Kibaka the noble male was willing neither to articulate an alternative to the rough virility he had set up for mocking deconstruction nor to fully inhabit the "taboo self" (Bowman 2010) towards which his play was leading, as his final rueful comment suggests. The effect was to reveal the unsustainability of a "macho" gender ideology when faced with a genuine female presence at the table and in the fiction—quite a difference from the "reaction of male gamers" described by Fine (1983) almost thirty years ago.

This analysis is only partial, of course; it gives only short shrift to the experience of the female players at the table, but it should be clear that some kind of gender identity enactment was also taking place for them as well, with its own successes and failures, consistencies and contradictions. An extension of this analysis would examine how the discursive deployment of male and female gender ideologies interacted in play to create real-world

and diegetic *modi vivendi* for negotiating gender and other sorts of conflict.

4. THE ART OF ROLE-PLAYING

Bakhtin (1990) asserts that "what radically distinguishes play from art is the absence in principle of spectator and author" (p. 74). Play, in other words, is unself-conscious; and so stepping inside the "magic circle" (Huizinga 1950) of play involves less the adoption of an alternative persona and rather more the expression of a contingent identity—a felt, longed-for, or "trialable" aspect of self, that is to say—that may be as fleeting as the experience of play itself (see Bowman 2010, for a discussion of the approaches to identity enacted in RPGs). But as we have seen, players of role-playing games at least in some cases both author and witness their own play, moving it into the domain of *aesthetic* rather than purely *expressive* activity. In other words, in the gap between player and character may lie the difference between art and play.

(51) KRISTA (Telakrak): You know what? "I just came here because I love you and I wanted to give my support," so that's four.

(52) FRANK (Kibaka): I feel so bad.

(53) ANDREW (Karatoq): It's so like a real argument.

Mackay (2001) wants to understand fantasy role-playing gaming as a performance art, but it can sustain that classification only insofar as it is *available for reflection*—to the extent, that is to say, that it permits itself to be read as text. To be sure, there are some who are willing to allow RPGs to be called art by those who perceive its humanizing value for themselves (see Novitz 1996), but such allowances serve only to ascribe to role-players particular expressive needs, rather than to enable role-playing as a form to aspire to greater aesthetic aims. Nonetheless, the idea that role-players are "tertiary authors" (Hammer 2007) may be taken to imply that they are also "primary readers" of their own play. For this implication to be taken seriously, we must imagine that players are capable of engaging in the self-reflective examination of their own play, and that such self-reflections can be made available to secondary and tertiary readers within the gaming community. The existence of discussion sites like the Forge (Edwards

and Baker 1999), with its emphasis on “actual play” as the *lingua franca* of gaming talk, arguably gives substance to these suppositions.

The masculine ideologies displayed by the players via their characters were... enacted in play dynamically, in response to the exigencies of the fiction and in a recursive or reflexive fashion such that the character was the medium as well as the instrument of that enactment, changing in response to each player’s play.

The possibility thus exists that “participatory culture” of the sort that includes role-playing gaming may be able to *act on itself*—to serve as a discursive space in which dialogic action can change people’s understandings in addition to celebrating pop cultural tropes, motifs, and icons in an uncritical fashion or bemoaning them in an apocalyptic one (see Eco 1994).

These results also suggest that the most appropriate site for achieving an understanding of role-playing gaming is *not* the game-text but rather the “text” of play itself, even though the game-text is usually far more accessible for analysis. It should be noted that the increasing availability of recordings of “actual play” via Internet-enabled podcasting and transcripts of online gaming on “virtual tabletops” may affect the degree to which RPGs may achieve at least a kind of second-hand textuality, and thus be available for reflective examination in that sense (much as in the case of the current essay).

In the gap between player and character may lie the difference between art and play.

In that regard, the complicated position of the current study deserves notice, written as it was by a participant in the game (tertiary author) who also ran the session (secondary author) and designed the game being run (primary author) as well as observing the play of others (primary reader), creating a transcript of play (secondary reader), and analyzing that transcript (tertiary reader). Still, this is perhaps only slightly more complicated than most role-playing scholarship, involving as it does in many cases an examination of the investigator’s

own role-playing experience, either as player (Bowman 2010, Waskul and Lust 2004) or as GM (Hendricks 2003, Hendricks 2006, Mackay 2001). Moving among multiple “frames” of authorship and readership may be in and of itself a kind of role-playing; certainly that idea deserves closer examination.

But the possibility of *thoughtful* role-playing gaming, that may be both *experienced* and *reflected upon* as a thought-provoking exercise, is an intriguing possibility for further research, design, and play.

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Immersion as a Prerequisite of the Didactical Potential of Role-Playing

Popular Abstract - The article deals with the relation of immersion and the didactical potential of role-playing. It fathoms the extent to which role-playing games without a didactical goal still have didactical potential, as well as the extent to which this potential is being exploited. Along the lines of the concept of surplus reality, I specifically look into the subject of the role-playing game's alternative reality and demonstrate that the didactical potential of methodically applied role-playing can only unfold by means of the generation of an isomorphous model of a real subject matter. It can then be shown that recreational live role-playing indeed has an enormous didactical potential, just like the methodically applied kind. This potential unfolds just like in methodically applied role-playing, as live role-playing generates an isomorphous model of our reality.

On the basis of these explanations I conclude with the development of a process-oriented definition of immersion, which allows for an intermediary perspective on the phenomenon of immersion, instead of a purely subjective one.

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the didactical potential of role-playing and with the concept of immersion, which is often regarded as problematic. It proposes the hypothesis that the possibility to experience immersion – and not the determination of a didactical goal – is the foundation of this didactical potential.

The article focusses on the existence of an alternative world (typical for live role-playing events) as the foundation for the didactical potential of role-playing. This alternative world functions as a kind of special reality in which the participants have the unique possibility to 'act as if'. The article then demonstrates that the didactical potential of methodically applied role-playing can usually be fully exploited by the purposeful generation of an isomorphous model of a real subject matter. With the help of Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action, and with reference to further pertinent research (e.g. frame analysis and hermeneutical approaches), the article then verifies whether the alternative reality of live role-

playing generates a sufficiently complex model of reality to function as an isomorphous model of the usual reality. Subsequently, it can be shown that live role-playing indeed has the same didactical potential as methodically applied role-playing with a didactical goal – even though it does not itself feature such a goal.

Taking up the results regarding the comprehension of a live role-playing game's gameworld as an isomorphous model of the usual reality, a definition of immersion which does not refer to the respective subjective experience and emotions of the individual is presented. As other researchers have done before, the change of the interpretative frame is used as the argument's point of departure instead. The individual's interaction with its environment is then examined starting from this point. Thus, a process-oriented definition of immersion, allowing for an intermediary perspective on the phenomenon of immersion instead of a purely subjective one, is being developed.

1. INTRODUCTION

Especially in the research on live role-playing, the concept of immersion is controversial. It appears infeasible, and there are numerous heterogeneous definitions. Holter (2007) even goes so far as to demand we: "stop saying 'immersion!' ". He deems the concept useless for the theory of communication, because immersion is experienced in a completely different way depending on who is experiencing it and can therefore merely have subjective validity.¹

Even though the concept of immersion is so controversial in live role-playing research, it seems to designate precisely the feature of role-playing which makes it so unique: the possibility of attaining a state of consciousness "in which the person concerned experiences a diminution of self-awareness due to a captivating and challenging (artificial) environment. The concept of 'immersion' thus describes (...) the plunge into an artificial world in the context of virtual reality" (Wikipedia.de, "Immersion", 24.11.2009).² This plunge into another world, which Harviainen (2008, p.69) describes as "intentional evocation of artificial experiences through the use of fictional characters as masks / identities / personas"³, and Lappi (2007, p.75) defines as "thinking of and perceiving the world as a character would if she was real", is what distinguishes role-playing games from other kinds of games.⁴

The concept of immersion is, however, not being used at all in the psychological and pedagogical research on methodically applied role-playing. This seems strange, for the aspect of plunging into another world is exactly what makes role-playing interesting to the fields of psychology and educational science. Precisely by this temporary plunge into another world the participant of a role-playing game is being enabled to try out and experiment with actions in a safe environment. According to some theorists, this very state of consciousness is the reason for a didactical role-playing game's participant's ability to implement his game experiences in everyday life; this state, of which the participants "say, they had been

'immersed' in the simulation, the consciousness of it being 'just' a game/an exercise had been severely diminished or partly lost" and that "during the simulation, they had had the same thoughts and emotions as in the real situation" (van Ameln & Kramer 2007, p.390, oG)

Although the concept of immersion is – so far – merely being used in the research on recreational role-playing and digital games, what it describes appears to be decisive for the exact coverage of both forms of role-playing. The 'plunge into another world' seems, in a way, to also be at the basis of the immense didactical potential of methodically applied role-playing.

This is why I want to pursue the hypothesis that the possibility of immersion, and not the existence of a didactical goal, is indeed the prerequisite of role-playing's didactical potential. This article's first object will thus be to develop a theoretical model able to explain this hypothesis more clearly. To this end, I will first show that recreational role-playing without any didactical goal features enormous didactical potential, just like methodically applied role-playing (1. and 2.). I will then theoretically verify⁵ to what extent this didactical potential of recreational role-playing can indeed be realized, even without a didactical goal (3. and 4.).

How can it be possible for 'another' world, a different reality, to exist next to our own?

After dealing with immersion as the foundation of role-playing's didactical potential, I will finally turn to the problematic phenomenon of immersion itself (5.). The article's second object will then be to arrive at a functional definition of the concept of immersion, on the basis of the model developed and verified in the first four parts.

The prerequisite of immersion, and therefore of methodically applied role-playing's didactical potential, is the existence of another world, an

¹ In this article, Holter also introduces a short list of different definitions of immersion in live role-playing and provides a good overview of the various views of and approaches to the notion.

² This and all future citations from originally German sources have been translated by the translator of this article. Such citations will, in the remainder of the text, be denoted by the abbreviation oG (originally German) attached to the publishing year.

³ Harviainen does not refer to immersion at this point.

⁴ Harviainen elsewhere even goes so far as to say: „The key difference between role-playing games and other forms of role-playing is that in the former, a possibility for reality immersion exists.“

⁵ Based on a thorough investigation of this assumption in Balzer, 2009.

alternative reality. Therefore, we begin with the question:

How can it be possible for 'another' world, an alternative reality, to exist next to our own?

2. A DIFFERENT REALITY EMERGES...

The other world emerging in a role-playing game is called the *magic circle of gameplay* by Salen and Zimmerman (2004, pp. 93-99), and, following them, by Stenros (2008, p.9) and Montola et al. (2009, p. 10)⁶. The 'magic circle' of a game is "the space within which a game takes place" (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, p.99), and it is "set apart from ordinary life in locality and duration" (Stenros 2008, p.9). Salen and Zimmerman posit the existence of this magic circle for every kind of game and point out that "within the magic circle, the game's rules create a special set of *meanings* for the players of a game [...] [which] guide the play of the game" (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, p.99).

Following Moreno (1965), and regarding action-oriented methods and didactically used role-playing, van Ameln and Kramer (2007, p.391) call this kind of space a *surplus reality*. They comprehend the alternative reality of a role-playing game as a special reality, as an agreed upon illusory world (Sader 1991), which can exist next to our normal reality and in which we have the possibility to pretend, to 'act as if'.⁷ On the basis of this possibility to 'act as if', a space of reality and possibility is constituted whose limits separate what happens during the role play from the context of reality. In its distinction from normal reality this surplus reality enables the participants to try out actions experimentally, as actions in this special reality do not entail the usual real consequences (cf. Bodenstern & Geise 1987, p.14). Goffman (1974, p.60), too, points out the unique character of 'acting as if', which consists in the doer's knowledge that there will be no practical consequences⁸. In the same vein, Stenros (2008, p.9) – following Salen and Zimmerman and referring to the magic circle of gameplay – highlights that "what happens within [a game] is interpreted playfully and has no direct effect on the ordinary world".

Both the concepts of 'magic circle of gameplay' and of 'surplus reality' thus designate a space distinct from reality, an alternative reality with its own rules, in whose frame actions do not entail the usual consequences.⁸

According to van Ameln and Kramer (2007, p.391) and corresponding constructivist concepts (Spencer Brown 1997), the surplus reality's existence is created as a social construction through a distinction from reality on four levels:

- **Temporally**, the distinction is made by the demarcation of a clear-cut beginning and ending of the experience.
- **Spatially**, a distinction between the space where the relevant surplus reality is in effect and the remaining environment is made.
- **Topically**, this special reality is – in accordance with Luhmann (1984, p.114) – distinguished from normal reality by a change of subject matter.
- **Socially**, the surplus reality is formed by the distinction of the real person and the role in the game.

Stenros (2008, p.9) also points out this fundamental separation of gameworld and reality and employs three of the four levels in doing so: "This removal from ordinary life is complete: spatially, temporally and socially the game is disconnected from everyday life."

Even though an 'alternative reality' can then exist next to the usual one, this does create a certain paradox (cf. van Ameln & Kramer 2007, p.391): on one hand, the events of a role-playing game do not occur in the usual reality, but in an alternative reality, in the surplus reality. They occur in a different kind of reality, in which one can 'act as if', and in which actions do not entail consequences in the way they usually do. On the other hand, however, the events of a role-playing game *do* occur in our usual reality, because there is no way for them not to. Everything that happens during a role-playing game also happens within the

⁶ The concept has originally been introduced by Huizinga (2009).

⁷ In this way, Bateson (1955, p.183) already asserts "that the messages or signals exchanged in play are in a certain sense untrue or not meant".

⁸ In Goffman's words, this kind of alternative reality is a 'modulation', that is: a temporally and spatially limited, purposeful transformation of a frame. The modulation consisting in 'acting as if' makes it possible to perform an action, which, for the participants, is the open imitation or execution of a less transformed action, while knowing, that it will not have any practical consequences.

boundaries of our reality, in which objects fall down and not up, in which water is wet, and in which no one – at least to our knowledge – is able to wield magically conjured and controlled fireballs.

Just like the distinction between reality and alternative reality is paradoxical because it simultaneously exists and cannot exist, the assertion that actions within this alternative reality do not entail consequences in the usual reality is fundamentally paradoxical. On one hand, the participants' 'as-if-actions' really don't entail the usual consequences, simply because these participants just 'act as if', because they just pretend. If, for example, a warrior slays someone with his sword during a larp event, the first player does not really kill and the other one does not really die. On the other hand, the 'death' of his character – which he might have grown to like a lot over the course of several years – at such an event does indeed have consequences for the player, as he will not be able to play this character anymore.

Even though paradoxical, live role-playing features an alternative reality, in which the participants can act as if.

Even though somewhat paradoxical, however, the existence of an 'alternative reality' – understood as a social construct fabricated precisely by a distinction from usual reality – is no less possible. Now, what effect does this existence of an alternative reality have on the participants of a role-playing event?

3. THE EFFECT OF AN ALTERNATE REALITY

As we have seen, both forms of role-playing – recreational and didactically applied – feature a kind of special reality, distinct from the usual one. It is precisely this distinction of usual reality and alternative reality which does not only constitute the possibility of plunging into another world (and

thus the possibility of immersion), but also provides the basis for the didactical potential of action-oriented methods. This is due to the fact that the existence of an alternative reality makes it possible to purposefully experience a real subject matter by way of a simulation in the 'as if'-reality. This kind of learning on a model offers such didactical potential because the participants are being integrated into the physical, factual, scenic arrangement as agents; they are allowed to actively take part in the simulation's creation. Using the extensive possibilities of an alternative world, a real subject matter can thus be simulated in a way which does not solely rely on language, but can comprehensively represent relevant parts of reality (van Ameln & Kramer 2007, p.390).

The specific mechanisms and the didactical potential of action-oriented methods (and therefore of methodically applied role-playing) identified by van Ameln and Kramer can then emerge: by means of the simulation of a real subject matter a kind of *space of reality and possibility* develops in which realistic as well as fictitious scenarios and structures can be represented.⁹ In this space, there is a possibility for the *deconstruction of existing realities*, as well as for the *construction of new reality*. Participants are thus enabled to "reflect their realities through observations of the second order, and contrast them with other possible realities" (van Ameln & Kramer 2007, p.398, oG)¹⁰. Additionally, otherwise *abstract subject matter* can be represented in a *sensually experienceable* way. Content can then be staged in a way that *addresses cognition as well as emotion*, thereby improving the participants' ability to remember and process their experiences. By being actively engaged in situations, participants can autonomously *learn from experience* – what Dewey described as "learning by doing"¹¹. Accordingly, "learning from experience always means relating the experienced to one's own self and one's own universe of meaning" (van Ameln & Kramer 2007, p.394, oG). In the participants' learning from their own experience in practical situations and in their consequent comprehensive dealing with a subject

⁸ In Goffmans words, this kind of alternative reality is a 'modulation', that is: a temporally and spatially limited, purposeful transformation of a frame. The modulation consisting in 'acting as if' makes it possible to perform an action, which, for the participants, is the open imitation or execution of a less transformed action, while knowing, that it will not have any practical consequences.

⁹ Thereby, the additional possibility to make mistakes without their usual consequences arises, which can lead to a sense of achievement even in making such mistakes. (cf. Vester, 1978, p.184)

¹⁰ Henriksen (2008, p.159) agrees, when he argues that: "the game-provided experience becomes a tool for staging a reconstruction of the participants' conception of reality."

¹¹ Pertinent studies confirm that people generally learn more easily with experience-based methods (Blake, 1990), and that they can remember what they have learned better and for a longer time (Specht & Sandlin, 1991). As Lainema (2008, p.8) writes: "Learning is an active process in which meaning is developed on the basis of experience."

matter their *bodies* – in the sense of “tacit knowledge”¹² (Polanyi 1985) – act as a *sounding board* for the experiences they have made, and the situations which present themselves to the participant become *individually and subjectively meaningful* (cf. Schick 2008). Furthermore, with the help of *alienation, distancing and imagery* latent parts of a system or a problematic subject matter, which would otherwise be very likely to encounter resistance and defensive mechanisms, can be staged (Stein 1998, pp.3-7).

Thus, *isomorphous models of reality* which do not show any immediate similarity with the real subject matter at hand, “but generate the same dynamics and relations on a deeper level” (Tuson 1994, p.60, oG) can be created. *Expectational patterns are foiled* (Schreyögg 1999, p.35), and the *combination of internal and external apperception* is enabled for difficult subjects as well. Because it takes place in an alternative reality, the simulation is situated in a kind of *secure space*, in which the participants can *playfully* deal with a subject without their actions entailing the usual real consequences. “In this way, a sanction-free field of experience emerges for the trying out of new strategies of thinking and acting” (van Ameln & Kramer 2007, p.397, oG) regarding otherwise problematic subjects. In the participants’ opportunity to playfully deal with the model of a real subject matter in an ‘as-if-mode’ most of the general positive effects of play take hold in action-oriented methods. This can then lead to experiences of success “which can radiate into ‘real’ life” (van Ameln & Kramer 2007, p.402, oG). Furthermore, the first step in using an isomorphous model of reality in an alternative world is the purposeful reduction of complexity. “Reduction to a model, to the exemplary means reducing reality to basic relations, or to limit it to certain aspects and details” (Keim 1992, p.138, oG). An isomorphous model therefore adopts only the features of a real subject relevant to the creation of an equivalent structure and dynamic of content. It leaves aside everything insignificant and circumstantial, thus simplifying the participant’s dealing with complex subject matter. At the same

time, however, the diversity and complexity of situations is also being increased by introducing new options and perspectives through the active participation in the simulation. Thus, the alternative world’s frame allows for new leeway, which in turn allows for a particular way of learning: “learning means creating disorder and increasing diversity” (Weick & Westley 1996, zitiert nach Klabbers & Gust 2005, p. 2, oG).

“Reduction to a model, to the exemplary, means reducing reality to basic relations or to limit it to certain aspects and details.”

Interestingly, the above mentioned traits informing van Ameln and Kramer’s description of the mechanisms of action-oriented methods are valid both for didactically applied role-playing and for the recreational role-playing game larp (Live Action Role-Playing): both feature an alternative reality, distinct from the usual one. In both forms of role-playing the simulation of events which are actually and physically staged, and in which the participants are actively engaged in the creation of the simulation, takes place in this alternative reality in the form of ‘acting as if’. Consequently, the constitutive difference between these two forms of role-playing consists in their respective goals: while recreational role-playing games are played solely for fun and therefore exhibit *all* of the characteristics of a regular game¹³, role-playing games as an action-oriented method are conducted with a didactical goal and therefore exhibit *only most* of the characteristics of a game (cf. van Ameln & Kramer 2007, p.401-402 and Balzer 2009, p.24).¹⁴ In addition, the player’s distance to his role and to the gameworld, usually very difficult to control in didactically applied role-playing (cf. Greenwood 1983; and, regarding the relevance of acceptance of a role: Schaller 2006), should be somewhat smaller in recreational role-playing, due to the intrinsic motivation of the participants, the usually more complex roles and the often much longer duration of such events (Zayas und Lewis 1986; Cierjacks

¹²The concept of ‘tacit knowledge’ describes non-formal knowledge, meaning skills and abilities, which are not or cannot be explicitly formulated. The concept focusses on the process of skillfulness and emphasizes its importance, as opposed to mere knowledge.

¹³For a comprehensive summary of the various definitions of play, and their respective elements, cf.: Weisler & McCall, 1976 and Salen und Zimmerman, 2004, p.79.

¹⁴It can thus be assumed that only live-roleplaying represents a truly aesthetic gaming activity, in the sense “that the perceived represents the intended state”, whereas didactically applied role-playing ‘only’ represents a functional gaming activity, which – according to Krause-Pongratz – means, a non-successful activity, in which “the perceived does not represent the intended state” (Krause-Pongratz, 1999, p.210, oG).

2002).¹⁵ It can thus be concluded that live role-playing does at least feature the same enormous didactical potential as didactically applied role-playing.¹⁶

This being said, methodically applied role-playing usually exploits its full didactical potential by purposefully designing an isomorphous model of a real subject matter in the frame of a surplus reality. This model may be superficially alienated, but will still exhibit the original subject's dynamics and mechanisms beneath the surface. Only in this way can the simulation provide a space for the same thoughts and emotions as in reality, and a real subject matter can be worked on in the form of a model.

The question is then: is it possible to let the didactical potential inherent in live role-playing unfold, even though there is no purposeful creation of an isomorphous model of a real subject matter based on a didactical goal?

4. INTERACTION OF INDIVIDUAL AND ENVIRONMENT

It is a constitutive feature of live role-playing in general that its alternative reality is made up of a comprehensive gameworld touching on every aspect of daily existence. Live role-playing thus might not create the model of a particular real subject matter, but it does create the model of a whole reality. This brings up the question whether this model of a reality is sufficiently complex to function as an isomorphous model of our usual reality. In order to clarify this point, I will now focus on the question of how an individual interacts with his/her usual surrounding reality. For this, I will draw on Jürgen Habermas's theory of action. In a further step, I will then be able to verify if an individual can interact with a larp's gameworld in the same way, and if a larp event's gameworld can indeed function as an isomorphous model of our reality.

According to Habermas, a communicatively acting individual – meaning someone who acts with the goal of understanding – relates to him-/herself and to his/her environment in accordance with his/her

*lifeworld*¹⁷. The lifeworld is to be understood as the “horizon of intersubjectively shared background assumptions, in which every communications process is antecedently embedded” (Habermas 1981a, p.228, oG). It functions as an intersubjectively shared resource of information we were born into and which we thus did not choose. It includes all of the preceding informations and interpretations that have ‘always already’ been the foundations of our communication; the concepts thus contains the core idea of modern hermeneutics (Reese-Schäfer 2001, p.60). As Harding (2007, p.27) puts it, with regard to hermeneutics: “Any text is interpreted by someone within a context, which composes the interpreter's horizon of understanding.”

In its function as omnipresent resource of information, the lifeworld is basically the same thing that Goffman's frame-analysis calls the primary frame. Goffman himself (1974, p.31) posits the work hypothesis that the actions of everyday life are comprehensible due to one or more primary frames which bestow them with sense. While Goffman (1974, p.31), at this point¹⁸, uses the classic realist distinction of object world (natural world) and social world in order to further concretize these primary frames and thus identifies two basic classes of primary frames, Habermas comprehends the lifeworld as wholly produced by man and providing interpretations for different aspects of the world. The three so-called ‘worlds’ the lifeworld provides interpretations for are:

- The *objective world*, defined as “the entirety of facts which exist or emerge, or are brought into being by directed interventions” (Habermas 1981a, p.130, oG)
- The *social world*, defined as consisting of “a normative context, determining which interactions belong to the entirety of legitimate interpersonal relations” (Habermas 1981a, p.132, oG).
- The *subjective world*, defined as an individual's ‘interior world’, comprising

¹⁵ As Schick (2008, p.193) puts it, regarding the willingness to break frame: “participants are much more likely to blur the boundaries between what they experience as play versus serious [...] when they perform roles that are evaluated as a test, especially if it is a high-stakes test that will determine future employment.”

¹⁶ For a more thorough review of larp's didactical potential, cf.: Balzer, 2009, pp.51-55.

¹⁷ Habermas takes up the concept of lifeworld as developed in Edmund Husserl's later works and introduced into sociology by Alfred Schütz.

¹⁸ Realism asserts the existence of a reality outside of our consciousness. It claims that: „the conceptual universal is real ,before’ or ,in the things’, independent of human cognition” (Halder & Müller, 1988, p.256, oG).

his/her needs and wants, which are themselves to be further differentiated into a volitional part – the individual's likes, dislikes and wishes – and an intuitive part – his/her emotions and moods (Habermas 1981a, p.140).

The relation of individual and environment presents itself as a sort of circular process: on the one hand, the intersubjectively shared lifeworld is the frame for the agents' actions, necessary for their being able to come to an understanding. They are born into this frame without ever having a choice in the matter. It is the unsurmountable horizon of their thought and action, and its borders shift together with the observer. Consequently, communicative action can only address a small, limited section of the lifeworld, in the form of a situation. The lifeworld as a whole, however, understood "as the context constituting the horizon of communication processes, delimitates the situation of action and thus remains inaccessible to discourse" (Habermas 1995, p.590, oG). Because the lifeworld, being the frame of all questioning, remains unquestionable, the agent is, in a way, nothing but the result of his lifeworld. He is "the product of traditions, in which he lives, of solidary groups, to which he belongs, of processes of socialisation and learning, to which he is subjected" (Habermas 1995, p.593).

On the other hand, the lifeworld does not have any inherent, objective validity in itself. It assumes its validity only through the recognition of the agents referring to it. Only with a communicatively acting person who keeps relating to his environment in accordance with the lifeworld, only in being used as a mutual interpretative resource in processes of

understanding, the lifeworld becomes valid as such a lifeworld and is constantly being reproduced. "The reproductive process connects new situations to the existing states of the lifeworld" (Habermas 1995, p.594). Thus, the participants actual communicative action in interactive situations additionally provides the cultural reproduction of knowledge and tradition, regarding the functional aspect of communication.

Therefore: "As a resource, the lifeworld is constitutive for processes of communication" (Habermas 1995, p.591). Inversely, the existence of communicatively acting agents referring to it and thus rendering it valid is just as constitutive for the lifeworld.

5. THE LARP GAMEWORLD AS AN ISOMORPHOUS MODEL OF REALITY

Now that we have clarified how an individual interacts with its environment in the usual reality, we can see whether an individual can interact with the gameworld of a larp event in the same way. To this end, we will first have to find out if a larp's gameworld is sufficiently complex to function as the model of a lifeworld.

As we already know, the lifeworld represents the intersubjectively shared interpretative resource for the people living in it. It provides interpretations for three worlds: the objective world, the subjective world and the social world. Now, the gameworld of a larp event also provides interpretations for those three worlds: on the level of the objective world, for example, it determines that a green 'person' with long ears and teeth is an orc, while someone uttering wild incantations and throwing something red at someone else is a wizard

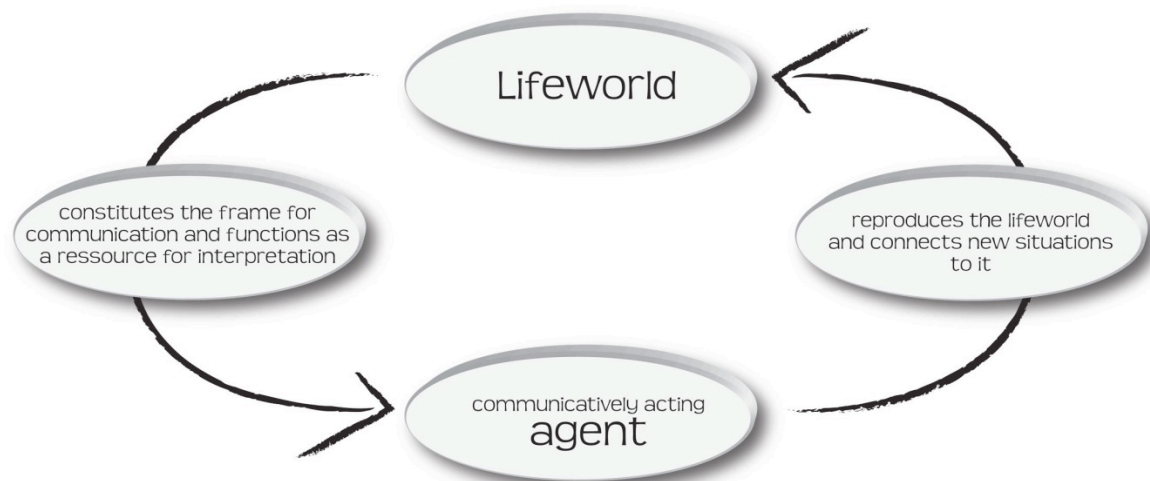


Figure 1 – The circular relation of individual and environment according to Habermas

conjuring fireballs. It also includes the interpretation to get lost as quickly as possible in such a case, so as not to go up in flames. On the level of the social world it might determine that a stranger being introduced to you should not be greeted with "Hey, how are you", but, for example, with a hearty "Greetings, stranger"; or that it is well within the realm of possibility to get hit over the head by a drunk barbarian mercenary, if one were to make fun of the cute little fur tuft on his belt pouch and claimed the whole thing looked like a hostess's shoulder bag. Finally, the gameworld also includes interpretations for the subjective world: it determines that I am not Leonie, the nice, polite economics student, but indeed Lyra, the wild shaman, who should better not be provoked.

The larp's alternative world thus includes the character's objective, subjective and social world, just as the usual reality does for the participant. The gameworld functions as the character's resource for interpretation, in the same way the lifeworld does for the participant outside of the game. Only through knowledge and use of the gameworld as such an interpretative resource can the alternative reality's proceedings become accessible to the participant.

As the gameworld functions as the model of a lifeworld, the player can act communicatively in the gameworld in a model-like way. The participant in his role then refers to the three worlds around him, just like he would in his usual reality. In order to interpret whatever presents itself to him, however, he does not subconsciously rely on the lifeworld he was born into, but consciously uses the gameworld as a resource for interpretation. Just like an individual reproduces its lifeworld and thus gives it validity again and

again by continuously referring to it and connecting new situations to it, the gameworld only remains valid as long as the players keep referring to it, to use and to accept it as a resource for interpretation.

Therefore, the relation between individual and environment in live role-playing can also be represented as a circular process: on the one hand, the gameworld is the irreducible frame for the character's actions. It is constitutive for the participant's ability to form an image of what is before him/her, and to communicate about it with other participants. On the other hand, it is equally constitutive for the gameworld that the participants refer to it in their role, as this is the only way for it to have any validity.

As we have seen, a larp's gameworld does in fact represent a model of our usual reality: within the alternative reality, the gameworld functions as the model of a lifeworld. The players refer to it in the form of model-like communicative action, just like they refer to their lifeworld in their usual reality. In their roles, the players can act communicatively in a model-like way, interpreting what presents itself to them in the three worlds according to the gameworld and thereby giving it validity. Therefore, the gameworld of a larp event does indeed represent an isomorphous model of reality, insofar as it features the same structures as reality regarding the interaction of the individual with his environment. Even though they are superficially alienated they still generate the same relations and dynamics on a deeper level. Thus, an isomorphous model of a real subject matter is in fact created in live role-playing – and even an isomorphous model of reality as a whole, as has been shown above – and it appears to be possible for the enormous didactical potential which lies in live

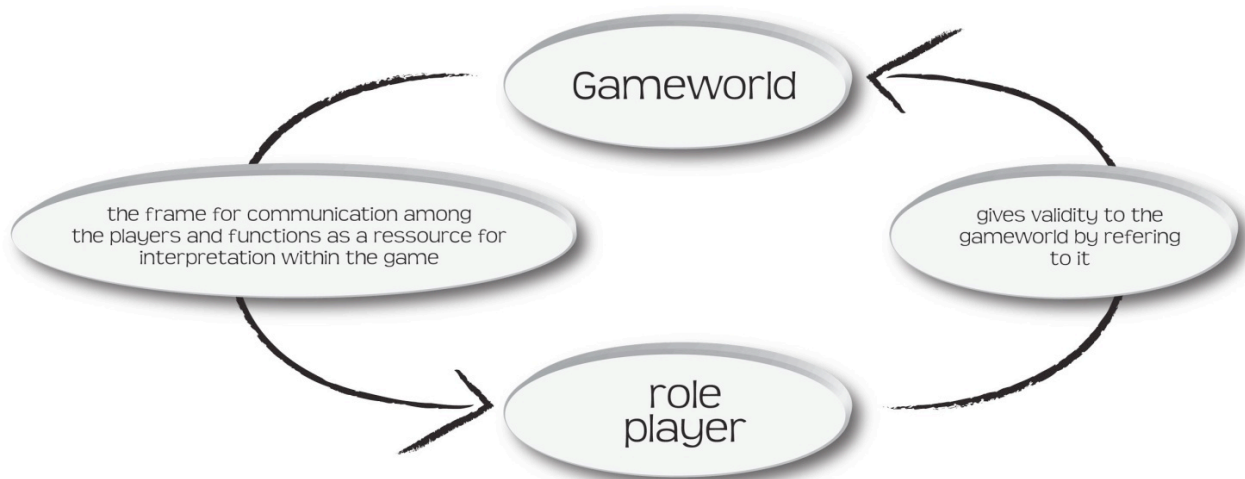


Figure 2 – The circular relation of the player and his gameworld

role-playing to unfold.¹⁹

There is, however, a further essential difference between an agent's communicative action in his/her usual reality, and an agent's virtually communicative action in the alternative reality: while the usual reality's lifeworld is merely continuously *reproduced* by the communicative action of the individuals, because it was *always already* there anyway, the alternative reality's gameworld in larp has to be *produced* from scratch by the participants' virtually communicative action. Because of this – and in contrast to their usual reality – the participants do not have the choice to either act communicatively or not during the game. As an individual in its usual reality is simply reproducing its lifeworld by acting communicatively, this lifeworld does not instantly lose its validity and fall apart just because a single individual does not act communicatively in some situations. A larp event's gameworld, however, is not only reproduced by the participants' model-like communicative action. Because the gameworld – as a model of a lifeworld – has not always already been there but is valid only for the duration of the event, it has to be *produced* completely by the participants' model-like communicative action. If a player does not refer to it through model-like communicative action, it instantly loses its validity to the extent that he/she does not refer to it. Because of this, a larp event's gameworld as model of a lifeworld instantly disintegrates completely when the participants cease to refer to it. As soon as the gameworld loses its validity as model of a lifeworld, role-playing as we know it becomes impossible: without a valid gameworld, functioning as the model of a lifeworld, the playing participants cannot interpret the events and objects before them anymore, which consequently cease to make any sense. Furthermore, without the gameworld as the horizon of intersubjectively shared background assumptions, the participants can no longer communicate about what presents itself to them during the game. As the gameworld collapses, none of it makes sense anymore. Thus, the participants are forced to model-like communicative action, in order to secure the gameworld's validity.

6. A DEFINITION OF IMMERSION

We have seen that the gameworld can represent an isomorphous model of reality, and that larp's enormous didactical potential can indeed be brought to unfold. It has become clear that the basis for both existence and realization of role-playing's didactical potential is not the formulation of a didactical goal, but the possibility of 'plunging into an alternative reality' so deeply that the perception of one's real self is diminished. So what exactly does this mean? How does it happen, then, that someone feels like a shaman instead of like an economics student, or that someone 'sees' an orc in a person painted green, sporting glued-on latex ears and a dental prosthesis, instead of a strangely disguised human being?

How does it happen, then, that someone 'sees' an orc in a person painted green, sporting glued-on latex ears and a dental prosthesis, instead of a strangely disguised human being?

Harding (2007, p.25) takes a hermeneutical perspective to further elucidate this phenomenon. He suggests "that larp can alternatively be understood as a change in how the player interprets the world". He therefore does not regard immersion as "a change of personality but [as] a change of interpretative framework". Representatives of frame-analysis (Stenros 2009, p. 24) also view immersion in a game as such a change of interpretative framework. Immersion then means, for example, that someone seeing a person painted green, sporting glued-on latex ears and a dental prosthesis does not think: *'There's a disguised man walking up to me, has he lost his mind? Well, let's see why he's dressed up so strangely and what he wants from me...'* Instead, he might think: *'Alright, there's an orc coming right at me... wonder if he's friendly or up to something bad?'*

In order to concretize the phenomenon of immersion in his own hermeneutical examination, Lappi follows Heidegger in introducing the additional concept of *everydayness*, which comes rather close to the concept of lifeworld.²⁰ Lappi (2007, p.76) defines everydayness as "the basis of every belief, value and behaviour pattern" and as "something we do not usually pay any attention to,

¹⁹ For a thorough comparison of didactically applied and recreational role-playing regarding their didactical potential, cf.: Balzer, 2009

²⁰ Both concepts have their origin in the phenomenological tradition.

not to mention doubting it". For Lappi (2007, p.75), immersion can thus be understood "as a transformation of everydayness". This means that it is no longer their usual 'world' that functions as the participants' everyday life, but the world of the game: "Immersion means that a player takes temporarily things included in (her) imagined space for a part of everydayness" (Lappi 2007, p. 77).

The above-mentioned theorists thus agree that immersion is not to be examined starting from the distinction of participant and character, but as a change of interpretative framework.²¹ What is interesting about this starting point for a definition of immersion is, in my opinion, the fundamental acknowledgement of the gameworld's potential functionality as an alternative interpretative frame. Only if the gameworld features the same functions as the interpretative frame used in reality, the larp participant in his role can refer to it during the event in the same way he relates to his environment in reality. Only if the participants in their roles interact with the gameworld in the same way they interact with their environment in reality, the factually existing alternative reality they become a part of while experiencing immersion can emerge. "In other words, immersion is a subjective experience of being a *part* of an imagined reality instead of being only in *relation* to the imaged reality" (Lappi 2007, p.75). This is the only way for the phenomenon the participants of scientifically conducted role-playing with a didactical aim describe as 'immersion into the simulation' to develop; a phenomenon of which they report that "the consciousness of it being 'just a game/an exercise had been severely diminished or partly lost; during the simulation, they had had the same thoughts and emotions as in the real situation" (van Ameln & Kramer 2007, p.390).

Immersion means, that a player plunges into the alternative world of live role-playing and experiences a decrease of self-awareness, because, for him, the gameworld functions as an isomorphous model of reality for the duration of the event.

It has now become clear that it is precisely this existing isomorphous model of reality – or of a real subject matter –, this model in which we find the same structures we find in reality – and which

therefore generate the same relations and dynamics that exist in reality –, that makes immersion possible on the one hand and enables such an effective kind of learning with the help of a model on the other.

Immersion thus means that the players plunge into the alternative world of live role-playing and experience a decrease of self-awareness because the gameworld functions as an isomorphous model of reality for the duration of the event. During this experience, they interact with the gameworld in their role, in the same way they interact with their environment outside of the game. They interpret everything they experience according to the gameworld instead of according to their usual lifeworld.

7. SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK

On a theoretical level, this article has shown that it is not necessarily the didactical goal which determines whether or not role-playing has realizable didactical potential, but rather the act of 'plunging into an alternative reality' described by the concept of immersion. It is this experience of immersion which provides the opportunity to learn within an isomorphous model of a given subject matter and which thus establishes the basis for the numerous functions and mechanisms of role-playing. Recreational role-playing does not purposefully create the isomorphous model of a subject matter to be worked on. It does, however, create an isomorphous model of reality as a whole. This enables the participants of a recreational role-playing game to act communicatively in a model-like way, and therefore to exploit the didactical potential of role-playing even though there is no concrete didactical goal.

So far, however, the possibility to tap the didactical potential of communicative action in recreational role-playing without any didactical goal has only been shown theoretically. It has not been looked into the question to what extent a recreational role-playing game's gameworld is an isomorphous model of other aspects of reality.

Furthermore, the process-oriented definition of immersion is functional in a way, but still has a limited range. This definition's strong point consists in the possibility to leave behind a purely subjective perspective on the phenomenon of immersion in favor of an intermediary,

²¹ For a more thorough discussion of the exact way an individual interprets what it is confronted with, as opposed to the above explanation of the framework it interprets it in, cf.: Lopenen & Montola, 2004

functionalistic one. This strong point, however, is also what reduces its range, as this definition does not allow for any insights into the participants' different personal dispositions regarding immersion (cf. Harviainen 2003).

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Stereotypes and Individual Differences in Role-playing Games

Popular Abstract - Because of the endurance of stereotypes about role-playing gamers, much research has been carried out which provides evidence to contradict the stereotype's prevailing misconceptions. This paper aims to investigate this existing research into the individual differences in those who play role-playing games and provide a comprehensive review of research in the areas of demographics, interests, personality and identity as they pertain to gamers. The goal will be to investigate the extent to which the common perception of game-players stands up under investigation. The paper will also attempt to refute some of the more extreme and outrageous claims which have been made in relation to role-playing games – particularly those which involve crime, violence, murders, suicides and Satanism. The article will also examine child's play and role-playing games in order to illustrate the importance of this style of imaginary play for identity development for both children and adults.

The stereotypical image of role-playing gamers depicts them as anti-social male teenagers who are largely more interested in technology than in their own personal appearance, believing that they are highly intelligent and imaginative, passionate about topics which are uninteresting to their peers, and consequently persecuted by some of these peers. Through an examination of the research carried out in this area, the emerging image of a gamer is in fact that of an individual who does not necessarily fit into the stereotypical demographic of being a young male, and who is actively involved in developing his or her own personality and identity through participation in the games and also within the social networks that are often framed by these games.

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ABSTRACT

Because of the endurance of stereotypes about role-playing gamers, much research has been carried out which provides evidence to contradict the stereotype's prevailing misconceptions. This paper aims to investigate this existing research into the individual differences in those who play role-playing games and provide a comprehensive review of research in the areas of demographics, interests, personality and identity as they pertain to gamers. The goal will be to investigate the extent to which the common perception of game-players stands up under investigation. The paper will also attempt to refute some of the more extreme and outrageous claims which have been made in relation to role-playing games – particularly those which involve crime, violence, murders, suicides

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1. INTRODUCTION

A Role-Playing Game (RPG) is a game in which the participants assume a character role and determine that character's actions, within a specific scenario, with agreed rules, played individually or in a group, with or without a mediator, and where the outcome is without definite limits as of duration or amount.

In 1974, the genre of Role-Playing Games came into being with the publication of the "world's first role-playing game" (Mackay 2001) – Gygax & Arneson's *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974). The game emerged from a background of war-games and fantasy-based fiction such as the works of J.R.R. Tolkien (King & Borland 2003; Mackay 2001; Schick 1991). The popularity of the genre is attested by the fact that this earliest example is currently (in 2010) in a fourth edition.

In the intervening years, role-playing games have expanded into a range of different formats, advancing onto computers as both purely text based programs (MUDs) and Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) with intricately designed Graphical User Interfaces, and into other forms such as games played through the post (play-by-mail), and Live Action Role-Playing (LARP), although many people still play the original table-top format role-playing Game (Mackay 2001). In fact, one study found that the table-top format still outranked its more digital descendants in terms of enjoyment (Tychsen et al. 2007).

The purpose of RPGs has expanded, as their format has evolved, and apart from their primary functions of enjoyment and entertainment, role-playing games are often used for training and educational purposes, to develop skills and strategies, or to allow participants to cooperate with others on tasks as part of a team (Tychsen et al. 2007; Law.Com 2009; White 2007). As expected, while their formats and purposes have expanded,

so have their user-base, and role-playing games are presently played by millions of people worldwide every day: *Blizzard Entertainment* (2008) claim that an estimated 11 million plus individuals are involved in playing the most popular of the online version of role-playing games, *World of Warcraft*, and this is merely one of the many different RPGs available.

As such, the production and sale of computer games is a multi-billion dollar industry, with the ESA (2009) providing figures for computer and video game software sales as reaching \$11.7 billion during 2008. It is thought that, on average, 9 games were purchased every second of every day in America during 2008, a quadrupling of sales since 1996 (ESA 2009). Within these sales, the genre of 'role-playing games' or RPGs has been found to account for 5.4% of all video games sales and 19.6% of all computer games sales in the USA.

Similarly, Internet use has increased exponentially in recent times. By the year 2002, approximately 600 million people had access to the internet (Manasian 2003), and today this number has grown to over 1.7 billion internet users worldwide (Internet Usage Statistics 2009). Owing to the advent of widespread internet access and game availability, it is no surprise that online role-playing games have expanded further than ever before.

Owing to the advent of widespread internet access and game availability, it is no surprise that online role-playing games have expanded further than ever before.

Despite the undeniable popularity of the role-playing game, no agreement has yet been reached on a formal definition of the term, perhaps owing to the wide variety of different types of RPG and the many formats and platforms in which they exist. This is not to say that definitions have not been proposed: numerous definitions of role-playing games have been put forward (Hitchens & Drachen 2009), yet no consensus has yet been reached in the academic community.

In the quest for a definition, role-playing gaming has often been seen as being based on a largely qualitative process (likened to a social process), rather than a quantitative, measurable, formal game system (Montola 2008). This, however, has

made the game-play quite difficult to investigate, and the difference has been described by Montola as carrying out a straightforward analysis of the rules laid out for a formal game system such as Poker, and then including the almost infinite number of extra possibilities that are added with the influence of the social aspect of the game such as bluffing. Many researchers agree that a role-playing game must involve rules of some type, either spoken or unspoken; however there are still some who disagree with this, asserting that RPGs have no *static* rules (Juul 2003).

One research group's definition describes RPGs as being "created in the interaction between players or between player(s) and games master(s) within a specified diegetic framework" (Hakkarainen, & Stenros 2002). Diegesis is the telling of a story through narration, as opposed to a story being shown and enacted, which seems applicable to RPGs given that they have occasionally been described in terms of "collaborative storytelling" (Padol 1996). Critics of this definition disagree that a diegetic framework is suitable to describe this type of game in its entirety (Montola 2008) and an application of this can be seen, for example, in the proposed structure of role-playing games which includes a game level and a social level, as well as the diegetic level (Fine 1983).

Work on a formal, accepted definition of role-playing games is on-going.

1.1 Stereotypes: Who plays Role-Playing Games?

With the increase in diversity of role-playing games, they have equally grown in popularity during this period (ESA 2009). RPGs have emerged into the modern era as sophisticated phenomena which is now embedded in popular culture (Mackay 2001), having both influenced and been influenced by the media, literature and particularly films and television. While gaming has gone from strength to strength over the years, what can be said of the individuals who are involved in the hobby?

From early on in the conception of these games, there has been an enduring stereotype of role-players as being 'nerdy' (Lægran & Stewart 2003; Ruzycski-Shinabarger 2002; Tocci 2007). Individuals who engage in the action of playing a role-playing game are regularly portrayed by the media (particularly in film and television) as being unpopular, and have also been labelled, both in the media and by peers, as 'nerds', 'dorks' and 'geeks'

amongst other things (Kinney 1993). "Gamers and Computer enthusiasts" are seen as belonging to a community which is characterised as "Nerdy" (Lægran & Stewart 2003) and generally existing within the demographic of white, male youths (King & Borland 2003).

The implication of any stereotype is that there are specific attributes which define all individuals as part of that group. The clinical psychologist David Anderegg (2007) has laid out the foundations of 'nerdiness' as follows:

"(a) unsexy, (b) interested in technology, (c) uninterested in their personal appearance, (d) enthusiastic about stuff that bores everyone else, and (e) persecuted by nonnerds who are sometimes known as jocks."

The 'nerdy' stereotype at its extreme can portray those involved as believing that they are highly intelligent and with a good imagination, well-educated with extremely detailed knowledge about specific unusual hobbies or topics, with strong feelings for-or-against war, and very poor social skills, tending to disregard social norms (Fine 1983).

In the media of the eighties and nineties, however, role-playing games gained some hostile attention and were occasionally depicted as causing players to become involved in criminal activity. Branch (1998) presents a list of news articles in which games have been used as scapegoats for a range of crimes – as a general rule, these cases involved the perpetrator of a crime admitting that he played *Dungeons & Dragons* or another role-playing game. On occasion, even more serious matters such as murders and suicides have also been claimed by the media and certain religious fundamentalists to have emerged from involvement in role-playing games (Schnoebelen, n.d.). Some more outrageous criticism also proposes a link between RPGs and involvement in satanic cults and even claims that by playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, gamers may gain the ability to cast "real" spells (Chick 1984). The less extreme stereotype, one which is more enduring than the above, portrays the gamer as a teenage boy or a grown man, with poor social skills and little interest in his personal appearance (Anderegg 2007; King & Borland 2003; Williams 2003). The viability of these persistent stereotypes will be investigated in terms of demographics, interests, personality and identity.

1.2 Demographics

The stereotypical demographic of a gamer is of a teenage boy – “mostly male, mostly young and mostly white and middle class” (King & Borland 2003).

Indeed, one study carried out on a particular fantasy role-playing MUD called *Blue Sky* found that the majority of its typical players were actually male, young, white and middle-class, adding to this the finding that the majority of players of this game were heterosexual (Kendall 1999). Williams (2003) agreed with the classification of game players as being male and young, adding to this that they lack social skills and may have pale skin owing to spending very little time outdoors. Douse & McManus (1993) studied a particular fantasy play-by-mail game and supported the idea that players were more likely to be male, adding that there was a tendency of gamers to be educated – a factor that may reinforce the idea that players are more likely to come from a middle-class background (Kendall 1999, King & Borland 2003). Taylor (2006) pointed out that the idea of gaming as a male-dominated hobby is held, not only by male gamers and the media, but also by women who are involved with games, and who “hesitate to call themselves gamers”.

Focussing on these studies, we can see a trend emerge: there is agreement that the majority of players are male, and almost unanimous consensus that game players are young, and along with these there is evidence that players may have a tendency to be white, pale-skinned, middle-class, educated and with poor social skills. However, since these studies focused on very specific games, it is not possible to generalize the result to the broader population of gamers.

In contrast to these studies, however, recent statistics from the Entertainment Software Association (2009) indicate that, in the USA at least, only 18% of gamers fit the description of the average gamer as a teenage boy, while females over the age of 18 appear to make up 34% of the gaming market – this being absolutely contrary to the gender aspect of the pre-existing studies. In fact, although it is still perceived as a hobby which is almost entirely dominated by male youths, almost 40% of all game players are women, and the average age of those who play games is 35 years (ESA 2009), up from 33 years in 2006 (ESA 2007). This is a huge contrast to general observations in the eighties where it was believed that the age of gamers was actually decreasing (Smith 1980). In terms of age, it has also been indicated that while

83% of teenagers engage in game-play and 67% of teenagers play online games, 40% of adults are also involved in some kind of game-play (Williams et al. 2008) so it is not entirely exclusive to young individuals. In contrast with the stereotype, the same study found that the majority of players are in their 30s (Mean: 31.16 years old), and more players are in their 30s than in 20s or teens. The gender difference and race difference, however, holds up in this research, finding that 80.8% of players are male, and that white Caucasians and Native Americans have the highest rates of play. The demographics based on race, class and education have yet to be examined on this basis, and would most certainly be worthy of further investigation.

An interesting study which investigates the online game, and MMORPG, *Everquest*, compares adolescent gamers against adult gamers, and finds that there is a higher percentage of male gamers (93.2%) in the adolescent sample than in the adult sample (79.6%) (Griffiths et al. 2004a). It should be noted, also, that this study had a significantly larger sample size (n=540) than other demographics studies cited here. One finding of this study, which appeared to be particularly incongruous when compared to related research, indicated that almost one third of the adolescents in the sample had left school before reaching 11 years of age. Another publication by the same group (Griffiths et al 2004b) cites the percentage of male game players to be 81%, and the mean age to be 27%. Yee (2006) states that the age range for this type of game – MMORPG – is 11 years to 68 years.

The stereotype of the game player involved some basic demographic information – primarily that the stereotypical gamer is young and male, from a middle-class background and probably well-educated. While a number of studies (Douse & McManus 1993; Kendall 1999; King & Borland 2003; Smith 1980; Williams 2003) have backed up this stereotypical image of a gamer, and added other aspects such as a tendency towards heterosexuality and lack of social skills, the claims made by the Entertainment Software Association (2007, 2009) from their survey based data largely refute these stereotypical images of gamers. It appears that the number of female gamers has actually increased and is continuing to do so, and also – contrary to Smith’s (1980) observations from the eighties that the average age of gamers was decreasing – it now appears that the trend has turned around and the average age of gamers is increasing.

It must be noted, however, that although the earlier demographic-based studies focussed on a few very specific games and therefore are not generalisable to the general role-playing population, the more recent demographic data which comes from the Entertainment Software Association (2007, 2009) is based on a very broad spectrum of games, including non-role-playing games and therefore is also difficult to generalise to the population of role-playing gamers. It would be beneficial to carry out an investigation into the demographics of role-playing gamers specifically, but focussing on a far broader range of games which fit into the genre of RPG.

2. INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

Individual Differences is an area of modern psychology which investigates the ways in which people are different from one other and the ways in which they are similar, in their behaviour, their thinking and emotions (Ellis 1928; Eysenck & Eysenck 1985; Hampson & Colman 1995).

A stereotypical image of role-playing gamers depicts them as lacking in social skills (Williams 2003), often coming across as shy and introverted (Bainbridge 1976). On the contrary, Hall (1988) found that playing fantasy Role-playing Games actually caused an increased socialization of some shy students as an incidental result of the improved writing ability and vocabulary caused by the games. A more recent study found that socialising online, as opposed to offline, was preferable to 21% of gamers (Hussain & Griffiths 2008); however, this came from a study with significantly more male participants than females in the sample so there may be some bias. Bias or no, this is an interesting result in that it may highlight the idea of role-playing gamers as being conventionally introverted, as they tend away from traditional forms of socialising.

An investigation into the specific interests of fantasy role-playing gamers found that those who were highly involved in fantasy games were more likely to describe themselves as being "scientific", and were more likely to include "playing with computers" and "reading" as items in their list of interests than the control group who were matched with the gamers in terms of age, sex and level of education (Douse & McManus 1993). As well as this, gamers were cited as being *less* likely to include "going to the cinema, theatre or concerts" and "going to parties" as interests. This appears to reinforce the stereotypical image of gamers as being

introverted and quite shy. There was a small difference in personality found between the groups in this study, although there is a possibility that this difference could be of the same magnitude as the difference present between any groups involved in different hobbies.

3. PERSONALITY

Personality is defined as "the dynamic and organized set of characteristics possessed by a person that uniquely influences his or her cognitions, motivations and behaviours in various situations" (Ryckman 2004). There are many different questionnaires currently used to create a personality profile, and the research into personality in Role-playing Games over the years has employed a wide variety of these.

3.1 General Personality Traits

Many studies into Role-playing Games have used Cattell's 16 Personality Factor Questionnaire (16PF) to create a personality profile of gamers. The 16PF is a multiple choice questionnaire designed to measure where an individual's score lies in relation to fundamental traits of the human personality which include *inter alia* Openness to Change, Emotional Stability, Warmth, Perfection and Dominance. Originally, Cattell had 16 primary traits that were developed through factor analysis of everyday behaviour. However further factor analysis was carried out on these 16 traits to develop five global factors known as the *Big Five* model – Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism (Goldberg 1990), and to some extent, the Big Five has overtaken the earlier work (John et al. 2008). Nonetheless, the 16PF has been utilized in many studies of role-playing games with relatively enduring results.

Simon (1987) was one of the first to attempt to disprove the harmfulness of games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* to their players. His study, using the 16PF, was carried out with 68 participants, all of them game players but with no control group. Simon's aim in this study was to pay particular attention to Factor C: Emotional Stability and this yielded perfectly healthy personality profiles with an increased level of Cattell's factor Q1, 'Experimenting; Liberal; Freethinking', as the only unusual result.

Following his original study on the emotional stability of those involved with *Dungeons & Dragons*, Simon (1998) carried out Cattell's 16PF on

24 participants who played the game *Vampire: The Masquerade*, expecting to see a difference in the Emotional Stability factor, but in this study the increased level of factor Q1: 'Experimenting; Liberal; Freethinking' of his previous study was not replicated. The reason for this is unclear, but it is suggested that it may be because of the more modern world game setting.

Carroll and Carolin's study (1989) did not focus solely on RPGs, on this occasion the participants were also involved in other genres of games, although they again used the 16PF. Carrying out these personality tests on 75 University Students, they found gamers to be "normal" but also demonstrated that the fantasy Role-playing gamers scored higher on Cattell's factor Q1 – 'Experimenting; Liberal; Freethinking'. This corresponds with the findings of Simon's *D&D* based study (1987), where participants also had a higher level of factor Q1.

With the wide variety of scientifically validated personality tests available today, it makes sense that not all studies of RPGs used the 16PF to examine personality. A survey-based study was carried out by Yee (1999), with 100 participants who played Role-playing Games and a control group. This survey included an approximation of three of Goldberg's Big Five factor domain scales – namely Extraversion, Agreeableness and Openness. A significantly higher rating for 'Openness to Experience' was found for role-playing gamers.

There is a similarity between 16PF Factor Q1 'Experimenting; Liberal; Freethinking' (as seen in Carroll & Carolin 1989; Simon 1987 & 1998) and Goldberg's Big-5's Factor 'Openness to Experience' (as seen in Yee 1999), considering that Goldberg's Big-5 were originally derived from Cattell's 16PF. As such, it is not surprising that Role-playing gamers have been shown to have increased scores in both of these factors.

Douse & McManus (1993) looked at the personality of fantasy game players using the Bem Sex Role Inventory, Decision-Making Questionnaire, Eysenck Personality Inventory and Davis' Empathy Questionnaires. With 35 participants, 92% of which were male, involved in a fantasy role-playing play-by-mail style game and a matched control group, Douse & McManus found any analysis of sex difference to be impossible due to the gender imbalance within the group studied. They found that game players were involved in

playing 11.4 hours per week on average: almost five times as long as the control group who played for 2.5 hours per week. The study showed that players were less feminine and less androgynous on the Bem Sex Role Inventory than the control group. Players were found to display significantly lower scores of empathic concern on Davis' Empathy Questionnaire, which is unusual because high scores on this trait were reported as "prone to anxiety and shyness". There was, however, no significant difference in scores on this questionnaire for fantasy, perspective taking or personal distress. Yee (1999) points out that he finds this study to be biased owing to the fact that computer/email preference is, here, confused with role-playing games.

In 1990, DeRenard & Kline (1990) conducted an investigation of 35 role-playing gamers who played *Dungeons & Dragons* with a control group of 35 non-players, in which a questionnaire with the anomia scale was employed. Individuals in the control group reported having feelings of 'meaninglessness' and the researchers speculated about whether their involvement with the game gave players a sense of purpose. Game players were found to have a slightly higher score in "cultural estrangement" than the control group – implying a lower awareness of popular entertainment. It was noted, also, that those participants who were more deeply involved in the game (who spent more money on materials, and more time playing, for example) had higher reported feelings of alienation than the other participants. These feelings of alienation could warrant further investigation, although given the small sample-size, it is currently not possible to generalise the result to the population of gamers at large.

3.2 Neuroticism & Psychoticism

In a study undertaken by Carter & Lester (1998), using the Eysenck Personality Inventory and Beck Depression Inventory, involving participants who played *Dungeons & Dragons* and a control group of male undergraduate non-gamers, there was no significant difference found to exist between the gamers and the control group. No difference was found between the two groups in mean scores on depression, suicidal ideation, psychoticism, extraversion or neuroticism.

Rosenthal et al. (1998) carried out a similar study where they compared 54 Gamers with 64 non-gamers – in this case, the non-gamers were national guardsmen. The findings were that the

stereotypical gamer is male and has similar numbers of close friends to the guardsmen. The study failed to confirm the stereotype of a gamer as “withdrawn, emotionally immature adolescents” although gamers reported slightly longer time spent sleeping and daydreaming than the guardsmen. No difference was found in the measure of Neuroticism between the two using a separate neuroticism scale.

In the Douse & McManus (1993) study, cited earlier, they used the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire with 35 Gamer participants and 35 members of a control group and showed that players were likely to be significantly more introverted than the control group but no difference was found for neuroticism or social acquiescence.

It is difficult to prove a negative, given the logic which is an integral part of scientific hypothesis testing – a study’s sample could have been badly drawn, for instance, and this would affect the results. Taking this into account, it is still important to note that there have been three studies which have replicated negative values for neuroticism for their samples of gamers.

3.3 Crime, Violence & Cultic Practices

Implications regarding the supposed tendency of role-players to extreme deviation from the norm as regards crime, violence and cultic practices have also been researched. There is a popular belief that those who play games are more prone to criminal behaviour, and these games have been portrayed in the media as causing this disposition towards violence and crime. Fine (1983) describes a stereotype of fantasy role-playing gamers as well as war-gamers, as exclusively having an interest in war and killing.

While this belief had existed for many years, it experienced a lot of media attention from 1999 onwards owing to the discovery that two American high-school students who stormed their school and shot 15 people in the so-called ‘Columbine High School Massacre’ were also heavily involved in computer games and in fact used one of their favourite games to play out their rampage multiple times before carrying it out in reality (King & Borland 2003).

King and Borland describe the aftermath of this discovery in detail. Following the revelation, a surge of disapproval, criticism and “hostile attention” affected the culture of gaming – as well

as the gamers themselves. Subsequently, attempts were made to sue games designers and games companies by families of the individuals affected by the events at Columbine, as well as other similar events which were perceived as being caused by involvement with Role-playing Games. During many of these cases, doctors appeared and gave professional opinions about the detrimental effects of games, without having carried out any medical research in the area, and the media continued to portray games as dangerous. Despite all this, the cases were thrown out of court as the judges declined to rule on them – but the damage had been done and “the stigma had stuck” on the game industry (King & Borland 2003).

Further criticisms of computer games caused the industry to instigate a rating system for games so that individuals – particularly parents – would be informed about the content of games before purchasing.

RPGs as a cause for criminal activity are more of a historical myth at this stage, in the US, with no evidence or court cases which have ruled to this direction, and we should move beyond those implications now. Violent video games are still often touted by the media as being a cause for crime and violent behaviour, but the spotlight has moved beyond RPGs at this stage.

Abyeta & Forest (1991) began their research on the then-popular belief that role-playing games caused the players to be unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality and individuals who played regularly became involved in criminal behaviour. Virtually no difference was found to exist between role-players and non-role-players beyond that psychoticism had a higher incidence in the non-role-players than in role-players. This finding, however, was not very reliable due to the very small sample size – 20 gamers with a non-gamer control group of 25 – which renders the findings open to the possibility of sampling error.

As regards the extreme claims that gamers may be involved in satanic practice (Bourget et al. 1998) and demonic rituals, Leeds (1995) used the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire on 217 adult male participants to measure levels of psychoticism, extraversion and neuroticism. There were three groups of participants, those who played fantasy role-playing games (n=66), those who were involved in satanic dabbling (not fully committed to Satanism) and were not involved in gaming (n=26) and a control group of non-involved college

undergraduates (n=125). As well as Eysenck's Questionnaire, the participants were asked to complete the Belief in the Paranormal Scale and the Satanic and Fantasy Envelopment Scale (SAFE). After carrying out a series of one-way ANOVA'S and Pearson Correlations, there was found to be a significant difference between fantasy gamers and satanic dabblers in all of the measures used. This evidence suggests that either the popular hypothesis that role-playing games are a precursor to players becoming involved in satanic practices is incorrect, or that role-players who do become engaged in satanic practices undergo a significant personality change before doing so.

Schnoebelen (n.d.) lists 11 murders and suicides which are claimed to be caused by involvement with Dungeons & Dragons. One study (Carter & Lester 1998) showed no difference in level of suicide ideation, depression, neuroticism or psychoticism between gamers and a control group but such comparison can be easily biased by the composition of the control group. Stackpole (1989) investigated suicide rates of those involved with role-playing games by calculating the expected suicide rates per the gamer population, then, an estimated 4 million players worldwide. The estimated suicide rate for this population would be 500 individuals, per year. However, in his study, Stackpole had documented only 7 suicides of game players per year, and inferred that playing Dungeons & Dragons appeared to cause a lower suicide rate amongst the youth involved in it. He also suggested that role-playing games could even be used as a public health measure due to these findings.

It should be noted that confirmation bias may play a part in the tenacity of the media when it comes to the detrimental effect of games on the players. Confirmation bias (Klayton 1995), or confirmatory bias, is a prejudiced way of looking at information, and causes an individual "to seek and interpret information in ways that are partial towards existing beliefs" (Ask & Granhag 2005). Individuals have this inclination towards favouring information which stands to confirm a pre-existing ideas and hypotheses, and interpreting information in a prejudiced way, regardless of the truth of the information in question.

Another example of this was seen in the media in 2001, where Microsoft's Flight Simulator software, designed for amateur enthusiasts, was depicted in playing a major role in the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York, as the perpetrators were said to have

used this software to practice their attack. The fact that a small number of terrorists used this software does not, by any stretch of the imagination, imply that use of the software causes individuals to have a tendency towards such crimes.

4. IDENTITY

Identity is an individual's sense of self, comprising characteristics which make them distinct and unique from others, and also characteristics which correspond with others. Many different aspects combine to create an individual's sense of identity; their gender, background, ethnicity, religion, self-assessed personality characteristics and traits, membership in groups such as family or non-familial social groups, their perceived role in their relationships, role at work, and their goals in life.

For each individual, these aspects may be seen more strongly as part of the identity, or less so, depending on the importance placed on each of them by the individual. Identity is not fixed, it can and does change and re-form many times during a lifespan owing to changes in situation or perspective and re-evaluation of values.

The most relevant types of identity, which comprise the main body of work on identity with respect to role-playing games, are personal identity, social identity and gender identity.

4.1 Child's Play and Identity Development

Through much of the research on child's play in the early years, certain themes recur often, namely the presence and requirement of *roles*, *rules* and *imaginary situations* as part of this type of play. According to one group (Verenikina et al. 2003) there is an essential characteristic in child's play, "a dimension of pretend...interactions in an imaginary, "as if" situation, which usually contains some roles and rules and the symbolic use of objects." Free play within this imaginary setting enables the child to "explore the roles and rules of functioning in adult society."

According to Vygotsky (1934) "Imaginary situations of any form of play already contains rules of behaviour." These are not necessarily rules which are formulated previous to play but are merely automatic, situational rules which come about from the existence of an imaginary situation. In playing a game based in a medieval style fantasy world, for example, an automatic situational rule exists in that a character would not have at their disposal modern technology such as a

computer with internet access or mobile phone. Conversely, while it is possible to use the existence of technology to aid characters in a game in a more modern urban setting such as New York City, magic, mythical creatures or ancient modes of transport, for example, would be equally incongruous.

“Just as the imaginary situation has to contain rules of behaviour, so every game with rules contains an imaginary situation” (Vygotsky 1934). The relationship between imaginary situations and rules, therefore, goes both ways. The example used by Vygotsky to explain this is a game of chess. Chess is a game with rules, and an imaginary situation wherein the pieces, each with its different role, can only move in specified ways, and where the taking of a piece is a concept which exists purely in the game of chess – there is no direct proxy for this action in real life.

There has been much discussion about the idea of “make-believe” ‘play’ – in its traditional sense, occurring in an “imaginary, illusory world” (Vygotsky 1934). This description of child’s play sounds very similar to the previous descriptions of role-playing games, where the participants enact roles within an imaginary setting and through this enactment, the situations and characters develop within the rules and framework of the game.

From this description, it can be seen that role-playing games are similar to child’s play in three ways: in both of these activities roles and rules are essential, and there is an importance on interactions within an imaginary setting. It can be considered that some role-playing games, with their detailed rulebooks and reliance on numbers and dice-rolling to determine outcomes, are the same kind of activity though at a more advanced level than traditional child’s play.

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Imaginary play is important for children’s development, one description insisting that it contains all of the child’s developmental tendencies “in a condensed form” (Vygotsky 1934). This

includes identity development which occurs early on in childhood, although identity changes and transforms at many stages throughout life. Children use play to “explore the roles and rules of functioning in adult society” (Verenikina et al. 2003) which children will need in their adulthood, and they may also use it to rehearse their own roles in the present and “play at reality” (Vygotsky 1934).

In this type of reality-based play, the child plays an exaggerated version of herself. An example of this is when a pair of female siblings play at ‘being sisters’. During this play, the children emphasize the relationship between the two, as sisters, and go out of their way to display the aspects which stand to highlight this – for example, sharing toys, talking and dressing alike. As part of this emphasis, the children will also stress the importance of the aspects which stand to make them different from other people, and this also helps the children to reinforce and highlight their current roles and relationships.

It could be considered that when Verenikina et al. (2003) mention the acquisition of the “foundations of self-reflection” through play, reality-based play fits into this theory, as it enables the child to examine and reflect on existing aspects of their identity.

This idea of identity development is touched on in Vygotsky’s research on child’s play also, and the development of the basis of self-reflection can be seen in children when they engage in imaginary play (Verenikina et al. 2003). By putting on a role, a child can discover new ideas and develop new skills, and consequently the child may incorporate these ideas and their newly discovered social norms into their identity – such as heroism in the case of playing a superhero saving somebody’s life, or loyalty in the case of playing a good friend to somebody else (Vygotsky 1934).

4.2 Personal Identity

Personal identity refers to the way in which an individual defines the self “in terms of idiosyncratic personal relationships and traits” (Hogg & Vaughan 2002) and according to Wallace, games add to the sense of identity and self (1999). In contrast to the idea that involvement in (violent) RPGs can lead to real world involvement in violence and Satanism, researchers involved in the development of identity in role-playing games generally affirm that games have a positive development function in adults, just as with

children.

Role-playing gamers are “constantly creating and performing a variety of identities”, whether they are using tabletop games, MUDs or online games such as Everquest as their platform (Taylor 2006). Taylor & Walford (1972) state that all that is necessary is for “the participant to accept a new identity...and act and react as appropriately as possible”.

The question “Do you believe it is possible to identify so strongly with one’s character that it becomes one’s primary identity (i.e. does, in your opinion, “character immersion” exist)?” was answered by 40 Live Action Role-Playing gamers from Europe (Harviainen 2007). 82.9% of answers were positive, with 93.8% of these stating that they had experienced immersion themselves.

“Users can construct identities that may or may not correlate to their offline persona”; they are not ‘bound’ to make sure their online persona corresponds with their offline identity (Taylor 2006). It can be seen, nonetheless, that the persona created within an online role-playing game can impact on the player’s real-life identity. Taylor describes an individual handing out roses at a convention, which he does in-game, as in an act of creating a parallel with his online identity, almost as an “offline incarnation of his online persona.” This, of course, can work both ways. In online role-playing games, one often finds participants sharing virtual drinks and physical signs of affection. Even barring *conscious* efforts to mimic online personae, role-playing can have a real effect on offline identity. For females, “identity exploration” is considered to be a primary play goal, and it has been reported that “...virtual world experiences “filter back”” with women finding that they have become more confident due to their experiences in the game (Taylor 2006).

Affirmation of identity is what players endeavour to find through virtual play, and Bartle (2001) sees immersion, the level of involvement in a game, as an aid to convey this affirmation of identity. Bartle describes the highest level of immersion, termed ‘Persona’, in a very clear way:

“A persona is a player, in a world. Any separate distinction of character has gone – the player is the character. You’re not role-playing a being, you are that being; you’re not assuming an identity, you are that identity. If you lose a fight, you don’t feel that your character has

died, you feel that you have died. There’s no level of indirection: you are there.”

So, players can construct online personae which are very unlike their offline personality, they can create ones which are also very similar, and the construction of an online identity can have an effect on their real-life identity. ‘Drift’ is the term given to the phenomenon of players and characters changing to fit one another (Bartle 2001). When a player is more aligned with his character, he may also be more immersed in the character and the virtual world. The ideal is seen as being when one reaches full immersion and character alignment at the same time and pace.

The construction of an online identity can have an effect on real-life identity. Drift is the term given to the phenomenon of players and characters changing to fit one another.

What we find, therefore, on the one hand there is a separation of identities (real identity vs. constructed identities) and, on the other hand, there is a ‘drift’ between these identities, in both directions. This mirrors the “reality based play” of children, discussed in the previous section.

Immersion is the extent to which one is willing to take on another identity as her own and in online role-playing games, players are given the opportunity to create multiple new identities for themselves, and “become authors...of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction” (Turkle 1997). Immersion could, therefore, be considered as an important element which allows for ‘drift’

If a player either reaches total immersion before finishing alignment with the character or is happily aligned with the character before fully being immersed in the game, he may feel a sense of dissatisfaction. The designer’s job is to try to ensure that the players “become their characters at roughly the same time that their characters’ skills become internalised”. It is not certain, however, what the link between the two facets is.

Identity is an important issue to consider when the objective of immersion in a role-playing game is to take on the role of a completely discrete entity. Some individuals spend the majority of their free time playing online games, enacting a character. In

this way, an individual can create his identity and attempt to embody the role that he is playing, but he has also created the initial possibility for creating the identity that he wishes himself to have.

4.3 Gender Identity

In contrast to the literature on personal identity, studies on gender and social identity are more descriptive and it is difficult to draw general conclusions in these areas. For instance, it is said that games can "...allow access to gender identities that are often socially prohibited or delegitimized offline" (Taylor 2006), which is obvious. But what is the effect of such experimentation?

Interestingly, in a study on gender swapping and socializing online, Hussain & Griffiths (2008) found that 21% of gamers preferred socializing online to offline, when given the choice, and it was shown that 57% of gamers took part in gender swapping online. Reid (1995) found that reactions to such gender swapping could be very passionate – with many believing that it is a form of "deceit" or "cheating" even within the boundaries of a role-playing game. Wallace (1999) stated that in the example of an online MUD (Multi-User Domain), those who were 'female-presenting' (putting forward a female persona/ character) "tended to receive more attention and chivalry in the form of hints and gifts, and occasionally received more harassment". Also, while 15% of individuals were female, 25% of people on this game presented themselves as female. This suggests that the 10% of males presenting themselves as female have some kind of agenda, perhaps a role in leveraging attention. It would be very interesting to examine the presence or absence of 'drift' in this type of player.

4.4 Social Identity

Social identity is used to define the self in terms of social group memberships. Being involved in role-playing games generally involves being part of a group by their very nature. There are computer role-playing games (CRPGs) which involve a single player approach, moving through a set storyline, in which no interaction with players is necessary or even possible. Even online MMORPGs give the scope for solo-play, but to achieve certain goals within these games it generally becomes necessary at some stage to align oneself with other players, whether temporarily in a 'Pick-Up-Group' or for much longer time periods in a 'Guild' or 'Clan'.

Playing tabletop role-playing games or Live Action

Role-playing games involves playing with a group of players which can vary in size from 3 or 4 to hundreds during big live action events. Gaming societies of all sizes tend to exist when gamers come together in schools and colleges and in towns and cities worldwide. Although gamers are sometimes thought of as being solitary, the majority of games require two or more individuals to play, and so gaming groups come together out of necessity for the hobby.

Grantham Aldred (2009) describes gaming groups in terms of folk groups with particular traditions attached involving shared jokes which "reference the various tiers of cultural identity" which are possessed by members of the gaming group.

Thus, although the games are a virtual experience, away from 'reality', participation in a gaming group is a real experience. Gender crossing as described above may be negatively perceived as violating the virtual/real boundary: in effect, a taboo.

5. SUMMARY

Contrary to the stereotypic image of the game player as an anti-social 'nerd' who finds it difficult to create or maintain relationships with others, the image that is being developed in the light of the reviewed research is of an individual who is actively seeking to develop his own identity through 'drift' and who is involved in game-based social networks that involve their own fairly complex collections of norms and taboos.

The aim of this paper was to investigate the existing research that has been carried out with reference to role-playing games and stereotypical characteristics of gamers, and draw up a review of literature concerning child's play and role-playing games and the importance of imaginary play for identity development. The research can generally be divided into four main sections: Demographics, Interests, Personality and Identity.

In terms of demographics, although many of the older studies appear to back up the idea that the vast majority of gamers are male, young, well-educated and from a middle-class background, more recent data would suggest that the hobby is becoming more balanced in terms of gender, and that the average age of gamers is in fact increasing rather than decreasing.

In respect to personality, little or no evidence has been found to support a difference between role-

playing gamers and the non-gaming population. The few differences that have been found appear inconclusive owing to small sample sizes in some studies, and in other cases further research is required in order to fully confirm the findings.

Little or no evidence has been found to support a difference between role-playing gamers and the non-gaming population.

In summary, role-playing gamers have rarely been found to deviate from the rest of society as regards personality. Slightly higher scores for Q1 ('Experimenting; Liberal; Freethinking') and Openness to Experience have been found in a number of studies (Carroll & Carolin 1989; Simon 1987; Yee 1999). This was to be expected, to an extent, as one facet to Openness to Experience involves having a tendency towards fantasy and having a vivid imagination and unusual ideas, all of which are involved when taking part in a role-playing game.

Game players were shown to be more likely to be introverted, in their interests and activities, yet they are also more likely to have a significantly lower score of empathic concern although high scores of this factor report as being "prone to anxiety and shyness". Role-playing gamers were seen to have a higher level of "cultural estrangement" i.e. a somewhat lower awareness of popular entertainment, perhaps owing to the fact that they have very specific niche areas of interest which may differ from other populations.

The claims that players are more likely to become involved in cults, or carry out crime or violence towards the self or others have been investigated and there is some evidence to the contrary for each of these claims, in that none of these claims stood up in court, and no clear evidence was found in their support. It has been indicated that players also scored no higher in neuroticism, psychoticism, depression, suicidal ideation, extraversion, perspective-taking or personal distress than non-gamers.

The control group (non-gamers) of DeRenard & Kline's study (1990) reported experiencing higher feelings of 'meaninglessness' than the game-playing group, and it is suggested that the advent of the fantasy role-playing games in the lives of the

game players stands to give extra meaning to the individuals involved. An assertion has been made that participation in RPGs may, indeed, serve a developmental function in terms of personality growth and development of social identity. It has also been suggested (Stackpole 1989) that owing to the low rates of suicide amongst role-playing gamers in comparison to that of non-gamers, that these games could have some benefit if used as a public health measure.

6. CONCLUSION

Looking at the research as presented in this review, it can be seen that many varied aspects of the stereotype of role-playing gamers have been investigated by researchers.

Considering the volume of research that has been carried out in relation to role-playing games and their effect on the players, it is unfortunate that a greater number of variables are not being taken into consideration. Heretofore, the focus of the research in this area and the range of variables studied have been narrow. In the main, this work has been concerned with general demographics trends and involved the use of a variety of different personality measures, many of which show very few differences between role-playing gamers and non-gamers.

It is of concern that much of the existing research replicates similar test designs – one group of participants who are gamers, a control group of non-gamers, and the use of a chosen personality questionnaire – with little to differentiate them from previous studies. It is to be regretted that more variables have not been operationalised.

Even the briefest examination of existing studies, particularly the pre-2003 demographics-based studies, indicates the necessity for larger and more balanced samples. Many of the existing studies fall down on the fact that they have almost entirely male participants. While this fact may reflect the general population of gamers, it renders the results of certain research studies virtually uninterpretable – for example Douse & McManus (1993) use of the Bem Sex Role Inventory. For such a popular activity, it is imperative that broader studies are carried out on gamers.

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Sadomasochist Role-Playing as Live-Action Role-Playing: A Trait-Descriptive Analysis

Popular Abstract - This article describes sadomasochist role-playing which is physically performed by its participants. All sadomasochist activities have a role-playing component to them. It is a form of role-playing where people consensually take on dominant and submissive roles, for the purpose of inflicting things such as pain and humiliation, in order to create pleasure for all participants. In some cases, participants agree to emphasize those roles, or make them fetishistically attractive, by adding complexity and definitions to them, and then act them out in semi-scripted fantasy scenes. This paper examines that activity, commonly called "sadomasochistic role-play", as opposed to the more generic "sadomasochism" of which it is only one facet.

Furthermore, the article compares this form of play with live-action role-playing (larp). Its main emphasis is on the question of how closely related the two activities are. To determine this, the article examines sadomasochist role-playing as being potentially a game, the question of its goal-orientation and the issue of whether or not it contains a character in the sense of a live-action role-playing character. Based on this process, it comes to the conclusion that sadomasochist role-playing is not a separate type of role-playing, but rather one kind of live-action role-playing.

As its theoretical framework, this text utilizes studies done on both live-action role-playing games and on sadomasochist role-playing. Reliable material on the latter being quite limited, descriptions have been gathered from both academic works and practical manuals. The data gained from these is further supported by interviews of practitioners with personal experience in playing sadomasochist fantasy scenes. This article has two key purposes: The research of a relatively understudied form of role-playing, and the building of bridges from that to live-action role-playing research.

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ABSTRACT

This article describes sadomasochist role-playing in which the participants are physically present and perform their actions. All sadomasochist activities have a role-playing component to them. It is a form of role-playing where people consensually take on dominant and submissive roles, for the purpose of inflicting things such as pain and humiliation, in order to create pleasure for all participants. This article examines cases where participants agree to emphasize those roles, or make them fetishistically attractive, by adding complexity and definitions to them. They then act out their characters' actions in semi-scripted fantasy scenes. This paper examines that activity, defined as "sadomasochistic role-play".

Furthermore, the article compares this form of play with live-action role-playing (larp), fantasy play which also contains characters and physical actions. Main emphasis is on the question of how closely related these two activities – both easily recognizable as pretence play – actually are. To determine this, the article examines sadomasochist role-playing by analyzing its key traits as role-play. These include it being potentially a game, the question of its goal-orientation and the issue of whether or not it contains a character in the sense of a live-action role-playing character. Based on this process, it comes to the conclusion that sadomasochist role-playing is not a separate type of role-playing, but rather one kind of live-action role-playing with a particular, distinctive framing.

As its theoretical framework, this text utilizes studies done on both live-action role-playing games and on sadomasochist role-playing. Reliable material on the latter being quite limited, descriptions have been gathered from both academic works and from practical manuals. The manuals have been chosen from amongst those most quoted and considered reliable in academic works on sadomasochism. The data gained from these is further supported by the author's interviews of practitioners with personal experience in sadomasochist role-playing. This article has two key purposes: The research of a relatively understudied form of role-playing, and the building of bridges from that to live-action role-playing research.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sexual role-playing exists in various forms. It has been so far researched very rarely, and mostly just from a quantitative perspective, as a side note in studies concentrating more on other sexual behaviors. It is commonly believed that people play pretence games such as "plumber and housewife" in their homes, or "man picking up a prostitute" at bars, as a form of sexual play. Yet not a single research paper on this phenomenon seems to exist.¹ A likely reason is that it has been ignored as an "insignificant factor of foreplay" by sexologists conducting surveys, and thus never included in the questionnaires (Moser, personal discourse, 2009). Sadomasochist role-playing (much, but not all, of which counts as sexual role-play; Newmahr 2010), however, is a different case: It has been documented to some extent, and its central forms (including the popularity of those forms) are known well beyond anecdotal levels of evidence.²

In this article, I will examine sadomasochist role-playing in which the participants perform their actions for real (as opposed to using just verbal descriptions of them), as a form of role-playing. I will compare it to live-action role-playing (larp), a type of role-playing game where players adopt the part of fictional characters and physically act out their actions (see Brenne 2005 for an example). As

my tool, I use systematic trait analysis – a type of hermeneutic deconstruction – on already existing studies of both, supplemented with interview material (see Harviainen 2008 on using hermeneutics for the study of role-play, and Mäyrä 2009 on hermeneutics in game studies). This is a formalist, technical study, deconstructing and discussing traits and structure, as the meaning given to the activity is well beyond the scope of this article (see Newmahr 2011 for more on the significance of sadomasochist role-play to its practitioners), as are individual descriptions of sadomasochist role-playing scenes.

According to a widely (see Weinberg 2006 for details) accepted definition of sadomasochism – also called by various names such as BDSM and Leathersex, depending on connotation and practitioner identity³ – coined by Weinberg, Williams and Moser (1984), there are five key components to it. Not all of them need to be present in order for an activity to constitute sadomasochism, but they are often found together. These are:

1. **The appearance of dominance and submission;** the appearance of rule by one partner over the other.
2. **Role playing.**
3. **Consensuality,** that is, voluntary agreement to enter into the interaction.
4. **Mutual definition,** i.e., a shared understanding that the activities constitute SM or some similar term.
5. **A sexual context,** though the concept that SM is always sexual is not shared by all participants.

The dominant partner in a sadomasochistic event (often called a "scene" or "session") is generally referred to as the "top", and the submissive partner as a "bottom" (Weinberg 2006). Other concepts also exist, depending on local and personal preferences, some of them common (such as "Master" or "slave"), others quite obscure (Rinella 2006). The playing of roles has a central part in sadomasochistic activities, as also the first criterion

¹ This observation is based on the author's extensive database, sexological journal, and online searches for such between 2006-2010. It has further been confirmed as likely by sex researchers Elina Haavio-Mannila (personal correspondence, 2007), Osmo Kontula (personal correspondence, 2007), and Charles Moser (personal discourse, 2009). If such studies do exist, they appear to be extremely obscure and difficult to find.

² A second well-documented but contested example of physical sexual role-playing exists, in the form of paraphrased "gender roles" adopted by homosexual individuals. The study of those, however, is beyond the limits of this article.

³ Even though some communities prefer different terminology, I will use sadomasochism and BDSM (an abbreviation of Bondage & Discipline, Dominance & Submission, and SadoMasochism) as an interchangeable umbrella concept here, denoting activities as defined by Weinberg, Williams & Moser 1984.

ties into role-playing (Siegel 1995). The whole activity can be perceived in some cases as an escape from normal gender roles, to various degrees (Nordling et al. 2006).

Since Gebhard (1969), many researchers have seen BDSM as a social activity (see Weinberg 1978 and 2006 for detailed literature surveys), which rises as an emergent property from the possibility of experiencing some pain as pleasurable (*algolagnia*). According to Gebhard, and expanding on him Weinberg & Kamel (1995), especially societies with both strong power hierarchies and a chance for mobility in such hierarchies give rise to this social sadomasochism, i.e. the ability and propensity to enjoy sexual scenes with a strong, yet consensual power dialectic. This means that according to these researchers there is a pretence play component to sadomasochism. (Studies which concentrate on psychophysiological reactions have a tendency to skip any analysis of roles played beyond the dominant/submissive dichotomy as insignificant; see Sagarin et al. 2009 for an example).

Furthermore, Mains' (1984) ethnography of gay male sadomasochists introduced a view of BDSM activities as "ritual psychodrama". Gebhard (1969), Deleuze (1967) and Weinberg (1978) also note that BDSM play is a fantasy activity, set in a temporary fictional world, and contains theatrical elements, yet is not theater. These observations, in addition to the playing of very obvious roles, raise the question of the extent of the similarities with larping.

2. THE BASICS OF BDSM ROLE-PLAY

Sadomasochist role-playing, like role-playing in general, can take place in any interaction environment, including subtle interactions in everyday life, not visible to outsiders (Dancer et al. 2006). Online BDSM role-playing has a lot in common with traditional tabletop role-playing games (Cross & Matheson 2006), and virtual environments such as Second Life have given rise to sadomasochist role-playing communities within them (see Sixma 2008 for an excellent example).

Physical BDSM role-play has several natural-seeming siblings, from re-enactment to psychodrama, but its closest correspondences are with larp. This is because at its core, sadomasochism, like larp, contains its own narrativity (Siegel 1995). The narrativity rises as an emergent property from pre-seeded potential, and thus very closely follows the outlines set by

Fatland (2005) for larp narratives. It contains a "script" only in the sense of sexual scripts, guidelines on the level of general scene and behavior, as opposed to the rather precise activity defined by formulas such as a theatrical script (Alison et al. 2001). And a template-like script is not necessary for the activity, simply a common element (Weinberg 1978).

Sadomasochist role-playing, like role-playing in general, can take place in any interaction environment, including subtle interactions in everyday life, not visible to outsiders.

The types of scenarios that can be played are as unlimited as in other pretence activities, but quite naturally tend to gravitate towards situations with a strong power dialectic. For example, the Wikipedia entry for "Sexual roleplay" lists the following examples:

1. **Age-play** – where one player takes the role of an adult and the other a child.
2. **Animal-play** – where the bottom is treated as a non-human animal such as a dog or pony.
3. **Master-slave** – where the submissive is treated as the property of the master/mistress.
4. **Torturer/Captive prisoner** – where the top is a captor who abuses the bottom.
5. **Caught and punished** – where the bottom is "caught" doing something wrong.
6. **Authority figure/Misbehaving Adult** – where an authority figure threatens the bottom with exposure of a secret.
7. **Gender-play** – where one or more players take on roles of the opposite sex.
8. **Goddess worship** – where a woman is seen as a pagan deity.
9. **Hospital fantasies** – involving doctors, nurses and patients.
10. **Uniform fetish** – the female dresses as a submissive schoolgirl, cheerleader, French maid, waitress, and so forth, while the dominant male plays an authority figure (parent, teacher, coach, etc.).
11. **Rape fantasy or a ravishment** – where one player feigns being coerced into an unwelcome sex act.

12. **Owner/Inanimate object** – such as the bottom being human furniture.

While not an academically reliable reference in any way, the existence of such lists points towards a community acceptance of such activities' existence (this particular list appears to actually be a summary of activities described in Brame, Brame & Jacobs 1997). Sandnabba, Santtila & Nordling (1999) had the following categories of role-play in their survey on self-identified sadomasochists:

1. Master/Madame – Slave
2. Uniform scenes
3. Teacher – Student
4. Execution scenes
5. Hospital scenes
6. Rape scenes

Such scenes can be played as separate power-exchange encounters ("sessions"), as a series of those, or as a full-time system. In a single session, the participants create a fictional scene, where the dominant partner is given the permission to subject the submissive partner to activities such as humiliation or the induction of pain. Both take on character roles which either emphasize this power exchange, offer fetishistic pleasure, or do both (Mains 1984). For example, one partner becomes a Roman patrician and the other her slave. After the session has ended, the normal everyday power dynamic between the participants – which may or may not be equal – is restored.

After the session has ended, the normal everyday power dynamic between the participants - which may or may not be equal - is restored.

In a series, the participants continue a previously played fantasy, often playing the same roles as before. It fits certain types of role-play better than others. Examples of this type of role-play include recurring age-play scenarios, developmental themes, and sadomasochist role-playing based on suitably themed works of fiction, such as the works of John Norman (e.g. 1967) or Jacqueline Carey (e.g. 2001).

"In our role-play, my partner was a young student boy and I an experienced older prostitute

(in real life I was four years younger than he). The young boy was insecure when he first arrived as a customer to the prostitute, an adult woman. She helped him relax, touched and undressed him, and taught him to pleasure her, with the determinate skill of an older woman. On his next visit, the boy was far more self-assured already.

We played variations of this for about a year. As time went by, the roles slowly changed and grew, so that the young man grew up into a determined man, a customer who wanted "his money's worth" from the whore, and used her to fulfill his own needs. If she resisted something, such as tried to refuse anal sex, he could use violence (agreed-upon, consensual, such as twisting an arm behind the back) to take her the way he wanted.

We played a lot with this theme of "one is inexperienced, the other one very experienced". the characters and roles changed, sometimes we were a schoolgirl and her teacher, sometimes a youth camper and a camp counselor, but for some reason the game of prostitute and client was such that we returned to it over and over. We did not discuss the play outside of the sessions, they simply moved forward on their own, guided by very subtle hints and tones." (Sara)⁴

Full-time sadomasochist relationships (often called "24/7") are based on a total power exchange (TPE), instead of the temporary power exchange of the other types. The classical example of this, contracts including, can be found in Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* (*Venus im Pelz*, 1870). In such relationships, the submissive partner gives a part of the control of his or her own life to the

⁴ Interviews translated from Finnish by author. The names of the interviewees have been changed.

dominant partner. This can include elements such as financial control in addition to the power to inflict pain, humiliation, etc. (Dancer et al. 2006). The continual nature of a TPE makes it very unlikely that the partners engage in very obvious role-playing (except possibly in smaller scenarios played within the TPE). There is, however, a subtle pervasive role-playing aspect present: The consensual nature of the TPE contract means that the participants are constantly role-playing the parts of a slave and an owner (or their equivalents), regardless of where they are.

“I have the permission to hurt and fuck her against her will, whenever I feel like it, as long as I stay within the limits we have agreed upon in advance. At work, she wears an ankle bracelet which reminds her that she is mine at all times.”

“I really like it that he forces me to do things even when I am not aroused, for that act in itself arouses me. When I am not in his presence, I am still constantly aware of the fact that I am his willing slave.” (Martin & Maria)

The continuity types of sadomasochistic role-playing are very much those of larp, ranging from the one-shot session to the campaign (a set of scenes set in the same continuity) and pervasive play (in the case of a TPE exchange). As Montola, Stenros & Waern (2009) note on the connection:

A typical play session takes place within a carefully established magic circle with, for example, a dominatrix and a slave. It has a clear beginning, a clear end and a safe word. If this consensual power exchange is extended into ordinary life, this kind of (sexual) play becomes pervasive play, moving beyond sexual

encounters.

These are pretence activities which run the same range of frequencies as larps, even though the number of participants is usually much smaller.⁵ Likewise, frequency cannot be compared, as no reliable data exists on how often the “average” sadomasochist participates in role-playing. Moser and Levitt (1987) and Nordling et al. (2006) do provide some data on what percentage of self-identified BDSM practitioners has tried such scenarios, but that is insufficient for any comparison.

Based on the small amount of research done on BDSM role-play so far (presented in the references of this paper), is known that people *do* play out fantasy scenes with fictional or semi-fictional roles. The roles in those cases are mostly just subsets of the dominant/submissive dichotomy, i.e. social roles comparable more to the social roles in multi-player online role-playing games than to larp characters. The role depth (i.e. the depth to which the player immerses into character) may of course vary, just as in online role-playing (see Copier 2007 for an example on comparable variance). Sadomasochism is innately theatrical, contractual and ritualistic (Deleuze 1967), as is larp. Furthermore, it is rather obvious that a *sufficiently complex* BDSM role-play scenario – with complex characters, plots and a credible fictional reality – would be indistinguishable from a larp. Where, then, is the defining limit between the two?

3. NOT A GAME

While BDSM role-playing is not defined as a game (or a sport) by its participants, it does fit the definitions of such activities. It in many ways exemplifies Suits' (1978) definition of a game, being a rule-bound activity, where efficiency is hampered by a selection of limitations taken on for the purpose of increasing the rewards of said activity.⁶ The role-play itself is also such a rewarding limitation, as is the potential use of tools (or words) to inflict only certain kinds of pleasurable pain. The point is not to just hurt the submissive participant, but to hurt that participant in a very particular, consensual way. The initiatory basis may be in the participants' algolagnic urges, but the execution of

⁵ The number of people present in a given scenario may vary greatly – and many people at a BDSM event may hold individual role-plays within the same space. Furthermore, larger-scale events such as “Prison Camps” may be just as large (20-100 participants) as a larp. Little data on those beyond advertisements exist, however, but the author has personally witnessed several. BDSM events reaching the scale of a German or British “Fest” larp such as Conquest of Mythodea (nearly 7000 players; www.live-adventure.de) are so far unheard of, outside of movies and literature.

⁶ It also fits very well Suits' (1978) assertion that “non-standard” sexual practices (e.g. satisfying sexual acts that do not contain an orgasm) may actually be considered games.

the activity is that of structured play.

Sadomasochist role-play also matches very closely the definition of role-playing games as limit-case games (i.e. gaming activities that can be framed as containing or not containing a quantifiable outcome) suggested by Salen & Zimmerman (2004). One could argue that the pleasure-seeking inherent in the activity would make it more goal-oriented than a larp, but that part can be equated with the way people tend to larp for fun (Harviainen 2006). Likewise, a pre-lusory goal (i.e. one existing outside the fictional reality of the play) such as orgasm, total exhaustion and/or crying can just as well be equated with the resolvable goals of an educational larp or a training simulation, up to and including the question whether those were a side effect or the actual purpose of the activity (as per Henriksen 2009).

BDSM role-play has rules, ranging from safe words to agreed-upon conventions (Moser & Madeson 1996), making it fit with Montola's (2008) definition of role-playing:

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

[...]

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

participating in game master roles.

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

It even has a game master of sorts: The dominant partner has a scripting power very close to that of a run-time game master (i.e. a person constantly monitoring and possibly altering the game situation), and uses it in interaction with a player, the submissive (Moser & Madeson 1996). It is also possible for the submissive to control the situation (Sagarin et al. 2009). While not a very highly evolved game master function, it is nevertheless extremely similar to the active game mastering described by Lancaster (1999).

It is possible to meta-play around the edge of the rules and control systems, but to break them is to break the social contract of the activity and thus to ruin it. This, too, is a classic sign of an activity's nature as a game (Suits 1978). Followed and accepted, a suitable set of constitutive rules increases immersion (Balzer 2010).

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A sadomasochist role-play scenario contains a similar set of frames and a system of keying (Weinberg 1978) as do larps (see Balzer 2009 and Brenne 2005 for examples). The participants seek to concentrate on the fantasy frame, but are also aware of the rule-frame (containing limits and safe-words) and the real-world frame. Likewise, 24/7 BDSM is frame-wise (Dancer et al. 2006) identical to pervasive larps (see Stenros 2008 for comparison).

4 A LACK OF CHARACTER?

BDSM scenario participants tend to focus on a facet of their own person rather than a complete fictional character, even if they have one. This is sometimes even seen as preferable, by persons who think it shows that a BDSM practitioner is made of "sturdier stuff" than most people, as he gives free reign to his inner demons in a controlled setting (Miller & Devon 1988). This cathartic self-analysis, however, has been contested by Baumeister (1988), Siegel (1995) and Nordling et al. (2006), who claim that at the core, the whole activity is an escapist fantasy from either social role pressure and rules, gender roles, or both. Regardless of the veracity of those not necessarily incompatible claims, the debate itself is highly reminiscent of the question of possible escapism in larps (see Harviainen 2006 for details), i.e. currently on the level of anecdotal evidence and debate on what exactly constitutes escapism.

While the characters of scenario participants may be indeed facets of the player more than full-fledged characters per se, the situation is not different from a larp. There may be a tendency to favor more holistic characters in live-action role-playing, yet as Hakkarainen & Stenros (2003) and Harviainen (2006) have noted, not all larpers necessarily play using a character-immersive approach. It therefore appears that no real distinction can be made on the basis of character depth, as both types of role-playing contain the potential for any character depth.

Physically performed sadomasochist role-playing actually uses less representation than many larps, due to the essentiality of the what-you-see-is-what-you-get approach to the situation. It can therefore be argued that as a play environment, BDSM role-play is actually more conducive to immersion than an average larp. Furthermore, the shared goals and raw physicality of sadomasochist role-playing makes it highly suitable for fostering inter-immersion, i.e. the feedback cycle where each participant's immersion enhances that of others (as per Pohjola 2004).

5. GOAL-ORIENTATION

"SM roles are varied and complex, offering different things to different people, but the goals are the same: an intense sexual experience, fun, emotional release, catharsis." (Moser & Madeson 1996)

One of the key traits where the activities seem to differ is goal-orientation. Sexual role-playing is performed for the purpose of sexual pleasure, a goal existing also outside of the fantasy (Mains 1984), whereas a larp may not have any clear goals. The distinction vanishes, if examined from a broader perspective. While larps in many cases may not have such explicit goals, they contain multiple smaller ones, and participants enter them to fulfill goals of their own (Salen & Zimmerman 2004). Also, the play itself in both of them may be the main purpose for some participants: The playing of a certain role in a larp can be a goal in itself, or fulfill a fetishistic function in sexual role-play (Gebhard 1969), making such play a self-rewarding (autotelic) activity.

Sexual role-playing is performed for the purpose of sexual pleasure, a goal existing also outside of the fantasy, whereas a larp may not have any clear goals.

Larps, as a generic category, are also no strangers to goal-orientation. Educational larps actually exemplify it. In them, the character is a tool for learning through play (Henriksen 2009). This is an obvious pre-lusory goal (as per Suits 1978).

6. ADVANCE(D) STAGING

The staging of a sadomasochist scenario is not that different from a larp, either. They may or may not need paraphernalia and/or pre-planning, depending on concept and individual taste (Wiseman 1996). And formal pre-scripting may or may not be necessary (Weinberg 1978). Due to the focus of BDSM role-play, the scenario concepts tend to be rather simple, being very specific and limited to the central theme. The scenarios do not therefore develop as randomly as larps do, as they are bound by a central concept that needs to be followed.

Their external parameters are very much alike, though. Both use upkeying (in the manner described by Brenne 2005 and Stenros 2008, based on Goffman 1974) to initiate the action. In sadomasochist role-plays, the start-up may differ heavily, depending on type of scene and the participants' preferences. For example, Wiseman (1996) suggests both starting and ending with the dominant's question about the submissive's willingness to take up the role of the bottom and to

leave it, respectively. In contrast, Mains (1984) describes how some leathermen with both dominant and submissive inclinations may begin their scenes by wrestling, and the winner gets to be the top. The range of options is particularly important in cases where sadomasochism is practiced in otherwise equal relationships, as the submissive may need to transmit signs of his or her willingness to be dominated to the dominant partner (Kamel & Weinberg 1995).

In a TPE situation, the constant pretence is typically kept active by small symbolic anchors, such as a slave collar worn at home and a necklace symbolizing it outside of privacy (Dancer et al. 2006). Similar practices are used in pervasive larp, to allow players to recognize one another (Montola, Stenros & Waern 2009). Symbols of the same type are also visibly worn by submissives at fetish events, to denote varieties of relationship status (Moser 1998).

The sphere of activity, i.e. the magic circle of play, itself in a sadomasochist role-playing scene is similar to that of larp. Their information environment is identical on all counts (as per Harviainen 2007): The illusion is preserved through a social contract, which both prevents the intrusion of distracting information into the session and makes the participants more dependant on each other in cases of information gaps. The illusion is furthermore sustained through semiotic re-signification, in accordance of the pattern outlined by Loponen & Montola (2004). And as Sebeok (1994) notes, fetishism actually eases re-signification: Items and/or behaviors enhancing sexual pleasure for a person are more easily re-signified by that person into objects of particular importance within the scene.

In a BDSM role-playing scene, the potential for reaching a ritual-like liminality is always present. In other words, the play can create a temporary imposed reality of its own, not just a fantasy (Brodsky 1993; Mains 1984). Larps have the same innate potential (Lieberoth & Harviainen, forthcoming)

7. DISCUSSION

This examination of traits leaves only two significantly distinguishing factors between the two sorts of physical role-playing. The first of these is ideology: Larpers may not want to be associated with “perverts”, nor participants of what they see as “adult role-play” (in both senses of the phrase)

with something possibly considered juvenile. This is normal for any activity that carries a social stigma (Goffman 1968). Furthermore, some people want to keep sexual elements out of larp, so as to offer players maximal protection from potential trauma, and thus resist any connections between the two (see Borina & Martins 2009 for an example).

The second factor, the fundamental difference, is the basic framing of the activities. Larp is framed as a larp, a game played for the purpose of experiencing things such as fun or something interesting (Brenne 2005). Sadomasochist role-play is framed as a sadomasochistic activity, a sexual activity, performed for the purpose of sexual pleasure (Nordling et al. 2006). This is particularly significant, because whereas a larp stands as its own event, sadomasochist role-playing is a part of a larger activity, namely sadomasochism (Mains 1984). Performed on its own, a sadomasochist role-playing session would appear to outsiders to be both a larp and a BDSM role-play. This is because, in my opinion and in the light of this analysis, they are at the core the same thing.

It is, nevertheless, reasonable to also delve further into the differences. Why would sadomasochist role-play not be larping? And how do so-called *extreme* larps differ from BDSM role-play? In the author’s view, the key – if it at all exists – lies in the aforementioned framing: Sadomasochist role-play takes place in a context of its own, as a larping facet of an activity which is not akin to a larp. It is done in a larp-like segment of something much wider. It would therefore not be unreasonable to claim that this lack of a defining structure related to the activity itself (in the manner of “larp” and “larping” being related) makes it essentially a different phenomenon.

Performed on its own, a sadomasochist role-playing session would appear to outsiders to be both a larp and a BDSM role-play.

As for extreme larps there are similarities, but also a set of frame-related differences. Tobias Wrigstad’s *GR* (described and analyzed in Montola 2010), for instance, simulates rape. It is not a rape fantasy play. This is a crucial difference, as the latter is a form of consensual transgressive gratification, the former a consensual depiction of non-consensual

violence (as per Zurbriggen & Yost 2004). The social contracts of those two simulations is fundamentally dissimilar, and altering the purpose of GR towards gratification would make it a different, less extreme scenario. GR furthermore uses rules of no touching, making it much closer to non-physical role-play than to the physical sadomasochist scenes analyzed in this paper.

Certain larps, such as the *PehmoYdin* series (described in Harviainen 2011) and *Blue Threads: The Seventh Circle* (Olmstead-Dean et al. 2010), in turn, were larps using elements from sadomasochism, not sadomasochist role-playing. The difference in their case is that their BDSM activities were game-internal, and even though they contained things that count as sadomasochistic, those took place between in-game characters. The primary fantasy frame was that of the game, not that of BDSM. They were fictional realities, within which existed sadomasochism, also in its non-role-playing aspects. It is important to note, however, that these examples do not preclude the aforementioned possibility of a sadomasochist role-playing scenario being simultaneously also a larp in any way.

8. CONCLUSION: NOT JUST SIMILAR

Geoff Mains (1984) wrote of BDSM role-play:

Role play is undertaken because people enjoy it. Submission is voluntary with full awareness of it taking place. The adoption of distinctive roles is restricted to specific situations, and between specific individuals. Often, the individuals are flexible in their choice. Role play is at least in part a form of conscious auto-drama.

Physically performed sadomasochist role-playing is, in effect, indistinguishable from larping by its traits alone. For every variable, there appears to be a similar variable on the other side of the fence. The sole significant difference is the particular framing of sadomasochist role-playing as a part of other activities, i.e. sadomasochism, a field containing much more than just role-play. While there is no game master per se, the dominant's role includes a game master function. Both activities run the same gamut of potential character depth and immersion possibilities.

A sufficiently complex BDSM role-play, such as a hypothetical days-long prison camp where each participant has his or her own continual character and the play-space has an illusion of new reality, contains a definite magic circle of game play and is obviously also a larp. Any less thoroughly scripted sadomasochist role-playing session is still just that, very much like a low-preparation larp.

Sadomasochist role-playing is not just a sibling to larp, another part of a group of activities categorized under "pretence play". It is essentially the same activity, performed with a different sort of social framing. When we speak of physically performed sadomasochist role-play, we are actually speaking of larping done with BDSM elements in it, for the purpose of (often sexual) satisfaction.

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