

# Role-Playing Games: The State of Knowledge

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## ABSTRACT

Role-playing games form one of the major genres of games and exist across all hardware platforms as well outside of the technology domain in a huge variety of forms and formats. Role-playing oriented research has focused on culture, storytelling, game processes as well as e.g. user interaction, play experience and character design. Today role-playing games research is an established component of game studies. This panel presents a state of the art of the knowledge of role-playing games research covering a great variety of angles and interests, providing an overview of the current hot topics and future research directions within one of the key genres of games.

## KEYWORDS

Role-Playing Games, experimentation, culture, storytelling, game masters, emotion modeling

## INTRODUCTION

Role-Playing Games (RPGs) form one of the primary genres of games, and is possibly one of the most widely varying game forms around. Furthermore, RPGs have been designed for or ported between every existing hardware platform produced for games, in addition to tabletop and live-action variations. RPGs formed one of the primary sources of inspiration for the early evolution of computer games, and retain a strong influence to this date [e.g. 17].

The diverse range of RPGs, which despite a strong variation across and within formats, share a similar focus on providing the player with a character that grows and

develops through play experience as well as on storytelling, provide a unique opportunity to examine many of the pressing questions of game studies. Therefore, in recent years, RPGs have been the subject of rapidly increasing interest in the game studies community, from a variety of viewpoints including design, development, culture, sociology, psychology and interactive storytelling [e.g. 11,13,19,21]. Similarly, the operation of NPCs (agents) in these games is of interest in agent-based systems [20,22]; and the unique nature of RPGs make them an obvious source of study for investigating the interaction between the player, their character (representation within the game) and the game itself, with the results applicable across the spectrum of game studies [e.g. 35].

This panel will present a range of perspectives on RPGs, covering the latest advances within topics such as storytelling, game process, RPG culture, characters and player-character interaction, LARPing and much more. The key takeaway for participants is an updated view on the current state-of-the-art of RPG research and development across various forms and media formats.

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## ALTERNATE REALITY ROLE-PLAYING

A new form of role-playing has recently been emerging. Quite different from traditional role-playing games: *Alternate reality role-playing* is similar to larps (live action

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role playing games), being based on interaction with mediated simulacra.

Baudrillard [8] discusses mediated personalities as *simulacra* that no longer bear any relation to any reality: Oprah Winfrey, as we perceive her in media, does not exist as such, but is only a construction pieced together from her media. Many people spend more time with simulacra than with actual people. The simulacra are now reaching for a new level of (un)reality through responsivity, interactivity and fabrication [see 31]. “Bree”, the fabricated video-blogger of *lonelygirl15*, responded to your emails. “Laila Salla” of *The Beast* received hundreds of condolence emails after blogging about her grandmother’s death [32] “Adrijanna Klinga” of *Sanningen om Marika* could even be met in person. This creates role-playing interactions where one party is unaware if the other is playing, role-playing where you have to pretend to role-play to succeed in game tasks and advance the narrative. While it places increasing demands on actors and producers, such techniques are powerful way of creating easily accessible role-playing experiences.

**DR. MARINKA COPIER** is researcher and lecturer at Utrecht University and director of programs in game design & development, game art and interaction design at the Utrecht School of the Arts. Her dissertation focused on role-play in online games. Currently she works on the educational application of role-play mechanics.



### GAME MASTERS AND STORYTELLING

Pen and Paper RPGs (PnPs) are complex games that involve multiple participants engaging in an activity that takes place partly in the real-life gaming situation, partly in the minds of the participants. One of the key aspects of these games is that they form very pure examples of interactive storytelling systems [2], which makes them sources of inspiration in the creation of digital storytelling systems. Notably, PnPs generally contain a function often referred to as Game Masters (GMs) [5,36]. The GM is associated with a range of functions, with however substantial variance in the specific responsibilities. In PnPs, the GM normally plays a central role as story facilitator [2,8]. Game Masters are normally responsible for managing the overall plot of the game story, and controlling the behavior of any game world entities and objects not controlled by the player characters [34]. In short, the GM acts as a drama manager. The specific detail of how GMs operate and function in PnPs is however far from well-understood, at neither the higher level of operations, nor in the details of managing action-reaction cycles. The general principles of GM functionality have been discussed within the hobbyist community for decades and some models of key aspects have been proposed, e.g. concerning division of authorial control [e.g. 4,10,16,24,36]. There has been

comparatively less work done focusing on the evolution of the collaborative storyline. In comparison, within the games research community, an increased amount of attention has been given to the subject of how the collaborative, interactive storyline is evolved and managed. This in terms of mapping GM functionality and how to transfer GM story facilitation to digital storytelling systems [e.g. 2,35,36]. Despite this recent work, the cognitive processes and detailed mechanics of how GMs operate are not known in detail [8]. This presentation will cover the state of the art of knowledge of the game process of RPGs, GM functionality and storytelling.

**DR. ANDERS DRACHEN** is a Post Doctoral Research Fellow at the Center for Computer Games Research at IT University of Copenhagen; and science journalist. His research is focused on empirical and theoretical studies of games across tabletop and digital platforms, user experience, interactive storytelling, usability/playability and related game evaluation methodologies. He collaborates with a range of companies, including IO Interactive and EIDOS.



### DESIGN RULES FOR SERIOUS ROLE-PLAY

Originally the term role-play referred to acting out a role for therapeutic reasons. The psychiatrist Moreno, who coined the term role-play in the 1920s, asked his patients to act out their problems instead of talking about them. Role-play became a common tool to approximate ‘real life’ experiences in disciplines such as psychotherapy, organizational change and education [37]. In 1974 Gygax and Anderson [14] designed the first rule set for entertainment role-play in the pen & paper game *Dungeons & Dragons*. From that point on role-playing games developed into a diverse set of entertainment products ranging from tabletop RPGs to MMORPGs, to live-action and alternate reality role-playing. These role-playing experiences are negotiated shared fantasies, which consist of (mixture of) imaginary worlds as well as aspects of daily life [6,13].

In turn these entertainment role-playing have been studied for their learning effects. Steinkuehler [30] argued that MMORPGs are naturally occurring learning environments that recruit collaborative problem solving and distributed apprenticeship during play, but also have an effect on the development of digital and print literacy, science math and computational literacy. Current learning experiences are distributed: teachers and students still get together in a physical environment for classes but also make use of various digital media tools, including serious games.

This presentation discusses what we can learn from the various instances of entertainment role-play for the design of serious games but also for the innovation of the ‘big

game' [29] of education, in which learning means serious and meaningful fun.

**MARKUS MONTOLA** is a researcher at Nokia and a PhD-candidate at University of Tampere. He is working on a dissertation on pervasive role-playing, synthesizing his work on various forms of role-playing and pervasive gaming, notably the pervasive larps *Prosopopeia* and *Momentum*.



### ROLEPLAYING GAMES, DEFINITIONS AND WHAT THEY CAN TELL US ABOUT OTHER GAMES

Role-playing games are an idiosyncratic form. They resist definition, both in themselves and in their place in the wider gaming spectrum. Salen and Zimmerman [28] went so far as to call them a "limit case" of a game. Many definitions of a game include the need for some defined goal or outcome, including those of Parlett [25], Abt [1], Suits [33], Costikyan [7] and Salen and Zimmerman [28]. Yet role-playing games rarely meet this requirement.

Role-playing games hold at least the promise of giving players a wide configurative scope. While there are car racing games, shooting games and even galaxy ruling games, all their activities and more, are potentially possible in a role-playing game.

The role-playing format continues to evolve and mutate. This diversity and scope points to why role-playing games are both difficult to define in themselves and difficult to include in more general definitions of games. They may well be a limit case, not in terms of definition, but in terms of what is possible in a game. The flexibility open to game masters and players produces a dynamism and unpredictability of outcome rivaled by few other forms. This scope may indicate that what some have identified as limits to games, such as Ryan's [27] contentions about the range of playable characters, are in fact limits of technology or individual forms and not absolute limits on games.

This talk will survey some of the approaches to defining role-play games, how well general definitions of games cover role-playing games and what role-playing games can tell us about what is possible within a game.

**DR. MICHAEL HITCHENS** is a senior lecturer at the Macquarie University, and long term game player with a particular interest in all forms of Role-Playing Games. His research into these games focuses on communication and storytelling. He brings to this panel both extensive empirical experience and a research background in computer systems.



### RULES FOR ROLE PLAY

Role-play (RP) in commercial MMORPGs is seldom supported by the game mechanics. The game play is based on rule-sets following design paradigms set back in the seventies [3,14] which, as Copier [6] shows, encourages instrumental game play. Copier notes that RP in MMORPGs mostly rely on meta-game rules since RP is hard to capture in a system. In fact, Copier describes a specific MMORPG play-style as characterized by negotiation of principles of these meta-game rules.

One of the aims with the prototype MMORPG "Pataphysic Institute" (PI) is to experiment with game mechanics that both support role-play and which can be played according to its own rules.

PI is built with inspiration from personality psychology and affect theory in an attempt to mimic possible emotional responses in order to give the player support in role-playing. The mental state of player characters depend on the own personality and on the current mood – a value that differs according to context and to recent experiences. Emotional experiences become memories and define the relationships between characters. The mental state is the sum of the character and governs what actions can be performed in a given moment. In order to do certain things the characters need to be in certain moods – and for this the players need to game their emotions, and game their relationships.

**MIRJAM P. ELADHARI** is a lecturer and PhD-candidate at the GAME department of Gotland University and the School of Computing at the University of Teesside. Her dissertation work explores characterization and story construction in MMO's focusing on the player character. Currently she is building the MMO-prototype "Pataphysic Institute", where the personalities of the inhabitants are the base for the game mechanics.



### CHALLENGES OF DOCUMENTING ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

Non-digital role-playing games are ephemera. The moment they end, at the point of completion, they cease to exist [18]. Each participant has memories of the game from their character's point-of-view, in addition to an assortment of props and costumes (live action role-playing games), character sheet and notes (table-top role-playing games, freeform). Even if the game is based on published content, it will never be played in the same way again as the pre-diegetic [12] material usually only defines the situation at the beginning of the game and possibly some key turning points.

Documentation, criticism and participation-based research of role-playing games thus have numerous

problems that are heightened in comparison to studying, for example, digital games, theatre and mainstream performance arts. The role of each player as an active co-creator throws the whole concept of a role-playing game text into question. What is it that is being documented, criticized or researched?

This presentation outlines the challenges of this kind of research and studies how these problems have been tackled by the hobbyists and researchers writing about the Nordic live action role-playing scene [e.g. 9,15,23], where games have been written about in the form of reports of play, forum discussions, analytical criticism, designer master classes, ethnographies and design research.

**JAAKKO STENROS** (M. Soc Sc.) is a game researcher at the Game Research Lab, University of Tampere, Finland. He is passionate about role-playing games and larps as a player, gamemaster and researcher, and has co-edited two books on the subject: *Playground Worlds* (2008) and *Beyond Role and Play* (2004). He is currently working on a book on documenting Nordic Larp.



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