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breaking the invisible rules: borderline role-playing

Abstract

In the process of defining role-playing, it's critical to also look into the practices on the borderline of definition and analyze activities left outside as well. This paper starts from the three invisible rules of role-playing that can be used to define role-playing, and looks at playing styles that compromise these rules. Three cases are studied; MMORPG role-play that compromises the continuity of game world, freeform role-playing that toys with power hierarchy, and minimalist role-playing that uses roles but dismisses characters.

Introduction

In the rulebook of almost every commercial role-playing game there is a section describing role-playing. Typically these descriptions discuss the relations of players and game masters, role of rulesystem in creating the adventure and the practices of describing the game world and characters portrayed by players. Often the section discusses character play, maybe even including some rudiments of dramaturgy.

The role of this section is to answer one question: "What is role-playing?" Interestingly, these rulebooks providing hundreds of pages of procedures and con-

cepts never explicate the underlying process of role-playing itself. The reader learns that a sword does d10 points of damage, but the process of play making this information relevant is disclosed only implicitly.

Looking into the rules of the social process of role-playing, I have elsewhere¹ proposed that role-playing is based on three *invisible rules* forming the foundation of role-playing interaction. These three qualitative and usually implicit rules exist on a different level compared to what is generally understood as role-playing rulesets, and apply to tabletop role-playing, larp and to online role-playing equally.

They are the *world rule*, the *power rule* and the *character rule*:

- 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.

In essence these rules establish that a role-playing game needs a process of defining an imaginary world. Role-playing needs a power structure with several participants controlling the defining process. And role-playing needs characters, which are imaginary and anthropomorphic representations of players acting within the imaginary world.

I have defined role-playing as gameplay where all the three rules are applied, and thus defined that the fundamental elements of role-playing are the process of re-defining a game world, a power recognized hierarchy to govern the process of re-defining, and personified characters that act as the players' proxies in the game world.

The world rule, power rule and character rule apply to all forms of role-playing, including tabletop role-playing, larping and role-playing conducted in online worlds. This implies that the media used to communicate the imaginary world (such as a virtual space represented on computer screen, physical space serving as a stage for a larp or a world described purely by symbols of speech) are secondary, while the primary processes of role-playing happen on the level of imagination inspired by the communication.

Various forms of role-playing can be differentiated by further, form-specific rules, such as the following two for larping and verbal tabletop role-playing.

- L1) In larp the game is superimposed on physical world, which is used as a foundation in defining the game world.
- T1) In tabletop role-playing the game world is defined predominantly in verbal communication.

In this paper I will discuss several forms of social interaction toying with the rules of role-playing, in order to evaluate the invisible rules of role-playing and to assess their analytic value. All these rules can be bent in many ways, but in this paper I've limited myself to analyzing only some of these ways:

How *World of Warcraft* role-players compromise the continuity of their game world, how freeform role-players toy with power hierarchies and how roles provide interesting content for players without characters in *Epidemic Menace* crossmedia game.

Compromising Continuity

The first invisible rule of role-playing is, in a sense, a constitution of the role-playing process. The players communicate with each other, constructing imaginary game worlds (diegeses) based on game communication and their own input to the game; the game works as long as the players have a similar enough understanding of the game world to meaningfully interact, and may break with misunderstandings. (Loponen & Montola 2004).

The game world discussed in the world rule is something more complex than a board of *Chess* or the vague symbolic and iconic implications of playing cards. In Juul's (2003) terms the world must be *coherent*. "Some games contain coherent worlds, where nothing prevents us from imagining them in any detail", he writes. In practice, the role-players have to be able to imagine the world and to add details in a creative fashion, which might be highly problematic in the surreal and two-dimensional world of *Super Mario Bros*.

Even though utter rejection of the world rule leads into games hardly having any resemblance to role-playing, many variants of role-playing walk on the border of having a coherent, consistent and chronological game world.

An interesting case of breaking the continuity of game world happens in online role-playing games, where many people attempting to role-play their avatars have to cope with the limitations and problems imposed by the games themselves. I have earlier (2005) discussed the problems of goal structures in online role-playing; the problem of a static, persistent world meeting the needs of an individual player lies in the

conflict of player's extradiegetic motivations and character's diegetic motivations.

Like the most contemporary online worlds, *World of Warcraft*² is a static and inflexible role-playing environment: The player has no means to influence the game structure with his choices. For example, a player who wants to play a powerful elven druid has few alternatives to starting his career by killing literally dozens of bears, tigers, boars and other animals, as those animals are pretty much the only opponents a beginning avatar can defeat, and also restrict the player's access to other areas of the game.

Many essential game mechanics can make the game fiction nonsensical; for instance by allowing an infinite amount of resurrections with no diegetic explanation to everyone. The tasks and rewards provided by the game force certain choices: When a nature-loving shaman encounters an undead wizard offering excellent and necessary game rewards for quest entailing spreading of a plague, there is a conflict between role-playing and progress in the game. Sometimes the conflict just makes the game more difficult, but occasionally it also compromises the access to considerable parts of the game content.

The solution adopted by most role-players is "turning off" their character play and diegesis construction for a while. History becomes optional; a group of players may attack an enemy fortress while role-playing constantly, but when the characters die, they typically cease role-playing until the resurrection duties are done, after which the role-play goes on. The nonsensical period is *bracketed* – even though things happened in the virtual world; they are not included in the diegetic history. Sometimes the players pretend that instead of the bracketed events, something else happened – the characters might discuss about tactical retreat after dying and resurrecting in another place.

This optionality of history only occasionally causes conflicts; usually due to misunderstanding on what is

bracketed and what is not: Some role-players bracket all the flavor text in quests (or just leave them unread) while others bracket none and use them as a central part of their role-play. In practice it appears that the most role-players bracket at least 50-90% of their total play time, or at least leave it ambiguous whether they are role-playing or not.

Occasionally the bracketing may lead into conflicts, for example having a druid accuse the shaman for spreading the plague, while the shaman player never included that episode into his character's story of self. These diegesis conflicts can be solved by one player adapting to other, or by finding a consensus in extradiegetic discussion.

Toying with Power Hierarchy

Requiring a role-playing game to feature a power hierarchy is certainly a slippery slope leaving the definition of sufficiently clear hierarchy up to debate. Styles of role-playing are numerous. The strictest rulesets are employed by worldwide campaign organizations (such as Camarilla and RPGA³) with dozens of titles, positions, procedures and punishments used to maintain the game. The loosest hierarchies are used in playful improvisation that closely resembles children's play.

Caillois (1958, 13) classifies forms of play on an axis ranging from free play, *paidia*, to formal rules-based play, *ludus*, as follows:

At one extreme an almost indivisible principle, common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety is dominant. It manifests a kind of uncontrolled fantasy that can be designated by the term *paidia*. At the opposite extreme, this frolicsome and impulsive exuberance is almost entirely absorbed or disciplined by a complementary, and in some respects inverse, tendency to its anarchic and capricious nature: there is a growing tendency to bind it with arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions, to oppose it still more by ceaselessly practicing the most

embarrassing chicanery upon it, in order to make it more uncertain or attaining its desired effect. This latter principle is completely impractical, even though it requires an ever greater amount of effort, patience, skill, or ingenuity. I call this second component *ludus*.

The element of *ludus* is especially strong in rules-heavy games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, where tedious bookkeeping can be a part of everyday reality. The formal system of a “rule-less” larp is much closer to *paidia*: it’s still formal compared to “uncontrolled fantasy” or “frolicsome and impulsive exuberance”, but the conventions are much more implicit. Even though mathematical or algorithmic game rules are not used, the invisible rules of role-playing are still present.

The continuum from *ludus* to *paidia* is what differentiates – or sometimes does not differentiate – children’s make-believe pretence play from role-playing. If the social rules are fixed and if the power structure is established and recognized, make-believe can change into a form of role-playing. Indeed, drawing an exact line between the two is not necessary. Reflecting the position of role-playing on the Caillois’ broad continuum shows that even though many forms of role-playing are free when compared to *games*, even flexible free-form games reside in the formal part of the big picture of playful activities.

It’s interesting to also notice how certain attempts of abolishing power hierarchy simultaneously create a new hierarchy. One prime example is the collective method of larp authoring which removes one hierarchy, but simultaneously imposes another hierarchical structure with detailed rules and heavy regulation (see Svanevik 2005). Another example is *Polaris*⁴, where the traditional hierarchy of game master and players is removed and replaced with a more intricate process where different positions of participation are circulated around the table.

Freeform role-playing style is a mix and match style of role-playing with considerable input from improvisational theater. The playing style combines the iconic representation of larp, as players act most of the events out, but symbols are used as well. For example, a player might pick up a TV remote and start talking to it pretending that it’s a cellphone, and a couple of minutes later to use it again for changing channels on an imaginary television. The participants improvise new rules on the fly and switch player positions around flexibly.

Without extensive ethnographical data, it’s hard to provide a conclusive view on how power structures and rule systems work in freeform games.⁵ In typical setups there is some kind of game master, narrator or at least an originator for the game, who may wield stronger or weaker game master power. Also, often every player is allowed to use game master power momentarily, if that is done with good taste and in accordance to the whole of the play. As the Swedish *Vi åker jeep* collective puts it:⁶

You may add anything to the game world if it improves the story: if you all of a sudden feel that it is important that your character went to Eton, then she did; if you need a bottle of scotch or a plane ready to lift at any time, then you have it, just be sensitive to where the game is heading. If the point of a scene is for the characters to be threatened by a man with a knife, deciding that your character has a gun is probably the wrong choice.
(www.jeepen.org/dict)

Which could be generalized as a form-specific rule for freeform gaming as follows:

F1 In freeform role-playing, any participant can propose any change to the game world or to the rule system. The participant consensus determines whether these are included in the game, usually accepting all or most proposals.

In their work, *Vi åker jeep* has labeled and classified dozens of conventions used in the sphere of Swedish freeform. Their practically oriented work reveals the importance of structures in improvisation, as exploiting established conventions allows other participants to read performative acts correctly. As an example, they codify the method of allegoric play as follows:

Allegoric play is just as the name suggests, expressing parts of the story through allegories, playing a metaphor of something instead of the actual thing. Allegoric play can be used for an entire game, as well as for one track of a story or and individual scene. An illustrating example, that might not be very inspiring, is playing WWII as a tea party (Mrs. America arrived late). More subtle, less tongue-in-cheek uses are of course possible. Unless the underpinnings of the scene are very good, telling your players that they are playing a metaphor for something (and what this something is) is generally a good idea. Interpreting allegoric play is generally harder, but generally, the different interpretations are non-conflicting and compatible. (www.jeeopen.org/dict)

The skill of reading a freeform game is similar to that of reading any form of expression; it feels natural, intuitive and easy, but the practices are contractual and conventional. For comparison, reading a comic book also feels natural, intuitive and easy, but a reader from a different cultural background would not understand the chronological sequentiality of juxtaposed images (as McCloud 1993 would put it).

In fact it can be theorized that freeform role-play is even *more* complex and structured than regular larp or tabletop role-play, and the freedom comes from the fact that all players can tap into the extensive reserve of conventions used in the game. The lack of regular role-playing rules with tables, dice and mathematics is replaced by the more complex set of social conventions.

Playing Without Characters

Probably the best current analysis on the essence of character has been created by Hakkarainen and Stenros (2003). According to their view, a role-playing character is a collection of situational roles bound together by a 'fictitious' story of self. In their post-modern sense, character's story of self and player's story of self are equally 'real'. It can be argued that characters' self-narratives are included in that of the player, making the player's identity a meta-narrative, bridging and contextualizing his characters.

The essence of character-based story of self is that it's bracketed from ordinary story of self, and it rises from pretence. According to Lillard (1993) pretence necessitates layers of actual world and fictive world, and the awareness of the layering, fictitious and actual. Thus, in order to role-play a character with a story of self, the player needs to have and bracket his story of self for the duration of play, and craft another story of self – while still being aware of both stories and their layered nature.

Character-rule can now be broken in two ways; either by having appropriate situational roles but lacking the fictitious, bracketable story of self, or by lacking differentiable characters completely (as most people often do in online worlds).

A perfect example of game using situational roles in a very interesting manner while missing a story of self is *Epidemic Menace*⁷ (Ohlenburg & al 2006), a prototype game built in order to experiment mixed reality gaming with a wide array of hardware platforms.

Basically *Epidemic Menace* is a campus game lasting a few hours, where players utilize different technological devices (cellphones, PDA:s, AR-glasses, stationary computers) to fight a spreading virus. The various gaming devices have specific roles in the game, and success necessitates collaboration of players using these different interafaces: While augmented reality glasses are an efficient method

for searching viruses, interacting with them requires a player with a mobile phone representing a viral scanner. The players staying in the control room coordinate the action, based on “satellite image” data seen on computer screens. The story of the game is conveyed to the players through video clips. The players portray agents of EEPA, the “European Epidemey Prevention Agency”, but the characters are not defined, in order to reach a more mainstream audience.

Analyzing *Epidemic Menace* in comparison with a typical (Finnish) larp reveals many similarities. It had physical interaction, costumes, props, scenography, backstory and so forth. *Epidemic Menace* lacked characters, but there were *functional roles* emerging from the interaction with various gaming devices. Players were not provided with any character fiction or imaginary names (as is typical to larps), so they didn’t have any starting points to construct a fictional story of self. Even though there were two competing EEPA teams in play, the players were not expected to create game-based social relationships.

Despite the lack of characters, *Epidemic Menace* had game-based roles that were created by different devices and interfaces the players were using. The people using stationary computers in control centre had to assume strategic roles while the field-workers depending on their instructions had to assume away-team roles. This kind of *minimalist role-playing* could be very efficient in creating interesting player interactions in many games while avoiding the aversion and stress of performative gaming often experienced by casual gamers who are forced to role-play. The ludic part of the player’s story of self is separated from the everyday story of self, but the self that plays is seen as a subset of the ordinary self. In full-fledged role-playing games the pretence of character not being the player is central.

In ten years the technologies of speech recognition may offer very interesting opportunities for minima-

list role-playing. Computer observing the discourse on the bridge of Starship Enterprise can efficiently and discreetly enforce a mood-enhancing manners of speech and behavior. While the different consoles used by *Star Trek* officers offer an excellent theatre for functional roles, a computer understanding verbal military commands would create a perfect atmosphere. Forcing players to utter commands such as “*Computer! Power to the shields!*” while having a tactical discussion on the bridge, gives them a legitimate reason to perform casually.⁸

In comparison to *Epidemic Menace*, *World of Warcraft* is an interesting game in the sense that to some extent it features functional roles, as players have dedicated tasks – but these tasks rarely stimulate minimalist role-playing. This is because the tasks are not communication-dependent and because they are executed in a very similar manner – priests and wizards both spend their time blasting spells, one removing health from enemies and other providing it to allies. Succeeding in *World of Warcraft* requires tanks, healers and damage-dealers to succeed in their particular jobs, but the execution of the tasks is not very inter-dependent.

Conclusion

In this paper and in my earlier work I have stated that the three invisible rules can be used to define role-playing. This paper discusses a few interesting and rewarding activities that lie on the border of those rules in order to demonstrate what is left outside the definition. The borderline practices are useful and interesting to all role-players, as they broaden the perspectives on what is role-playing.

The divides I have presented here are certainly not clear-cut. It’s up to the reader to decide when the element of *paidia* in freeform role-playing is so strong that the power structure loses its significance or when the selective bracketing makes character-play nonsensical. Constructing an exact and accurate category of for role-playing is probably an impossible task.

Role-playing is notoriously hard to commercialize for mainstream audiences, due to the fact that a satisfying game requires some participants to have skills and experience. While many lessons of role-playing have been utilized in e.g. computer gaming (immersive playing, character identification, mood creation), the social interaction component has rarely been exported. Minimalist role-playing might be one recipe for the problem, planning player interaction beginning from functional and situational roles instead of forcing hesitant mainstream players to full-fledged performative pretence play. The military-style chain of command is an obvious starting point that can be rethought for different collaborative and competitive contexts.

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Notes

- 1 This paper builds on a forthcoming paper, *The Invisible Rules of Role-Playing*, written in 2005. That work has been presented in 2006 in *Playing Roles*-seminar, Finland, and in *Knutpunkt 2006* convention, Sweden. It's available from the author on request.
- 2 *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004) is a fairly typical fantasy-themed online role-playing game, where avatars slay monsters and complete quest in order to obtain gold, equipment and new skills. Observations are based on *Argent Dawn*, *Defias Brotherhood*, *Steamwheelde Cartel* and *The Venture Co.* (EU-region) role-playing servers in 2005-2006.
- 3 Camarilla (www.camarilla.white-wolf.com) is the player organization of White Wolf running a global World of Darkness larp campaign. RPGA (www.wizards.com/rpga) is a similar organization of Wizard of the Coast that runs a global game of

- tabletop *Dungeons & Dragons*. (Ref. November 17th 2006.)
- 4 Ben Lehman's *Polaris* (2005) is one of the recent American independent tabletop role-playing games. In the paradigm that has shaped around The Forge internet community, experimentation with power structures is central.
 - 5 As groups around the world do freeform role-play, it's impossible to tap into any collective global freeform culture. All observations in this paper are based on discussions with Swedish and Danish freeformers and experiences from playing their games. Many styles of freeform differ radically from the style discussed here, such as role-playing convention freeform represented by e.g. *Life of the Moonson* (by Nick Brooke, Chris Gidlow, David Hall, Kevin Jacklin, Rick Meintz and Michael O'Brien 1997) that is excellently documented in www.etyries.com/moonson. (Ref. November 17th 2006.)
 - 6 All the freeform quotes are from the website of Swedish *Vi åker jeep* collective (Martin Brodén, Torbiörn Frizon, Olle Jonsson, Tobias Wrigstad & others). (Ref. November 17th 2006.)
 - 7 *Epidemic Menace* (2005) and *Epidemic Menace 2* (2006) were research prototypes created and developed by Fraunhofer FIT and other IPerG partners in Germany.
 - 8 The more performative console games, such as *Dance Dance Revolution* (1998) and *Singstar* (2004) provide the players with similar excuses. *Singstar* allows singing and *DDR* dancing in a context of game, where performance is a byproduct and winning the game is the goal. Minimalist role-playing with speech recognition could do the same with acting and role-playing.