

Genre, Style, Method and Focus

Typologies for Role-Playing Games

The purpose of this text is to attempt to create a basic typology for role-playing games. It is intended as a tool for the game master, so that she can better understand what various approaches can be taken in RPGs and to better be able to communicate her vision of the game to the player. It is important to bear in mind that this typology is based on social constructions, metaphors. The divisions are not discovered or divined, but created. This model should be seen as a tool. Its usefulness will be dictated by its applications and validity.

This text takes as given that role-playing is a medium and a valid form of expression. Role-playing is communication and it has the potential to be art. Also, organising a game requires a vision and fulfilling that vision requires tools. This model is aimed at being such a tool. Role-playing is defined according to the Meilahti School. Role-playing is what is created in the interaction between a game master and a player or between players in a defined diegetic frame (Hakkarainen & Stenros 2003) and as such this model is seen as fitting both the traditional tabletop role-playing as well as live-action role-playing.

The model will explore four of the various dimensions defining a role-playing text. These dimensions are method, genre, style and focus. Method is used to differentiate between different ways of interacting between the game master and the players or between the players such as live-action role-playing and tabletop role-playing. Genre is the collection of expectations that in a cultural context organizes different texts, such as fantasy and cyberpunk. Style is the genetic interpretation, the way that the game is played, such as soap opera and realism. Focus is a dimension for differentiating between various collective approaches of the participants to the game, such as chaotic and orderly (more on which later). It should be noted that the approach that this text takes is based on cultural studies and film studies.

Method

Role-playing is often divided to two categories, *live-action role-playing* and traditional *tabletop role-playing*. Sometimes these two methods are even seen as distinctively different forms of expression. That point of view uses a very narrow definition of role-

playing, where physicality and the physical configuration of participants are seen as instrumental. The underlying structure of role-playing is the same in both forms of gaming. (See for example Hakkarainen & Stenros 2003, Loponen & Montola 2004.)

Live-action and tabletop are two forms of role-playing, methods of interaction between the participants. Most role-playing games employ methods of both live-action and tabletop role-playing; thus it is difficult to create clear-cut categories. Role-playing games usually fall somewhere between the ideal tabletop and live-action games. As such these categories are useful mostly as communicating the expectations that a game master has of her players.

Tabletop games are usually played in a confined area where the participants sit down, possibly around a table (hence the name). The actions in the game are described, and the physical configuration of the room, the props or the player do not represent those that are found in the diegetic frame. Tabletop role-playing games also often have a lot of rules and systems for deciding what happens in the game. Dice or other random generators are often employed.

In larps the physical configuration of the place where the game is played as well as the props and the exterior of a participant has a lot more weight. The so-called real world represents the game world and the players represent their characters not just mentally but physically as well (see for example Sihvonen 1997). Rule systems are often also lighter and more geared up to create safety as well as the perception of diegetic believability.

In an idealized tabletop game a participant would only describe the actions of her character in third person without trying to act or physically represent the character. "My character opens the door wearing a tuxedo. She spreads her wings and says hesitantly: 'Er, can I help you.'" In a pure live-action game the participant would open the door wearing a tuxedo, spread her wings and say, "Er, can I help you" acting hesitantly. These are extreme examples, ideals, and most games fall somewhere between. In most tabletop games the participants, if nothing else, talk as their characters, using first person pronouns and punctuating the speech as it is delivered with pauses and different facial expressions while looking at the participant whose character her character is talking to. Participants in tabletop games can act out whole scenes, get away from the metaphorical table and then go back to third person descriptions when they feel like it. Also, sometimes the game master can give a prop, a handout, to a participant that is a physical representation of something in the game world. A map is a good example of this. In a pure tabletop game the map would only be described.

In the same manner, most larps employ tabletop-like methods. Sometimes actions are described instead of played out, for example when they are impossible to perform, such as flying or spreading one's wings. Often also the gaming area doesn't look exactly like the diegetic place it is supposed to represent, and the participants are often wearing clothes that are symbols for the clothes in the game world instead of being identical replicas of the diegetic clothes.

Thus the categories of tabletop and larp are far from absolute. They are useful when a game master wants to communicate some of her expectations to the participants. Larps usually last longer and the participants are expected to show up with costumes and props for their characters, they are expected to look the part. In tabletop games a lot less preliminary work is expected, often the participant just needs to know her character and the setting – but sometimes one can show up completely unprepared to a tabletop game.

As the spectrum between pure live-action and pure tabletop is so varied, sometimes game masters want to be more precise. For example, in the live-action end of the spectrum the subcategories include the division to *photorealistic* and *symbolic*. In a photorealistic game the game area and the players aim for perfect simulation where every object represents an identical object in the game world. In an ideal photo realistic game there are no wigs, no make-up or no contact lenses that are not present in the diegetic frame as well. Symbolic games are less strict. For example even if the participant has long hair the character can still have short hair or vice versa and clothes that are not visible need not correspond with the diegetic frame. Symbolic games are often referred to as low ambition games and photo realistic games are also known as high ambition games. These names, however, do not take into account that a symbolic game can be very ambitious as well (see the film *Dogville* (2003) as an example from a different medium).

The contents of these categories are gaming culture specific even if the same labels are used in many parts of the world. The examples listed above are from the Nordic countries. In North America larps often use less elaborate symbols for props, for example. A piece of paper with the word 'book' written on it can be used as a prop in a larp, and such symbols can replace all 'real' props in a game. In the Nordic countries such purely symbolic props are seldom used and a game using only such symbols would be labelled experimental and avant-garde – or badly propped.

Live-action, tabletop and the spectrum between are not the only methods available: *digital role-playing games* are also emerging. In digital role-playing games the game world is created with the aid of computers and the characters have some kind of presence, an avatar, in the diegetic frame. A pure virtual role-playing game would be very close to a pure larp in the way that the participant sees everything exactly as it is in the game world. The difference there would be how the movements of the participant are transferred to become the movements of the avatar-character.

Today few virtual games fit into the description of a role-playing game and the ones that do are closer to tabletop than to live-action. Obviously text based online gaming, play-by-email or playing through chat or irc, is basically tabletop gaming with text replacing speech, and even the most elaborate realistic games are still limited to the computer screen. Still, virtual role-playing games are one more method for the game master. *Neverwinter Nights* is an example of computer-mediated role-playing and there have been live-action games that have used computer games to simulate combat between battle mechas (*Destination Unknown* used *Heavy Gear II*) and tabletop games

that have used computers to simulate the shifting of political power in a galaxy (see for example the computer game *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri* and the role-playing source book it inspired, *GURPS Alpha Centauri*).

Genre

Genre is a cultural convention, which strives to build some kind of an organisation to the huge amount of texts and meanings, which are recycled in our culture by agreement of both the producers and the audiences (Fiske 1987). This means that certain kinds of collections of themes, settings, stereotypes, behavioural patterns and stories form classes that the game masters and other participants of role-playing games recognize. In role-playing games most recognised genres are probably fantasy, cyberpunk and vampire. The participants have clear preconceptions and expectations regarding a game that is branded as "fantasy". The game master can use these preconceptions to her advantage when communicating what kind of game she is organising. Still, there is always a possibility for interpreting and conflicting readings.

Fantasy, for example, for most people suggests the presence of elves, dwarfs, magic and some sort of pseudo medieval feudal society. The literary works of J. R. R. Tolkien, David Eddings, Margaret Weiss and Tracy Hickman (among others) have had a major influence on the fantasy genre in role-playing games. If all the participants are familiar with a certain genre, then the game master need not work as hard when communicating her vision of the game world, she can take as given that everyone knows that dwarfs are short, have beards, live in the mountains and hate elves. Popular culture in general has had a tremendous effect on role-playing genres (see for example Mackay 2001).

The strength and weakness of genres is that even if most participants have very similar conceptions of a certain genre, they are never the same. This means that just branding a game fantasy doesn't really mean much as fantasy has a wide variety of different sub-genres. If no further information is given, then most participants will use the most stereotypical reading of fantasy available to them and the game may run the risk of being rather bland. Genre can be a very fast way of communicating an impression of the type of the game, but at the same time generic descriptions produce generic games.

For example fantasy can be divided to high fantasy (powerful magic, dragons, elves), low fantasy (little or no magic, no races besides humans, shamans instead of mages), SCA-like historical fantasy (historical world that is clean and most people are nobles etc.), historical fantasy (inspired by Viking mythology, *Kalevala*, *Beowulf*) and so on. Using sub-genres helps, but the more precise the genre, the more probable it is that not everyone is familiar with it.

Role-playing games can of course also combine or change genre halfway. These kinds of *slipstream* games can even be created as a surprise to the players. For example a

game that starts as a simulation of a corporate conference in the wilderness can become a lovecraftian horror game if a monster shows up during evening festivities. From the point of view of the players, the game has then gone from a realistic game to a horror game. The game masters may view the game as a horror game from the beginning, as one of the conventions of the horror genre is the surprise emergence of a supernatural threat in a confined space.

The genre need not be the same for all players either – some characters might have more information than others. For example if the monster is exchanged to a few hidden vampires in the corporate conference in the wilderness game, then for most participants the game is a real life game but a few would be playing a vampire game.

Many successful games have also been genre hybrids. Describing a game as a horror western can be a very economical way of communicating a lot of information. It is good to note that even if role-playing games have a lot of genre conventions and characteristics that are only applicable to role-playing games, most genres do transcend the borders of medium. Even if none of the participants have taken part in a western game before, they still know what westerns are like in films, books and comics.

Using well-known works done for other mediums as common reference points for the players is also a fast way of communicating a crude vision (see also *ibid*). For example the Danish game *Zombie – A Night of Terrors* is quite clearly set in the horror subgenre of zombie fiction, but additional reference points could be first person shooter computer games and the film *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) or the Swedish game *Carolus Rex* might be sold as 50's Hollywood sci-fi, with elements from the films *Das Boot* (1981) and – again – *Full Metal Jacket*. These brief descriptions can be powerful, but if the potential participant has never watched any war films or played FPS-games then the descriptions mean nothing. Genre and common reference points are fast ways of explaining the core of a game, but they cannot replace a more thorough description of the setting of a game.

John H. Kim (2003) has also divided genre conventions into three categories, *World conventions* (what is the world like), *Character conventions* (what kind of protagonists are chosen) and *Story conventions* (what is possible in the story). Such detailed divisions may indeed be helpful when communicating the genre of a game. The concept of Story convention bears similarities to what I call the style of play.

Style

Style of playing refers to the way the character is expected to act and react within the genre of the game to ensure the desired end result, a game along the lines of the game master's vision. As such style is always an interpretation of the genre. It is a tool for the game master and an instruction for a player.

Different styles include for example realism, dramatic, surrealism and soap opera. The styles are in many ways similar to genres as they too are cultural conventions, they

help understand texts and meanings and they are recycled in our culture by agreement, but they are also both broader and more specific. Style helps build the structure of a text, it determines actions within a genre to ensure certain kind of dramatic curve or pacing. On the other hand styles are not genre specific, but they can be applied to any setting.

This means that even if the genre of a role-playing game doesn't change, the stylistically most probable effect of a unified cause can change if the style changes. For example if a person is hit by an arrow in a fantasy game, then in a realistic game that would be very painful, and the injury would most probably get infected with possibly deadly results. If the style is dramatic, then a hero might not feel the pain until she has been able to complete her mission and then she might die from all the damage done to her in the heat of the battle. In a surreal fantasy the arrow might turn into singing yeast that exhales French cheese and shame. In a soap opera the arrow might be deadly but not before the heroine has been able to confess her long hidden love for the king and that she has actually been a spy for the king's evil brother's lover. Note that soap opera can be seen both a genre and a style.

The style of play is clearly communicated to the players more seldom than the genre. This means that often in the beginning of the game the style is being negotiated in the interaction of the players and usually the game will end up being played in a realistic or a dramatic manner. If the game master desires to have the game played in a different style, she needs to communicate this clearly.

The style of gaming seldom changes in the middle of a game, but that doesn't mean that it cannot change. For example a realistic game can become surreal if a game includes dream sequences or hallucinations.

Focus

The terms integrative and dissipative gaming are lifted from Markus Montola's model that applies chaos theory, as it is understood in the context of organisational communication, to role-playing. Montola's model breaks role-playing into a series of decisions where a participant chooses a certain action in order to work towards (or against) a certain plotline. These plot points are called *attractors*. Thus every time a participant makes a decision, she either tries to steer the game to an orderly or a chaotic direction. (Montola 2004.)

In practise this division between integrative and dissipative gaming forms the basis for the focus of the game; either the game is more geared up to build a coherent drama with an emphasis on a story (*integrative*, orderly) or a game is more akin to a world simulation, where the individuals act without a responsibility towards a story (*dissipative*, chaotic).

A pure chaotic game is aimless, random, free and focused on the moment. In a chaotic game the character is an actor who is moving in a complete world exactly

according to her wishes. The player's only responsibility is to be true to the character. A pure orderly game is balanced, controlled, and holistic, and produces a coherent story. The overall role-playing text is more important than an individual character and the player has a responsibility towards the bigger story and the stories of other characters. Again, these idealised extremes are seldom if ever encountered in actual games. Striking a good balance between the extremes is often integral to the success of a game.

The game master has a number of methods that she can use to steer the games towards order or chaos. Dissipative methods include a complete and functioning world, rational individuals with personal agendas, briefing the players even on unnecessary background knowledge, players coming up with their own characters, secrets and individual plots and immersion as defined by the Turku schools (Pohjola 2000). Integrative methods include characters written by the game master, clearly defined genre and style, rationalising character motives, dramatic playing, fate-play (Fatland 1998), the game master as the world pushing events in certain directions, putting emphasis on loyalty and team spirit, creating characters as groups, controlling the time and prewritten scenes. (Montola 2002)

Both of these collective approaches to gaming can be used fruitfully and neither one is preferable to the other. Different games and different visions require different approaches and the game master can use this division to better understand how to reach her goals. It is also easy to start creating subcategories in which the same division to chaotic and orderly focus can be observed. For example one can define the focus of the diegetic frame, the character creation, the rule system and the character dynamics.

Practice

It should be noted that all of these categories as well as their contents are but tools and examples. The divisions can be continued and endless lists of sub-categories can be created. These four dimensions should not be seen as the only ones that can be used in categorizing games. A number of different distinctions, categories if you will, can be proposed. For example Emma Wieslander has divided games based on the motivation of the player to backdrops for larger than life drama, social events, fulfilling artistic ambitions and showcases for handcrafts and equipment.

The purpose of these categories is to help the game master to communicate her vision to the participants by creating a shared framework for the role-playing process. It can also be used to categorise and interpret old games and as a springboard for new ideas.

For example *Panopticornp* was a game that used almost exclusively live action methods. The genre of the game is more difficult to define. The game was firmly rooted in reality (in role-playing games real life games are a genre), in this case set in an advertising agency, but it used a number of external reference points. *Panopticornp* was a social criticism in the vein of Naomi Klein's *No Logo* with more than a hint of George

Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* thrown in. The style of gaming was based on realism with shades of satire. The focus of the game was closer to orderly than chaotic, the framework of the game was somewhere in the middle but the players were instructed to play towards a common goal in an integrative fashion.

On the other hand *Helsingin kronikka* (The Chronicle of Helsinki) uses both live-action and tabletop methods in creating the game. The genre is vampire, mostly in the sub-genre of official by-the-book White Wolf World of Darkness. The style of the game has varied (the game has been played for almost ten years), but mostly it has been dramatic or soap operatic. The focus on the game is closer to chaotic as even if there are a number of grand stories and some heavy railroading done by the game masters, the sheer number of individual characters with individual goals and motivations, some of them as old as the game, pull the game to a more dissipative direction.

Randomly combining elements from the various categories can help think outside the mainstream of role-playing. What kind of a game would be a live action with some tabletop methods thrown in to simulate combat (with miniatures, for example), set in a fantasy of the 1970's in the vein of the film *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), played in a realistic fashion that makes way for surrealism from time to time and all of this as a chaotic character study?

Of course, if these categories start limiting the imagination, this tool has ceased to do its job.

This text is based on a number of presentations I have given in various places over the years. The seeds were sown in 2000 in Ropecon, Finland, but since then the typology has become more comprehensive, and these later versions have been presented in Knutpunkt 2002 in Stockholm, Sweden and Knudepunkt 2003 in Copenhagen, Denmark. I am in debt to a number of people who have commented on these thoughts through the years, especially to Markus Montola, Henri Hakkarainen and Satu Heliö.

Games

Carolus Rex (1999) by Martin Ericsson, Karim Muammar, Henrik Summanen, Thomas Walsh and Emma Wieslander, Sweden.

Destination Unknown (2000) by Tero Mäntylä & al., Finland.

GURPS Alpha Centauri (2002) by Jon F. Zeigler, Steve Jackson Games.

Heavy Gear II (1999) by Activision.

Helsingin kronikka (1994-) by Suvi Lehtoranta & al., Finland.

Neverwinter Nights (2002) by Infogrames Entertainment.

Panopticon (2003) by Irene Tanke & al., Norway.

Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri (1996) by Electronic Arts.

Zombie – Night of Terrors (2003) by Morten Gade, Xenia Salomonsen & al., Denmark.

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