

# Immersive Story

## A View of Role-Played Drama

*Within role-playing game theory, there is often perceived to be a clash over the concept of story. One type of play, known as immersionism, tends to be characterised by terms like immersion, simulation, and realism. The other type, known as dramatism, tends to be characterised by terms like drama, story, and performance. This split has been discussed in the Threefold Model (Kim 1997) and its revised form, the Three Way Model (Bøckman 2001). To the dramatist, the immersionist may seem to be rejecting story as a goal. However, immersionist play will produce a series of fictional events – often with deep characters and intricate interactions. Is this not a story? I think that it should be regarded as such, though there are also important distinctions between immersively role-played story and story in static media such as books and film.*

A useful analogy to role-playing is a live puppet show. Puppets are capable of some amazingly expressive acting, but there are some inherent limitations. In Western puppetry, the puppeteer is generally above or below the puppet and hidden by a screen so the audience cannot see. Because of this limitation, puppets are strictly limited in their action. This furthers the illusion, but it limits the type of stories which can be told.

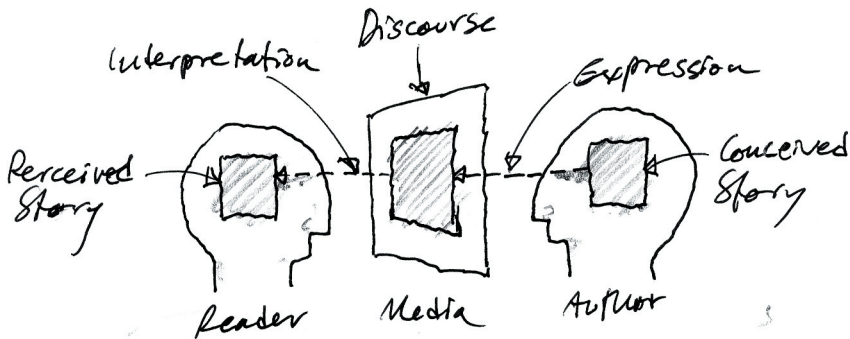
In the Japanese tradition of bunraku, the puppeteers are visible to the audience. This permits a greater range of action for the puppet, which can allow much deeper performances. However, the experience for the audience is arguably lessened by having the illusion broken. I would say that neither style is inherently better. Greater expression allows better stories, but the distraction of visible manipulators detracts from the story.

In role-playing, there is no exactly parallel split. There are puppets, but they are psychological rather than physical. However, there are related trade-offs between possibilities for story and visible breaking of the illusion. In an immersionist play, the player thinks only about the in-game reality of her character. This means that the experience of story is more encompassing. However, it also means that it is difficult to arrange for events to achieve closure or fit into a distinct theme. To look deeper into this, though, we need to consider what story is.

# Traditional Story

In books and film – what I call “static media” – the author creates a product in a fixed physical form that is later viewed by an audience. The author creates the work in relative isolation from the reader, and the reader views it without direct contact with the author. In the formalist view of theorists like Tzvetan Todorov and Gérard Genette, there are two parts to this work: *story* and *discourse* (Martin 1986, 100–102). A story is the imaginary sequence of events involving the characters and the setting. It is a mental construct within the imagination of a person, i.e. a picture in the mind’s eye of what is happening. A discourse is the expression of that story: words and images which attempt to represent the events. The story begins in the mind of the author, and is then expressed into a discourse which is contained in the medium. By viewing this medium, the reader then forms a mental construct of that story within her own mind. This can be visualised as follows:

Illustration 1: Story as transmitted in static narrative



This is over-simplified in many ways, given the variety of narrative forms. However, I think it is important to understand this simple, traditional model first. To formalise the elements:

*Conceived Story*: A mental construct within the mind of the author, consisting of a sequence of imaginary events. Within this simple model, the conceived story is pre-verbal and is independent of the expression of that story. An author might express the same story in different ways – a book and a film, for example.

*Perceived Story*: A mental construct within the mind of the reader. Like the conceived story, it is a non-verbal depiction of events. For example, a filmgoer might express through words the story of a film which she just saw. However, she will refer to the events which happened rather than describing the images on the screen.

*Medium:* The physical means of communication between the author and the reader, such as book, film, or voice. Within this model, the medium is a blank slate which does not include any expression of story.

*Discourse:* The discourse is a particular expression of the story. In simplest terms, the story is the what in the narrative that is depicted, discourse is the how. Some theorists would break this down further into the concrete product or “text”, and the inferred process of expression or “narration”.

So to reiterate: the story is not the expression itself – i.e. the text of the book, or the print of the movie. Rather, the story is an imaginary construct: a mental image or model. Through the tool of the medium, an author tries to convey the story as she conceives it to the reader. After viewing the medium, the reader then has another imaginary construct in his head – the perceived story – which may be different than the author’s conception.

Often, it is considered good art if the perceived story matches the imagined story. Artistic technique covers how to express the story vividly and clearly, so that the reader has a definite mental image. However, there are reasons to vary from this. In other words, there are reasons to describe events less completely.

For example, a technique of horror fiction is to only hint at the monster rather than show it. The reader then imagines what is most horrific to her, even if it is different than what the author had pictured. Another example would be setting your story in a fictional generic location, like Smallville or Metropolis. This encourages readers to imagine the setting as being similar to their hometown or city. By encouraging the reader to fill in details with his own imagination, the perceived story becomes more personally relevant. This is often related to the concept of “transference” in psychology – i.e. the displacement of unresolved conflicts, dependencies, and aggressions onto a substitute object. The reader displaces her own associations onto the substitute of a fictional object.

This model does not cover role-playing games. Film, novels, theatre, storytelling, and other narrative forms all share this common structure, where there is separate author(s) and audience. The only difference is the means by which the authors communicate with the audience, i.e. the medium. Note that a role-playing game is not a medium – voice, for example, is a medium. A medium is simply a physical means of communication. The medium of voice can be used in many different contexts and to communicate different content (i.e. song, lecture, story). A role-playing game can be considered *a structure* which can be implemented using different media, such as tabletop play using voice or online IRC play using computers or larp using bodily expression. It could be considered a format, a relation of author and audience. Alternatively, it can be considered a method of expression, like a writing technique. Really, though, it does not fit in this model since it does not have separate audience and author.

# Protagonism

Traditional stories also tend to have a protagonist. In classical dramatic theory, the protagonist is a single focus character with whom the audience emotionally identifies. That character's decisions and changes then draw the audience through a range of emotions. As Lajos Egri describes it, "The first step is to make your reader or viewer identify your character as someone he knows. Step two – if the author can make the audience imagine that what is happening can happen to him, the situation will be permeated with aroused emotion and the viewer will experience a sensation so great that he will feel not as a spectator but as the participant of an exciting drama before him." (Egri 1965, 18–19)

In the view of theorists like Egri, the work of a dramatic story is an emotional reaction. The end product of an author is not simply text, but the mental state of the reader. In the terminology used above, the end product is the perceived story. This is the sum of what the reader feels and imagines upon reading the story, not simply an objective interpretation of the statements. The protagonist is a tool to achieve this emotional involvement, through audience identification (or "transference") to the fictional character.

Now, there is more to fiction than classical dramatic theory. However, classical drama is an important structure, and the concept of a protagonist is an important parallel to the emotional impact of a player character in a role-playing game. The important thing to note is that the end product is a personal imagining.

As Egri describes, identifying with the protagonist produces an illusionary feeling of involvement. Within the viewer's imagination, the protagonist may take on characteristics which are personal to the viewer. For example, if the protagonist's age is not described, the viewer may imagine it as being close to her own. The viewer's imagination will fill in many details about the protagonist as part of identification. Within classical drama, this is intended and indeed necessary. Each viewer will have an emotional reaction that is personal and based on their own issues. Thus, their perceived story is unique and personal.

## Story in Role-Playing Games

Based on this understanding of traditional story, the question becomes what story is in role-playing games – and in particular what an immersive story means. Role-playing games do not have a separate author and audience, nor is it even clear what the discourse would be. Lisa Padol ponders this question in her essay on collaborative storytelling in RPGs:

There is nothing to prevent the video taping of a game session; however, the tape is not the text. The text is the session itself. It is, therefore, transitory, existing only for the duration of the session.

[...]

Anything which reaches the interface between the GM and the players is part of the text. Anything which does not reach the interface, and, therefore, does not affect both the GM and the players, is not part of the text.

[...]

Matthew Porter, who proposed the earlier definition, suggested that the term 'interface' be re-defined so that it includes "any interaction between two or more gamers". (Porter, Personal Interview) The interaction may be between all the players and the GM, between at least two players, or between the GM and at least one player. In short, the text is defined by the interface between or interaction of at least two gamers. (Padol 1996)

This is a useful definition of what the text, or discourse, of play is. However, this does not define what a story is. For traditional static media, the discourse is the interaction between the conceived story of the author and the perceived story of the audience. But in a RPG, the author and the audience are the same.

One approach is to say that a role-player is acting in two capacities. As author, a player has a conceived story which is his imagination of what his character is thinking, among other things. By speaking and acting, he communicates this conceived story to the other players. As audience, the player also has a perceived story which is his interpretation of the actions of other players, which becomes his imagination of what happens elsewhere in the game-world.

However, these two stories are constantly interacting. The conceived story will be revised by what is perceived and vice-versa. Indeed, it is questionable whether they should really be considered as separate entities. I will continue with this as an analogy.

## **Role-Playing as a Performance**

Based on this analogy, we can conceive of role-playing as a performing art. It is a format unique from other arts, in that it is directed solely at other performers and that each is simultaneously audience and actor. This view and relation to theatrical theory is analysed by Daniel Mackay in his book describing RPG as "a new performing art" (Mackay 2001). In our analogy, the player would be acting as an author in performing the character, and also acting as audience by watching other players.

Following classical dramatic theory, the player should strive to make the internal emotions of the character visible. This corresponds essentially to what has been characterised as the dramatist point of view in models such as the Threefold Model (Kim 1997). In this analogy, the player is entertained by the performances of other players, and in turn actively entertains via her own performance.

## PC as a Protagonist

I would argue that the performance analogy fails to capture a vital element of most role-playing, however. In a RPG, the player emotionally identifies most with his own player character. So the center of the story in his view is not how the other characters are portrayed, but the emotions and decisions of his own character. This fits perfectly with what Egri (1965, 18–19) says about the purpose of the protagonist in traditional fiction: “The viewer will experience a sensation so great that he will feel not as a spectator but as the participant of an exciting drama before him.”

So emotionally, the player character has the function of a protagonist. This means that in a game, there are actually as many different protagonists as there are players. Each player sees a slightly different story, one where their PC is the protagonist. The actions of other characters may be interesting and relevant, but they are not where the power of the story lies.

This view has far-reaching consequences. In traditional stories, the audience is drawn into emotional reaction by identification with the visible description of the protagonist. In a RPG, the player is drawn to emotional reaction by the thoughts and emotions of her own character. These thoughts are not necessarily expressed visibly to other players, however. In other words, they may be conceived story rather than perceived story. This is similar to the ideas expressed by Markus Montola in his essay on subjective diegeses. As he puts it “most of the feelings and thoughts experienced by the other participants are never announced” (Montola 2001, 82–84). He suggests that the imagined facts of the game are different (i.e. each player has a different subjective diegesis). I go further and say that these differences can be essential to the emotional power of the game.

This makes the act of role-playing self-centered in a sense. Because each player identifies most with her own PC, that means the performance of that character matters most the player herself. While other players will enjoy the portrayal, they do not have the same degree of emotional identification with that character. This also breaks the analogy of theatre. The player does not derive emotional impact primarily from the performances of others, but rather from her own performance.

## Supporting Immersive Story

This picture of PC-as-protagonist is what I will call immersive story. It is very different view than traditional story. A traditional author will try to illuminate the inner emotions of the protagonist in order to get the audience to identify with that character. However, in many ways the challenge of traditional drama is inherently solved in a RPG. The player already is an active participant in the narrative.

In a RPG supporting immersive story, the protagonist is not external to the player. Thus, one is not trying to make the player emotionally identify with an external

character in the game. The external game should provide the antagonist, background, and conflict for the character's inner struggle. However, that inner struggle need not be externalised in the same way as a classical dramatic story. For the organizers (of a larp) or the GM (of a tabletop game), this means that each PC should have internal conflict that forms the core of the emotional story. Each PC should also have a stake in conflict. On the other hand, the organizers are not responsible for how that story plays out. The organizers are not the authors of the story, and indeed they will never directly experience what the real story is.

For the player, there are personal responsibilities as well as social responsibilities. For the player to have emotional engagement, he *has to* delve into the personal issues of his own character. This does not mean mentally contemplating the character; it means taking actions which are personally meaningful to the character. By playing through the consequences of choices made, the story develops meaning for the player.

Every player is also a participant in other players' stories. However, this is not projecting his story to them. Rather, pieces of one player's story are the background and supporting pieces to other players' stories.

This hopefully sheds some light on the perceived split between immersion and story. Novels, theater, film, and many other narrative forms treat externalisation of internal conflicts as the most important thing. RPGs often try to imitate this, but that is not necessary and can be counterproductive. In immersive story, the emotional power comes from identification with the player's own character, which does not require externalizing of all issues. The character is an aspect of the player's personality which includes both external display (what the character says and does during game sessions) as well as internal thoughts, reactions, and motivations (which may never be seen by other players).

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