

## Notes on Role-Playing Texts

*The analysis of role-playing games is often muddled by a failure to assess the basic ontological question: what is being analysed when we speak of analysing a role-playing game? Producing a valid analysis of a role-playing game requires that the analyst clearly defines the object under scrutiny. Role-playing games can be approached from a number of perspectives, but all methods cannot be used in all situations. Thus, it is imperative to explicate what is here called the role-playing text, and its various aspects. I will here attempt to formulate six different ways of conceiving role-playing games, gaming, and closely related phenomena.*

The Meilahti Model defines a role-playing game as that which “is created in the interaction between players or between player(s) and gamemaster(s) within a specified diegetic framework” (Hakkarainen & Stenros 2003). The end result of the process of role-playing is the *role-playing text*<sup>1</sup>. The term ‘text’ is here used as in semiotics – that is, it does not refer only to written text, but any form of expression or a body of work that can be analysed. Thus a picture, a film or a role-playing game can be seen as a text that can then be read and interpreted. Lisa Padol’s (1996) definition of the role-playing text as game-related “interaction of at least two gamers” is similar to this one. She also stresses the transitory nature of the role-playing text:

But what is the story? What is the text of a role-playing session? If a supplement is used, is that the text? But what if the GM has made changes to the supplement? What if the GM is working from notes, or from improvisation alone? [...] The GM’s notes do not constitute the text either. They may be more tailored to the group than a commercial supplement, but they do not dictate how the session will go. Like the material in a supplement, the material in the GM’s notes will be modified, or even ignored, depending on what happens during the session. Neither the GM’s notes nor the commercial supplement is the text. Neither is a transcription of the session the text, any more than a film is the screenplay. The film itself is the text. Similarly, the session itself is the text of the session. However, the comparison between game and film must not be taken too far. One can watch a film over and over again. 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. (Padol 1996)

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘role-playing text’ is used to denote one specific kind of text associated with role-playing. It is not the only text that can be read in regards to role-playing games, but it is the most important and specific. It should not be confused with the other textual types introduced in this article.

It is important to note that the role-playing text contains all the diegetic elements, from the back-story to the experiences of individual characters. This role-playing text is a theoretical construct, almost an abstract Platonic idea of this particular role-playing game, or series of games. The role-playing text is comprised of elements that are somehow transmitted via symbols, so that they can be read. There is nothing in the role-playing text that at least one of the participants does not know, but in practice usually no one knows the entire role-playing text.

A role-playing session produces the diegesis, the role-playing text, and the experiences of the various participants. The diegesis is all of that which is true within the game (Hakkarainen & Stenros, 2003). The same background material will thus produce various role-playing texts, because the author of the role-playing text comprises of all the individuals participating in the gaming experience. The content of the role-playing text is very similar to the notion of diegesis, but it also includes some extradiegetic elements that are in direct symbolic relation to the diegesis (such as background music which can be used, for example, as a symbol for a mood – for an exploration on semiotic relations in role-playing games, see Loponen & Montola 2004). Thus, the role-playing text includes not only the what (diegesis), but also the how (methods). The third product of role-playing is the experiences of the participants, which include, along with the role-playing text, extradiegetic events that do not directly relate to role-playing (such as off-game gossip) but which would contribute to an ethnographic study of the game.

## Reading the Game

Each participant produces a *reading* of the role-playing text. This reading constitutes the game for that particular individual. Markus Montola calls the combination of these readings and the internal processes of the participant *subjective diegeses* (Montola 2003) and defines role-playing as the co-operative interaction between various diegeses. I would say these readings compete for the hegemonic position as the explicated diegetic truth. Participants create these readings as the game progresses. They also constantly re-evaluate and adjust their readings. From a practical point of view, these readings are the role-playing game for the participants, but although direct and complete access to the abstract role-playing text eludes the participant, to deny its existence (or to ignore it) would suggest that each participant is reading a separate text.

Often the reading by the game master is seen as a special case, as she has the final word on what is true within the diegetic frame. Nonetheless, her reading is constructed in the same way as the ones created by the other participants, despite the fact that she might have more control over and information regarding the diegetic frame than the other participants.

Of these three starting points, the first and foremost is the *role-playing text*. The *reading done by a participant*, and the special case of a *reading done by the game master*, are the second most common starting-points of analyses of role-playing games.

Note that the term ‘reading’ is here used to denote the participants’ initial take on the events in the process of role-playing, and ‘interpretation’ is used to denote the further development of this initial reading.

Readings can also be constructed from the story of the game, but it is important to note that role-playing games do not have stories (Heliö 2004). Thus these readings are always based on a *narrativisation* of the game events. This narrativisation is constructed after the fact in communication between the participants or when a participant is narrativising the events to some one else, interpreting her reading.

## Additional Aspects

It is possible to conceive other aspects of a role-playing as texts. One such is a *scenario*. Even though it is not possible to produce the same role-playing game twice, it is possible to organise a number of games based on exactly the same background material and associated paraphernalia (props, the gaming location, etc.). The scenario is a collection of the pre-created material for a game or series of games. The reading of the background material produces the scenario. Thus, a scenario can exist even if a game has never been played. Running “the same” live-action role-playing game twice produces different role-playing texts, just as various tabletop role-playing games based on the same adventure modules are never identical. Still, it is possible to see these different end products as based on the same text, the scenario.

The material making up the scenario can be divided into smaller parts. For example, character descriptions as well as background world guides can always be read and interpreted separately from the rest of the scenario.

Another aspect of role-playing is comprised of the methodologies that are used for abstraction and simulation – the *rules*. Rules are understood here as shared systems both for encoding/decoding information, and of specific norms. For example, rules decode what rolling a six on a die means, how a latex sword is supposed to be understood and how a participant should communicate that she is feeling uncomfortable in a game situation. They also include norms like “a participant should not leave the larp area when the game is in progress”. Padol (1996) sees rules as a meta-text, though she only defines them as a mechanism for solving disputes. Because rules are usually read with a practical goal in mind, the reading of rules in itself produces one type of role-playing related text. The rules include the preconceptions the reader has about role-playing.

Also, from an ethnographic point of view, the gaming *session* can be seen as a type of text. A session is the temporal window where the participants convene, play, eat, chitchat and generally socialise, until they finally disperse. As such, a session includes not only the social process of role-playing and meta-gaming, but also all the actions not directly relating to the game that take place during the time between the beginning and the end of a session. Padol (*ibid*) sees no difference between the text of the session and the role-playing text, but still states that a session “can [be] transcribed, summarized, or

videotaped and shown to those who did not participate in the session. However, once this has happened, we no longer have the [role-playing] text itself. We have a new text, and a new audience.” In the end she only recognizes one type of text in relation to role-playing games, the role-playing text, even if she does point out that *source books* and other published material can, of course, be read as text in the manner of any publication. Still, as I have here attempted to demonstrate, more specific distinctions than this are necessary in order to thoroughly dissect what role-playing in fact is. If the goal is to produce coherent readings of role-playing games, then it is important to explicate what is actually being read.

Currently, discussion regarding these six different aspects is conducted in different contexts. Most analyses on games that are published (on mailing lists, discussion forums and in fanzines such as *Larppaaja* and *Fëa Livia*), are based either on the role-playing text (often the readings of the participant or the game master) or on the text that is produced after narrativising the events of the game into a story. Often, no divisions are made between these types of texts and readings, which creates confusion as the authors vary between telling what happened to their characters and what the game seemed to be about as a whole.

Analyses on scenarios often tie into role-playing text and narrativisation, but they are also reviewed in role-playing publications alongside source books and rules. The distinctions between the three aspects of gaming are sometimes muddled because the exact same physical material can be approached from all three points of view – even if the rules usually bring in unvoiced notions about the gaming process. Sessions are rarely analysed outside the peer review of the participants of the game.

## Conclusion

These six aspects of role-playing can all be conceived as different types of texts. The primary type is what is here called the role-playing text itself, the transient product of role-playing. It includes some elements of most of the other aspects as well, namely that role-playing is conducted in a session, that it is to some extent based on a scenario, that some rules are employed and that the participants have used source material in preparation to the game. These four additional subservient aspects of role-playing also contain elements which are not present in the role-playing text and which can also be read separately. On the other hand, narrativised story of the game is not a part of the role-playing text but a result of narrativisation done to a reading based on it.

Searching for meaning in role-playing games is a worthwhile process, but it is important to enunciate properly what it is exactly that is being analysed. Scrutinising the different aspect of role-playing yields different information only if the point of view is clearly understood by both the analyst and her audience.

## References

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