

Foreword

Writing the Foreword for this book is an interesting task, not least because one has to, first of all, ask whom one is addressing. Who needs these pages of role-playing theory, methods, models or analyses? For an outsider, the subject might seem marginal or esoteric to demand – or be worthy of – extended, analytical treatises. This is all about adult people playing children's games, right? The stereotypical perception may be changing, but still an extra effort must be taken to underline the significance of larp and role-playing – as art, as popular culture, as something that not only the small core group of the initiated, but a much wider audience can learn and profit from. This is an important book, indeed.

The previous Knudepunkt/Solmukohta book, *As Larp Grows Up – Theory and Methods of Larp* (eds. Gade, Thorup & Sander 2003) was a fascinating collection of texts, and with this recent addition, the power of Nordic larp community seems to be well on the way of providing us with something we all very much need: a language for the era of games and other interactive cultural forms.

Game studies is a discipline in the making, and compared to the history of, for example, literary studies or film studies, it will no doubt take its proper time for us to accurately understand what these new ways of interacting in storytelling, in online environments, interactive television shows, and elsewhere are actually contributing to our culture and society. Studying role-playing is justifiable for many reasons, but one of them is that in it, we are confronting a phenomenon that is both ancient, and something very topical for the rupture our way of life is currently going through. Last couple of years have seen a powerful rise in the publication, curriculum and research activities related to games, but these have particularly started from the study and design of digital games. The media-independent research into tabletop RPG and larp in its multiple important forms is still lagging behind in the academic world.

Beyond Role and Play – Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination is a document of a certain point in the self-understanding of the larp community. As such, it inevitably sounds polyphonic, can appear uneven from some angle, and is no doubt open for the larp-theoretical self-criticism that some authors present also within these pages. But there is no easy way out: traditional academic research is slowly coming along, and trying out ways to document, describe and fit larp among the phenomena already mapped by science. However, the qualitative understanding of role-playing, how it is experienced, why it is practiced in certain ways and what are its potentials, demand such expertise that can only be found by being a role-player or a larper oneself.

The geographic scope of the writers in this anthology match the variety of approaches, disciplinary discourses and practical considerations they explore in their contributions. Particularly delightful is the opening up of Nordic larp and role-playing theorisation to the discussions that have been going on the English-language discussion lists, fanzines and other publications elsewhere. Only by such a dialogue between the

different centres or sub-cultures where role-playing is practiced and constantly re-invented and redefined, can this field progress in any long-lasting manner.

Such dialogue is obviously needed between the various artists, innovators and researchers of larp, too. I think that there would be some benefits from more clear division of roles between game innovator and game researcher, too, but currently there are not any “departments of role-playing studies”. In this kind of institutions it would be possible to do large, long-term research projects that would be dedicated to collecting and analysing substantial and representative records from different types of actual players, larp organiser groups or role-playing communities. At the moment, our understanding is based on our individual larp and RPG histories, and thereby necessarily partial. However, this book is also evidence of how this situation is in the process of changing, and more ambitious and rigorous research is constantly devised and conducted.

One can only sincerely thank Ropecon ry., as well as Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros, who have done an enormous job (on their free time) while preparing not only a significant event, but also a book that no doubt will retain its value as reference for the future creation and criticism, whether in the areas of role-playing theory or practise, or in some of the many applied fields that are also appearing and profiting from the multiple, surprising opportunities opened by role-play.

January 18, 2004, Tampere

Frans Mäyrä

Preface

The book project for the Nordic role-playing convention Solmukohta 2004 was motivated by both the desire to archive the discussion on role-playing that has made all the seven earlier conventions so captivating and intriguing, and the wish to create further discussion by offering an attractive forum. As we look on the resulting texts, we can say we are impressed.

As the readers of this book are as diverse as the contributors, we have divided the texts into four sections: Theory, Practice, Games and Openings. Of course, the division is at times arbitrary. These sections are framed with articles, which put role-playing into a historical and anthropological context: The first one is a critical look at the first 25 years of Anglo-American role-playing studies and the second traces the history of larp-like practices of several different cultures. The book concludes with a view from the outside as role-playing is approached as a subculture and a neotribe.

The *Theory* section covers role-playing from the point of view of semiotics, theatre studies, narratology, game studies, cultural text analysis, post-modern identity theory, communication studies, psychology, pedagogy, philosophy and textual analysis. These articles should interest especially role-play researchers. *Practice* offers tools for character and narrative design, a model for conceptualising the chaotic nature of role-playing games, basic typologies to aid the communication of the game master's vision, a new way of simulating amorous relations and a method for implementing the body language of a character. This section is useful for game masters, players and theorist. The section on *Games* takes a look at three very important larps played in the Nordic region in the past few years. The articles are provided to both inspire game organisers and to increase the methodological consciousness of the reader. *Openings* charts new paths with discussion on using role-playing as an educational tool, reclaiming drama from tragedy, a normative manifesto for narrativist role-playing, a controversial look at story and finally Genesi, the wonderful spark of larp.

During the selection of the texts for this book, three major themes emerged: a narrativist view on role-playing, the role-playing revolution, and the core process of role-playing games.

Satu Heliö, John H. Kim, Erling Rognli and Aksel Westlund all see role-playing as a device for storytelling even though they have no shared view on what a story is. Markus Montola tries to construct a model on how the role-played plots emerge chaotically, while Juhana Pettersson counters the narrativism, claiming that role-playing stories are merely the birth pangs of a new form of expression.

Martin Ericsson, Tova Gerge, Elge Larsson, Mike Pohjola, Christopher Sandberg, Gabriel Widing and Emma Wieslander all see role-playing as an instrument for change in society. Both their approaches and conclusions are different, but the common connecting thread is that role-playing can and will change reality.

Edward Choy, Satu Heliö, John H. Kim, Ari-Pekka Lappi, Mika Loponen, Markus Montola, Christopher Sandberg and Jaakko Stenros all attempt to find the core essence of the role-playing medium; to understand in what way role-playing differs, and does not differ, from other forms of art or expression. The focus on the process of interpretation in role-playing is a common factor among many of these texts.

A Few Technical Notes

Within the fragmented scene of role-players most terms are considered normative by some group. We have chosen *role-playing* as an umbrella term, including the various forms of traditional pen and paper and live-action role-playing; it is also applicable for computer-mediated role-playing in multi-user digital environments, ranging from IRC to complicated virtual realities.

The term *live-action role-playing*, or *larping*, includes also the various forms and styles of live role-playing and indrama, just like the term *tabletop role-playing* includes the various forms of pen and paper role-playing. The freeform tradition lies between these two. These terms have been chosen because they are in widespread use in the Nordic countries, despite the fact that action, pens, papers and tables are all irrelevant or contested requirements for the role-playing expression.

Regardless their differences the various forms of role-playing have a lot to offer each other at both the theoretical and methodological level. All the papers included are applicable to larping, while most of them can also be applied for tabletop role-playing and computer-mediated role-playing.

We ask the readers to notice that the articles of the book are based on various scientific disciplines, represent several genres of writing and were written in eight different countries. Reader discretion is – as always – advised.

Acknowledgements

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