ROLE-PLAYING GAME STUDIES

This handbook collects, for the first time, the state of research on role-playing games (RPGs) across disciplines, cultures, and media in a single, accessible volume. Collaboratively authored by more than 50 key scholars, it traces the history of RPGs, from wargaming precursors to tabletop RPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons* to the rise of live action role-play and contemporary computer RPG and massively multiplayer online RPG franchises, like *Fallout* and *World of Warcraft*. Individual chapters survey the perspectives, concepts, and findings on RPGs from key disciplines, like performance studies, sociology, psychology, education, economics, game design, literary studies, and more. Other chapters integrate insights from RPG studies around broadly significant topics, like transmedia worldbuilding, immersion, transgressive play, or player–character relations. Each chapter includes definitions of key terms and recommended readings to help fans, students, and scholars new to RPG studies find their way into this new interdisciplinary field.

**Sebastian Deterding** is a Reader at the Digital Creativity Labs at the University of York (York, UK). He has been an RPG player and designer for more than 20 years and has published ethnographic portraits of the German pen-and-paper RPG subculture. He is founder and organizer of the Gamification Research Network and co-editor of *The Gameful World* (MIT Press, 2015), a book about the ludification of culture. He holds a PhD in media studies from Hamburg University. See also: http://codingconduct.cc/.

**José P. Zagal** is an Associate Professor with the University of Utah’s Entertainment Arts & Engineering program. He wrote *Ludoliteracy* (2010) and edited *The Videogame Ethics Reader* (2012). In 2016, he was honored as a Distinguished Scholar by the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) for his contributions to the field of game research. He also serves as the Editor-In-Chief of DiGRA’s flagship journal *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association* (ToDiGRA). He received his PhD in computer science from Georgia Institute of Technology in 2008. See also: http://www.eng.utah.edu/~zagal/.
ROLE-PLAYING GAME STUDIES

Transmedia Foundations

Edited by
José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding

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Like many things in role-playing games (RPGs), this book began as an online discussion thread. In October 2012, sparked by Jon Peterson’s (2012) voluminous history of the origins of Dungeons & Dragons, members of the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) Role-Playing Studies Special Interest Group mailing list debated why academic and fan scholars of RPGs often talked past each other unawares rather than building on each other’s work.¹ Like game studies a decade ago, the discussion thread went, the study of RPGs was a dispersed network without a shared recognized ‘canon’ of texts and concepts. It needed a textbook that would bind people, texts, and ideas together into an interdisciplinary field. More than five years later, you hold this textbook in hand. Its authors include not just many participants of said academic discussion thread but also Jon Peterson. We are no longer talking past each other.

From the first moment, we intended a truly integrative book: it would cover tabletop and computer and live-action and multi-player online RPGs and recognize other forms as well. It would represent Australian tabletop and Nordic larp and Japanese computer RPGs and other cultural specifics. And it would integrate perspectives from sociology and psychology, economics and education, literary studies and game design, academics and fans and designers alike.

Achieving this goal required assembling an invisible college across the globe. In Atlanta, Georgia, in August 2013, we convened a workshop at the international conference of DiGRA, discussing and proposing topics a textbook of RPG Studies should cover and ideas for organizing them.² The circle of co-authors expanded and contracted, and although each individual chapter now carries a list of authors at the top, this book is really co-authored by all. Over months of collaborative online discussion and drafting and commenting, the initial jumble of ideas became first a unified list of topics, then a table of contents, then short, then extended chapter outlines. Many chapters would then be drafted by whole author teams, as no single person would hold an integrative view of the respective topic in their head. And every chapter went through three or more cycles of peer review and revision, gathering input and critique from the textbook team and outside experts. Draft by draft, revision by revision, we created our shared language and canon and map: a field of RPG Studies.
Our first and foremost thanks therefore go to our team of authors, who bared with us editors and each other through the better part of five years. We also thank our external reviewers for graciously donating their time, words, and insights. And we thank our spouses and families for their patience and support. And pancakes.

Sebastian Deterding and José P. Zagal
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Notes

2 http://rpghandbook.tumblr.com/.

Reference

We all role-play. As mere toddlers, we imitate the adult world around us, playing pretend by hosting stuffed animal tea parties and grocery visits. As young children, we become pirates and sorcerers and go on underwater expeditions in the living room, momentarily transcending the bounds of our bodies, skills, and parents. As adolescents, we discover the power of being someone else on a stage in drama class. We try on and shed social roles in quick succession in the desperate desire to become and be recognized as someone. When we go to the theater, read a book, or watch a movie, we imagine ourselves in the shoes of the protagonists, and bits of their fictional worlds may linger with us on the way home – the traffic light changing to green echoing a car chase scene with us as the super spies bringing the engine to a roar, for a moment transcending the norms of responsible adulthood. In our private lives, our therapists ask us to reenact traumatic episodes of our past, and we confide in sexual partners the scenarios that captivate and stoke our desires. In the working world, we partake in drills, dry runs, team-building, and leadership and communication exercises where we assume the roles of managers and employees or emergency patients and doctors. We work hard to be taken seriously as “doctors,” “managers,” or just “parents” in social roles we are insecure we will succeed at. And in everyday life, we “put on faces” and “play our parts” as required by the endless succession of social occasions, gatherings, and rituals until we reach the last act, our own funerals, where, for once, we only have to show up and can leave the acting to the others.

Given the universality of role-play, it is little wonder that games, those trusty little mirrors of social life, have incorporated it into their form: a snow globe version, safely packed, miniaturized, maybe a bit abstract, but strangely compelling. Starting with Dungeons and Dragons in the 1970s, role-playing games (RPGs) have turned the human practice of role-play into a contemporary leisure genre enjoyed by millions across the globe. RPGs have since spawned subgenres and subcultures of their own: from sitting around a table narrating the actions of one’s characters to scouting the woods wearing chain mail and carrying foam swords; from mourning the death of Aeris in Final Fantasy VII in front of the television screen to using a headset and text chat to a frantically lead team of 40 players in defeating the Lich King in World of Warcraft. What people call “RPGs” today range from the gigantic – online RPGs connecting millions of players, live-action role-plays played in a decommissioned warship refurbished as a
spaceship – to the minimalist: two players sitting motionless, improvising the dialogue of
a chance encounter between two rocks like a theater piece by Samuel Beckett. RPGs just
as readily provide power fantasies as they afford artistic expression, education, or social
activism.

The Intersection of Roles, Play, Games, and Media Culture

RPGs sit at the intersection of four phenomena – roles, play, games, and media culture
(Figure 1.1). They take a fundamental form of play – make-believe – and a fundamental aspect
of social reality and identity – roles – and give them the structured form of a game. They arose
from and sit at the heart of much of contemporary fandom, “geek,” and, increasingly, main-
stream media culture. To understand RPGs, their forms, origins, and social place, it is useful
to examine them through the lens of these four phenomena in turn.

RPGs as Play

RPGs involve play. Play is a behavior universally found across all human cultures and in many
animal species (Burghardt 2005; Konner 2010, 507). Play transforms and recombines other,
functional behaviors, exaggerating, varying, and rendering them incomplete so they lack their
“serious” consequences and thus their obvious instrumental or survival value. Instead, play is
performed voluntarily, intrinsically motivated, and autotelic, that is, performed “for its own
sake.” Play is facilitated by a “relaxed” field of familiar surroundings and others, with no im-
mediate pressing threats or stressors (Burghardt 2005, 68–82; Pellegrini 2009, 8–20). Notably,
transforming other behavior does not mean that play necessarily represents other behavior: In locomotor or object play, the player often just relishes exploring repetitive engagement with a movement or thing (84–86).

Symbolic play may be what sets humans apart from other animals. Humans exhibit specific forms of play otherwise only rudimentarily found in higher primates, namely, strong symbolic, as-if, or pretense play; socio-dramatic or role-play; and rule play involving explicit, pre-defined, and not spontaneously renegotiable rules (Konner 2010, 89–93). Developmental psychologists note that these forms typically occur in rough succession during a child’s development, potentially mirroring their evolutionary emergence: First comes pretense play, in which players jointly enact a script around a (nonexistent or reinterpreted) object, like “going to bed,” with a puppet and magazine as child and blanket. This evolves into role-play, where players stick to the scripts that make up a situational role (the mother, the child) and finally turns into rule play, where players fluidly reenact and reschedule existing scripts and also agree on explicit shared rules governing their actions (Oerter 1999, 93–103; Pellegrini 2009, 18–20).

Similarly, philosopher Roger Caillois (2001) fashioned a fourfold typology of play with alea (roughly, games of chance), agon (contest, rule-based games), ilinx (vertigo, locomotor-rotation play), and, finally, mimicry, where “the subject makes believe or makes others believe that he is someone other than himself” (19). Whereas developmental psychologists see rule play as a refined, more complex version of role-play, Caillois set the two in opposition: Games are “ruled or make-believe” (9, emphasis in original), and mimicry lacks “the continuous submission to imperative and precise rules” (22) that characterizes play more generally for Caillois. But Caillois’ model, first published in 1961, only considered the games of his day. Role-playing games prove it outmoded, if not wrong, because they merge role-play and rule play, “make-believe” and “precise rules,” as anyone who has browsed the hundreds of pages of rule books for a contemporary tabletop RPG can attest.

**RPGs as Roles**

RPGs involve roles, another universal human phenomenon that has been studied for over a century (see Biddle 1986; Turner 2001 for reviews). Roles are patterns of behaviors and attitudes expected from a person occupying a given social position. As such, roles are a fundamental part of the power structures and processes of a society. They also provide resources and strategies to those occupying a position (Lynch 2007). During a “restaurant visit,” for instance, we expect the person acting as “server” to do certain things like distribute menus, take orders, and care for our well-being. These expectations also provide a script for performing “waiting tables” and certain rights (like interrupting our conversation to ask whether we’d like coffee). And, if we go along with it, the server may turn their role performance into an informal conversation among friends, a curt and formal affair, or something else entirely.

Roles are fundamentally involved in people’s identities, selves, and self-concepts (Owens and Samblanet 2013; Stets and Serpe 2013). In our lives, we typically occupy and move between multiple – often conflicting – roles. Our identities are partially construed from the social roles we and others ascribe to us. Similarly, our selves and self-concepts – the thoughts, emotions, identities, and motives we attribute to ourselves as what constitutes us, and the thoughts and feelings about these selves – are formed from the experience of interacting in situational roles with others.
In RPGs, people adopt situational roles of players and are free to play with – temporarily try on, explore, experience, act out, subvert – alternative roles, identities, and selves by enacting the character of a revered healer, a megalomaniac salesperson, a brooding scientist, etc. In a sense, to inhabit a social role is to follow the social rules defining that role, some of which may be quite explicit and specify goals, progress, or failure for that role. Yet RPGs – like games in general – are played, which, as we saw, entails voluntary participation and reduced “serious” consequences. This sets RPGs apart from “real” social roles, which typically cannot be entered and left at will and whose rules are obligatory and can incur serious social consequences if broken.

**RPGs as Playing with Roles**

This also puts RPGs in the long cultural tradition of rituals, celebrations, theater, and other forms of performance where role-play (and rule play) is institutionalized to serve social functions in the adult world (Schechner 2006; Stephenson 2015) (→ Chapter 11). Consider rites of passage, weddings, funerals, and other events that transform the social world and its actors; parades, religious processions, or other official proceedings that present an ideal order of things; or happenings, sit-ins, protests, or modern theater pieces that re-present and question the actual current social order. All performances help reproduce the social and moral bonds of a group by creating strong experiences of shared emotions, moral sentiments, and belonging. Compared with them, RPGs present the interesting case in which “child’s play” is institutionalized and prolonged into adulthood but not for the “respectable” purposes of rituals or celebrations. Instead, RPGs emerged as a form of leisure and entertainment in affluent modern nation-states (Fine 1983).

**RPGs as Games**

Beyond play and roles, RPGs involve rule play or games. The systematic scholarly study of games is relatively recent. It flourished with the use of simulations and serious games in the early 1970s (Abt 1970; Crookall 2012) and intensified with the rise of digital games in the early 2000s (Aarseth 2001). Although debates about the definition of “games” are ongoing (→ Chapter 2), games are commonly seen as involving goals and rules that turn the attainment of those goals into a non-trivial challenge – e.g. overcoming a human opponent or material obstacle (Juul 2005).

This game aspect is what distinguishes RPGs from children’s spontaneous role-play or activities like improvisational theater. In RPGs, a player typically enacts a single continuous character in one stable continuous world where actions and their outcomes are structured and decided by explicit rules. Also, by merging the enactment of roles with rule systems originating in wargaming, RPGs allow players to measurably “win,” “lose,” or advance, thanks to design innovations like progress mechanics (Zagal and Altizer 2014). Through the migration of designers and players, RPGs deeply influenced the tropes and game mechanics of many other game genres (→ Chapter 18).

**RPGs as Media Culture**

RPGs grew from and sit at the heart of contemporary media culture. Beyond deep sociological ties (play, games, performance), RPGs can be traced to several immediate cultural precursors (→ Chapter 3) among “hobby” wargaming and fantastic literature. Examples that
influenced early RPGs include J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle-earth, R.E. Howard’s Hyborian Age of Conan, Fritz Leiber’s Nehwon, or the Cthulhu Mythos created by H.P. Lovecraft and his literary friends. Early RPGs not only created their settings from the liberal pastiches of Tolkien, Howard, and similar “sword and sorcery” authors: They catered to and attracted players from wargaming and science fiction and fantasy fandom and, through their popularity, helped solidify the tropes and market of the fantasy genre. This puts RPGs at the center of the modern phenomenon of “disenchanted enchantment” (Saler 2012, 12). As secularization, rationalization, and bureaucratization rid our modern lifeworld of deeper experiences of spiritual, magical, or sublime meaning and awe, fiction authors reinstated imaginary worlds full of such enchantment albeit with an ironic consciousness of their “as if” status (→ Chapter 12).

Role-play, wargaming, and fantasy literature all came together in 1974 in the shape of Dungeons & Dragons, the first tabletop RPG (TRPG), which quickly proliferated into myriad forms across cultures and media (Figure 1.2). TRPGs were played as a group sitting around a table, with players controlling and verbally describing the actions of their characters in a game world managed and described by a referee, using rule systems imported from wargames and dice to
decide the outcomes of actions (→ Chapter 4). Computer RPGs (CRPGs, → Chapter 6) translated this setup into something that could be experienced individually sitting at a computer, where the player controlled one or more characters, and the game world was rendered and controlled by the computer. As the first instantiation of multiplayer online RPGs (MORPGs, → Chapter 7), so-called multiuser dungeons (MUDs) turned CRPGs back into a group experience: Players used computer networks – then mostly university networks and the Internet predecessor ARPANET – to play in and create a shared virtual world. In live-action RPGs (larps, → Chapter 5), players embody their characters, often dressing up and physically performing (when possible) their character’s actions. TRPGs, CRPGs, MORPGs, and larps are the four most prominent of a plethora of forms, each with many subforms, cultural variations, and innovations.

Despite or because of their popularity, RPGs quickly became the subject of moral panics (→ Chapter 19). In the United States in the 1980s, TRPGs were accused of recruiting adolescent players into satanic cults and practices. Rumors spread of players who confused fiction and reality and died getting lost in underground tunnels playing larp. The 2000s saw a second panic around MORPG “addiction,” with news stories of players dying from extended play or committing crimes over virtual game items. RPGs present an example of adult pretend play that lacks the legitimacy of tradition (like carnival) or recognized cultural function (like theater). Although this is changing, playing RPGs as an adult still carries stigma, even within the fantasy and science fiction fandom (Deterding 2017).

However, RPGs are also part of the throbbing heart of fandom – a passage rite and secret language, a stigma to the outer world that signifies “true” belonging and commitment to the inner group. A core aspect of fandom is participating in a fictional world by consuming and discussing media while also extending and co-creating them. RPGs make such shared creation and inhabiting of fictional worlds their focal practice. Large parts of the global population today immerse themselves in transmedia worlds like those of Star Wars, The Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, or Game of Thrones. A significant subset of people also engage with these worlds in participatory ways: fan fiction, costume play, and more. In the age of convergence culture, fandom and its transmedia practices have gone mainstream (Jenkins 2006). Alternate and Augmented Reality Games that layer game rules and game world over everyday life are becoming the digital hope of media and advertising industries (Rose 2011). Many of the involved practices and forms were first developed in RPGs: Long before the Atlas of Middle-Earth, Discworld Companion, or Pop-Up Guide to Westeros, RPG authors and referees had

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**Box 1.1 LARP, Larp, or larp?**

While LARP as an acronym stands for live-action role-play, in recent years, “larp” is being used as a noun (and verb) by some player communities. For example, players might say “I designed this great larp” or “Let’s go larping tomorrow.” Like laser, radar, and scuba in the past, larp is in the process of turning from an acronym into its own meaningful lexical unit: a new word. We have decided to use it as such, not in all caps, throughout this book. We recognize that this may be a bit confusing when seen side by side with the other acronyms (TRPG, CRPG), but we hope you will bear with us.
to flesh out guides and maps to fictional worlds, learn to write scenarios rich with potential starting points and conflicts for emergent player action, and manage a fictional world in response to multiple players’ actions to give each a satisfying experience. This puts them at the cutting edge of contemporary transmedia authorship of franchises or alternate reality games. RPGs popularized the practice of genre-mixing, like Science fantasy (Gamma World, Shadowrun) or Weird West (Deadlands). They spawned successful novelizations, comics, board and video games, and movies (→ Chapters 9 and 21).

**Box 1.2 MORPG, MMOG, MMO or MMORPG?**

The term MMOG, or massively multi-player online game, is broadly used to refer to online games that allow hundreds, thousands, or more players simultaneously in a virtual world or environment. The term is commonly abbreviated to MMO, and then extended to MMORPG for those MMOs that are also role-playing games. For the purposes of this book, the commonly used terms MMO and MMOG are too broad, since these games are not necessarily RPGs.

Rather than using the term MMORPG we have chosen to use a new acronym: MORPG (multiplayer online RPGs). Our reasoning is that the term MMORPG is not broad enough to include all of the kinds of games we wish to refer to and discuss in the context of this book. Specifically, we want to include and acknowledge those online multiplayer RPGs that are not "massive". As discussed in Chapter 7, this includes the multiplayer online dungeons (MUDs) that served as precursors to current MMORPGs as well as other games, many of them offshoots of MUDs, that would otherwise be ignored.

**Why Study RPGs?**

Examining the RPG through the lenses of its four constituent aspects (roles, play, games, and media culture) helps us understand and put in perspective its origins and forms. It also highlights why scholars are (and should be) interested in studying them (Figure 1.3).

In terms of *play*, RPGs provide insight into adult pretense and role-play, which occur in many places besides RPGs: many board, card, and video games have moments of emergent micro-role-play. Contemporary cultural practices, like cosplay, attending Renaissance fairs, steampunk events, theme parties, or increasingly high-profile, mainstream immersive theater productions by groups like Punchdrunk (→ Chapter 11) all entail role-play. Even in day-to-day life, we often engage in daydreaming “barely games” (Davies 2009), little bouts of private role-play. Besides answering fundamental psychological and sociological questions regarding how adult pretense play works – how people create shared immersion (→ Chapter 22) – RPG literature provides great insight into designing for it.

Moving on to *roles*, RPG scholarship has developed a deep understanding of the many ways players, their identities, and selves relate to their in-game characters and avatars. This work is relevant to any game researcher and designer interested in these dimensions of gameplay as well as to sociologists and psychologists working on identity, self, and role-taking (→ Chapter 12, 13, and 23). Intimately connected to that is the rich work on *framing* in RPGs. RPG scholars have empirically and conceptually disentangled how the “magic circle” or “separateness” of
gameplay comes about – the special norms and understandings governing a gaming encounter (→ Chapter 12). This has also led them to study deviant “dark play”: how actions considered deviant become acceptable within the frame of play and how certain actions test and break the norms of play itself (→ Chapter 24). This is valuable knowledge for any study of deviance and social norms in and beyond gameplay.

Speaking of games, RPGs are an important transmedia genre of games, which has explored and refined many aspects of game design and play that designers and scholars coming from other genres can draw rich inspiration from: world-building (→ Chapter 20), the materiality of games (→ Chapter 17), and the myriad ways of organizing and sharing control over game events between referees, players, and game systems (→ Chapter 27). Many video game genres are deeply informed by RPG game mechanics, like progression systems (→ Chapter 18). Studying RPGs is essential to understanding the history of video games and informing the future of game design across genres and media.
RPG tropes not only deeply influenced games but also media culture writ large, yet this historical legacy is still underexplored (→ Chapter 9). RPGs have thriving fan subcultures of their own while also connecting and pervading science fiction and fantasy fandom more generally (→ Chapter 21). As such, RPGs are an exemplary site for studying and understanding stereotyping and discrimination in fan cultures (→ Chapter 26) or the way subcultural and adult play practices are cast as deviant in public discourse (→ Chapter 24). The virtual-real economies of MORPGs are an essential site of experimentation with new forms of labor, intellectual property, business models, and governance (→ Chapter 16). All this makes RPG research vital to understanding contemporary media culture and its economies.

Last but not least, RPGs are a popular cultural form, practice, and industry of their own. They are increasingly used as a medium of artistic expression, forming and informing the vanguard of contemporary theater, media, and performance art as well as experience design (→ Chapter 11). And for more than four decades, RPGs have been used for all kinds of serious purposes, including therapy (→ Chapter 13), education (→ Chapter 15), business planning and simulation (→ Chapter 16), or activism.

A (Brief) History of RPG Research

The first academic studies of adult role-play arose around the first wave of educational simulation and gaming, beginning in the late 1960s and presented at venues like the International Simulation and Gaming Association (ISAGA) conference or in the journal Simulation & Gaming (Abt 1970; Crookall 2012). A significant milestone of role-playing games research was sociologist Gary Alan Fine’s Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds (1983). His ethnography of RPG player groups, published when Dungeons & Dragons first gained mainstream attention, delivered an influential analysis of RPGs as “an urban leisure subculture”; the cultural context of RPGs, like fantasy literature; and the interplay of players’ selves and identities, their everyday lifeworlds, and the fictional characters and worlds they create. Fine’s work has been deeply influential for RPG scholars in performance studies (→ Chapter 11) and sociology (→ Chapter 12).

As noted, the 1980s were also witness to a moral panic, as studied by communication researchers (→ Chapter 19). Journalists, religious spokespersons, and other moral entrepreneurs warned of the harmful effects of RPG play on youth, which triggered a counterresponse of researchers, who, over the course of the 1980s and early 1990s, questioned the negative effects of RPGs and, in turn, highlighted a number of potential positive therapeutic, educational, pro-social, and cognitive effects of playing them. A firebrand in this debate was Patricia Pulling’s (1989) book The Devil’s Web: Who Is Stalking Your Children for Satan?, linking D&D to satanic rituals, insanity, and perversion, and author and game designer Michael A. Stackpole’s Pulling Report (1990), a meticulous deconstruction of Pulling’s book and its argument. Most other general audience books from this time period consist of introductions to the hobby of role-playing (e.g. Albrecht and Stafford 1984; Butterfield, Parker, and Honigmann 1982; Livingstone 1982), guides for improving RPG play (e.g. Plamondon 1982; Gygax 1987), or bibliographies (Schick 1991).

Like much fandom research, RPG scholarship is characterized by intense para-academic scholarship and aca-fandom: early on, RPG designers and fans developed thoughtful and theoretical discourse of their own, and many university academics studying RPGs either started out as fan-scholars “professionalizing” their work or are self-identifying RPG fans who turned their leisure time activity into their research subject (see Hills 2002; Mason 2004) (→ Chapter 10).
Already in the 1980s, designers and players began reflecting on the design and play of RPGs at conventions as well as in magazines and fanzines like *Dragon, Different Worlds, Alarums & Excursions*, or the short-lived *Interactive Fantasy*. This fan discourse flourished with the rise of the Internet and online communication tools in the 1990s on Usenet discussion groups like rec.games.frp.advocacy or the online discussion board *The Forge*. Another focal point of fan theorizing and aca-fandom has been the Knutepunkt conventions, an annual gathering of the Nordic larp community. Knutepunkt has published proceedings and companion books since 2001 and is a source of much contemporary larp scholarship and design literature as well as a culture of manifestos advancing larp as an artistic medium by articulating particular aesthetic visions (→ Chapter 5). Today, RPG scholars, designers, and players actively promote the exchange between fandom and academia through panels and publications at events like Wyrd-Con, Intercon, Living Games, or NecronomiCon. Beyond general theories and models of RPGs and their design, this fan scholarship has shaped debates about play and design styles and the cultural role of RPGs (→ Chapter 10).

The rise of the Internet in the 1990s also spurred research that brought CRPGs and MORPGs to greater attention: Sherry Turkle’s *Life on the Screen* (1995) proposed that the multiple “windows” and worlds of the Internet, such as MUDs, fostered new, fluid multiple forms of identity. Janet Murray’s *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997) examined networked computing, including MORPGs, to analyze the forms, authorship, and aesthetic experience of digital interactive environments as a new medium of storytelling. And MUD pioneer Richard Bartle (1997) published “Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: players Who Suit MUDs” in the inaugural issue of the now-defunct *Journal of Virtual Environments*, then named *Journal of MUD*. Bartle’s paper spearheaded research around player personalities and motives in RPGs (→ Chapter 10).

The 2000s saw game studies flourish as an interdisciplinary field, initially focused on digital games, with important waymarks like the founding of the journal *Game Studies* in 2001 and the *Digital Games Research Association* (DiGRA) in 2003. RPG research thrived with the rise of game studies in general, and RPG scholars have chiefly gathered within this community. Worthy of note is Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin’s book trilogy *First Person* (2004), *Second Person* (2007), and *Third Person* (2009). These collections of essays, responses, case studies, design reflections, and games bridged new media and game scholarship, circling around role-play, performance, storytelling, and the authorship of fictional worlds and “vast narratives” found in RPGs.

In the 2000s, scholars in fields such as sociology (→ Chapter 12), communication research and media studies (→ Chapter 19), and human-computer interaction followed Fine with ethnographies of RPG communities and their community dynamics, framing processes, or negotiations of the boundaries of work and play. They were joined by scholars who explored the psychology of player motives, immersion, player-avatar relations, and gaming addiction (→ Chapter 13). These strands coalesced in the mid- to late 2000s when the success of MORPGs, particularly *World of Warcraft* (WoW), put MORPGs on the center stage of game studies for several years (e.g. Corneliussen and Retberg 2008). Economists studied MORPGs (→ Chapter 16), interested in their virtual economies and interactions with real-world economics. Simultaneously, education researchers in communities like the Games+Learning+Society conference began exploring the use and design of edu-larps, “massively multiplayer classrooms” fashioned in the style of an MORPG, and the educational potential of RPGs more generally (→ Chapter 15). Literary and media scholars studied the forms of textuality, authorship, and narrative in RPGs (→ Chapter 14). Starting with Daniel Mackay (2001), researchers have begun to use theater and
performance studies as a lens for RPG aesthetics, design, and play (→ Chapter 11). Design researchers became interested in describing the particular design patterns and practices of RPGs (→ Chapter 18). Scholars informed by science and technology studies (→ Chapter 17) have begun to disentangle the many roles of material artifacts in RPGs. And true to the intertwining of RPG fandom and scholarship, independent authors like Jon Peterson (2012) and Shannon Appelcline (2015) have produced substantial historiographies of the emergence and evolution of TRPGs and RPGs more generally.

Today, RPG Studies is a small but established and lively scholarly community with a diverse and growing body of organizations, conferences, journals, and monographs, including a DiGRA special interest group on role-playing (formed in 2008); the International Journal of Roleplaying, inaugurated in 2009 (Drachen 2009); and, starting in 2014, the semi-regular summit of RPG Studies, hosted as part of the general DiGRA conference. RPG Studies also benefits from earlier work by fans and researchers in other fields (Figure 1.4).

**FIGURE 1.4** Disciplines of RPG Studies.
Purpose and Plan of This Book

Despite this lively community and a rich body of knowledge created over the past four decades, RPG Studies today faces three challenges.

First, while fans, designers, aca-fans, and scholars have developed theories, concepts, and tools around phenomena that hold great potential beyond RPGs, little of this work is known outside RPG circles. It is also often scattered across fan and academic venues, making it hard to find and access.

Second, following the diversity of RPG forms and local cultures, RPG research itself has remained somewhat siloed. MORPG research doesn’t necessarily build upon TRPG research (and vice versa). CRPG scholars examine different questions and make different assumptions of RPGs than larp scholars. What is true for US-American CRPGs and MORPGs might not be true for Korean ones. The list goes on. Collecting, comparing, and contrasting findings across forms, cultures, and disciplines not only enriches our understanding of each individual phenomenon: it is essential for constructing a holistic study of RPGs as an interdiscipline. Yet RPG scholars currently have no easy way of reviewing the state of research on other RPG forms, cultures, or disciplines.

Third, the disciplines that have engaged with RPGs still have much to offer: researchers have barely scratched the surface when it comes to e.g. applying sociological role theory to RPGs, exploring the experience of playing RPGs through the lens of performance studies, or unpacking the design process of RPGs with the concepts and methods of design research. Yet again, there are currently no easy entry points to relevant literatures across disciplines for interested scholars.

The purpose of this book is thus to serve as an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and transmedia synthesis of the state of the art of RPG research. Its goals are to lay the transmedia foundations for RPG Studies as a field while also making RPG research concepts and findings easily accessible for other interested parties. We wrote the book with three main audiences in mind: advanced students in game studies and other fields who want to study RPGs; scholars in game studies and other fields who want to do research on RPGs and need a quick reference book to get up to speed or look up key terms; and fans and professionals using RPGs for serious purposes, who want to deepen their understanding of their pastime or make the case for RPGs.

As such, this book is designed as a hybrid textbook and handbook: each chapter provides a synthesis of the current state of research on a core perspective or aspect of RPG Studies. That said, each chapter is written without expectations of prior knowledge and includes definitions of key terms and recommended further readings. A handy glossary at the beginning of the book points to definitions of key RPG terms.

The book is organized in four parts, which can be seen as concentric rings (Figure 1.5): at the center – Chapter 2 – sits the introduction to and definition of RPGs. For novices unfamiliar with one or several RPG forms, it offers grounding narrative descriptions and exemplary vignettes of each. It then presents philosophical and linguistic considerations regarding what kind of definition is appropriate for RPGs. Rather than searching for one “true” definition of the “essence” of RPGs, the chapter advocates a pluralism of disciplinary perspectives and empirical attention to the variety of things we call “role-playing games.”

Following this advice, the chapters in Part II empirically describe the historical emergence, evolution, and cultural variety and impact of the main contemporary forms of RPGs: from their precursors and parallels (Chapter 3) to TRPGs (Chapter 4), larps (Chapter 5),
CRPGs (Chapter 6), MORPGs (Chapter 7), and the emergent online freeform (Chapter 8) to the impact of RPGs on media culture (Chapter 9). Although there are other forms of RPGs, we focus on those that have been significantly influential due to their popularity, their historical influence, and/or the research attention they received.

Part III includes disciplinary perspectives on RPGs and constitutes the outer ring of our conceptual map: performance studies (Chapter 11), sociology (Chapter 12), psychology (Chapter 13), literary studies (Chapter 14), education (Chapter 15), economics (Chapter 16), science and technology studies (Chapter 17), game design (Chapter 19), and communication research (Chapter 20). Given its prominent role in the formation of RPG Studies, fan theorizing receives its own extended treatment (Chapter 10). Each of these chapters gives a short introduction to the field, explains how RPGs are seen in that field (as performances, markets, texts, etc.), describes what makes them interesting to that field, and surveys existing disciplinary work on RPGs. Any additional number of disciplines could have been brought to bear upon
RPGs – art history or moral philosophy come readily to mind. But we highlight those disciplines that have already produced significant work on RPGs.

Sitting at the intersection of forms and disciplinary perspectives are interdisciplinary issues, collected in Part IV. These chapters address fundamental aspects of RPGs that have been studied across multiple disciplines and are of relevance to scholars in and beyond game research: how people author collective fictional worlds (Chapter 20); RPGs as a subculture and its place within media fandom (Chapter 21); how immersion in role–play works (Chapter 22); how players relate to their characters and avatars (Chapter 23); transgression in and through RPGs (Chapter 24); erotic and sexual role–play (Chapter 25); discrimination and representation in RPGs (Chapter 26); and, finally, how power over the fictional world and its events is distributed between players, referees, and artifacts (Chapter 27).

These last chapters reflect the emerging body of knowledge of RPG Studies as an interdisciplinary. If RPGs are characterized by a multitude of forms and cultures at the intersection of roles, play, games, and media culture, the future of RPG Studies is likewise thousand-faced – and an exciting call to adventure.

Summary

RPGs sit at the intersection of four phenomena – play, roles, games, and media culture. They foreground a particular form and constitutive aspect of play: shared pretense or make–believe. Through pretense play, they allow players to temporarily step out of their existing social roles and try on and explore alternative roles. This makes RPGs relevant to e.g. sociologists or psychologists interested in adult pretense or basic processes of situational sensemaking and role–taking. As rule–play or games, they are structured by formal rules and goals and a rich source of influential and inspiring game design. As media culture, they sit at the heart of modern disenchanted enchantment and contemporary media fandom and prefigure increasingly mainstream media phenomena like transmedia storytelling or virtual–real economics. Finally, RPGs are a popular cultural form, practice, industry, and artistic medium, forming and informing the vanguard of contemporary theater, media, and performance art as well as experience design. And for more than four decades, they have been used for purposes other than entertainment, like therapy, training, or activism.

However, RPG Studies as a field faces three challenges. First, while RPG fans, designers, and scholars have created knowledge with great potential beyond RPGs, little of this work is known outside RPG circles. Second, due to the diversity of RPG forms and local cultures, RPG research itself has remained dispersed. Third, a lot of existing RPG research hasn’t been fully tapped or connected with the basic knowledge of relevant disciplines. To address these challenges, this book provides an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and transmedia synthesis of the state of the art of RPG research. It seeks to lay the transmedia foundations for RPG Studies as a field while also making RPG Studies concepts and findings easily accessible for other interested scholars.

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Note

1 The website rpgstudies.net provides an excellent bibliography of the moral panic.

References


PART I
Definitions
For some, defining “game” is a hopeless task (Parlett 1999). For others, the very idea that one could capture the meaning of a word in a list of defining features is flawed because language and meaning-making do not work that way (Wittgenstein 1963). Still, we use the word “game” every day and, generally, understand each other when we do so. Among game scholars and professionals, we debate “game” definitions with fervor and sophistication. And yet, while we usually agree with some scholars and professionals on some aspects, we never seem to agree with everyone on all. At most, we agree on what we disagree about – that is, what disagreements we consider important for understanding and defining “games” (Stenros 2014).

What is true for “games” holds doubly for “role-playing games”. In fact, role-playing games (RPGs) are maybe the most contentious game phenomenon: the exception, the outlier, the not-quite-a-game game. In their foundational game studies text Rules of Play, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004, 80) acknowledge that their definition of a game (“a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome”) considers RPGs a borderline case. While RPGs are widely recognized for their influence on many other games (e.g. Tychsen 2006), they are apparently not game enough because they lack a quantifiable outcome (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 81). Jesper Juul, author of another influential game definition, likewise considers tabletop RPGs (TRPGs) a borderline case: they are “not normal games because with a human game master, their rules are not fixed beyond discussion” (Juul 2003).

To make matters worse, “role-playing games” refers to a plurality of forms across media – there are TRPGs, computer RPGs (CRPGs), (massively) multiplayer online RPGs (MORPGs), live-action RPGs (larps), and more. Do these different forms have “enough” in common to all be called “role-playing games”? Furthermore, there are many different communities discussing the definition of “role-playing games”, each with different practical ends: game designers and publishers use the word in game manuals, sales venues, trade publications and conference talks to set consumer expectations and discuss design issues; fans discuss RPGs in fan media; and scholars discuss RPGs in the contexts of research and teaching. RPG fans and designers have long observed the existence of quite different styles and ends of playing RPGs – focusing e.g. on storytelling, playing a role, simulating a world, or achieving goals and progress.
according to rules (→ Chapter 10). This openness to divergent preferences and enactments seems characteristic for RPGs. For instance, different cultural regions have developed distinct flavors like “Nordic larp” (Stenros and Montola 2010). Existing forms are constantly remade and redefined by avant-garde movements like “indie” TRPGs. What’s more, game research is itself notoriously multidisciplinary, looking at games – and RPGs – through many different theoretical and disciplinary lenses (Deterding 2016).

Box 2.1 Sample Definitions of Role-Play

“A role-playing situation is here defined as a situation in which an individual is explicitly asked to take a role not normally his own, or [of] his own in a setting not normal for the enactment of the role” (Mann 1956, 227).

Role-play is “not a single well-defined activity but a whole species of activities grouped under a convenient name. At one end of the spectrum is the intensive ‘acting out’ of personal emotions. … At the other … is the situation where ‘taking the part’ is closer to the concept of advocacy” (van Ments 1981, 27–28).

Role-play is “a media, where a person, through immersion into a role and the world of this role, is given the opportunity to participate in and interact with the contents of this world” (Henriksen 2002, 44).

“roleplaying is the art of experience, and making a roleplaying game means creating experiences” (Pettersson 2006, 101).

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. […]

I also present four optional, additional rules that often complement the first three rules. […]

i Typically the decisive power to define the decisions made by a free-willed character construct is given to the player of the character.

ii The decisive defining power that is not restricted by character constructs is often given to people participating in referee roles.

iii The defining process is often governed by a quantitative game ruleset.

iv The information regarding the state of the game world is often disseminated hierarchically, in a fashion corresponding with the power structure of the game. […]

Additionally, these three endogenous rules […] differentiate certain forms of role-playing from each other:

1 In tabletop role-playing the game world is defined predominantly in verbal communication.
Different forms, communities, design and play styles, cultures, historical moments, disciplines: all these contribute to the difficulty of defining “role-playing games”. Yet we believe that a crucial reason why people haven’t been able to settle on a shared definition is the – largely unreflected – way in which they have tried to do so. For, as linguistics and philosophy tell us, there are many ways of defining things: some outmoded, many only appropriate for specific purposes, and all laden with consequential assumptions, decisions, and implicit values.

To clarify the definitions of “role-playing games”, we therefore first survey the different forms and misunderstandings of definitions. We argue that how scholars have traditionally tried to define “role-playing games” – as a presumed unchanging “essence” consisting of a set of shared features – is at odds with what we know about language and meaning-making and with the kind of phenomena “role-playing games” refer to. We present an alternative pragmatist position that allows for a plurality of definitions as explicit (disciplinary) perspectives and tools. We then proceed with what we identify as a useful task for disciplinary-spanning work: clarifying discourse by empirically describing who is using the word “role-playing games” how. We do so by discussing four commonly distinguished forms of RPGs: tabletop, live-action, single-player computer, and multiplayer online. For each, we tease out:

• how they have been defined by scholars, designers, and fans, as these are the three main social groups producing and circulating definitions;
• what empirical phenomena these groups have pointed at with the word “role-playing games” and what characteristics reoccur across these phenomena;
• where these characteristics historically originated; and
• how they evolved over time and what kind of variation we see.

Finally, we tease out common characteristics across forms of RPGs as well as characteristics of the discourse about them. We argue that joint ancestry in early TRPGs can explain at least part of the shared characteristics of the things people call “role-playing games”. The divergence of multiple forms of RPGs, in turn, stems from the affordances of their socio-material assemblages: what form of play they make easy or hard to accomplish. Because RPGs are social, not natural entities and relatively underdetermined, they show such a wide and growing diversity of forms and play styles.
Box 2.2 Sample Definitions of RPGs

RPGs are “any game which allows a number of players to assume the roles of imaginary characters and operate with some degree of freedom in an imaginary environment” (Lortz 1979, 36, as cited in Fine 1983, 6).

“role-playing has a lot more in common with novels that it does with games. […] A role-playing game is, in fact, an improvised novel in which all the participants serve as authors” (Swan 1990, 3).

“A role-playing game must consist of quantified interactive storytelling”: “Character abilities and action resolution must be defined by numbers or quantities that can be manipulated following certain rules”; “player decision-making drives the story forward”; “It is a story with a group for an author, a story that grows organically and is acted out, is experienced by its creators” (Schick 1991, 10–11).

An RPG “Allows people to become simultaneously both the artists who create a story and the audience who watches the story unfold. This story has the potential to become a personal myth, shaped to meet the needs of its creators” (Padol 1996). An RPG is “an episodic and participatory story-creation system that includes a set of quantified rules that assist a group of players and a gamemaster in determining how their fictional characters’ spontaneous interactions are resolved. These performed interactions between the players’ and the gamemaster’s characters take place during individual sessions that, together, form episodes or adventures in the lives of the fictional characters” (Mackay 2001, 4–5).

An RPG is “what is created in the interaction between players or between player(s) and gamemaster(s) within a specified diegetic framework. […] [A] roleplaying game requires four things, a gamemaster, a player, interaction, and a diegetic framework” (Stenros and Hakkarainen 2003, 61).

“1 Game World: A role-playing game is a game set in an imaginary world. Players are free to choose how to explore the game world, in terms of the path through the world they take, and may revisit areas previously explored. The amount of the game world potentially available for exploration is typically large.
2 Participants: The participants in the games are divided between players, who control individual characters, and referees (who may be represented in software for digital examples) who control the remainder of the game world beyond the player characters. Players affect the evolution of the game world through the actions of their characters.
3 Characters: The characters controlled by players may be defined in quantitative and/or qualitative terms and are defined individuals in the game world, not identified only as roles or functions. These characters can potentially develop, for example in terms of skills, abilities or personality, the form of this development is at least partially under player control and the game is capable of reacting to the changes.
4 Game master: At least one, but not all, of the participants has control over the game world beyond a single character. A term commonly used for this function is “game master”,

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although many others exist. The balance of power between players and game masters, and the assignment of these roles, can vary, even within the playing of a single game session. Part of the game master function is typically to adjudicate on the rules of the game, although these rules need not be quantitative in any way or rely on any form of random resolution.

5 Interaction: Players have a wide range of configurative options for interacting with the game world through their characters, usually including at least combat, dialogue and object interaction. While the range of options is wide, many are handled in a very abstract fashion. The mode of engagement between player and game can shift relatively freely between configurative and [interpretive].

6 Narrative: Role-playing games portray some sequence of events within the game world, which gives the game a narrative element. However, given the configurative nature of the players’ involvement, these elements cannot be termed narrative according to traditional narrative theory” (Hitchens and Drachen 2009, 16).

“1 Game World: There is a game world, which is defined at least partially in the act of role-playing. This game world is at least partially separate from the [player’s] ordinary life, and exists within a magic circle of play.

2 Participants: There [is] more than one participant, which may include computers.

3 Shared Narrative Power: More than one player can alter the narrative, or it is not role-playing, but storytelling. Shared narrative power implies narrative.

4 Interaction: There are varying modes of interaction with the game world. Conventions of play influence these forms of interaction, limiting the scope (What can I change in the game world?) and modes (How can I change it?) of interaction” (Arjoranta 2011, 14).

“An RPG is a game, not a game system or product, but a game experience that a player plays, in which the player portrays a character in a setting. Each player’s portrayal of their character must include three components: immersion, experiencing the character; acting, performing in character; and gaming, obeying and manipulating rules and goals in character” (Simkins 2015, 56).

**Defining “Definitions”**

Definitions are usually seen to state the reference and meaning of a word or concept, to specify its extension and intension (Baumann 2002). Extension is the set of phenomena a word refers to – e.g. “game” refers to all the actual games that exist. Intension is the meaning of the word stated as a set of properties all and only instances of that essence share – e.g. what is the “heart of gameness” (Juul 2003) that makes all games games? What list of properties allows us to tell whether something counts as a game?

Definitions in game studies usually align with this tradition, taking the form “X is a Y with the properties Z1, Z2, ..., Zn” – e.g. “a game [X] is a system [Y] in which players [Z1] engage in an artificial conflict [Z2], defined by rules [Z3], that results in a quantifiable outcome [Z4]” (Salen and Zimmerman 2004). This classical conception of definitions – dating to Aristotle and Plato – is sometimes called a genus-differentia definition because it defines X as a specific kind
of a larger category or genus (here: a system) that is distinct from other kinds in this category by some differentiating properties or differentia (here: players, artificial conflict, etc.) (Margolis and Laurence 2014; Gupta 2015). Although intuitive, there is significant evidence in psychology and linguistics that concepts and words do not work as the classical conception suggests (Baumann 2002; Margolis and Laurence 2014).

Scholars have proposed numerous alternatives (see Margolis and Laurence 1999 for a collection). Ludwig Wittgenstein (1963), for instance, held that there is no set of necessary and sufficient properties shared by all and only those phenomena people call “games”. This was not a statement specific to games. Rather, Wittgenstein used games as an example for a general argument about language and meaning. Wittgenstein’s family resemblance model argues that each thing a word refers to shares many properties with other things that word refers to, but no such properties are shared by all and only those things. Given this plurality of theories of concepts and their meanings, each with varying support, any scholarly definition should, with reason, be able to state which theory it subscribes to and why. Yet most current definitions of RPGs don’t.

This brings us to a second unspoken assumption: what kind of definition are we making? To mention common distinctions (Gupta 2015), there are stipulative definitions used to introduce a new concept (e.g. “zlorch is a unit of X”) or clarify the use of an existing one – e.g. “I here use ‘game’ to mean any conflict between two or more parties”. Nominal definitions try to capture the meaning and use of a word (as done in a dictionary), and real definitions try to capture the properties of the phenomena the word refers to. Closely linked to that is the anthropological distinction between emic and etic accounts (Headland, Pike, and Harris 1990): emic accounts state the views, concepts, and understandings of a given culture, such as “these people call these things RPGs”. Etic accounts present views and concepts of the observing researcher, such as “they call these ‘RPG’s, but I call them ‘socially-focused play experiences’”. So, when examining existing definitions, it is important to understand what kind of definition is being proposed and what purpose it is attempting to serve.

A third assumption: of what “stuff” are concepts, words, and the things they refer to made? The two most relevant considerations for our purposes are whether RPGs are natural or social entities and, connected to that, whether they are natural kinds. Natural entities are things described by the natural sciences, like bees, quasars, or magnetism, that are seen to exist independent of human action and meaning-making. Natural kinds are groupings of natural entities that reflect the structure of the natural world rather than the structure of human interests, actions, and understandings (Bird and Tobin 2015). In contrast, social entities, like divorce, crime, or money, are brought into existence by human action and meaning-making (e.g. Searle 1995). For instance, chemical elements like gold and silver are natural kinds that show the same observable properties in every context, whereas what counts as a “precious metal” and what can be done with it depends on local social contexts of human action and meaning.

This doesn’t mean that social entities are “less real” or “less sturdy” than natural entities. Just as chemistry describes the chemical processes through which hydrogen and oxygen combine to produce water, the social sciences describe the social processes – how people act, talk, and shape their material environment – that produce the sturdy entities we call “government”, “money”, or “crime” (Hacking 1999). Because these entities are made of social processes, scientific description can affect the entities described: a psychologist defining a behavior as “mental illness” and classifying someone as “having” that illness affects how we understand and treat that person. With natural kinds, whether something belongs to that kind can be settled empirically. With social categories, whether something belongs to it is determined by the agreement
of that society’s actors. A social category is its practical use (Bowker and Star 2000). As a result, social entities exhibit historical change and cultural variation: Swedish and Japanese people may have different opinions on what is “embarrassing”; these opinions may also differ from those of their ancestors from 100 years ago.

The point is that some game definitions imply that “games” are a natural kind, while a number of game scholars have recently argued that games are social (or socio-material) entities (Montola 2012; Stenros 2015). Arguably, RPGs foreground this social constitution of games. In TRPGs and larp, it is readily apparent that people talk and act a given game and game world into being – when people stop enacting it, the game ceases to exist. In contrast, board games continue to exist as physical objects that people can point to and call “games” even when the game is not being played. Defining games as social entities implies that they are subject to historical change and cultural difference. Thus, game definitions can only tease out “what games are” for a given social group at a given point in time. It also means that we have to specify what social entity they are. The word “role-playing games”, like “games”, is used to denote both objects and activities (Hitchens and Drachen 2009). There has been an analogous split between definitions of role-play and definitions of role-playing games (ibid.).

Any definition is always an abstraction: the map, not the territory. As such, it foregrounds certain aspects as relevant and ignores or de-emphasizes others. What is considered relevant is always informed by some human concern. As Chris Bateman (2015) pointed out with regard to game definitions, “every definition marks out some subset of phenomena as being of specific interest to its topic and thus involves some kind of value judgment”. This leads to another unspoken assumption of most definitions: from what (disciplinary) perspective are we looking at the phenomenon in question?

Now, to some extent, academic disciplines are constituted by what they consider worthy of concern. This concern informs what their theories look like, how the world appears to them and, consequently, what ends up being the starting term or genus of their definitions. An economist is concerned with how goods and services are produced, distributed, and consumed. So, when asked to define “role-playing games”, she might state, “It is a good, specifically, an entertainment/hedonic/experiential good with the properties x, y, z” or “it is an economy, specifically a virtual economy” (Chapter 16). To an educational researcher – concerned with human learning – RPGs would appear (and be defined) as a specific site or form of learning (Chapter 15). The fact that current popular game definitions (e.g. Juul 2003; Salen and Zimmerman 2004) present “games” as systems reflects the concerns and preconceptions of their authors, namely, design, systems theory, and formal literary studies. Similarly, Thomas Malaby’s suggestion (2007) that we understand “games” as processes, practice, or cultural domains reflects his anthropological concerns and preconceptions.

We can also consider definitions without a basis in the constructs of an existing discipline. RPG definitions using everyday language – in rule books, fan discourse, or academic texts – typically cast RPGs as an analogy to or deviation from an existing cultural form: RPGs are a form of play/fiction/game/storytelling/drama/simulation/art/literature/etc. (see Simkins 2015 for an instructive example). This is practical as it provides an immediate, rich mental model to work from: “It’s like improv theater, only you sit at a table and describe what your character does” immediately conjures a mental image with rich inferences. However, like disciplinary perspectives, it necessarily reduces the complexity of the phenomenon in some way and embodies what Bateman (2015) called “implicit game aesthetics” and what fan theorists called “creative agenda” (Edwards 2004): RPGs can be realized in distinct styles or desired
experiences – e.g. gamism or playing a rule-based game to win, dramatism or theatrically embodying and enacting a character, narrativism or telling an interesting story together, or simulationism or creating a realistic simulation of a world. Thus, to define RPGs as “an act of shared story-creation” implies a normative value judgment that “good” or “real” RPGs emphasize storytelling over e.g. gaming or dramatic role enactment.

These implicit aesthetics may be why definitional debates quickly become contentious and are hard to resolve: they necessarily entail abstractive reductions and value judgments. As individuals, we have usually been socialized into some forms and styles of RPGs earlier and/or more thoroughly than into others and have developed personal aesthetic preferences. Hence, the reference set our intuition draws upon to check whether a given definition “makes sense” or not, whether it captures every feature we “feel” is important, and whether it includes/excludes everything we “feel” should be included/excluded, is necessarily partial and biased towards that personal set of experience and taste.

We point this all out to reiterate that defining something entails decisions regarding importance (i.e. a value judgment regarding what is worthy of attention), some (theoretical) language, and thus some reductive translation of the defined phenomenon. To summarize, defining something implies

- *semiotics* – a theory of how concepts and meaning-making work and how they hang together with reality, knowledge, and words;
- *a type of definition* – a specific way of defining something;
- *an ontology* – a theory of what being is and what stuff reality is made of; and
- *a perspective and language* – a focus on some phenomena as worthy of concern and some (conceptual) language appropriate for articulating them.

So, how can we construct an *interdisciplinary* definition of “role-playing games”? One strategy is to devise a *transdisciplinary* grand unified theory that can articulate the concerns of any individual discipline (Deterding 2016). Yet no such grand theory has been forthcoming in game research. A second strategy – which we adopt here – is to allow a *pluralist dialogue* of human concerns and disciplinary perspectives. Instead of defining “what ‘role-playing games’ are”, we ask, “What useful questions can be phrased, what helpful things are observable if we see role-playing games as <insert disciplinary perspective X here>?” This move from “is” to “as” allows for multiple perspectives without forsaking rigor. It demands that every perspective explicitly articulate the (theoretical, semiotic, ontological) stance from where it speaks, that it argue effectively why this stance is productive for answering its concerns, and that it maintain rigor within its own stance. To enable this pluralist dialogue, the chapters in Section III (Chapters 10–19) each articulate a perspective on RPGs from a discipline that has concerned itself with them in some way.

Our pluralist strategy also leaves space for joint foundational work that clarifies, empirically, what we talk about when we talk about “role-playing games”. True to our own demands, we note that this strategy is *epistemologically pragmatist*: it views scientific disciplines, theories, concepts, and definitions as tools for solving human problems and measures their validity by their practical consequences (Haack 2004). It acknowledges that other stances are possible and possibly useful. *Ontologically*, we assume that the phenomena called “role-playing games” (like words or science) are human creations and therefore at least partially constituted by joint action, talk, and shaping of material artifacts: “Role-playing games”
is a social, not natural entity and thus not a natural kind. Semiotically, we subscribe to the pragmatist notion of meaning as use settled by a language community within a shared life-world. We also state properties frequently reoccurring across definitions and phenomena people have called “role-playing games” because all current nonclassical theories of concepts employ them in some central way. In short, our goal is to provide an empirical transmedia explication of how the word “role-playing games” has been defined and what phenomena it has been used to refer to.

Forms of RPGs

When scholars, designers, and fans use the words “role-playing games”, they typically don’t speak about all phenomena called “role-playing games” but usually refer to one of several clusters of phenomena, which we here call forms (Dormans 2006; Hitchens and Drachen 2009). In this book, we focus on four prominent forms: tabletop, live-action, single-player computer, and multiplayer online RPGs.

TRPGs, usually played by a group sitting around a table, are arguably the common ancestor of all forms. Players typically each create and then control a fictional character within a shared fictional game world, maintaining character information (possessions, specific abilities, etc.) on a piece of paper commonly called a character sheet. Player characters’ abilities are generally quantified (e.g. strength is 15, driving skill is 12). One special player – called the referee, game master, judge, dungeon master, or something similar – is the arbiter and manager of the game. The referee enforces the rules of the game, enacts the fictional world by telling the players what their characters perceive and what the non-player characters (NPCs) do. Players verbally describe what they want their characters to do, and the referee tells them the results of those actions – typically using a combination of improvisation and the game’s rules, where dice are often used to determine the outcome of certain actions.

Box 2.3 Essential Terminology

**Campaign:** In TRPGs, this refers to a series of adventures with a cast of recurring characters (player and non-player) played over multiple game sessions. Campaigns can be open-ended, continuing for as long as the players are interested in participating. In the context of CRPGs, a campaign can refer to the entire storyline of the game (e.g. “campaign mode”).

**Character Sheet:** A piece of paper commonly used in TRPGs that serves as a written record of the status and state of a character in the game. This would normally include their statistics and attributes, skills, inventory of equipment, current state of health, name, and so on.

**DX:** One X-sided die. So, D8 means an eight-sided die; D6, six-sided; D20, 20-sided; etc. If preceded by a number, it specifies how many dice need to be rolled: 3D6 would mean roll three six-sided dice.

**Game Master (GM):** In TRPGs, the person who organizes and manages the game, plays the role of all NPCs, and is responsible for everything except the actions taken by the player
characters. This includes describing everything the player characters experience (see, hear, etc.). Common synonyms include dungeon master (DM), referee, director, and storyteller.

**In-Character (IC):** Communications by a player that are understood as being said/communicated by the character rather than the player.

**Non-player Character (NPC):** All characters in the game world that are not directly controlled by a player. They may be controlled by a game master (TRPGs), an actor (larp), or by computer software (CRPGs and MORPGs).

**Out-of-Character (OOC):** Things a player says or does that are not being said or done by their character. Players sometimes explicitly signal which actions or utterances are OOC, although it is also common for them to be understood as such based on their context.

**Party:** Refers to a team or group of characters, generally PCs, who collaborate or work together (e.g. “The Fellowship of the Ring” in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*). In the context of CRPGs, it is common for a single player to control all of the characters in the party. In MORPGs, there are sometimes in-game benefits from player characters forming a party.

**Player Character (PC):** A character in a game that is directly controlled by a player. This term is usually applied across all forms of RPGs.

From this, perhaps the easiest way to describe larp is to imagine a TRPG where players embody and act out their characters’ actions rather than verbally describing them. As in TRPGs, not all participants are players; some might be referees, while others may play the parts of NPCs – “supporting roles” who receive instructions and information from the referees to guide the flow of events. Rules are still used to govern the success of in-game actions, though they are often simpler and more embodied than those of TRPGs. For example, they might use versions of rock-paper-scissors or rules of thumb, like “your character can do what you can do” to decide the outcome of uncertain actions.

CRPGs can be described as TRPGs that are played alone on a computer: one player controls all player characters, and the computer acts as the referee, displaying the game world through monitor and speakers. Their rules are often similar to those in tabletop games, though many CRPGs involve real-time play, testing the player’s reflexes. CRPGs are arguably distinguishable from tabletop games in that they enable easy single-player play; emphasize storylines and rules, which can become much more complex and involved as they are maintained by the computer; and usually don’t afford role-playing in the sense of dramatically empathizing, embodying, and acting out a character (Hitchens and Drachen 2009).

MORPGs can be thought of as tabletop games in which players log in to a computer who handles all of the usual referee responsibilities. Conversely, they could be considered multiplayer CRPGs in which players play together in a shared world online, each controlling only one character. In MORPGs, the fictional game world is persistent: it continues to exist and change, even when (individual) players are not logged in. MORPGs also often allow for the coexistence of a massive numbers of players, in which cases they are usually called massively MORPGs (MMORPGs). As with CRPGs, there is usually an emphasis on rules and systems, often borrowed from TRPGs, rather than on the role-playing.
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Again, with “forms”, we don’t mean natural kinds: they are distinctions people make in and through talk, action, and shaping of material artifacts. Consequently, different people distinguish and list different forms. Michael Hitchens and Anders Drachen (2009), for instance, list freeform, system-less, and pervasive as additional forms. In the present book, Chapter 8 describes online freeform as another emerging RPG form. We highlight these four because their distinct reality is widely acknowledged by scholars, designers, and fans; they have had significant cultural impact through their historical roles and sizes of player audience; each has sparked its own definitional debates; and formal etic analyses suggest that the phenomena subsumed under each of these labels indeed share characteristics that differ from those bunched under the other labels (e.g. Dormans 2006; Hitchens and Drachen 2009). Obviously, there are variations, exceptions, and debates within each form: is a TRPG with no rules “still a tabletop RPG”? If a CRPG has a human referee, is it “not actually a tabletop RPG”? And so on.

We will now (1) briefly sketch the historical provenance of each form, (2) provide influential definitional attempts, (3) list characteristic features of that form, and (4) highlight common deviations and innovations from that list. Our historical sketch is consciously reductive and partial: we have chosen TRPGs as the ancestor and will trace the other forms through the lens of how they evolved and differentiated themselves from TRPGs. There are other lenses we could have considered (e.g. as acts of collective pretend play, theater, simulation, gaming, storytelling). We focus on the shared lineage from TRPGs because it is helpful for our sociocultural understanding of how and why the different forms differ and don’t.

Tabletop RPGs

In 1974, a small company called Tactical Studies Rules, later known as TSR, published Dungeons & Dragons (D&D, Gygax and Arneson 1974a). It was an unassuming box (containing three slim booklets) whose cover described its contents as “Rules for Fantastical Medieval Wargames Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures” (Gygax and Arneson 1974b). The game was not only closely modeled on its ancestor – miniature wargaming (Peterson 2012) – but also labeled itself as such.

And yet, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson’s introduction to D&D already highlighted characteristics that, while not individually innovative, when taken together, led to its being considered a new type of game (Peterson 2012). It was an open-ended game for which “your time and imagination are about the only limiting factors” (Gygax and Arneson 1974b). Its rules were “guidelines to follow” [emphasis in original]. D&D also required a referee who had to prepare “dungeons” – a scenario set in a fictional game world, typically a cave or castle in a fantasy world filled with adversarial monsters and traps as well as treasures. Players could each decide what individual character or role they wanted to play and then create and govern the actions of that character. PCs could improve their abilities and “work upwards” as they gained “experience”, measured in “experience points”. And the referee would present and govern the events and entities of the game world (Gygax and Arneson 1974b).

While TRPGs – in contrast to wargames or board games – gave players unlimited freedom in imagining what their characters might attempt to do, whether these actions succeeded or not was constrained and adjudicated by rules and the whims of the referee. As Daniel Mackay put it in his definition, there are “rules that assist a group of players and a gamemaster in determining how their fictional characters’ spontaneous interactions are resolved” (Mackay
For this task resolution (→ Chapters 10 and 18), D&D utilized many conventions of the miniature wargames of its time: combat was the (almost exclusive) concern. Rules modeled characters and decided their actions probabilistically: a combatant was described by numerical traits, like level, strength, or “hit points”, and these traits determined the probability of a certain action’s succeeding, usually resolved with dice rolls.

One characteristic novel rule component that D&D introduced was systems for character progression (Peterson 2012), that is, rules and game mechanisms that define how player’s characters improve from one game session to the next (Zagal and Altizer 2014). Character progression is one of the primary rewards of TRPGs (Fannon 1999):

[In most role-playing games, players maintain their characters from session to session, using them again and again. Gradually the player characters’ skills increase. They become more powerful and better equipped and undertake more difficult tasks to maintain the challenge of the game.

(Schick 1991)

As in wargames, players and referee sat around a table, using a printed rule book with rules, tables, dice, and character sheets. An individual quest or adventure – the looting of a dungeon – could take several sessions of multiple hours of playtime. Individual adventures could be connected together into a campaign by the progressing characters, a shared fictional world, and even an overarching plot. Referees could create adventures, campaigns, and worlds, but TSR (and other companies) also published adventures, campaigns, and books, detailing whole fictional worlds. D&D and other early TRPGs were often adversarial (Appelcline 2014a, 347–348): Players had to watch for traps and survive the challenges thrown at them by their referee. This quickly shifted towards a collaborative experience where players and referee worked together for the enjoyment of all (e.g. Plamondon 1982).

In contrast to the often historical settings of wargames, and in tune with the popularity of fantasy and science fiction literature in the 1970s, most early TRPGs were set in some “medieval fantasy” world. As a result, TRPGs are often viewed as a unity of form and content and were often alternatively called “fantasy role-playing games”. Yet as the TRPG market grew, it expanded into different settings: cowboys, spacefaring humans, post-apocalyptic mutants, and others. Still, TRPG settings have largely remained limited to some form of genre fiction, including established franchises (Star Wars, Star Trek, Middle-earth) and genre combination like fantasy-cyberpunk or horror-Western. However, the rise of “indie” TRPGs in the early 21st century (→ Chapter 10) demonstrated that the basic aesthetic form of TRPGs was amenable to all kinds of subject matter.

As a new phenomenon, TRPGs could not rely on people’s shared cultural knowledge of what they were or how to play them. They also could not rely on the game artifacts to guide and constrain play: games like D&D consisted of nothing more than printed pages of rules. Presumably for these reasons, to this day, their rule books often include “an obligatory section in the introduction usually titled ‘What is a Role-Playing Game?’ or ‘How to Play a Role-Playing Game’”, sometimes with a script of sample gameplay (Mackay 2001; see Torner 2015). These sections are thus influential manifestations in which designers express their understanding and definitions of “tabletop role-playing games” and shape those of players and other designers reading them.
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For example, an early manual for *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (AD&D)* (Gygax 1979) notes the existence of two schools of thought in hobby games: realism–simulation and games. Gygax positioned *AD&D* as an adherent of “the game school”, meaning it was primarily a fun game and not a realistic simulation of medieval combat, culture, or society (Gygax 1979). Other designers and companies, differentiating themselves from *D&D*, likewise decoupled their games from specific rules and settings. *Middle-Earth Role Playing (MERP)* describes an RPG as a “‘living’ novel where interaction between the actors (characters) creates a constantly evolving plot” in which each player should “take on the persona of his (or her) player character” (Charlton 1984). *James Bond 007* describes itself as “much like an improvisational theater piece” in which the players participate in a loosely prepared script and agree to follow the rules as enforced by the referee (Klug 1983, 5). These few early examples illustrate how understandings of TRPGs broadened and diversified from playing a fun combat miniature game to realistically simulating a world, story creation, and theatrical enactment of characters.

Beyond introductory passages in rule books, game designers and fans quickly developed theories around TRPGs. These took place initially in fanzines (e.g. *Alarums & Excursions*) and commercial magazines (e.g. *Dragon* or the short-lived *Interactive Fiction*) and then quickly extended onto the Internet, specifically Usenet groups and online forums like *The Forge*. Scholarly work also emerged in the 1980s and intensified from the 1990s on. Surveying definitional attempts across these communities as well as the phenomena they refer to, the following characteristics are commonly reoccurring in what people call “tabletop RPGs”:

- A group of players sits face-to-face around a table to play together (co-located and synchronous);
- Players create, enact, and govern the actions of individual characters in a fictional game world;
- A referee determines the game world, manages and communicates it to the players, and enacts all NPCs;
- Players and referee collaborate towards a shared enjoyable experience;
- The game world, including PCs and NPCs and their actions, are constituted by talk between referee and players, often with supporting props, like character sheets, miniatures, rule books, or maps;
- The game world is usually some form of genre fiction: fantasy, science fiction, horror, etc. or a mixture thereof;
- Attempted PC actions are limited by the imagination of players;
- The abilities of characters and the outcomes of their actions are usually determined by a quantitative-probabilistic rule system, with extensive rules for combat resolution;
- The game is open-ended and can be played over multiple sessions;
- In-game events may be guided along a pre-planned plot through the design of the game world and referee steering or emerge from player initiative;
- Player characters improve over time via systems for progression.

Not all phenomena called TRPGs have all these characteristics, of course. But this prototypical core helps understand why people consider something “clearly a TRPG” or debate it as “a borderline case”, why people perceive a certain game as “innovative”, and why people want to innovate in the first place.
TRPGs exist alongside each other: new games were generally designed in response to existing ones to fill an unexplored thematic niche, solve perceived problems of existing rule systems, support aesthetic goals not met by earlier games, and so on. For instance, the effort of gathering players face-to-face for a game session drove the creation of CRPGs, play-by-mail TRPGs, solo role-playing (e.g. certain scenarios for Tunnels & Trolls, Schick 1991, 358), and game books like the Fighting Fantasy series (Jackson and Livingstone 1982). Dissatisfied by the frequent disconnect between the characters created by individual players and the referee-created scenario, games like Hillfolk (Laws 2013) make character creation collaborative: characters are defined as a network of conflictual, emotionally charged relations, providing the dramatic raw material for player-driven plots. Other games explore the scope of the actors controlled by the players. In Aria: Canticle of the Monomyth (Moore and Seyler 1994), players fluidly move between role-playing characters, entire families (genealogies), nations, and more. As regards the role of the referee, some games encourage taking turns refereeing (Ars Magica, Tweet and Rein-Hagen 2004), while others allow players to enact certain NPCs (Cosmic Patrol, Catalyst Game Labs 2011). Some games do away with referees entirely, allowing play sessions where “everyone has equal authority at the table” (e.g. Grey Ranks, Morningstar 2007). “Independent” TRPGs have brought in “serious”, non-genre fiction game worlds and themes, like first dates (Breaking the Ice, Boss 2005) or Polish partisan teenagers during the 1944 uprising against the German occupation (Grey Ranks, Morningstar 2007). Dissatisfaction with probabilistic, quantified rule systems best fit for combat led to the exploration of alternative mechanisms, as in Amber’s dice-less role-playing system (Wujcik 1991). Some “rules-light” games reduced rules and props to a minimum to focus on inventive storytelling (The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen, Wallis 1998), while others increased the importance of rules and props, leading to TRPG-board game hybrids (e.g. When Darkness Comes, Breitenstein and Breitenstein 2002). Similarly, “one-shot” games like Fiasco (Morningstar 2009) do away with character progression and open-ended games because players, over a fixed number of acts or scenes, create a plot that ends in a tragicomic fiasco for all involved characters.

### Box 2.4 Paper and Pencil Session

Jasmine, Sam, Rosa, and Dennis have gathered around the table. They are in the middle of an ongoing campaign adventure where they play characters who are prehistoric humans, trying to survive in a savage and slightly magical world.

**JASMINE:** Ok, let’s get started. Last week, you were getting ready to sneak into the valley of the bears. You had decided to hide behind some bushes on a hill, overlooking the valley until nightfall.

**SAM:** [speaking out of character] Yeah, that’s right. We were worried about unexpected inhabitants. <laughs> Hey Dennis, do you still have the sacred animal whistle?

**DENNIS:** [checking his character sheet] Yeah, but I think the effect wore off. Rosa, does Tohanna’s mystical ability work with items, or is it just for animals?

**ROSA:** [looking at Dennis and speaking in character] I shall see if the mother of trees will assist us this night. May I have the whistle?
JASMINE: Ok, Rosa, roll for your mystical sight ability. Don’t forget the +2 bonus you get from your willpower stat.

[Rosa picks up a pair of D10s and rolls them. She gets a 5 and a 3.]

ROSA: [checking her character sheet]. I got an 8 plus ... uhm, hang on. Ok, total is 15! Does that work?

JASMINE: Tohana cradles the whistle in her hands and whispers while bowing in the direction of a tree. [addressing Rosa] The whistle trembles slightly in your hands and gets noticeably warm.

ROSA: Here ya go, Sharpspear, be careful with it.

DENNIS: [looking at Jasmine] I blow the whistle. I also want to have a good look around.

JASMINE: [rolling some dice but keeping the results hidden from the players] As you blow into the whistle, you get sensations of danger and excitement coming from some tall trees to the left of you, perfect timing as well! You see four large humanoid shapes moving towards you very quickly across the ridge. Ok, everyone, roll for initiative!

[The whole group groans except for Sam]

SAM: Oh yeah, I’m ready for this!

[Everyone picks up a D12 and rolls it in front of them]

DENNIS: 12!

SAM: I only got a 4...

ROSA: Do I need to add my reflexes modifier or not? I always forget.

JASMINE: Yup, reflex modifiers get added.

ROSA: Ok, I got an 8 then.

JASMINE: As you turn to face your attackers, you notice they are hunters from the Rockslide tribe. They’ve probably been stalking you for a while. Three charge forward while the fourth hangs back. Dennis, you go first...

DENNIS: I’m going to attack the one that’s closest to me with my spear, and I’ll use my second action to increase my dodge ability. [rolls a pair of D10s] Double 1s? Are you kidding me?

JASMINE: As you lunge with your spear, your foot slips on a loose rock. Your lunge goes wide, and you also let go of the spear. You’ve lost your weapon, but fortunately, you didn’t fall to the ground.

JASMINE: Ok, now one of them attacks [secretly rolls a pair of D10s]. Sam, what’s your defense score?

SAM: 12.

JASMINE: Ok, you get pummeled with a rock for ... [rolls a D6], 4 points of damage.

[Sam makes a note of this on his character sheet]

JASMINE: Rosa, you’re next. What are you going to do...?
LARP

It is unclear when people ran the first larps (Simkins 2015, 48). One may reasonably assume that some people started performing rather than describing the actions of their characters as soon as *D&D* was played – play-enacting character dialogue while sitting at the table is a common practice in TRPGs. There are rumors that, as early as 1979, students at Michigan State University organized larps in the network of steam tunnels beneath campus (Laycock 2015, 83).

In the context of *D&D*, people understood early larps as role-playing that is taken “beyond the realms of imagined adventures using paper, pencils, and miniature figures”: by fully embodying and enacting one’s character, the game “becomes ‘real’” (Livingstone 1982, 192–193). This notion of immersion through embodiment is an important differentiating characteristic of larp. Instead of describing character actions, players enact them. Instead of describing their appearance, players use costumes. Instead of describing the game world and its inhabitants, referees stage a real-world, physical setting with props and instruct likewise costumed NPCs. The importance of being “in-character” also changed. In most TRPGs, players fluidly move between speaking as players and as characters. In larps, “maintaining character” (not speaking as a player) became more important in order to achieve greater immersion for everyone involved.

Because players were no longer stationary, rules needed to be streamlined – e.g. using rock-paper-scissors instead of dice and tables. Rules could also rely more on players’ skills: proficiency in swinging a weapon made of reinforced foam (commonly called “boffer” weapons) could serve as a character's swordsmanship (M. Malaby and Green 2009). Another effect of staging a game in a physical space was that it could accommodate more players than fit around a table. This allows parallel activities, with up to thousands of players in some large-scale fantasy larps. As a result, a single referee often could not oversee and manage the entire game anymore. One common solution has been to increase the number of referees; another is to have players take on roles of NPCs. These NPCs are analogous to “supporting actors” in movies, who act semiautomonomously but share information with referees and take stage directions from them. Yet another strategy has been to forego pre-scripted referee plots in favor of emergent gameplay, sometimes structured by the detailed background stories and goals of player characters.

As a collaborative practice, new players typically learn how to larp by joining existing groups and learning from their peers. Larping is usually an embodied practice of a shared social group, and larps are arguably far less homogenized (and pre-scriptable) through mass-distributed objects, like TRPG rule books or video gaming hardware and software. As a result, maybe more than any other form of RPG, larp has developed many different local cultural communities practicing distinct styles of larps (→ Chapter 5).

Definitional discussions by larp designers and players have chiefly emerged around conventions where local groups encounter each other. Scholarly work on larp (and its definition) frequently stem from people involved in these communities. Notably, across designer, player, and scholar discourses, larp is commonly talked about and defined as live-action *role-play*, not a live action *role-playing game* (although numerous people also talk about larp games, running larps with ‘gamey’ characteristics like clear goals, rules, and progression systems). Despite this cultural diversity, one can still identify some characteristics commonly reoccurring across phenomena called larps:

- A group of players plays together in a shared physical location (co-located and synchronous);
- Players create and enact individual characters in a fictional game world;
• One or more referees stage and manage the game for the players;
• Some players may enact NPCs that receive instruction and information from referees;
• Players and referee collaborate towards a shared enjoyable experience;
• The game world, including PCs and NPCs, is constituted by players embodying and en-
  acting characters and real physical props and location, with varying degrees of realism or
  verisimilitude;
• The game world is usually some form of genre fiction: fantasy, science fiction, horror,
  Western, crime, or a mixture thereof;
• Attempted PC actions are limited by the imagination of players, rules, and the players’
  bodily abilities and physical surroundings;
• The abilities of characters and the outcomes of their actions are determined by a mixture
  of bodily abilities (“you can do what you can do”) and formal rules;
• In-game events may be guided along a pre-planned plot through the setup of the game
  world (including PCs and NPCs) and referee steering via NPCs or emerge from player
  initiative.

There is rich variation and innovation around this prototypical list. Some larps emulate D&D-
style TRPGs with fantasy backdrops, rules, referee-scripted plots, and an emphasis on combat
with boffer weapons. This style is sometimes called “boffer LARP”. Organizations like NERO
coordinate multiple larping groups under one set of rules, including character progression,
allowing “One Game World with Unrestricted Transference of Characters, Treasure & Pos-

In contrast, Nordic larp, as a style, is characterized by high aesthetic ambition and com-
mitment, a noncommercial spirit, minimal game mechanics and a de-emphasizing of game
aspects like “winning” or “progression” in favor of intense shared experiences (Stenros and
Montola 2010). Games in this tradition often have political and/or artistic aspirations, putting
players in the roles of e.g. members of a 1978 commune or attendants of a cross-cultural
marriage in Palestine. Staging of the game world may range from barren black rooms sim-
ilar to empty theater stages (“black-box”) to maximalist games like Monitor Celestra, where
over 140 players wore handmade costumes and used a retired military destroyer ship, which
was redecorated and augmented with digital control panels, to stage a three-day crisis on a
spaceship in the fictional universe of Battlestar Galactica (Berättelsefrämjandet 2013). Larps
may last as little as half an hour and have no rules other than a character prompt, strongly
resembling improv theater, or might be played over years at different locales. Yet other per-
vasive larps engage with the distinction between the real and the game world. The 2006 larp
Momentum ran continuously, 24 hours a day for five weeks, in everyday locations all around
Stockholm, with the goal of merging game and real life. Players enacted themselves being
temporarily possessed by ghosts and had to draw in non-players as part of their in-game tasks
(Stenros et al. 2007).

Some games blur the distinction between larps and TRPGs. Mind’s Eye Theatre: The Mas-
querade (MET) (Rein-Hagen, Lemke, and Tinney 1993) adapted the TRPG Vampire: The Mas-
querade’s (V:tM) for live play. Set in the same supernatural horror world as V:tM, MET is one of
the few commercially published larps games (Appelcline 2014b, 16). MET also allowed players to
bring their tabletop characters over to a larp game and back. V:tM itself was already conducive
to this crossover by encouraging “dice-less” and “live-roleplay” at the table, with long-running
campaigns full of politicking and intrigue (Fannon 1999, 150). Thus, MET and V:tM could
form a single transmedia RPG, with players deciding when to play in which format.
The earliest CRPGs appeared in the mid- to late 1970s, created and surreptitiously played by hobbyists on university mainframe computers (Barton 2008, 30). Bearing names like *Dungeon* (Daglow 1975), *dnd* (Whisenhunt and Wood 1975), or *DND* (Lawrence 1977), they often advertised their direct inspiration from *D&D*. The early CRPG *The Temple of Apshai* boasts that it “is guaranteed to be the best version of Dungeons & Dragons” (Automated Simulations 1980). What we now call CRPGs were then sometimes referred to as “D&D Games” (Crawford

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**Box 2.5 Larp Session**

Sam, Rosa, and Dennis have gathered on the outskirts of a local campground. All three wear fake animal furs. Rosa has thick necklaces made from stones and string around her neck. Dennis is carrying a spear whose end is thickly padded with foam and covered in duct tape, making it look like a giant cotton swab. They are in the middle of an ongoing campaign adventure where they play characters who are prehistoric humans, trying to survive in a savage and slightly magical world. Jasmine, one of the local referees, walks up to them.

**JASMINE**: Ok, it’s almost time to get started. Last week, you were getting ready to sneak into the valley of the bears. You hid behind some bushes on a hill, overlooking the valley until nightfall. [Suddenly, an air horn blast breaks the silence. Sam, Rosa, and Dennis quickly crouch, and Jasmine steps away.]

**SAM**: Showtime! [turning to Dennis] Do you still have the sacred animal whistle?

**DENNIS**: Ack! [He assents] But power weak. [turning to face Rosa] Tohana, you help?

**ROSA**: Mother of trees, you please bless! [She reaches for a small bone whistle being offered by Dennis]

[Rosa pulls a keyring from a pouch that hangs by her waist. The keyring has several colored plastic tabs. She removes a yellow tab and hands it to Jasmine, who then whispers something in her ear.]

[Rosa then carefully cradles the whistle in her hands and bows in the direction of the tree.]

**ROSA**: Oh, mother of trees. You favor us. We see through eyes of you! [after a brief pause] Go Sharp Spear, you have much care.

[Dennis takes the whistle from Rosa’s open hand. He looks at Jasmine, who nods, then places the whistle in his mouth and blows into it]

**JASMINE**: [shouting] Concealed creatures and tribespeople, the Mother of Trees commands that you reveal yourselves!

[Four people also dressed in fake furs and carrying padded spears step out from behind some trees about 20 meters away. They count to three and then run towards the group!]

**Attackers**: [yelling] Rockslate tribe!

[Both groups quickly meet and start swinging at each other with their padded weapons. As they hit each other, they yell numbers out loud, indicating how much damage they inflict with each hit.]
Early CRPGs commonly entailed quantitatively modeled characters, probabilistic action resolution, character progression, and fantasy maze (dungeon) exploration and combat well known from *D&D*.

Yet, as with early TRPGs, there was significant variation in what early games, now considered CRPGs, called themselves: some, like *Telengard*, straightforwardly self-labeled as “a computerized fantasy role-playing game” (Lawrence 1982, 3). Others, like *The Lords of Midnight*, proposed new labels: “not simply an adventure game nor simply a wargame. It is really a new type that we have chosen to call an epic game” (Singleton 1984, 3). Many CRPGs, like *The Faery Tale Adventure* (1987), called themselves “adventures” or “adventure games”, and contemporary uses of video game genre labels like “role-playing game” and “adventure game” still overlap significantly.

CRPGs were often understood as a response to perceived problems of TRPGs: (1) TRPGs could not be played solitaire (e.g. Katz 1982), (2) they often required tedious amounts of calculation and dice rolling (e.g. Crawford 1984, 33), and (3) they needed long (continuous) stretches of time to prepare and play (e.g. Lane 1982). The solution, for many, was to use a computer: “Even microcomputers in a fraction of a second can make complicated calculations that would take a *Dungeons and Dragons* referee minutes of page-turning” (Freeman 1980). Also, as explained in *The Temple of Apshai*’s manual, the computer could offer “an already created world with enough details and variety for dozens of adventures”, thus offering a game that is always ready to play (Lane 1982, 6). Instead of being constituted through joint talk, the game world and rules became an algorithmic and data-driven model – software running on a computer – that the player experienced and interacted with through a computer interface.

This provided additional affordances that would further distinguish CRPGs from their tabletop brethren: sophistication of simulations, real-time play, and encyclopedic scope. Because the computer handled the bookkeeping, early CRPGs could increase the complexity (and supposed “realism”) of their rule systems beyond human capacities to include features such as line-of-sight for enemy monsters, encumbrance and fatigue, and more (Barton 2008). While many of these existed in prior TRPG games, they were often too complicated to use in practice or were rarely enforced. The downside, as in computerized wargames, was that these rules were often “blackboxed”, only partially exposed to the player (Dunnigan 1992).

Real-time play allowed for a different kind of experience: “[i]f you don’t move, the monsters will” (Lindsay 1979). *Telengard*’s manual notes how

> [i]t is imperative to understand that the adventure you are about to embark upon is played in Real Time [sic.]. That is, you have a limited amount of time (about 5 seconds) to key-in a command before the computer will do one for you.

*(Lawrence 1982)*

Real-time rather than turn-based interaction also led to the increasing appearance of “action” elements where results were dependent on player’s reflexes and hand–eye coordination.

TRPGs, in principle, already allowed for a vast scope of their game world, supported by “random encounter” and “dungeon generation” tables, but, in practice, they were bound by the time and inventiveness of a human referee (or supplement author). CRPG designers used the storage of early computers to the maximum, handcrafting environments as well as algorithmically generating enormous game worlds: “over 17,000 screens of exploration” (*The Faery Tale Adventure*, Microllusions 1987). This encyclopedic scope (Murray 1997) became
CRPGs are also more limited in the actions available to characters. In a TRPG, a player could think up any possible action and describe it, no matter if it was explicitly foreseen in the rules: the referee would adjudicate its probability of succeeding on the spot. Game software, in contrast, can only process pre-specified inputs; thus, players are limited to those pre-specified actions offered by the CRPG interface. In a TRPG, a player might try and flirt with a guard instead of attacking it, even if the rule book has no rules for flirting. In a CRPG, if the program (and its interface) don’t support flirting, doing so is impossible. Given this lack of expressive capacities and the absence of a human audience, CRPG players less frequently enact characters in a theatrical fashion, although they may choose courses of action they feel are “true” to their characters. Curiously, at least in the early years, CRPGs were lauded for providing rich creative opportunities for players to make decisions. However, this was in comparison to (text) adventure games of the time, which were often devalued as mere puzzles (Freeman 1980). CRPGs added character development, strategic combat, and partially procedurally generated, non-pre-scripted game worlds to the adventure game mix of room exploration and puzzle-solving (Saltzman 1999, 7). This meant that CRPGs were far more re-playable and open-ended than text adventures: players could approach a varying game world with different characters and new strategies.

Another significant change from TRPGs to CRPGs is how they are played. While TRPGs are played and experienced as a group, CRPGs are generally designed for a solitary player, often controlling a “party” of multiple characters. The social experience of a CRPG usually comes from players controlling the game together (e.g. one player controls, others gives strategic tips) or player communities sharing experiences (e.g. see what I found!), strategies (e.g. how to beat a monster), and collaborative understanding of the game (e.g. optimizing character improvement).

Surveying the phenomena that are today called “computer RPGs”, we find the following commonly reoccurring properties:

- A single player plays with a computing device
- The player creates and governs the actions of one or more characters in a fictional game world
- The computer runs an internal model of the game rules and game world, including all NPCs, renders a representation through an interface, and updates model and representation in response to player input
- The game world is constituted by the computational model’s generating audiovisual representations that ground the player’s imagination
- The game world is usually some form of genre fiction: fantasy, science fiction, horror, or a mixture thereof
- Attempted character actions are limited to options made available through the game interface
• The abilities of characters and the outcomes of their actions are usually determined by quantitative-probabilistic rule systems or by the player’s reflexes and abilities in inputting commands.
• A game is often played over multiple sessions.
• In-game events are usually guided along a pre-planned plot through the extensive scripting of the game world (including non-player character actions) toward clear end points, but players may play open-endedly before, during, or after the conclusion of those plots.
• There are extensive rules for combat resolution.
• Player characters improve over time via systems for progression.

Plenty of CRPGs diverge from this list in some aspects. Not all CRPGs are for solitary play. *Vampire: The Masquerade – Redemption* (Nihilistic Software 2000) included a multiplayer mode that allowed for one player to be a referee, similar to TRPG games. The referee could “possess” NPCs, move them around, and control what they said and populate the maps with items and enemies (Sones 2000). In this sense, *Redemption* was an attempt to provide a TRPG experience in a CRPG.

In most CRPGs, players control either one character or a group of characters for the duration of a game. The composition of the group can sometimes change over time. In *Baldur’s Gate* (Ohlen and Muzyka 1998), players could recruit different characters. However, some characters might leave, depending on choices made by the player or whoever else was part of the group. In *Dragon Quest IV* (Nakamura 1990), the player controls different characters for each chapter of the game. Each chapter focuses on the perspective of a supporting character before they all join the protagonist in the final chapter. This allowed for a richer experience of the game’s narrative or, in the case of *Baldur’s Gate*, highlighted inter-character dynamics often missing in CRPGs.

As they evolved, CRPGs developed distinct subgenres, such as “action RPGs”, like the *Diablo* series, which emphasized fast-paced, real-time combat, and “tactical RPGs”, often turn-based, which focus on optimal tactical combat decisions and strategic character progression decisions.

### Box 2.6 Computer RPG Session

Petra sits in front of her computer, playing a CRPG. She is in the middle of an ongoing campaign where she controls a party of characters who are prehistoric humans, trying to survive in a savage and slightly magical world. As the game finishes loading, she sees an overhead view of a wilderness. Three human figures, about 3cm tall on the screen, are standing behind some bushes. There are two men and one woman, and their names are indicated by text that floats above their heads. To the side of the screen are portraits of each of them that provide additional information, such as their current level, how many life points each has, and what their current equipment is. All three figures wear furs, and one carries a spear.

Petra clicks on the portrait of the character called Tohana. A new window appears partially obscuring the landscape. It features a larger image of the character, a list of abilities, and the items and equipment the Tohana is carrying. Petra clicks on an item called “Sacred