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Zagal, José P. and Deterding, Christoph Sebastian orcid.org/0000-0003-0033-2104 (2018) Definitions of Role-Playing Games. In: Zagal, José P. and Deterding, Sebastian, (eds.) Role-Playing Game Studies. Routledge , pp. 19-52.

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2 Definitions of “Role-Playing Games”

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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 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*, Salen and 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 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 tabletop RPGs, computer RPGs, (massively) multiplayer online RPGs, live-action RPGs, 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; 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 (see **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” tabletop RPGs. What’s more, game research is itself notoriously multidisciplinary, looking at games – and RPGs – through many different theoretical and disciplinary lenses (Deterding 2016).

Box insert 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 if 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 Mentz 1981, 27-28).

“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:

t1) In tabletop role-playing the game world is defined predominantly in verbal communication.

l1) In larp the game is superimposed on physical world, which is used as a foundation in defining the game world.

v1) In virtual role-playing the game is superimposed on a computational virtual reality, which is used as a foundation in defining the game world.” (Montola 2009, 23-24)

“Role-playing is immersion to an outside consciousness (‘a character’) and interacting with its surroundings” (Pohjola 2003,34)

“Role-playing is immediated character immersion” (Pohjola 2004, 89)

“role-playing is defined as any act in which an imaginary reality is concurrently created, added to and observed” (Mäkelä et al. 2005, 207)

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 understandings 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 RPGs. 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 tabletop RPGs 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 insert 2.2: Sample definitions of role-playing games

“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 common with novels than 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 are “defined by numbers or quantities ... manipulated following certain rules”; “player decision-making drives the story forward”; “with a group for an author, a story that grows organically and is acted out, is experienced by its creators” (Schick 1991, 10-11).

“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 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)

“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”, 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 interperative.*

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 players ordinary life, and exists within a magic circle of play.

2. Participants: There are 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 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).

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. Which 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, understandings of a given culture: “these people call these things RPGs”. Etic accounts present views and concepts of the observing researcher: “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 role-playing games 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, and 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 like 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: Swedes and Japanese may consider what is “embarrassing” different from each other as well as 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; Deterding 2014; 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 people can point to and call “game” 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 as relevant is always informed by some human concern. As 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” (see **chapter 16**). To an educational researcher – concerned with human learning – role-playing games would appear (and be defined) as a specific site or form of learning (see **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, 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 rulebooks, 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 fan theorists “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. 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:

- *a 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;
- *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 maintains 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.¹ *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”, since all current non-classical 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 Role-Playing Games

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 multi-player online RPGs.

Tabletop 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*.² 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 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 insert 2.3: Essential Terminology

Campaign: In TRPGs this refers to a series of adventures with a cast of recurring characters (player and non-) 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 8-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 tabletop RPGs, 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.

Box insert 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 pre-historic 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 Tohana’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 Sharpsspear, 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...?

From this, perhaps the easiest way to describe *live-action role-playing* (larp) is to imagine a TRPG where players embody and act out their character's 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.

Computer role-playing games (CRPGs) can be described as tabletop RPGs that are played alone on a computer: one player controls all player characters and the computer enacts 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).

Multiplayer online role-playing games (MORPGs) can be thought of as tabletop games where players log in to a computer who handles all of the usual referee responsibilities. Conversely, they could be considered multiplayer CRPGs where 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. They also often allow for the co-existence of a massive numbers of players, in which case they are usually called massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). As with CRPGs, there is usually an emphasis on rules and systems, often borrowed from TRPGs, rather than on the role-playing.

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. Hitchens and Drachen (2009) for instance list freeform, systemless, 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 role and size 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 tabletop RPG with no rules “still a tabletop RPG”? If a computer role-playing game 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 tabletop RPGs because it helps socio-culturally understand how and why the different forms differ and don’t.

Tabletop Role-Playing Games

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, Gygax and Arneson’s introduction to *D&D* already highlighted characteristics that, while not individually innovative, when taken together, led to it being considered as 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. Player characters 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 war games 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 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 2001, 5). For this task resolution (**see chapters 10, 18**), *D&D* utilized many conventions of miniature war games 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 succeeding, usually resolved with dice rolls.

One characteristic novel rule component *D&D* introduced were 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 tabletop RPGs (Fannon 1999). “[I]n 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 rulebook 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 (see **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, their rulebooks to this day 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 where designers express their understanding and definitions of “tabletop role-playing games”, and shape those of players and other designers reading them. 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. The *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” where 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*), 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 together to play (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 non-player characters
- Players and referee collaborate towards a shared enjoyable experience
- The game world, including player and non-player characters 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 player character 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 computer RPGs, 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: Cantic 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 non-player characters (*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 exploring alternative mechanisms, as in *Amber*’s diceless roleplaying 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 & Breitenstein

2002). Similarly, “one-shot” games like *Fiasco* (Morningstar 2009) do away with character progression and open-ended games since players, over a fixed number of acts or scenes, create a plot that ends in a tragicomic fiasco for all involved characters.

LARP

It is unclear when people ran the first live action role-playing games (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 larp 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 non-player characters. 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. Since 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 non-player characters. These NPCs are analogous to “supporting actors” in movies which act semi-

autonomously 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 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 they are arguably far less homogenized (and pre-scriptable) through mass-distributed objects like TRPG rulebooks or video gaming hardware and software. As a result, maybe more than in any other form of RPG, larp has developed many different local cultural communities practicing distinct styles of larps (**see 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 *roleplay* not live action *role-playing games*. (Although numerous people also talk about live-action role-playing games, run 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 non-player characters that receive instruction and information from referees
- Players and referee collaborate towards a shared enjoyable experience
- The game world, including player and non-player characters, is constituted by players embodying and enacting 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 player character 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 player and non-player characters) and referee steering via non-player characters, 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* co-ordinate multiple larping groups under one set of rules including character progression, allowing “One Game World with Unrestricted Transference of Characters, Treasure & Possessions” across games (<http://nerolarp.com/news.php>).

In contrast, Nordic larp, as a style, is characterized by high aesthetic ambition and commitment, 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 be barren black rooms similar to empty theater stages (“black-box”) to maximalist games like *Monitor Celestra*, where over 140 players wore hand-made costumes and used a retired military destroyer ship that 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 pervasive larps engage with the distinction between real and 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 Masquerade (MET)* (Rein-Hagen, Lemke, and Tinney 1993) adapted the tabletop RPG *Vampire: The Masquerade’s (V:tM)* for live play. Set in the same supernatural horror world as *V:tM*, *MET* is one of the few commercially published

larp 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 cross-over by encouraging “diceless” 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.

Box insert 2.5: Larp Session

Sam, Rosa, and Dennis have gathered in 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 pre-historic 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 airhorn 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 Sharpsspear, you have much care.*

[Dennis takes the whistle from Rosa's open hand. He looks at Jasmine, who nods, and 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] Rockslide 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.]

Computer Role-Playing Games

The earliest computer role-playing games (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 by *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 computer RPGs were then sometimes referred to as “D&D Games” (Crawford 1984). 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 how 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 war game. 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 then 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 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, hand-crafting environments as well as algorithmically generating enormous game worlds: “over 17,000 screens of exploration” (*The Faery Tale Adventure*, MicroIllusions 1987). This encyclopedic scope (Murray 1997) became only more pronounced as storage capacities increased. Today, CRPGs generally rely on a mixture of pre-scripted linear narratives (especially in so-called “JRPGs”, a style of CRPG that developed in Japan, see **Chapter 6**), and ‘emergent’ stories players tell themselves based on procedurally generated events in vast open game worlds, prototypically in the *The Elder Scrolls* series (Bethesda, 1994-). TRPGs in contrast

allowed for intentional flexible weaving of dramatic plot between players and referees. Thematically, the game worlds of CRPGs have stuck close to the fantasy scenarios of early TRPGs.

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 whether 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 rulebook 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 character.

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 that 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 give 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 which 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 non-player characters, 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 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 in some aspects from this list. Not all CRPGs are for solitary play. *Vampire: The Masquerade – Redemption* (Nihilistic Software 2000) included a multi-player mode that allowed for one player to be a referee similar to tabletop RPG games. The referee could 'possess' non-player characters, move them around, control what they say 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 who 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 sub-genres such as “action RPGs” like the *Diablo* series that emphasized fast-paced real-time combat, and “tactical RPGs”, often turn-based, that focus on optimal tactical combat decisions and strategic character progression decisions.

Box insert 2.6: Computer Role-Playing Game 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 pre-historic 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 Animal Whistle”. A smaller window appears with some text and two buttons labelled “Use” and “Cancel”. The text says:

- *Duration: 5 minutes*
- *Use: Reveal hidden enemies in 50 meter radius*
- *Charges: 0 (rechargeable)*
- *“The mother of trees bestows her sight on those who are worthy”*

Petra curses under her breath as she clicks on the cancel button. As the smaller window closes she selects an ability named “Imbue Magic” and then picks the whistle from a list of available options. A message window appears stating “Sacred Animal Whistle now has 10 charges”. As she closes the window she notices that the purple “magic energy” bar beneath Tohana's character portrait is now only half-full. Before closing the

character window, Petra makes sure to bind the whistle to the “I” on her keyboard. Now, when she wants to use the whistle, all she’ll have to do is select Tohana and tap “I”.

While she’s been doing this, the world has been paralyzed. As soon as she closed the character window, however, everything “came back to life”: tree branches sway and the characters restlessly tap their feet. As soon as Petra taps “I” on her keyboard though, she notices the red outlines of four humanoid shapes that are moving quickly towards her characters. As they come in to view she sees that three of them are labeled “Rockslide Warrior” and the fourth’s label is “Rockslide Shaman”. Each character also has a small green bar beneath its name.

Petra taps the spacebar and clicks her characters. For each, she selects the option “Attack Closest Target” before hitting the spacebar again. She sits back to watch what happens, but keeps her hand hovering over the spacebar just in case. The characters on the screen start to move towards each other and begin to swing their weapons. Text messages such as “Critical!”, “Miss!”, and “Hit!” appear over the battle as well as numbers indicating how much damage each successful strike causes.

Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games

The history of multiplayer online role-playing games (MORPG) starts in 1978 with MUD (also called MUD1) on a mainframe computer at Essex University. MUD, which stands for Multi-User Dungeon, began as a multi-player implementation of early adventure games *Colossal Cave Adventure* (also known as *Adventure* and *ADVENT*) and *Zork* (Bartle 2010). Those games, directly inspired by *D&D* (McGath 1984, 5), provided players with a textual description of their virtual surroundings and allowed interaction via typed commands, often verb-object pairs such as “ATTACK MONSTER” or “GO NORTH”. MUD was also text-based, but was multi-player, open-ended, and provided a persistent environment that continued to exist (and change) even if a player was not accessing it through an interface.

The multi-player aspect of MUD1 allowed multiple players to participate via a network without requiring them to play co-located. The game was open-ended in that players freely traversed and interacted with the (textual) game world and its inhabitants without the puzzles and linear narratives of early adventure games: its designers decided these would not work in a multi-player environment (Bartle 2010).

In terms of refereeing, MUDs presented a mixture of TRPGs and CRPGs. The computer maintained the game world, but MUD administrators, often referred to as ‘Wizards’, often interacted directly with players as they created new content, areas, and objects in the database (Shah and Romine 1995, 13). Becoming a Wizard was often a goal for players since they could hope to be invited to play in this role of meta-referee (Turtle 1995). Wizards inhabiting in-game characters gave rise to enticing unexpected situations. For example, having obtained an item they shouldn’t have, a player could negotiate with the grim reaper to get it back (C. Morningstar and Farmer 1990) or they might ‘kill’ a famous Wizard-controlled character who forgot to activate his invulnerability (Blodgett 2009). Since collaboration between players was not needed for the game world to exist and players often used pseudonyms, behaviors such as ‘griefing’ also appeared – players deriving pleasure from annoying other players in the game. MORPGs also feature a lot of ‘parallel play’ as seen in larps with large numbers of players.

Over the years, MORPGs changed as technology improved. First was a move towards audiovisual representations, followed by a sharp increase in the number of concurrent players these games could support. In the mid-1990s, the Korean games *Kingdom of the Winds* and *Lineage* already attracted millions of players, soon to be followed by ‘Western’ games such as *World of Warcraft* (Bartle 2010). It was from these games and their successors that a new term was coined: the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG).

MORPGs are played by multiple players in different locations each using their own computing device. Players usually access one of several servers on which versions of the game world run – servers typically cater to geographical and language communities, but players may also cultivate certain play styles on a specific server, e.g. “role-play intensive”. On a server, players communicate using text chat or Voice-Over-IP technology, and often organize into lasting or temporary groups like guilds or clans to socialize and collaborate, e.g. defeat other player groups or accomplish an in-game “quest” or “raid”, a pre-scripted adventure akin to early TRPG dungeons with monsters to kill and treasures (‘loot’) to gain. Most games feature virtual economies, with players trading and selling goods with each other, an emphasis on combat and progression systems, and a genre fiction backdrop (see **chapter 16**).

Beginning with *TinyMUD* (1989), MUDs spawned subgenres of MUSH (Multi-User Shared Hallucination) and MOO (MUD, object-oriented). Where MUDs focused on *D&D*-style gaming, MUSH players tended to engage more in socializing and theatric role-playing. MOOs were similarly social but also allowed players to program the environment to add new areas, objects, functionality, and more (Bartle 2003, 11). Today's MMORPGs, arguably the most popular MORPGs in terms of audience, generally limit the impact of players on the game world: a quest may be played repeatedly by player groups, and opponents tend to re-appear ("respawn") shortly after their defeat. Lasting effects tend to limit themselves to narrowly specified areas (e.g. player homes) and player appearance.

Across contemporary phenomena called MORPGs, the following features frequently reoccur:

- A group of players plays synchronously, each accessing the game through an individual computing device linked through the Internet
- Players create, enact, and govern the actions of individual characters in the fictional game world
- Computers run an internal model of the game rules and a persistent game world, including all non-player characters, rendering representations on the players' local interfaces, and update model and representation in response to player input
- The game world is constituted by the computational model generating audiovisual representations that ground the players' imagination
- The game world is usually some form of genre fiction: fantasy, science fiction, or a mixture thereof
- Players can collaborate, compete, or ignore each other as they pursue a shared enjoyable experience
- Attempted character actions are limited to options made available through the game interface
- The abilities of characters and the outcomes of their actions are determined by quantitative-probabilistic rule systems or by the player's reflexes and abilities in inputting commands
- A game is usually played over multiple sessions
- Players can play open-endedly within the game world, which additionally usually entails multiple pre-scripted plots with clear end points
- There are extensive rules for combat resolution
- Player characters improve over time via systems for progression

While MMORPGs generally offer limited player control over the game world, *A Tale in the Desert* (eGenesis 2003) is an interesting exception. It is a combat-less MMORPG where players can petition and vote on laws that can globally affect player options and influence rules and laws that have lasting effects on the game. The game world cyclically begins and ends and players have a say in changes and additions introduced to the next cycle (Drachen and Heide Smith 2008). In a sense, many ideas present in MOOs are slowly appearing in MMORPGs.

Some MORPG designs and practices blur the distinctions between real and game world. Real-Money Trading describes the practice of players selling in-game assets, items, and characters for hard cash (Dibbell 2006). While this is often outlawed, *EVE Online* (CCP 2003) allows players to pay for their monthly subscription service using in-game currency, and *Entropia Universe* (MindArk 2003) allows regular exchange of game and real currency (see chapter 16). The Augmented Reality MORPG *Ingress* (Niantic Labs 2012) layers its persistent game world on the real world. Players take on the role of agents who, using a mobile app, must travel to real-world locations to “attempt to ‘hack’ portals for in-game supplies. As they do this [...] they gain experience points to level up through the game by gaining Action Points” (Chess 2014). Players can also create new in-game locations by submitting them for approval to the game’s creators (Chess 2014).

Box insert 2.7: MORPG Session

Jasmine is sitting in front of her computer playing a MORPG. As the game loads and her character comes in to view on the screen, she notices that Sam, Rosa, and Dennis are waiting for her. They are playing an online game where they play characters who are pre-historic humans trying to survive in a savage and slightly magical world. Jasmine enables team chat. As she does, her headset crackles to life and she can hear what the others are saying.

Dennis: ...and so I told my boss that... Oh! Hey Jasmine, glad you could make it.

Jasmine: Yeah, sorry I’m late. Ok, let’s get started. Remember we’re going to run ‘valley of the bears’. Everybody all geared up?

Sam: Yeah, I think we’re good. Don’t forget about the unexpected inhabitants. <laughs> Hey Dennis, do you still have the sacred animal whistle?

Dennis: *[there's noises of keyboard clicking in the background] Yeah, but I think the effect wore off. Rosa, does Tohana's buff work with items or is it just for animals?*

Rosa: *Everything, I think. You'll need to drop the whistle though.*

Dennis: *Ok, give me a sec.*

[Suddenly an item appears in mid-air in front of Jasmine. It falls to the ground and when Jasmine moves her mouse over it, a small window appears with the text "Sacred Animal Whistle". She's barely able to see it before the item disappears. A few seconds later it appears in mid-air again and this time Dennis picks it up. Rosa's character's magic bar is significantly depleted.]

Rosa: *Ok, ready when you are.*

Dennis: *Ok team, on my mark!*

[As he counts down everybody is ready to press a few keys on their keyboards and they position their characters behind Dennis', His character starts to gyrate and colored lights leave his fingertips. As soon as this is done, the entire group starts to move forward together. In the distance they notice the red outlines of 4 humanoid shapes that are moving quickly towards the group. As they come in to view everyone can see that three of them are labeled "Rockslide Warrior" and the fourth's label is "Rockslide Shaman". Each character also has a small green bar beneath its name.

Jasmine taps a few keys and selects her teammates. Her character begins to cast a spell, gyrating, and colored lights leave her hands. She's playing a support role in this battle as Dennis' character is the monsters' main focus. Jasmine is both healing him as well as buffing everyone else.

Comparisons and Conclusions

The empirical phenomena referred to as "role-playing games" are very heterogeneous, spanning different socio-material assemblages: joint talk and paper inscriptions (TRPGs), joint embodiment (larp), single (CRPG) and networked (MORPG) computing devices. As socio-material platforms, these gather different communities of practice: When people say "role-playing game", they often do so within the context of the form (CRPG, TRPG, etc.) they were socialized in or that is salient in the current context of conversation. These statements often do not generalize to other forms. Given different designer and player communities

chiefly engaged in one form, it is no wonder that their use (and thus, understanding) of the word “role-playing game” may exclude phenomena others readily call “role-playing games”. Tabletop RPG players sometimes hold that computer RPGs are not ‘real’ RPGs, while larpers call MORPGs like *World of Warcraft* MMOGs (removing role-playing) (Simkins 2015, 43). The need for a prefix like “tabletop” or “computer” only emerged once there were multiple forms and people needed to refer to and distinguish them in the same conversation.

With that preface, if one compares the commonly reoccurring features of phenomena clustered under the various forms, some common shared ‘meta’-characteristics and dimensions of divergence emerge (see Table 1), which allow us to formulate an analytic empirical construct “role-playing games”.

“Role-playing games” is a word used by multiple social groups to refer to multiple forms and styles of play activities and objects revolving around the rule-structured creation and enactment of characters in a fictional world. Players usually individually create, enact, and govern the actions of characters, defining and pursuing their own goals, with great choice in what actions they can attempt. The game world usually follows some genre fiction theme and is managed by a human referee or computer. There are often rules for character progression and task and combat resolution.

Call-out 2.1: Role-playing games

Box insert 2.8: Common characteristics across RPG forms

	TRPG	LARP	CRPG	MORPG
Play situation				
<i>Social</i>	Small group (ca. 2-6+)	Small to large groups (ca. 2-500+)	Single person	Massive population (1 mio.+), acting both alone and in temporary and lasting groups (ca. 3-40+)
<i>Spatial</i>	Face-to-face around a table	One or more face-to-face groups in a shared space	Private space with computing device	Individuals in private spaces with computing devices, accessing a joint mediated game world via Internet

<i>Temporal</i>	Synchronous play over multiple sessions, lasting hours at a time	Synchronous play over one continuous session, lasting hours to days	Multiple sessions, lasting minutes to hours at a time	Multiple sessions, lasting minutes to hours; players may synchronize joint play
<i>Role differentiation</i>	Referee determines and controls game world and enacts non-player characters, players enact player characters	One or more referees determine and control game world; some players enact non-player characters guided by referees, players enact player characters	Computer determines and controls game world, including non-player characters, player enacts player character(s)	Computer determines and controls game world, including non-player characters, players enact player characters, some players may determine parts of the game world through pre-scripted rules and tools
<i>Ethos</i>	Participants collaborate towards a shared autotelic experience	Participants collaborate towards a shared autotelic experience	Individual aims for an autotelic experience	Individuals aim for autotelic experience, in collaboration with others or at their cost (grief play)
Characters				
<i>Player-Character Relation</i>	Players create, enact, and govern the actions of individual characters	Players create and enact individual characters	The player creates and governs the actions of one or more characters	Players create, enact, and govern the actions of individual characters
Game world				
<i>Constitution</i>	Joint talk, often supported by props like character sheets, rule books, or maps fixating rule-relevant facts	Real physical locations and props and participants embodying characters, with varying degrees of identity or similarity with the represented entities	A computational model generating audiovisual representations on the player's interface that ground the player's imagination, updating model and representation in response to player input	A computational model generating audiovisual representations on the players' local interfaces that ground their imagination, updating model and representation in response to player input
<i>Theme</i>	Usually genre fiction: fantasy, science fiction, horror, etc. or a genre mix	The same	The same	The same
Rules				
<i>Possible actions</i>	Attempted character actions are limited only by the imagination of controlling players	Attempted character actions are limited by the imagination and/or bodily abilities of embodying players	Attempted character actions are limited to options made available through the game interface	Attempted character actions are limited to options made available through the game interface

<i>Action resolution</i>	Determined by agreement, usually involving a quantitative-probabilistic rule system	Determined by a mixture of agreement, bodily abilities, and rules that are sometimes quantitative-probabilistic	Determined by a quantitative-probabilistic rule system, in real-time play involving the player's reflexes and hand-eye coordination	Determined by a quantitative-probabilistic rule system, in real-time play involving the player's reflexes and hand-eye coordination
<i>Combat</i>	Extensive rules for combat	Extensive rules for combat in some games	Extensive rules for combat	Extensive rules for combat
<i>Progression</i>	PCs improve over time via systems for progression	In some games, PCs improve over time via systems for progression	PCs improve over time via systems for progression	PCs improve over time via systems for progression
<i>Closure points</i>	Play is open-ended, though participants usually aim for satisfying closures per session	Play is usually one self-contained session, though some connect multiple sessions	Play is open-ended, though players usually aim for satisfying closures per session	Play is open-ended, though players usually aim for satisfying closures per session
<i>Pre-scripting</i>	Events arise from players' in-game goals and/or a planned plot through the design of the game world and referee steering	The same, plus in-game goals of NPCs partially steered by referee	Events are guided along pre-planned plots through the extensive scripting of the game world, with various degrees of freedom for players' goals	Event sequences can emerge from players' in-game goals; the game world usually entails multiple pre-scripted plots with clear end points players can choose to engage in

Table 1: Common characteristics across RPG forms

Common *forms* of the phenomena called “role-playing games” include tabletop role-playing games, live-action role play, computer role-playing games, and multiplayer online role-playing games. Forms differ in the structure of the play situation; the constitution and governance of the fictional world; and the form and importance of rules.

Styles of role-playing games usually differ in their creative agenda (Edwards 2004) – what kind of experience they pursue. A commonly distinguished dimension is rules- and combat-heavy styles emphasizing game-typical experiences of goal achievement and progress versus “free form” styles light on rules and combat, emphasizing theater-like experiences of immersion in and creative expression through role enactment. We find this in the TRPG vernacular “roll-play versus role-play”, “boffer” versus “freeform” larps, MUD versus MUSH, or regular versus “role-play intensive” MORPGs.

Again, this is an etic description of features prototypically occurring across the phenomena people across communities call “role-playing games” rather than natural kinds. We assume they partially overlap with people’s emic conceptions: as prototypical features, the more of them are perceived in a given phenomenon, the more likely people will view it as a ‘typical’ RPG. The less of them are observed in a given phenomenon, the more likely people will view it as ‘atypical’, ‘borderline’, ‘weird’, to the point where the phenomenon is not perceived to be an RPG at all.

The *commonalities* we find across forms are not accidental: they stem from a historical ancestry rooted in early tabletop RPGs, specifically *D&D*. Both early larps and CRPGs were intentional attempts by individuals socialized in TRPGs to emulate the TRPG experience in a new socio-technical context and overcome some of its limitations: lacking full-body immersion in character, dependency on other players, or tedious rule bookkeeping. MORPGs in turn were inspired by a desire to add multiplayer play to early text-based adventure games (e.g. *Zork*) and borrowed many of the game elements of *D&D* (Mortensen 2014) as well as to have a social *D&D*-like experience on a computer.

The *diversity* of forms results from the idiosyncratic evolution of those socio-material assemblages, including their designer and player communities. Each initial form afforded and constrained role-play in different ways but each assemblage evolved over time as designer and player communities explored possible uses and changes. This cycle of innovation and contestation breeding new conventions (leading to further innovation and contestation) led to a wide range of local and historical variety. Japanese TRPGs for instance historically followed Japanese CRPGs which were modeled on imported of ‘Western’ CRPGs – this partially explains why they have taken such a different form compared to ‘Western’ RPGs.

Another cause of diversity: TRPGs and larps are particularly less pre-scripted and mass-homogenized than their CRPG and MORPG brethren. Videogame hardware and software are mass-produced and mass-distributed across the globe, creating relatively homogenous material conditions for play. This contrasts with TRPGs and larps that have arguably seen only one major brand of global homogenizing scale: *Dungeons & Dragons*. The material objects of TRPGs and larps – rulebooks, dice, paper sheets, props – likewise do not prescript specific usages. Even when rulebooks and scenarios include detailed instructions, they have to be interpreted, and agreed upon by the local player group. This *underdetermination* is arguably one reason why

TRPG rulebooks often include explanatory “What are RPGs?” sections and scripts of sample gameplay: to demonstrate the *practice* of playing TRPGs. It also afforded the emergence of very different local larp and TRPG cultures and traditions, and even of very different TRPG playing styles within one local culture or even player group.

Summary

Many definitions of “role-play” and “role-playing games” have been suggested, but there is no broad consensus. People disagree because they often have an unclear idea what *kind* of phenomena they are talking about, and therefore, what *kind* of definition is appropriate. Existing definitions often assume games and with them, RPGs to be a natural kind with some unchanging essence. However, since “role-playing games” is a social category created by humans, it has no unchanging, context-independent essence. Hence, if we ask for a definition of “role-playing games”, we can only refer to *either* how particular groups at particular points in time empirically use the word and organize actions and the material world around it, *or* how we as a scientific observer choose to use the word to foreground and understand a particular perspective: viewing RPGs *as* a performance, or *as* a virtual economy, etc.

RPGs can be historically traced to a shared historical ancestor: the tabletop RPG *Dungeons & Dragons*. From there, RPGs and their communities evolved increasingly idiosyncratic forms and styles, afforded by their material underdetermination. Commonly recognized forms are tabletop role-playing games, live-action role-playing games, computer role-playing games, and multiplayer online role-playing games. Common styles – ideas of what experience one hopes to achieve through play – are achieving goals and making progress according to rules, acting out and immersing oneself in a role, creating an interesting story, or simulating a world.

Every local community, form, or style captures only a subset of all the phenomena people call “role-playing games”, and carries with it some implicit or explicit normative ideas about what makes an RPG ‘good’. Thus, people often disagree on the definition of “role-playing games” because they are usually only familiar with and/or aesthetically prefer a subset of RPG forms, styles, and communities: “this is not a role-playing game” often means “this is not something I am familiar with calling and/or like in RPGs”.

Still, across forms and styles of RPGs, some characteristics commonly reoccur: they are play activities and objects revolving around the rule-structured creation and enactment of characters in a fictional world. Players create, enact, and govern the actions of characters, defining and pursuing their own goals, with great choice in what actions they can attempt. The game world, including characters not governed by individual players, usually follows some fantastic genre fiction theme and there are often rules for character progression and combat resolution.

Forms diverge in the structure of the play situation; the constitution and governance of the fictional world; and the form and importance of rules. Play situations range from a single player and computer to small face-to-face groups to large co-located or online mediated populations that organize into smaller groups. The fictional world may be constituted through joint talk and inscriptions; physical locales, props, and player bodies; or computer models and user interfaces. It can be governed by one or more human referees or a computer. Rules may be extensive or minimal, resolving the outcome of actions by player negotiation, a model and testing of probabilities, physical abilities of players, or combinations of all three.

Given the social constitution of role-playing games and the diversity of their forms and styles, we argue that it is pointless to capture an ‘essential nature’ in a definition. Instead, as the following chapter begin to do, it is more fruitful to empirically describe this diversity, and analyze it through a multitude of explicit disciplinary perspectives: not asking what something RPGs *are*, but what we can learn when we view them *as* a particular something.

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Acknowledgments

This work was partly conducted in the Digital Creativity Labs (digitalcreativity.ac.uk), jointly funded by EPSRC/AHRC/InnovateUK under grant no EP/M023265/1.

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¹ This means that it will differ across groups, change over time, and that there will be disagreement within and between groups about “what ‘role-playing games’ are”. Also, any account of “role-playing games” participates in this circulation of actions, norms, understandings, and artifacts that constitutes them, and thus changes the object observed (Hacking 1999). In the simplest case, people reading this book may have a changed idea of “role-playing games”, and play, make or talk about RPGs differently as a result.

² This is why tabletop RPGs are also commonly called pen-and-paper RPGs. Other common names include role-playing games, fantasy adventure games, and fantasy role-playing games.