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1 The Many Faces of Role-Playing Game Studies

Sebastian Deterding; José Zagal

We all role-play. Mere toddlers, we imitate the adult world around us, playing pretend by hosting stuffed animal tea parties and grocery visits. As young children, we become pirates and sorcerers and go on underwater expeditions in the living room, momentarily transcending the bounds of our bodies, skills, and parents. As adolescents, we discover the power of being someone else on a stage in drama class. We try on and shed social roles in quick succession in the desperate desire to become and be recognized as *someone.* When we go to the theater, read a book, or watch a movie, we imagine ourselves in the shoes of the protagonists, and bits of their fictional world may linger with us on the way home –the traffic light changing to green echoing a car chase scene, with us as the super-spy bringing the engine to a roar, for a moment transcending the norms of responsible adulthood. In our private life, our therapists ask us to re-enact traumatic episodes of our past, and we confide in sexual partners the scenarios that captivate and stoke our desire. In the working world, we partake in drills, dry-runs, team-building and 'leadership and communication' exercises where we assume the roles of manager and under-performing employee, or emergency patient and doctor. We work hard to be taken

seriously as ‘doctors’ or ‘managers’ or just ‘parents’ in social roles we are insecure we will succeed at. And in everyday life, we ‘put on a face’ and ‘play our part’ as required by the endless succession of social occasions, gatherings, and rituals until we reach the last act, our own funeral, where for once we only have to show up and can leave the acting to the others.

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

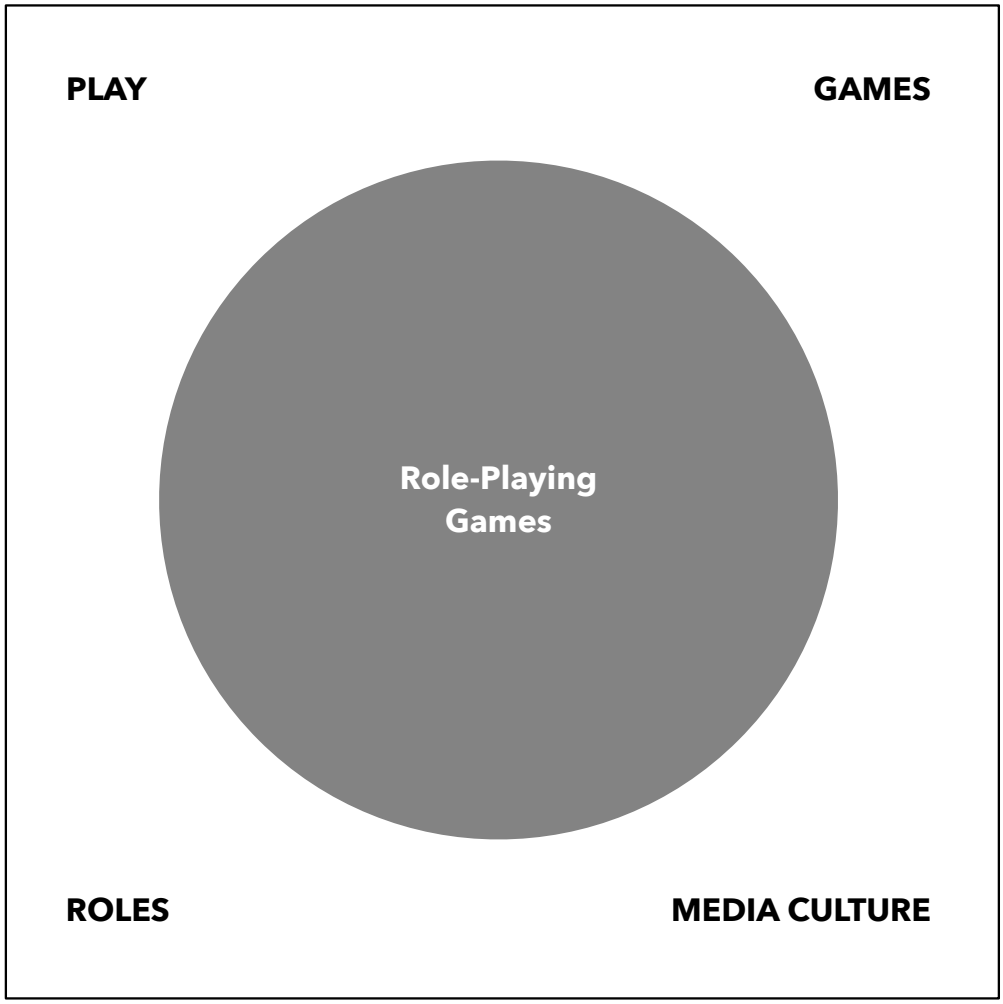

Figure 1.1: Role-Playing Games at the Intersection of Roles, Play, Games, and Media Culture

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

RPGs sit at the intersection of four phenomena – roles, play, games, and media culture (Figure 1.1). They take a fundamental form of play – make-believe – and a fundamental

aspect of social reality and identity – roles – and give them the structured form of a game. They arose from and sit at the heart of much of contemporary fandom, "geek", and increasingly, mainstream media culture. To understand RPGs, their forms, origins, and social place, it is useful to examine them through the lens of these four phenomena in turn.

Role-Playing Games as Play

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

Symbolic play may be what set humans apart from other animals. Humans exhibit specific forms of play otherwise only rudimentarily found in higher primates, namely strong symbolic, as-if, or *pretense play*, socio-dramatic or *role-play*, and *rule play* involving explicit, predefined, and not spontaneously re-negotiable rules (Konner 2010, 89-93). Developmental psychologists note that these forms typically occur in rough

succession during a child's development, potentially mirroring their evolutionary emergence: first comes pretense play, in which players jointly enact a script around a (non-existent or re-interpreted) object, like "going to bed" with a puppet and magazine as child and blanket. This evolves into role-play, where players stick to the scripts that make up a situational role (the mother, the child), and finally turns into rule play, where players fluidly re-enact and reshuffle existing scripts and also agree on explicit shared rules governing their actions (Oerter 1999, 93-103; Pellegrini 2009, 18-20).

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

Role-Playing Games as Roles

RPGs involve *roles*, another universal human phenomenon with more than a century of research (see Biddle 1986, Turner 2001 for reviews). Roles are patterns of behaviors and

attitudes expected from a person occupying a given social position. As such, roles are a fundamental part of the power structures and processes of a society. Roles also provide resources and strategies to those occupying a position (Lynch 2007). During a 'restaurant visit', for instance, we expect the person acting as 'server' to do certain things like distribute menus, take orders, and care for our wellbeing. These expectations also provide a script for performing 'waiting tables', and certain rights (like interrupting our conversation to ask whether we'd like coffee). And, if we go along with it, the server may turn their role performance into an informal conversation among friends, a curt and formal affair, or something else entirely.

Roles are fundamentally involved in people's identities, selves, and self-concepts (Stets and Serpe 2013, Owens and Samblanet 2013). In our lives, we typically occupy and move between multiple – often conflicting – roles. Our identities are partially construed from the social roles we and others ascribe to ourselves. Similarly, our self and self-concept – the thoughts, emotions, identities, and motives we attribute to ourselves as what constitutes us, and the thoughts and feelings about this self – are formed from the experience of interacting in situational roles with others.

In RPGs, people adopt situational roles of players and are free to play with – temporarily try on, explore, experience, act out, subvert – alternative roles, identities, and selves by enacting the character of a revered healer, a megalomaniac salesperson, a brooding scientist, etc. In a sense, to inhabit a specific role is to follow the social rules defining that role, some of which may be quite explicit and specify goals, progress, or failure for that role. Yet RPGs – like games in general – are *played*, which as we saw entails voluntary participation and reduced 'serious' consequences. This sets RPGs apart

from ‘real’ social roles, which typically cannot be entered and left at will and whose rules are obligatory and can incur serious social consequences if broken.

Role-Playing Games as Playing with Roles

This also puts RPGs in the long cultural tradition of rituals, celebrations, theater, and others forms of *performance* where role-play (and rule play) are institutionalized to serve social functions in the adult world (Stephenson 2015; Schechner 2006) **(see chapter 11)**. Consider rites of passage, weddings, funerals and other events that *transform* the social world and its actors; parades, religious processions, or other official proceedings that *present* an ideal order of things; or happenings, sit-ins, protests, or modern theater pieces that *re-present* and question the actual current social order. All performances help reproduce the social and moral bonds of a group by creating strong experiences of shared emotions, moral sentiments, and belonging. Compared with them, RPGs present the interesting case where ‘child’s play’ is institutionalized and prolonged into adulthood, but not for the ‘respectable’ purposes of rituals or celebrations. Instead, they emerged as a form of *leisure* and *entertainment* in affluent modern nation states (Fine 1983; Turner 1982).

Role-Playing Games as Games

Beyond play and roles, RPGs involve rule play or games. The systematic scholarly study of games is relatively recent. It flourished with the use of simulations and serious games in the early 1970s (Abt 1971, Crookall 2012) and intensified with the rise of digital games in the early 2000s (Aarseth 2001). Although debates about the definition of

"games" are ongoing **(see Chapter 2)**, games are commonly seen as involving goals and rules that turn the attainment of those goals into a non-trivial challenge – e.g. overcoming a human opponent or material obstacle (Juul 2005).

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

Role-Playing Games as Media Culture

RPGs grew from and sit at the heart of contemporary *media culture*. Beyond deep sociological ties (play, games, performance), RPGs can be traced to several immediate cultural precursors **(see Chapter 3)** among 'hobby' wargaming and fantastic literature. Examples that influenced early RPGs include J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth, R.E. Howard's Hyborian Age of Conan, Fritz Leiber's Nehwon, or the Cthulhu Mythos created by H.P. Lovecraft and his literary friends. Early RPGs not only created their settings from liberal pastiches of Tolkien, Howard, and similar "sword and sorcery" authors: they catered to and attracted players from wargaming and science fiction and fantasy fandom, and through their popularity, helped solidify the tropes and market of the fantasy genre. This puts RPGs at the center of the modern phenomenon of "disenchanted

enchantment" (Saler 2012, 12). As secularization, rationalization, and bureaucratization ridded our modern lifeworld of deeper experiences of spiritual, magical, or sublime meaning and awe, fiction authors reinstated imaginary worlds full of such enchantment, albeit with an ironic consciousness of their 'as if' status **(see Chapter 12)**.

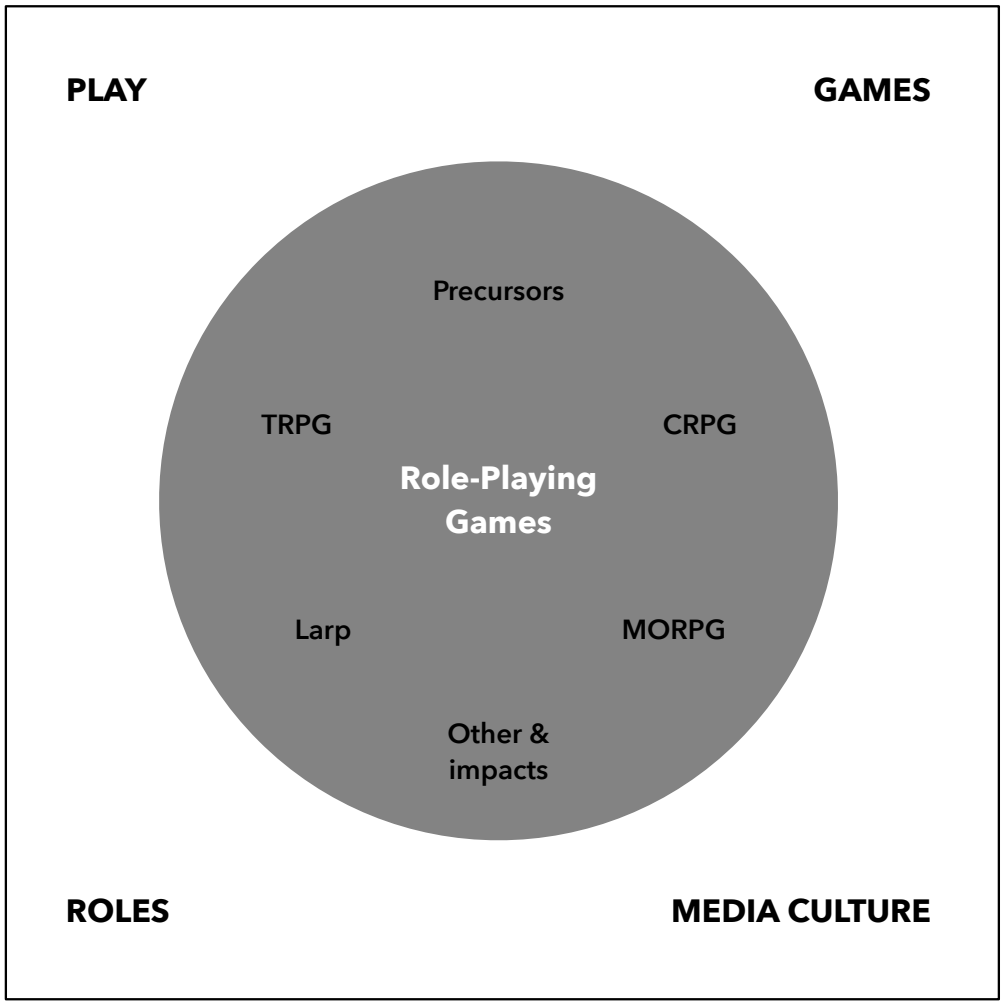

Figure 1.2: Forms of Role-Playing Games

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

Box Insert 1.1: LARP, Larp, or larp?

While LARP as an acronym stands for live action role-play, in recent years, "larp" is being used as a noun (and verb) by some player communities. For example, players might say "I designed this great larp" or "Let's go larping tomorrow". Like laser, radar, and scuba in the past, larp is in the process of turning from an acronym into its own

meaningful lexical unit: a new word. We have decided to use it as such, not in all-caps, throughout this book. We recognize that this may be a bit confusing when seen side-by-side with the other acronyms (TRPG, CRPG), but we hope you will bear with us.

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

However, RPGs are also part of the throbbing heart of fandom – a passage rite and secret language, a stigma to the outer world that signifies 'true' belonging and commitment to the inner group. A core aspect of fandom is participating in a fictional world by consuming and discussing media while also extending and co-creating it. RPGs make the shared creation and inhabiting of fictional worlds their focal practice. Large parts of the global population today immerse themselves in *transmedia* worlds like *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, or *Game of Thrones*. A significant subset of people also engage with these worlds in participatory ways: fan fiction, costume play, and more. In the age of convergence culture, fandom and its transmedia practices have gone mainstream (Jenkins 2006). Alternate and Augmented Reality Games that layer

game rules and game world over everyday life are becoming the digital hope of media and advertising industries (Rose 2011). Many of the involved practices and forms were first developed in RPGs: Long before the *Atlas of Middle-Earth*, *Discworld Companion*, or *Pop-Up Guide to Westeros*, RPG authors and referees had to flesh out guides and maps to fictional worlds, learn to write scenarios rich with potential starting points and conflicts for emergent player action, and manage a fictional world in response to multiple players' actions to give each a satisfying experience. This puts them at the cutting edge of contemporary transmedia authorship of franchises or alternate reality games. RPGs popularized the practice of genre-mixing like Science-Fantasy (*Gamma World*, *Shadowrun*) or Horror-Western (*Deadlands*). They spawned successful novelizations, comics, board and video games, and movies **(see Chapters 9 and 21)**.

Why Study Role-Playing Games?

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

In terms of *play*, RPGs provide insight into adult pretense and role-play, which occur in many places besides RPGs: many board, card, and video games have moments of emergent micro role-play. Contemporary cultural practices like cosplay, attending renaissance fairs, Steampunk events, theme parties, or increasingly high-profile, mainstream immersive theater productions by groups like Punchdrunk **(see chapter 11)** all entail role-play. Even in day-to-day life, we often engage in day-dreaming "barely games" (Davies 2009), little bouts of private role-play. Besides answering fundamental

psychological and sociological questions regarding how adult pretense play works – how people create shared immersion **(see Chapter 22)** –, RPG literature provides great insight into designing for it.

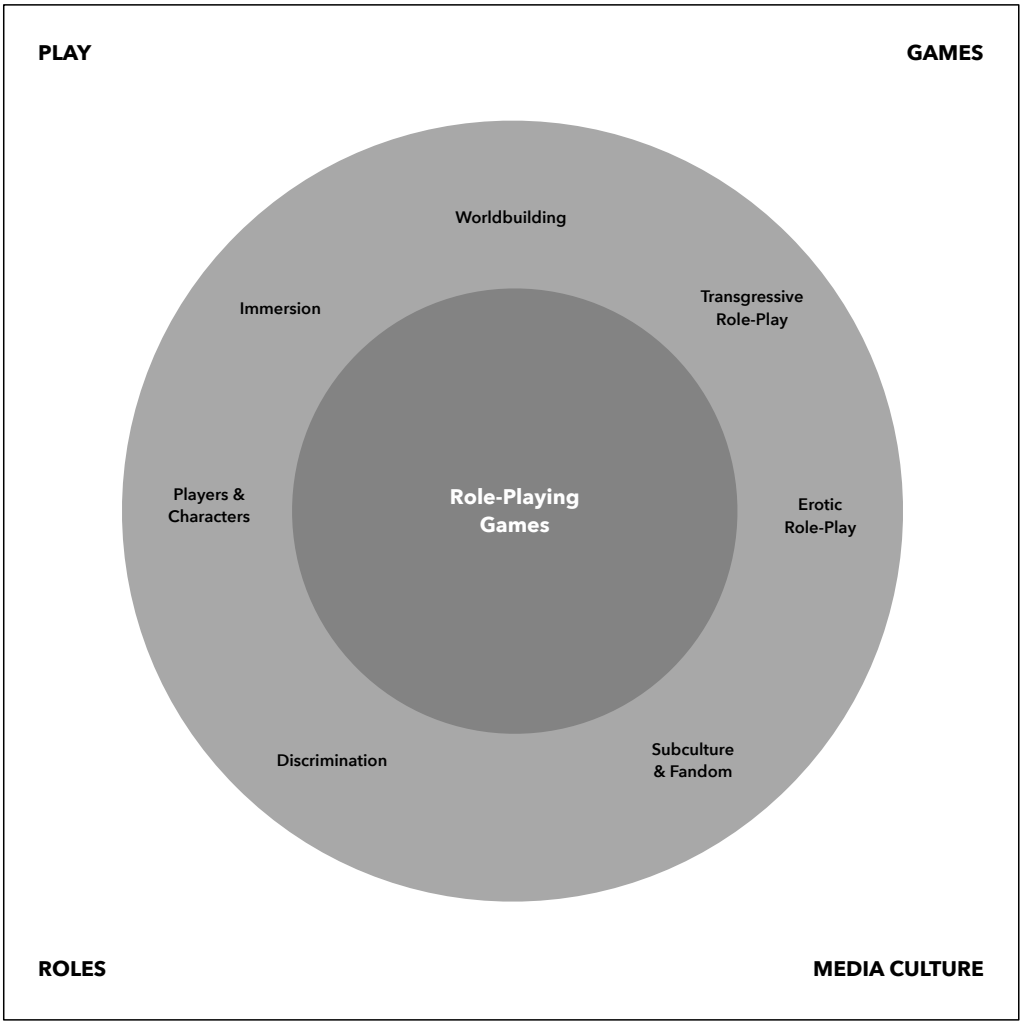

Figure 1.3: Issues in Role-Playing Game Studies

Moving on to *roles*, RPG scholarship has developed a deep understanding of the many ways players, their identities, and selves relate to their in-game characters and avatars.

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

Speaking of *games*, RPGs are an important transmedia genre of games which has explored and refined many aspects of game design and play that designers and scholars coming from other genres can draw rich inspiration from: world building **(see Chapter 20)**, the materiality of games **(see Chapter 17)**, and the myriad ways of organizing and sharing control over game events between referees, players, and game systems **(see Chapter 27)**. Many video game genres are deeply informed by RPG game mechanics like progression systems **(see Chapter 18)**. Studying RPGs is essential to understand the history of video games and inform the future of game design across genres and media.

RPG tropes not only deeply influenced games, but also *media culture* writ large, yet this historical legacy is still underexplored **(see Chapter 9)**. RPGs have thriving fan subcultures of their own, while also connecting and pervading science fiction and fantasy fandom more generally **(see Chapter 21)**. As such, RPGs are an exemplary site for studying and understanding stereotyping and discrimination in fan cultures **(see Chapter**

26), or the way subcultural and adult play practices are cast as deviant in public discourse **(see Chapter 24)**. The virtual-real economies of MORPGs are an essential site of experimentation with new forms of labor, intellectual property, business models, and governance **(see Chapter 16)**. All this makes RPG research vital to understanding contemporary media culture and its economies.

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

A (Brief) History of Role-Playing Games Research

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

has been deeply influential for RPG scholars in performance studies **(see Chapter 11)** and sociology **(see Chapter 12)**.

As noted, the 1980s were also witness to a moral panic as studied by communication researchers **(see Chapter 19)**. Journalists, religious spokespersons, and other moral entrepreneurs warned of the harmful effects of RPG play on youth, which triggered a counter-response of researchers, who, over the course of the 1980s and early 1990s, questioned the negative effects of RPGs and in turn highlighted a number of potential positive therapeutic, educational, pro-social, and cognitive effects of playing them.[1] A firebrand in this debate was Patricia Pulling's (1989) book *The Devil's Web: Who Is Stalking Your Children for Satan?*, linking *D&D* to satanic rituals, insanity, and perversion, and author and game designer Michael A. Stackpole's *Pulling Report* (1990), a meticulous deconstruction of Pulling's book and its argument. Most other general audience books from this time period consist of introductions to the hobby of roleplaying (e.g. Butterfield, Parker, and Honigmann 1982; Livingstone 1982; Albrecht and Stafford 1984); guides for improving RPG play (e.g. Plamondon 1982; Gygax 1987); or bibliographies (Schick 1991).

Like much fandom research, RPG scholarship is characterized by intense para-academic scholarship and aca-fandom: RPG designers and fans early on developed thoughtful and theoretical discourse of their own and many university academics studying RPGs either started out as fan-scholars 'professionalizing' their work, or are self-identifying RPG fans who turned their leisure time activity into their research subject (see Hills 2002, Mason 2004) **(see Chapter 10)**. Already in the 1980s, designers and players began reflecting about the design and play of RPGs at conventions as well as in

magazines and fanzines like *Dragon*, *Different Worlds*, *Alarums & Excursions*, or the short-lived *Interactive Fantasy*. This fan discourse flourished with the rise of the Internet and online communication tools in the 1990s, on Usenet discussion groups like rec.games.frp.advocacy or the online discussion board *The Forge*. Another focal point of fan theorizing and aca-fandom have been the Knutepunkt conventions, an annual gathering of the Nordic larp community. Knutepunkt has published proceedings and companion books since 2001 and is a source of much contemporary larp scholarship and design literature, as well as a culture of manifestos advancing larp as an artistic medium by articulating particular aesthetic visions **(see Chapter 5)**. Today, RPG scholars, designers, and players actively promote the exchange between fandom and academia through panels and publications at events like *WyrdCon*, *Intercon*, *Living Games*, or *NecronomiCon*. Beyond general theories and models of RPGs and their design, this fan scholarship has shaped debates about play and design styles and the cultural role of RPGs **(see Chapter 10)**.

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

Environments, then named *Journal of MUD.* Bartle's paper spearheaded research around player personalities and motives in RPGs **(see Chapter 10)**.

Figure 1.4: Disciplines of Role-Playing Games Studies

The 2000s saw game studies flourish as an interdisciplinary field, initially focused on digital games, with important waymarks like the founding of the journal *Game Studies* in 2001 and the *Digital Games Research Association* (DiGRA) in 2003. RPG research

thrived with the rise of game studies in general, and RPG scholars have chiefly gathered within this community. Worthy of note are Pat Harrigan's and Noah Wardrip-Fruin's book trilogy *First Person* (2004), *Second Person* (2007), and *Third Person* (2009). These collections of essays, responses, case studies, design reflections, and games bridged new media and game scholarship, circling around role-play, performance, storytelling, and the authorship of fictional worlds and "vast narratives" found in RPGs.

In the 2000s, scholars in fields such as sociology **(see Chapter 12)**, communication research and media studies **(see Chapter 19)**, and human-computer interaction followed Fine with ethnographies of RPG communities, their community dynamics, framing processes, or negotiations of the boundaries of work and play. They were joined by scholars who explored the psychology of player motives, immersion, player-avatar relations, and gaming addiction **(see Chapter 13)**. These strands coalesced in the mid- to late 2000s when the success of MORPGs, particularly *World of Warcraft* (WoW), put MORPGs on the center stage of game studies for several years (e.g. Corneliussen and Rettberg 2008). Economists studied MORPGs **(see Chapter 16)** interested in their virtual economies and interactions with real-world economics. Simultaneously, education researchers in communities like the *Games+Learning+Society* conference began exploring the use and design of edu-larps, "massively multiplayer classrooms" fashioned in the style of an MORPG, and the educational potential of RPGs more generally **(see Chapter 15)**. Literary and media scholars studied the forms of textuality, authorship, and narrative in RPGs **(see Chapter 14)**. Starting with Mackay (2001), researchers have begun to use theater and performance studies as a lens for RPG aesthetics, design, and play **(see Chapter 11)**. Design researchers became interested in

describing the particular design patterns and practices of RPGs **(see Chapter 18)**. Scholars informed by science and technology studies **(see Chapter 17)** have begun to disentangle the many roles of material artifacts in RPGs. And true to the intertwining of RPG fandom and scholarship, independent authors like Peterson (2012) and Appelcline (2015) have produced substantial historiographies of the emergence and evolution of TRPGs and RPGs more generally.

Today, RPG studies is a small, but established and lively scholarly community with a diverse and growing body of organizations, conferences, journals, and monographs, including a DiGRA special interest group on roleplaying (formed in 2008), the *International Journal of Roleplaying* inaugurated in 2009 (Drachen 2009), and starting in 2014, the semi-regular summit of RPG Studies, hosted as part of the general DiGRA conference.

Purpose and Plan of This Book

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

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

Second, following the diversity of RPG forms and local cultures, RPG research itself has remained somewhat siloed. MORPG research doesn't necessarily build upon TRPG research (and vice versa). CRPG scholars examine different questions and make

different assumptions of RPGs than larp scholars. What is true for US-American CRPGs and MORPGs might not be true for Korean ones. The list goes on. Collecting, comparing, and contrasting findings across forms and cultures and disciplines not only enriches our understanding of each individual phenomenon: it is essential for constructing a holistic study of RPGs as an interdiscipline. Yet RPG scholars currently have no easy way of reviewing the state of research on other RPG forms, cultures, or disciplines.

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

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

As such, this book is designed as a hybrid textbook and handbook: Each chapter provides a synthesis of the current state of research on a core perspective or aspect of

RPG studies. That said, each chapter is written without expectations of prior knowledge and includes definitions of key terms and recommended further readings. A handy glossary at the beginning points to definitions of key RPG terms.

The book is organized in four sections, which can be seen as concentric rings (Figure 1.4): At the center – **Chapter 2** – sits the introduction and *definition* of RPGs. For novices unfamiliar with one or several RPG forms, it offers grounding narrative descriptions and exemplary vignettes of each. It then presents philosophical and linguistic considerations regarding what kind of definition is appropriate for RPGs. Rather than searching for one 'true' definition of the 'essence' of RPGs, the chapter advocates a pluralism of disciplinary perspectives and empirical attention to the variety of things we call "role-playing games".

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

Section III includes *disciplinary perspectives* on RPGs and constitutes the outer ring of our conceptual map: performance studies **(Chapter 11)**, sociology **(Chapter 12)**, psychology **(Chapter 13)**, literary studies **(Chapter 14)**, education **(Chapter 15)**, economics **(Chapter 16)**, science and technology studies **(Chapter 17)**, game design

(Chapter 19), and communication research **(Chapter 20)**. Given its prominent role in the formation of RPG studies, fan theorizing receives its own, extended treatment **(Chapter 10)**. Each of these chapters gives a short introduction into the field; explains how RPGs are seen in that field (as performances, markets, texts, etc.); describes what makes them interesting to that field; and surveys existing disciplinary work on RPGs. Any additional number of disciplines could have been brought to bear upon RPGs – art history or moral philosophy come readily to mind. But we highlight those disciplines that have already produced significant work on RPGs.

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

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

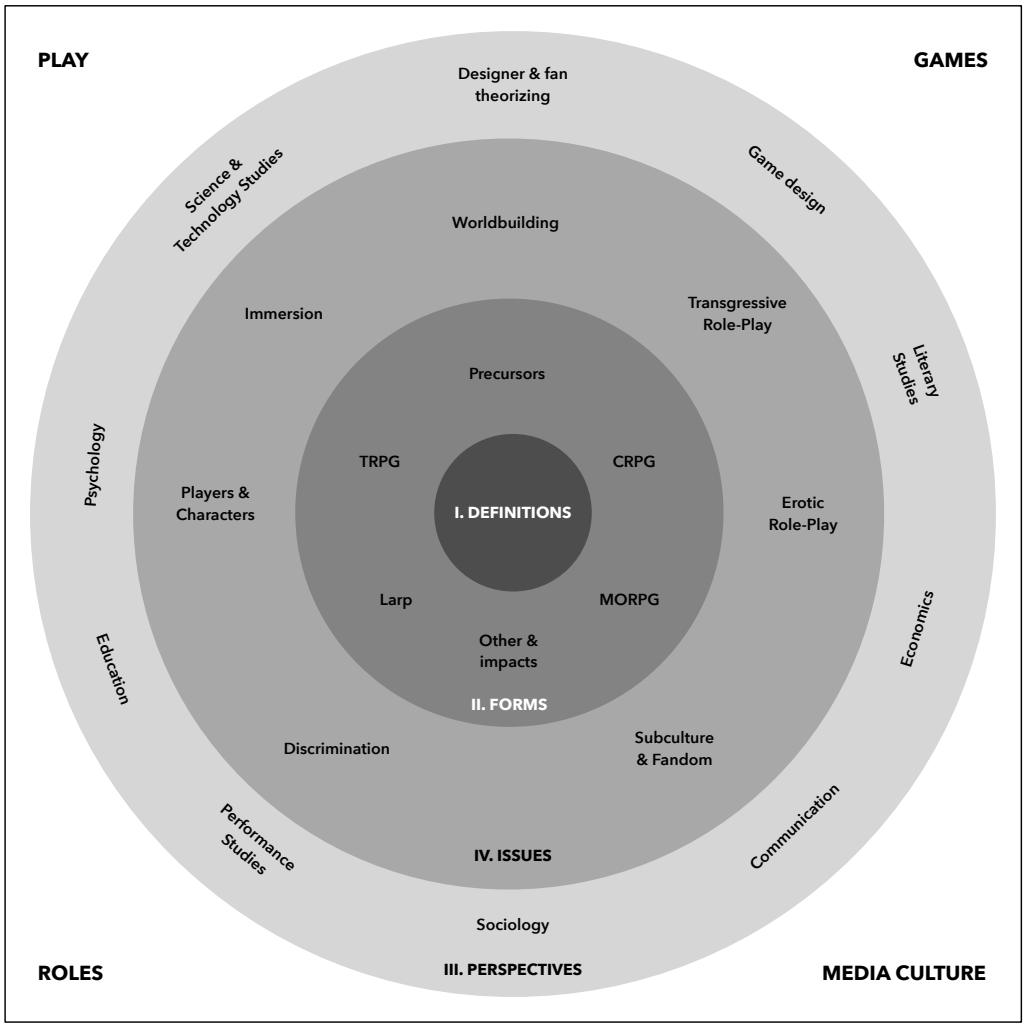

Figure 1.5: A Conceptual Map of the Book

Summary

RPGs sit at the intersection of four phenomena – play, roles, games, and media culture. They foreground a particular form and constitutive aspect of *play*, shared pretense or make-believe. Through pretense play, they allow players to temporarily step out of their

existing social *roles* and try on and explore alternative roles. This makes RPGs relevant to e.g. sociologists or psychologists interested in adult pretense or basic processes of situational sense-making and role-taking. As rule-play or *games*, they are structured by formal rules and goals and a rich source of influential and inspiring game design. As *media culture*, they sit at the heart of modern disenchanted enchantment and contemporary media fandom and prefigure increasingly mainstream media phenomenon like transmedia storytelling or virtual-real economics. Finally, RPGs are a popular cultural form, practice, industry, and artistic medium, forming and informing the vanguard of contemporary theater, media, and performance art as well as experience design. And for more than four decades, they have been used for non-entertainment purposes like therapy, training, or activism.

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

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