

Role-Playing as Interactive Construction of Subjective Diegeses

What is role-playing? Some five guys sit in a room, rolling dice and chatting about stuff. On the physical level, this is very true, but what is the important thing happening at the same time? Every guy in the room *imagines*. They imagine their characters from first-person perspective, listening to other participants communicating

what they imagine, adding that to their image. Occasionally, they spontaneously imagine their character doing something, and communicate this to the others. As I'm going to explain below, using the academic vocabulary, they *construct diegeses in interaction*. After discussing the nature of role-playing, I'll explicate what is the small but crucial difference of a larp and a tabletop game.

The Author

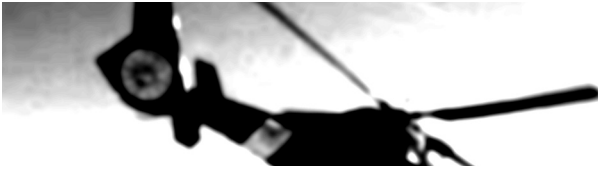
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He is a member of the Finnish rpg-theory clique; in Ropecon 2002 he presented his adaptation of the chaos model of organizations for role-playing, introducing the concepts of integrative and dissipative role-playing.

During the last couple of years, the concept of "diegesis" has become increasingly important in building the theories of role-playing. Speaking in broad terms, a diegesis means a fictional world or the truth about what exists in a fictional world. Something within a diegesis is called diegetic, something outside it is called non-diegetic. What is a diegetic gun in the diegesis of Pulp Fiction is a non-diegetic prop in the hand of the real-world actor. Usually every movie creates one diegesis (though Matrix or Truman Show can be seen creating a layered diegesis or two diegeses), which is then interpreted differently by every watcher.

Many people, such as Pohjola (1999) and Hakkarainen and Stenros (2002), use diegesis to mean an objective truth of the game world. I believe that understanding a diegesis as a subjective truth proves more accurate and fruitful. Every participant constructs his or her diegesis when playing, the crucial process of role-playing being the interaction of these

of the participants constructing the diegeses. A lot of what we imagine into our diegeses never comes up; single character's personal plans or well-hidden emotions for example. They exist only in the diegesis of that player, though the he may communicate them to others' diegeses, either by diegetic or non-diegetic means.



diegeses. The difference of players' diegeses is essentially larger than the difference of different interpretations of a movie diegesis. There are four reasons for this: a) role-playing diegesis contains very different kind of stuff than a movie diegesis, b) diegeses are shared by communication which is never perfect, c) participants of the game have greatly different viewpoints, and d) in an rpg, there is no audience, but the co-creators do interpreting.

The contents of a role-playing diegesis and a movie diegesis are different. When it comes to role-playing, it's important to understand that a diegesis is much more than a fictional world with characters running around. There is a lot happening in the heads

As a diegesis includes everything we know about the world, it's the sum of the background information, the laws of the fictional reality (guided by natural sciences, rules and genre- and style definitions), the explicit symbolic feedback from other participants (both players and gamemasters), and one's original creation (thoughts, emotions, actions). In addition to facts about the diegetic material reality, it includes the perceived history, the expectations of future, hidden knowledge, and secret feelings. When you are scared when playing, the relationship of your fear and your character's fear is quite like the relation of a prop gun and a diegetic gun. In a movie diegesis, emotions and intentions exist and have meaning only as interpreted by

the watcher.

Genre, style and rules are often overlooked but very essential elements in a diegesis; they decide whether charging a hundred orcs is sensible choice for the toughest paladin in the kingdom. Player's diegesis almost always includes information his character doesn't know, and almost always it includes information the player doesn't realize he knows. Both gamemasters and players construct their diegeses from the same elements.

Diegeses are shared by communication. Communication is never perfect; no meaning is ever perfectly translated to symbols, and no symbol is ever understood perfectly. There can't be an "objective diegesis shared by all participants", because an "objective diegesis" cannot be shared. When the gamemaster declares "there's a big rock on the field", how big is the rock? Can my character hide behind it? Can he lift it? Throw it? By testing the diegetic object I learn many of its qualities, but even if the GM shows me a picture of the rock, the interpretations of the rock differ. We'd need telepathy to understand what kind of a rock the characters are facing.

While the most of the stuff we create into our mental landscapes is our own creation, the most of the feelings and thoughts experienced by the other participants are never announced. We believe we share a static, objective

world, where we all run around killing dragons together, but actually we all have our subjective little worlds, which are subject to change without warning. After the game has started, no-one knows everything going on in the realities of the game. When the diegeses are found to be in conflict, the gamemaster generally arbitrates between them, sometimes using tools (such as rules or dice) to help him.

The different viewpoints. When a book is interpreted, the different interpretations are made from same symbolic material using the point of view implicated by the material (who narrates a book?). Interpreting a rpg-diegesis every participant intentionally interprets the symbolic material differently, using a strongly different point of view – usually either using the subjective lenses of a character or the "objective and omniscient" view of a gamemaster. Often the players' diegeses are constructed contradictory on purpose by giving every player different symbolic material. This is what happens when GM takes some players to another room to play secret scenes. In a larp the difference of viewpoints is even more essential, as no-one can hear or see everything going on in the game.

The interpreters are co-creators. This boils down to the very basics of adapting the film'n'literature research on role-playing. When interpreting a movie diegesis, readers' interpretations differ. In role-play, the

interpretations of co-creators differ; there can't be "an objective game-master's diegesis" because the game-master is not the sole creator of the fiction. Though the GM often is the judge when the diegeses are found to be in conflict, his subjective view on

be watcher can interpret from the audio-visual feedback. As pointed out above, the role-playing diegeses contain uncommunicable ideas and feelings, which can't be translated into symbols. When interpreting a movie, the watcher uses an outsider's



the game is lacking and partial; he has no access to what happens inside players' heads. The choices the players make when producing their diegeses are dependent of their perceptions of the surroundings. The character moves close to the big rock because the player believes the rock is big enough to hide behind.

Due to the restrictions of media, the diegesis constructed watching a movie contains only stuff that can

viewpoint to interpret the emotional expressions or to analyze a piece of art. In role-play, interpreting the symbolic material is only used to assist in the creation of one's own diegesis. While a book is a piece of art we interpret to enjoy, a role-player creates his own piece of art, interpreting symbolic feedback to augment the creation he makes for himself.

Larp is where diegeses meet

reality

Now that we have come this far, defining the larp is surprisingly easy. In larp there is just one more element to diegesis-construction: physical reality. With the most definitions of role-play, the difference of larp and role-play can be defined like this:

rock. There is always some arbitration in larping, like when the larpwright rules that pointing a guy with a plastic gun and saying “blam” equals shooting the guy within diegeses. Not all these arbitrations are explicated; it’s implicitly clear that modern underwear, if used in a medieval larp,



Larp is a role-playing game, where the actual physical reality is used to construct diegeses, in addition to communication, both directly and arbitrarily.

The physical reality is directly used to construct a diegesis when the physical reality equals the diegetic reality – the size of a diegetic rock in larp equals the size of the physical

represents medieval underwear (even if its faux pas in the game). All larps use both the direct and arbitrary methods of representation – even though Fatland and Wingård declared in Dogme ‘99 that “*No object shall be used to represent another object*”, they accepted players representing characters.

In a tabletop game, we use physical

reality only as a medium of transmitting symbols. If I point another player with a finger, it often symbolizes my character pointing the other character with finger. However, I'm not using my body to represent my character's body; the symbol is well understood even if my character is hanging from a helicopter while I'm sipping tea on a sofa. In practice, many larps still use tabletop methods and vice versa.

The fact that reality can affect diegeses leads to an interesting consequence. In every larp, the physical reality contains significant potential for meanings not anticipated by or known to anyone in the game. When playing in a real medieval monastery, there's the slim chance of players actually finding an unknown secret passageway, which then becomes a diegetic element – until potentially overruled by the gamemasters. Just as the subjective diegeses contain many things known only to the players, the physical environment contains things no-one knows, and has a similar potential to interact with the diegeses.

Defining the larp as role-playing plus physical reality also answers the theoretical position of MUDs and all kinds of everquests. As with larp, all the following expects there to be role-players willing to role-play and construct diegeses in the game. Not all playing of *Neverwinter Nights* qualifies as virtual role-playing, just like not all wandering around the physical reality

qualifies as larping.

Virtual role-playing game is a role-playing game, where the virtual reality is used to construct diegeses, in addition to communication, both directly and arbitrarily.

Usually the virtual reality is used to construct diegeses mainly directly. If the gamemaster wants to make some door locked, he might announce that no-one may open the door, but usually uses the virtual reality directly to make it impossible without a key. Still, the element of arbitration always exists, beginning from the moment when GM declares that some bunch of pixels represents a door. It has been said that playing *Everquest* is not role-playing, because the virtual reality restricts the player in very unrealistic ways; virtual reality does not allow character to change his socks, for instance. This virtual restriction is very similar to the fact that I can't see blood when stabbing someone with a diegetic dagger in a larp. Just like in larp, arbitration can go around these problems if a sentient GM is present (or players arbitrate without a GM). It is also possible to role-play in a diegetic framework where changing socks is impossible, though it is true that this kind of a framework is simple and far from ideal.

Conclusions

The basic difference of a book and a role-play is that the role-players are both co-creators as well as an audience.

This text addresses the difference from the angle of interpretation. Interpretations are generally constructed from nearly identical symbolic material, while diegeses are constructed from different symbolic material, adding one's creation to the top of that. Meanings encoded into the building blocks of a role-play are interpreted, but the true meanings rise from the diegeses constructed using the interpretations.

Many gamemasters fancy themselves storytellers, creators of great plots unfolding as the game progresses. In larp, the problems of this approach have been widely recognized as the game is different for everyone, and only few witness the pivotal scenes

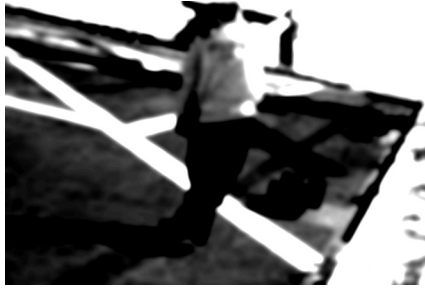
of the grand narrative. As Fatland and Wingård (1999) put it, *"This convention probably comes from organisers seeking to replicate movies, literature and theatre. A story in the non-interactive media necessarily has a limited amount of active characters. In LARP, an interactive form of art, the amount of actors and stories is theoretically unlimited"*. From the perspective of this article, grand plots are a common symptom of taking one shared and objective über-diegesis for granted. In role-play the amount of diegeses equals the number of participants, and telling a story by larp requires successfully communicating the story into every diegesis in game.

The problematic elements of diegesis-



construction are the ones that are difficult to classify as diegetic or non-diegetic. In larp, music is generally interpreted as diegetic, even if it's produced by an electric bard in a medieval game. In tabletop music sometimes represents diegetic music, but usually is only symbolic feedback assisting the construction of the diegesis. Playing the score of Crow and lighting some candles definitely makes my diegesis more

in the examined phenomenon, concealing some other elements in the process; for example, the ways of constructing a narrative with the game can't probably be fruitfully examined from this perspective. This model tries to explain the way role-playing is communication and creativity, but does not say that role-playing wouldn't be immersion, thrillseeking or storytelling as well.



goth and scary, but does my character recognize the gothness and scariness of the game world, if he does not hear the music? If a prop map represents a map in tabletop, does my tearing the map represent my character tearing the map? What if the diegetic map is in some other character's backpack? In larp the relation of a non-diegetic signifier and a diegetic signified is generally less arbitrary. Carsten Andraesen takes a closer look on these issues in his article in this book.

All in all, the view of diegesis is only one perspective for examining the role-playing. Every metaphorical approach opens our eyes for some elements

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