

# The Meilahti School Thoughts on Role-playing

## Foreword

This revised essay is an attempt to create a model describing role-playing games (RPGs). Even though there has been some writing on RPGs, so far no other serious, descriptive models attempting to define what RPGs actually are and how they are created exist. We are not interested, at this stage, in using tools created for theatre studies, organisational communication, ludology, or any other discipline. Before we can successfully use a tool from another field of study

we need to know what it is we are actually examining.

The purpose of this essay is to help define a theoretical framework for discussing role-playing and role-playing games. Any discussion needs a language shared by the participants to be meaningful, and sadly such a common language often seems to be missing when attempts to discuss role-playing are made.

We have attempted to define role-playing in a way that encompasses

## The Author

Jaakko Stenros, 26, studies sociology and communication studies in the University of Helsinki. Although he has been role-playing for a long time, he only started larping in 1995. He has never organized a larp, but he runs a traditional role-playing campaign and co-publishes panclou from time to time. His past glories include Linda Award Gala and other larp byproducts.

the different forms of playing that we know of and shuns normative choices that define the right, or better, ways of playing. Our wish is to encourage further and more detailed discussion of the subject, not declare one method of playing superior to others or try to limit the scope of role-playing based on our own preferences. We want to cover all games from classic Dungeons & Dragons games to post-modern Turku-school live-action games, and from table top games to computer assisted gaming.

It is important to note, however, that this model is necessarily an abstraction, and as such addresses ideal role-playing rather than role-playing culture in general. We have not been interested in examining the social structures underlying various gaming situations or the real-life dynamics between a game's actual

participants.

In short our attempt has been to create a descriptive model that covers and uncovers all the games that we intuitively call role-playing games on a theoretical level.

Thanks to Markus Montola, Syksy Räsänen, Taika Helola, Satu Heliö, Toni Sihvonen, Ville Marttila, Topi Pitkänen, Frans Mäyrä, Petri Lankoski, Mike Pohjola, Elge Larsson, Mike Holmes, and Fang Langford. Your questions, comments, argument, and encouragement made this text possible.

Helsinki, January 15th 2003

Henri Hakkarainen  
Jaakko Stenros

### The Author

Henri Hakkarainen is 23 years old and lives in Helsinki, Finland. He studies communications at the University of Helsinki.

He's been larping since 1994 and has organised several games since then. He has also done his time in the governing bodies of numerous organisations, including SuoLL, and helped in organising Ropecon on a couple of occasions.

These days he prefers to concentrate on theory, and playing in the really good games.

# The Meilahti Model

## Definition

A role-playing game is what is created in the interaction between players or between player(s) and gamemaster(s) within a specified diegetic framework.

Role-playing a role-playing game requires four things, a gamemaster, a player, interaction, and a diegetic framework. By “gamemaster” and “player” we are referring to roles assumed by participants. It is possible to switch from one role to another during one gaming session, and there can be a number of gamemasters and a number of players, but at least one of each is needed.

Diegesis is what is true within the game. Usually this means the game world. The diegetic frame is composed of what is true in the past (history of the frame and the characters), what the present is, and the expectations of the characters regarding the future. The gamemaster creates the diegetic frame and enunciates it in the depth that is necessary and possible.

Once the diegetic frame has been created, the gamemaster need not participate actively in the game, even though she has (and indeed must have) the possibility to jump in at any time. The gamemaster has total control

over the situation created, but she has to surrender part of that power either implicitly or explicitly to the player in order for meaningful interaction to be possible. Surrendering part of the creative control is necessary in order to make a distinction between role-playing and telling a story.

The gamemaster has the final say - nothing is true in the diegetic frame unless the gamemaster approves it (gamemasters usually implicitly approve all that the players have their characters do). This means that new elements cannot be incorporated into the game without the conceit of the gamemaster.

The player assumes a role, a subject position within the diegetic frame, approved by the gamemaster. The game is created in the interaction between the players or between the player and the game world. This process of interaction is defined as role-playing.

## Role, Character, and Player

A role is any subject position within a set discourse, an artificial closure articulating the player within the diegetic frame of the game or in a real-life situation. There is no need to differentiate between the roles the

player assumes within the diegetic frame and the roles assumed outside of it (in fact “player” is a role as well). They are all equally aspects of the participant’s fluid self; specific tools for interacting in certain situations according to a specific set of rules, and based on assumptions defined either explicitly or implicitly. (For an introduction to post-modern thinking on identity and the self, our basic framework for dealing with the concept of roles, see for an example Hall, 1988 and 1996)

A character is a framework of roles through which the player interacts within the game, and for which she constructs an illusion of a continuous and fixed identity, a fictional “story of self” binding the separate, disconnected roles together. It is important to note that the word “fictional” has a double meaning in this case, referring not only to the fictional nature of the diegetic frame, but also the illusionary quality of any notion of a fixed, stable identity. (Ibid.)

Usually the character is an anthropomorphic construct, a human-like being, but it is possible for the character to be anything from an inanimate object to a group of actors, such as a household, a corporation or a family. The only requirement is that the character needs to be able to communicate somehow - it needs to have the potential for interaction.

The term “character” has a double meaning in common usage. Character means not only the collection of roles played in a given setting, the interpretation created by the player, but it is also often used to refer to the actual concrete text given to the player by the gamemaster that describes the history and personality of the character. In this text we use the term “character” exclusively to refer to the collection of roles within a framework.

A player is a participant who assumes said roles within the diegetic frame. She usually plays one character at a time within the game world, but this need not always be so. The player can influence and even determine the events in the game within the boundaries set by the gamemaster.

The player has her own interpretation of the events of the game. The internal processes of the player are beyond the gamemaster’s control, but as soon as they are expressed, as soon as they become relevant to the game as a whole, the gamemaster has control over them again.

### **Diegesis**

Diegesis is what is true within the game. A diegetic frame is usually the game world, but as a game doesn’t have to take place in a world the term frame is adopted. The diegetic frame is composed of everything that is true in the game world (past, present, expectations of the future).

In practise this means that a written description of the history of the world is diegetic, but the rules of the game are not. Or to be more precise, what is described is diegetic, but the form of the description or the object where the description is stored may or may not be diegetic.

Non-diegetic factors should not ideally influence the possibilities available in the diegetic frame. This implies that the gamemaster must have the potential to actively influence the game while it is taking place, as full virtual realities are not yet available.

The player of course has her own interpretation of the diegesis (see Montola 2003, in this book), just as a reader constructs her own reading of a book or an audience member, or even an actor, of a play. However, once her interpretation is expressed and becomes relevant to the diegesis itself it is subject to the gamemaster's approval. Through this process the participants constantly adjust their readings of the game, and the gamemaster functions as the gatekeeper of the diegesis.

### **Gamemaster**

Gamemastering is a role adopted by a participant when defining the diegetic framework of the game. Usually one person assumes this responsibility for the entire duration of the game, but this does not need be so. There can be more than one gamemaster and

the participants can go from being a player to being a gamemaster and vice versa during a gaming session, as long as not everyone is a gamemaster at the same time.

Gamemaster has a number of synonyms in circulation: Game Moderator, Storyteller, Dungeon Master, Narrator, etc. We use the term gamemaster as it is very widespread and because it nicely underlines the fact that this role carries power.

The gamemaster has many tools for creating the diegetic frame. When describing the frame, the gamemaster not only describes what is currently in the frame, but also what is possible within the frame. As such the gamemaster is the highest authority in the game, but she must also surrender a part of the power to the player.

The gamemaster also defines the limits of the power passed to the players. Often this takes the form of defining, implicitly or explicitly, the medium (e.g. role-playing, live action role-playing), the narrative form (e.g. integrating or dissipating, see Montola 2002), the genre (e.g. fantasy, cyberpunk, see Stenros 2002) and the style of play (e.g. soap, immersionist, *ibid.*). The player has the possibility to define things inside the diegetic frame, but only to the extent condoned by the gamemaster.

### **Role-Playing in the Diegetic**

**Frame**

If the gamemaster doesn't release some power to the player, there will be no interaction, just the gamemaster telling a story. Usually the player is given control at least over the actions of one character. This control is subject to gamemaster approval, and if necessary the gamemaster can take the power back.

The gamemaster is hence the gatekeeper of the diegesis. This power is tied to the role of "gamemaster", is arbitrary in nature, and stems from the conventions of the discourse. In practice underlying social dynamics often affect the power structure of the gaming situation, and a player can choose not to participate in a game if she dislikes the gamemaster's methods of controlling the events, but this is irrelevant to studying role-playing on an ideal level. In order for role-playing to take place the player must accept the gamemaster's power over the diegetic frame.

When a game begins the gamemaster defines the diegetic frame. This can be done for example by stating that the diegetic frame is similar to the real world, by referring to a commercially published game world and rules, or by defining the frame from scratch.

When a character is created it can be created by the player, by the gamemaster, or as a group effort, but the gamemaster has final say on what characters are possible or suitable in a

given diegetic frame.

As the game proceeds the gamemaster describes the diegetic frame and usually plays the part of everything but the player's character. If the player oversteps her authority, attempts to do something that is impossible inside the diegetic frame, or for whatever reason, the gamemaster can override the player's actions.

If there is disagreement, on for example what the surroundings are like, or what exactly has happened, it is the gamemaster who negotiates and in the end decides, what is true. The role-playing game can be seen as series of incidents that the participants use as a basis for their individual narrative readings. If and when conflicts in these readings are expressed, the gamemaster defines what is true.

**Further Thoughts****Forms of role-playing**

Role-playing can take many forms. Traditionally they are played in a shared space, where most of the communication is verbal, but there are a wealth of possible tools and methods available. It is possible to communicate through email; Internet relay chat (IRC) channels; the diegetic frame can be created with a computer game; communication can be bodily, text based, or verbal and so forth. As long as there is interaction in a diegetic frame through roles, the activity can be called a role-playing game.

The traditional method of playing, “the tabletop game” based on verbal communication and often incorporating heavy game mechanics and dice as random number generators, has tended to hold something of a monopoly on the term role-playing and all the discussion surrounding it. In our opinion, the mechanics used for simulation are not the all-important defining aspect of role-playing. Trying to limit the term’s use merely to the type of game played

is transformed into live-action role-playing, as live-action games often use some amount of abstract simulation and most other games tend to have at least a small amount of bodily expression in them. The term is still useful in communicating the gamemaster’s expectations to players, especially as there has traditionally been a strong call to differentiate (or even exclude) live-action role-playing from the other forms of role-playing. There are, however, fairly notable differences in the level of simulation



originally (or often the type of game played by the person defining the limits) is a narrow-minded approach severely limiting the potential for further progress with this form of expression.

One clear sub set of role-playing is live action role-playing (LARP). In larps, the level of abstraction is lowered and roles are expressed bodily (see also Sihvonen 1997). However there is no clear cut line where role-playing

used in larps around the world. The vague distinction between larps and “traditional” role-playing games is thus underlined.

Computer-aided or even computer-based gaming has also tended to be a matter of heated discussion. Mostly this has been due to the limitations computers as a medium impose on the potential for interaction and the freedom enjoyed by the players (or even the gamemasters) within the diegetic

frame. In our opinion computer-aided gaming has potential, but at the moment the technical limitations are far too severe for it to be an especially interesting form of role-playing, even if the requirements for role-playing are met (and they usually aren't). As the technology develops there will be a need to discuss the computer-aided and -based games more extensively.

### Alternative Definitions

Our definition of what role-playing is hardly the first of its kind. Various

advocates of the systematic approach (Various, 2002). Their definitions of role-playing include the need for a rule system, character identification, and the possibility to think in context. We have not placed emphasis on a system of rules, since some form of a system can be identified within almost any human endeavour. Most rule systems we encounter in life are of course implicit. That explicated rules exist in some role-playing games, is not a very good basis for a definition as long as some or all of the rules are implicit in



role-playing source books have attempted to define role-playing, as have a number of different schools of thought (Turku, Iirislahti and Roihuvuori to mention a few, see for example Pohjola 2000, Lojonen 2002). These definitions have been largely normative, not descriptive, and they have usually concentrated on either traditional role-playing or live-action role-playing.

One vague definition is used by the

others. Character identification and thinking in context are unsatisfactory defining aspects at best, as books, movies, and theatre all have systems and offer the chance of character identification.

The closest approximation of our definition comes from Norway. Eirik Fatland and Lars Wingård define live-action role-playing in their manifesto Dogme 99 as »a meeting between people who, through their

roles, relate to each other in a fictional world« (Fatland & Wingård, 2002). In the Norwegian tradition, larping is associated strongly with performing arts and a clear distinction between traditional role-playing and live-action role-playing is made. We disagree. The idea behind both forms of expression is the same, even if the methods do vary.

Another difference is that we see gamemasters as a necessity. Somebody needs to define their »fictional world« and our diegetic frame; somebody needs to decide what is accepted into the diegetic frame. Our, or actually the post-modern, view of roles is also a bit more complicated than the one usually taken in discussing role-playing, but the inherent idea is the same.

### **Criticism and Questions**

There are a few questions regarding role-playing, which often turn up in theoretical discussions. Is it possible to play a role-playing game alone? Is it possible to have a computer-based role-playing game? Can a computer be a gamemaster? What separates child's play and make-believe from role-playing? What is the difference between improvisational theatre and live-action role-playing? What separates storytelling (in the sense that narratology uses the term) and role-playing?

According to our definition, it is not possible to role-play alone; a role-playing game is created in the

interaction between players or between a player and a gamemaster. What one does alone we call daydreaming. We do not want to imply that it is in any way an inferior pastime; we just do not consider it role-playing.

We also do not see most of the computer games that are advertised as role-playing games as actual role-playing games, because at the moment we are not aware of a computer that can satisfactorily fill the role of a gamemaster. There are a number of computer games that can be played as role-playing games, just like Monopoly or Risk can be played as role-playing games if proper characters are created and a GM is introduced. This we call computer-assisted role-playing. Some computer games nowadays are created with this object in mind (e.g. *Redemption*, *Neverwinter Nights*). Most massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) could very easily be played as role-playing games, but this possibility is seldom taken advantage of.

The distinction between role-playing and a child's play is the presence of a gamemaster. The same goes for improvisational theatre and larping, as well as storytelling and role-playing. Also, if everyone can be considered a gamemaster (as in improvisational theatre from another point of view), the activity ceases to be a role-playing game by our definition. Thus a role-playing game can have a number of gamemasters as long as not everyone

is a gamemaster all the time.

These are conscious choices we have made. Although we strive to be descriptive instead of normative, at some point choices have to be made. In order for the term »role-playing game« to have any meaning it has to exclude something. Otherwise we end up in situation where someone says that life is not just a game but also a role-playing game and we all nod our heads in unison.

This is where we have decided to draw the line. We have created a model that includes all activities that we recognize as role-playing and still creates a clear distinction between role-playing and other similar pursuits. In the process we have excluded solitary role-playing and storytelling games where everyone is a gamemaster all the time.

On the other hand our model includes some things that might not fit the most narrow-minded traditional definitions of role-playing games. For example sufficiently advanced S&M role-play would meet our criteria for a role-playing game. The same applies to some forms of therapy –some sessions of psychotherapy probably can be considered role-playing for example.

### Contact Information

If you have any comments or questions, feel free to contact us:

Further material and the latest version of this text can be found at

<http://www.iki.fi/henri.hakkarainen/meilahti/>

The authors can also be reached directly via e-mail - Henri Hakkarainen at [henri.hakkarainen@iki.fi](mailto:henri.hakkarainen@iki.fi) and Jaakko Stenros at [jaakko.stenros@iki.fi](mailto:jaakko.stenros@iki.fi)

### Literature

Fatland, Eirik & Wingård, Lars (1999) Dogme 99 – A Program for the Liberation of LARP, [http://fate.laiv.org/dogme99/en/dogma99\\_en.htm](http://fate.laiv.org/dogme99/en/dogma99_en.htm), ref. 22.7.2002

Hall, Stuart (1988) Minimal Selves, published in Identity, ICA Documents 6

Hall, Stuart (1996) Who Needs Identity?, published in Questions of Cultural Identity, Sage.

Loponen, Mika (2002) The Roihuvuori School, published in panclou #6, Stockholm

Montola, Markus (2002) Roolipeli ja kaaosteoria, [www.hut.fi/mmMontola/chaos.html](http://www.hut.fi/mmMontola/chaos.html), ref. 22.7.2002

Montola, Markus (2003) Role-playing as interactive construction of subjective diegeses, 2003, this book

Pohjola, Mike (2000) Manifesto of the Turku School, [live.roolipeli.net/turku/school.html](http://live.roolipeli.net/turku/school.html), ref. 10.1.2003

Sihvonen, Toni (1997) Pieni johdatus live-roolipelaamisen psykologiaan,

published in Larppaajan käsikirja (Vainio, Niklas, ed.), Tampere, Suomen live-roolipelaajat ry.

Stenros, Jaakko (2002) Genre and Style, Presentation given in Knutpunkt, Stockholm 5.4.2002

Various (2002) Defining roleplaying: an alternative approach, <http://www.indie-rpgs.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=3680>, ref. 10.1.2003