

# Relation Theory

During my work as an organizer of larps that had few participants, I have come to recognize the importance of the relations between characters. Trying to take this a step further I have developed a theory that uses the scientific concept of emergence to describe what it is that really happens during a larp. As the basis of this theory is the relations between the characters, which is aptly named relation theory.

Relation theory builds on successive theorems to achieve a better understanding of the workings of

a RPG. The first theorem describes when a thing actually is a RPG. It is important to keep in mind that in relation theory there is little difference between traditional RPG and larp – it is only a matter of means.

(1) A RPG is an emergent phenomenon arising from the individual player's interaction with the other players

Emergence is a scientific term for the complex global behaviour that can arise from the interaction of simple local rules<sup>1</sup>. Translated to RPG language this means that the RPG is the total sum of interaction from all players – but it is more than that. It is not possible to determine the RPG just from the interaction of the players. The RPG itself has other unique attributes. Just like a flock of birds can split into two but cannot flap its wings, a bird cannot split into two but can certainly flap its wings<sup>2</sup>.

Another interesting aspect of emergent phenomena is their predictability over short time scales but the lack thereof in long term. This coincides nicely with the behaviour of RPGS where the organizers is, more or less, able to foretell the next step of the players, but has no way to know how

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the RPG ends. The point of emergence is that it arises from the behaviour of the individual entity. There are no rules concerning the behaviour of the flock but only of the individual. This leads nicely to the second theorem:

(2) A RPG depends solely on the players mutual relations

First it is important to know that the term relation is broadly defined. It includes prejudices, rumours, exact knowledge and everything else that determines a player's attitude towards another players. To ease up the understanding relations are separated into two types: active and passive. Active relations are relations that force the player to take action. This is typically the type of relations described in the character created by or given to the player. Passive relations

is the attitude towards other players given by the other player's background and/or status. The carpenter's distrust towards hunters is spawned by his prejudices and he is likely to respond negatively towards a hunter greeting him. No relation has explicitly been described between the two players, but they still have an attitude towards each other. This gives another theorem:

(3) A player has relations to all other players in the RPG

Most relations are not described in particular in the character (history?) but is generated by the player as he/she is playing the RPG. To take the carpenter example again, he probably would not have 200 individual relations described in his character but would have a remark about those distrustful hunters. This remark



makes it possible for the carpenter to spawn passive relations to all hunters. But if the carpenter at some point is rescued by a hunter it becomes a active relation as the carpenter is forced to revise his attitude towards this hunter and probably all other hunters. This indicates another important aspect of a RPG:

(4) The emergence arise as the relations of the players change

If no relation has changed, no RPG has occurred is the simple extrapolation of this theorem when combined with the first theorem. And is it possible to think of a RPG where nothing changes? Even the avoidance of communication should force a relation change.

How does this all apply to the making of a RPG? Well, first it is important to accept that no organizer is able to control the development of a RPG so there is no reason to try. During the



RPG the organizers most important role is to keep the frame of reference intact. This means acting as the outside world<sup>3</sup> the RPG takes place in. But there is another important point in this. All RPGs have an initial state. It is contained in the description of the world, of the characters, and of course in the relations stated beforehand. And the organizers/authors can do much in the preparation of this initial state to ensure the success of the RPG. When the relation theory becomes more evolved, it is probable that relation patterns will reveal themselves. Patterns which are easily recognisable and can be deemed positive or negative for the development of the RPG.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This definition comes from Craig Reynolds' homepage, <http://www.red3d.com/cwr/boids/>, the man behind Boid's algorithm.

<sup>2</sup> Excerpt from the article »E Pluribus Unum«, American Scientist, January-February, 1999, volume 87

<sup>3</sup> The word outside world is used in the sense described in »Interaktionsteori« by Morten Gade, February 2002. The word is a translation of the danish word »omverden« used in the paper.