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2010

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

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Negotiating Realities –
A Brief Introduction to Role-playing games


**Introduction**

The radical political, social and cultural changes World War II inflicted upon Europe and America on both the collective and individual level resulted in an initially subtle shift of the perception and construction of reality away from earlier belief in concepts such as objective truth, the absolute and the unified self towards subjectivity, the relative and fragmented identities. The collapse of traditional dichotomies in the ethical and moral chaos of the war shattered certainties, creating an increasing distrust of ideologies that claimed to be the only true explanation of the world around us. During the late 1960s and early 1970s these diffuse developments – analysed and articulated by French Structuralists, Deconstructionists and Poststructuralists such as Althusser, Barthes, Derrida and Foucault – became the centre of attention for cultural critics at European and American universities and a new body of criticism and theory emerged that found one of its first and essential expressions in Lyotard’s *La condition postmoderne* of 1979.

In 1974 a completely new form of game, a so-called ‘role-playing game’, was released by a small private publisher in the US – *Dungeons and Dragons*. By 1978 this obscure storytelling/wargame hybrid had sold enough copies for the compa-
ny – TSR Hobbies Inc. – to move out of its founder’s basement into proper offices and afford employees and radio commercials. A new medium was born and soon gathered momentum attracting public awareness so that by 1980 *Fortune* magazine called it »the hottest game in the nation«.¹ The next 20 years saw a radical increase in the complexity and diversity of role-playing games, and the advent of the computer and the internet as mass technologies led to an extension of the concept into completely new virtual worlds that today are regularly frequented by millions of players all over the world.

It is the chronological coincidence between the formulation of Postmodern theories and the creation of role-playing games (or RPGs) that originally triggered my research interest. This brief introduction to the new medium will therefore attempt to construct it as an example of Postmodern cultural practice, incarnating the basic concepts of its theoretical and socio-cultural context on both the formal and the level of content.

The structure of this paper is a tripartite one. In the first section the object of this inquiry is defined on a broad theoretical basis and a short overview is given of its historical development up to the early 2000s. This is followed by a review of attempts made by the RPG community to create a theoretical framework for the medium and its various forms and genres. Building upon these earlier parts the last one will then connect the formal features of the medium in general and the content of several specific examples to Postmodern theories to highlight correspondences. In the conclusion I would finally like to formulate three main research questions that result from my observations which I would like to answer in more detail in my upcoming doctoral thesis entitled »Joyful Games of Meaning Making – Role-playing games and Postmodern Notions of Literature«.

**Part 1 – Definition and History of the Medium**

RPGs are ›story games‹, group activities where two or more people meet to invent an orally produced ad hoc story together, founded on the textual basis of world and rules information they get from a published rulebook and with randomisers (dice) to simulate the effects of chance dependent on the traits of the characters played. These are thus collective efforts of structured, formal play (game) to negotiate a communal result (story).

Depending on the platform used three basic categories of RPGs can be distinguished:

1) Pen and Paper (P&P) RPGs: oral storytelling with no or only a limited degree of physical acting

2) Live Action Role-playing (LARP): integrating impromptu acting of informal play and highly structured narratives of drama in public spaces or reserved areas

3) Computer RPGs (CRPG): off-line or on-line computer games, only character management and rules remain of P&P; also attempts to use the internet for P&P style of play

The game aspect of the medium invites all participants in the experience to create, as their »unique status as explicitly interactive narrative systems of formal play«\(^2\) allows games to signify in completely new ways. The inherent tensions between story (fixed, linear sequence of events) and game (meaningful interactivity) are at the heart of RPGs and represented by two different narrative agents structuring the communication situation and narrative production. One of the players is different from the others and goes by various names: Dungeonmaster, Gamemaster, Referee or Storyteller are the most frequently used terms. This player is closely associated with the story side of RPGs, the structuring force reacting to the players’ interactions (the game side) as the final arbiter of rules, striving to construct a meaningful plot. While other players only take over the roles of the main characters in the story and can »focus their imaginative powers on one unique individual, and spend all the effort bringing that character alive«\(^3\), the Storyteller has a more universal role explained in Rein-Hagen’s *Vampire – The Masquerade* (1992): »You are everything the players are not – you are the rest of the universe.«\(^4\)

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4 Ibid.
Between the structure created by the Storyteller and the anti-structure or ludic freedom enjoyed by the players the narrative of an RPG session is produced. In stark contrast to the monological power of the author, the Storyteller has to engage in constant plurilologous negotiation with their players, »must be willing to work with them« and to abandon all expectations of plot development:

The events and flow of the story are as much the responsibility of the players as the Storyteller. The primary duty of the Storyteller is to lead the story and to keep it moving briskly in the desired direction – or at least stop it from breaking down completely. Telling a story is more a matter of keeping up with the players, commenting and elaborating upon what their characters do and say, than it is of relating a narrative.

The Storyteller creates their own interpretation of rules and background information, populates the setting with supporting characters (NPCs or ›Non-Player Characters‹) and comes up with a rough draft for a story. The players create and play the main characters in that story (PCs or ›Player Characters‹), developing the plot through their interactions with setting and NPCs.

Since the inception of RPGs continuous critical and theoretical attention has been paid to this peculiar narrative situation. Early on, academic interest was mainly sociological. Fine’s landmark study *Shared Fantasies – Role-playing Games as Social Worlds* (1983) attempts to define the medium focussing mainly on its social aspects:

In FRP gaming [›Fantasy Role-playing‹, R.S.] rules and outcomes do not have the inevitability that they possess in most formal games; rather, both features are negotiated, and rules are adjusted by the referee and his group. As a result fantasy role-playing games are in some ways more like life, and less like games.

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5 Ibid., p. 60.
6 Ibid.
7 Fine: *Shared Fantasy*, p. 8.
The closeness of RPGs to the requirements of ‘real life’ becomes the central identifying feature. Even though play takes place in a narrative space separated from reality, the co-creation of a Secondary World (to use Tolkien’s term⁸), develops insights, social and intellectual skills relevant to life in the Primary World.

During the early 1990s a paradigmatic change towards a more serious use of RPGs beyond entertainment occurred and attempts were made to provide a theoretical framework to these hybrid artefacts. Rilstone is one of the creators of RPG theory and in his article »Role-Playing Games: An Overview« he, a gamer himself, gives his definition of RPGs:

A role-playing game is a formalized verbal interaction between a referee and a player or players, with the intention of producing a narrative. This interaction is such that the fictional character (controlled by the player) has complete or nearly complete freedom of choice within the fictional world (controlled by the referee). What is essential in this definition is the freedom of choice allowed to a player’s character, compared with the very limited range of choices available in most computer or boardgames.⁹

Here the game aspect of RPGs, player ‘agency’, the ability to interact meaningfully with the Secondary World, is the dominant aspect of the medium, situating this perspective closer to game theory.

To complete the picture, Mackay’s 2001 *The Fantasy Role-playing Game – A New Performing Art* draws heavily on the author’s background in theatre studies to construct a reading of RPGs that favours the story and performance side:

I define the role-playing game as 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.¹⁰

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Mackay’s »performed interactions« then converge to create »a single grand story that [he calls] the role-playing narrative«. 11

RPGs thus represent a hybrid medium combining aspects of literary precursors on the one hand, the need for structure and plot, while on the other hand using the player agency of games to break the monological discursive power of the author, including the audience in the process of co-creating a Secondary World. Besides these narrative and ludic aspects expressed in theoretical perspectives like Mackay’s or Rilstone’s, there is also an important social component in the constant need for re-negotiation of meanings as defined by Fine. This triad of approaches has influenced the development of the medium since its inception in the early 1970s.

Porter’s scheme of Generations, 12 expanded to include developments since 1995, is an apt tool to structure the history of RPGs.

After a Generation 0 encompassing free-form role-playing like children’s games or historical re-enactments, the birth of the new medium is Generation 1 that is synonymous with Dungeons and Dragons (or D&D). On the basis of Chess, Weiqi (Go) and military training simulations such as the Prussian Kriegspiel (18th cent.), a series of strategy boardgames for hobbyists, like H. G. Wells’ Little Wars (1913) or Avalon Hill’s Diplomacy (1959), was released during the early 20th century. Historical table-top war gaming followed in the 1960s with players controlling military units and simulating conflicts. The decisive change to individual, character oriented interaction according to Dave Arneson 13, one of the co-creators of D&D, was taken in 1968 as for the first time each player controlled a single character and was given a personal quest. It was also reputedly Arneson who introduced Fantasy into war gaming, 14 creating the first recorded Fantasy-RPG-setting for his Blackmoor campaign in 1971 that was continuously played until his death in April 2009. Together with Gary Gygax, Arneson then created Dungeons and Dragons, published by Gygax’s company TSR Hobbies Inc. in 1974. This first commercially available RPG still is the dominant text of the medium, and with its perceived insufficiencies has been the motor for many later

11 Ibid., p. 5.
12 Porter, David: »Where we’ve been, where we’re going« (http://www.rpg.net/oracle/essays/wherewevebeen.html 1995 [July 24, 2009]).
14 Cf. ibid., p. 14.
developments. Yet all of the basic building blocks of RPGs are already there: fixed characters with quantified attributes and skills and polyhedral dice to bring in randomness when characters attempt difficult actions.

Generation 2 is a reaction to the very limited setting used in Generation 1, the so-called »dungeon crawl«, where as an echo of the medium's roots in war gaming, characters explore a system of hallways and rooms, killing all opposition to achieve a set quest goal. Games like *Chivalry and Sorcery* (1977) by Edward E. Simbalist and Wilf K. Backhaus, or *RuneQuest* (1978) by Steve Perrin display a shift towards plot-based adventures and include options for non-hostile behaviour. Others, like Mark Miller’s *Traveller* (1977) open the medium up to new genres, in this case sci-fi.

For Generation 3 the relationship between rules and setting becomes the defining aspect. Most RPGs provides both, the rules to create and play characters and information on the Secondary World they inhabit. Whereas in Generation 1 the setting is only vaguely defined and Generation 2 sees the first fully fledged Secondary Worlds, Generation 3 RPGs either completely separate rules from background, creating meta-rules that can be applied to any setting, or they fall into the other extreme, simulating a Secondary World to such detail that it infuses every aspect of the gaming experience. A well known example for the multi-genre approach is *GURPS* (1986), the »Generic Universal RolePlaying System« by Steve Jackson, that provides a compact and balanced set of rules to be adapted to any published or home-made setting. Late N. Robin Crossby's *Hârnmaster* (1986) is seen as the most complete and detailed simulation of a Secondary World in the medium. Its complexity and high standard of realism is also reflected in the rules that are among the first to attempt a truthful simulation of medieval life and combat.

As Generation 3 rethinks the relationship between rules and setting, Generation 4 questions basic concepts. Players disturbed by the influence of dice on the game eliminated randomisers, creating dice-less systems: Erick Wujcik's *Amber Diceless Roleplaying Game* (1991) is credited to be the first published RPG to rely solely on the direct comparison of traits to determine the result of player interaction with the Secondary World. Resonating with that move away from the game aspect of RPGs, Mark Rein-Hagen's *Vampire – The Masquerade* (1991) heralds a paradigmatic change by postulating the pre-eminence of story over system, urging players to ignore the rules should they conflict with the necessities of plot. The so-called Storyteller games and the *World of Darkness* created as a setting for them reduce the complexity of rules to develop a degree of narrative and philosophical
complexity hitherto unknown. It is this change, I would argue, that marked the coming of age of a new art form, productively incorporating but no longer dominated by the entertainment aspect of its origins.

Porter adds a Generation 5 that would be »taken in some direction not possible for strictly pencil & paper roleplaying.«\(^{15}\) Information technology is at the core of this expected Generation, and since 1995 computers and the internet have changed our lives. CRPGs are played by millions of people each day all around the world, the cooperative creation of a Secondary World has, however, been more or less replaced by the consumption of content prefabricated by professional game designers. The internet is also a space for people to play ›traditional‹ RPGs: play by e-mail, play by post or play by chat are used to connect geographically dispersed gaming groups. Virtual gaming tables such as SmiteWorks’ *Fantasy Grounds* (2004) exist where all the paraphernalia of P&P RPGs are simulated, rules can be imported and tools are provided for the Storyteller to allow for a realistic experience of playing without the need to come together physically.

Publishing RPGs has also changed. After Hasbro’s take-over of the *Dungeons and Dragons* franchise in 1999 and the introduction of the *Open Game License* (*OGL*) in 2000, allowing the free use of *D&D* rules to create games under the *d20*-system trademark, independent online communities multiplied in response to the perceived danger of multinational control of gaming subculture. Creative developers that would stand no chance of being published by a profit-oriented corporation use these communities for feedback during the design stage and pdf or print-on-demand as cheap publishing options. The resulting indie-RPGs diverge considerably in system design and content from the mainstream releases of the industry. The experimental streak of Generation 4 reverberates in indie-games such as Greg Stolze’s *Reign* (2007), while big publishers such as Wizards of the Coast (the Hasbro subsidiary owning *D&D*) streamline their worlds and cash in on the MMORPG-craze by implementing formal features such as character powers, cool-down and tactical roles in throw-backs to Generation 2 or even 1. A growing tendency to foster player dependence is exemplified by the character generation tools or online resources and gaming opportunities provided by Wizards that require players to sign up for an account on the company homepage.

\(^{15}\) Porter: «Where we’ve been» (http://www.rpg.net/oracle/essays/wherewebeen.html 1995 [July 24, 2009]).
These developments in Generation 5 have led to a split in the subsociety between those emphasising the entertainment and game aspect of RPGs and those that see RPGs as artefacts of narrative, artistic expression. Even though this divide has always existed within the community and many gamers fluctuate in their tastes or allegiances, it has never been as pronounced as in recent years.

Part 2 – RPG Theory

By the early to mid 1990s RPGs were well established, especially in North America and Europe, and a trend was beginning to form to create a theoretical framework to underline their status as a serious new medium. In 1994 *Inter*Action magazine was created by Rilstone, serving as a platform for critical and theoretical articles from members of the community. Parallel to the magazine, discussions on the rec.games.frp.advocacy newsgroup enriched the theoretical understanding of the medium well into the 2000s.

The dominant model originally emerged from posts by Kuhner in July 1997, summarised and FAQ-ed by Kim in 1998, where she suggested her Threefold Model to overcome the dichotomy between storytelling-oriented players and war gamers. According to Kuhner/Kim, all decisions in gaming are motivated either by a Gamist, Dramatist or Simulationist agenda. These three dimensions are not mutually exclusive, but rather to be imagined as tips of an equilateral triangle: going towards one will distance you from the other two, but you do not have to go all the way. The Gamist agenda »is the style which values setting up a fair challenge for the players (as opposed to the PCs)«, where »winning« against the game motivates choices. In contrast, the Dramatist agenda »is the style which values how well the in-game action creates a satisfying storyline«, a rich plot, believable characters and serious reflection of the socio-political context of the gaming experience. To break the familiar opposition between the two, Kuhner/Kim add the Simulationist agenda, »the style which values resolving in-game events based solely on game-world considerations, without allowing any meta-game concerns to affect the decision.« Here satisfaction is drawn neither from overcoming challenge nor from telling an interesting story, but it is the creation of

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18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
and immersion in a fully functional Secondary World that motivates the gamer. Even though it was originally created to describe player decisions taken during gaming, the Threefold Model, or GDS-Theory, had considerable impact on how RPGs were played, analysed and developed during the late 1990s. It was also frequently criticised for its focus on the narrative process and exclusion of a possible fourth motivation for players: getting together with friends to spend an enjoyable evening (Social agenda).

Between 1999 and 2005 Edwards took up basic ideas of the Threefold Model and refined them further into his own GNS-Theory in discussions on his website The Forge (www.indie-rpgs.com). He collected his body of criticism into The Big Model, finalised in 2005. The GNS-Theory, suggested in the seminal article »System Does Matter« 20, keeps the Gamist and Simulationist agendas of Kuhner/Kim, renaming the Dramatist agenda Narrativist. Widening his focus, Edwards aims to include not only play styles and systems, but also the social context of gaming. In a series of three articles published online on The Forge in 2004, »Simulationism: The Right to Dream«, »Gamism: Step on Up« and »Narrativism: Story Now« 21, he attempts to establish hierarchical relationships between four different levels of the gaming experience represented by nested ›boxes‹ held together and shaped by the creative agenda favoured by the group: 22

1) Social Contract – the group of people getting together to play, their relationships amongst each other and with the outside world (the context)
2) Exploration – the motivating and defining aspect of RPGs, communicated »shared imaginings« 23 of characters, setting, situation, system and colour (atmosphere)
3) Techniques – methods and procedures of play, the concrete use of the abstract system which is part of Exploration
4) Ephemera – intradiegetic and extradiegetic interactions between characters, the game world and players

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23 Ibid.
Even though it is not uncontested in its ability to describe the medium in its complexity, Edwards’ Big Model is an attempt born within the community of gamers to express the multi-layered and challenging nature of RPGs and the gaming experience. Other valuable taxonomies exist, like the interaction-oriented Finnish Process Model\(^{24}\) or Mackay’s performance analysis\(^{25}\), Edwards’ model, however, unites both the styles of play observed and experienced by the author with a description of the structure of the medium.

Using these insights, I would like to come back to ideas posited in the introduction about how the form and the content of RPGs echo ideas of the Postmodern condition in the third and last part of this paper, before drawing conclusions and formulating possible research questions that result from my findings.

**Part 3 – RPGs as a Postmodern Medium**

RPGs are one of the latest new media created in the 20\(^{th}\) century, but in contrast to others like computer games or TV-series they are not the result of technological advances. On the contrary, they are a return to the very first device used for narrative communication: the human voice. Oral cultural transmission predates writing by several millennia, and even though western civilisation is associated with the written word, RPGs relegate it to a secondary position in the process of textual production. Based on the written information taken from fixed, printed and published texts, the playing group creates a different form of textuality: oral, unseizable, ephemeral, and utterly private. This inherent hybrid state between the old and the new, the written/fixed and the spoken/ephemeral, the public and the private defines RPGs. It makes them a Postmodern medium producing parodies in the »unfunny« sense of Hutcheon (»not the ridiculing imitations of the standard theories«\(^{26}\)), merging established dichotomies into something new and original, creating a form of pastiches from a pastiche of forms.

In addition to the material platform, the narrative situation of RPGs reinforces their Postmodern character. The constant renegotiation of narrative content between players and Storyteller according to their creative agenda on the intra- as well as the extradiegetic level highlights the opacity of the medium while using the immersive immediacy of Realist transparency, thus »retaining (in its typi-


\(^{25}\) Cf. Mackay: *The Fantasy Role-playing Game*, p. 60.

cally complicitously critical way) the historically attested power of both« and

denaturalising mediated ›reality‹ itself. In a process called ›frame-switching‹, first
defined by Fine and later refined by Mackay 28, participants in an RPG session
move fluently between various systems of reference.

Out of Postmodern distrust of monological authorial power, it is dispersed in
the group and a plurilogical narrative situation with rules acting as checks and
balances for all, players and Storyteller alike. In Generations 4 and 5, the issue
of balancing discursive power sometimes becomes a central part of the rules.
the power of the Storyteller with point contingents that they either have to earn
by playing the game according to the tastes of the players (Vermine), or that de-
pend on the power of characters as well as the playing style of the group (Agon).
Reciprocity, negotiation and interdependence become core mechanisms of the
system itself making it impossible to locate authorial power in the process. No one
individual is in control, even if the narrative production is highly structured.

Playing an RPG is the collective creation of artefacts that are aesthetically
pleasing to the group: art in everyday life. The border between art and life is sus-
pended, the »conflation of high art and mass culture« described by Hutcheon 29
and a move away from Modernist hermeticism and elitism. Their formal structure
gives RPGs an intriguing social function: they become intra- and extradiegetical
reflections on the power of discourse, the constructed nature of subjectivity and
identity, as gamers switch between various extradiegetical roles and intradiegeti-
cal characters.

And not only the formal aspects of RPGs express the Postmodern condition
and its precarious relationship with authority. The content or background of many
RPGs reinforces the message.

The complex web of intersemiotic relations, of inter- and intramedial refer-
ences spun around RPGs shows a rich repertoire of pre-texts within the medium,
but also in history, literature and mythology that are de-contextualised, decon-
structed into basic iconic building-blocks of meaning (Mackay’s »imaginary
strips of behaviour« 30), only to be reassembled and re-contextualised. Media
or genre boundaries, intellectual property and textual authority are disregarded
with Postmodern nonchalance, cross-fertilisation often openly acknowledged
by the authors of rulebooks. The Storytelling games have established a tradition

29 Hutcheon: Politics, p. 28.
30 Mackay: The Fantasy Role-playing Game, p. 80.
to indicate the pre- and intertexts as part of the rulebook, so that Storytellers and players can identify the origins of settings, characters and plots and expand their textual repertoires accordingly. Especially among indie-RPG designers that show a pronounced experimental interest in the medium, acknowledgement of pre-texts is common. Harper writes at the very end of his Agon-rulebook: «And when I say [this game is] ›inspired by‹ I mean ›shamelessly stolen from‹. This is a Frankenstein game, and I am not ashamed to say so. I’ve benefited greatly from the geniuses of game design that came before me.» 31 A courtesy returned in 2008 by Gregor Hutton when he borrows extensively from Agon’s rules to create his own award-winning indie-RPG 3:16 – Carnage Among the Stars 32.

This lax handling of intellectual property is part of a larger context to RPGs that Mackay describes on the extradiegetical level and identifies as the Bakhtinian Carnivalesque: 33 gamer subsociety in opposition to society at large. But I would argue that it also informs the texts produced by both, authors of rulebooks and gamers when playing. In an atmosphere of controlled transgression players spin tales of »what if« separated from, and often in opposition to ›official‹ society and culture. The fictitious actions taken do not endanger the player’s social position, the narrative situation in its privacy protects from real-life repercussions. Many RPGs, especially those developed since the early 1990s, focus on marginalised perspectives. In the World of Darkness games (1991 - ) that together with D&D account for the vast majority of RPGs played, characters are the monsters of folk-lore: vampires, werewolves, or ghosts. In Tribe 8 (1998), a Canadian game by Dream Pod 9, the PCs are outcasts that, in a reworking of the Quiet Revolution stripping the Catholic church of its power in Québécois society, fight a guerrilla war against a theocracy in post-apocalyptic Montréal. Even Dungeons and Dragons with its system of alignments allows for the playing of evil characters, although it favours the traditional heroic mode of gaming.

Even if the carnival of the mind RPGs create is not always populated with outcasts and dissenters, the stories they produce thematise the use and abuse of power: the power to define reality both as players co-creating a story and as characters making decisions and moral choices based on interpretations of right or wrong. Again, the Postmodern distrust of master-narratives surfaces, as national, religious and political ideologies are questioned and their fault-lines explored. The US-American myths of scientific progress and personal freedom are deconstruct-
ed by Rein-Hagen's dark and labyrinthine *World of Darkness* where humanity is nothing but pawns in the power struggles of ancient immortal beings. The French RPG *Guildes* (1996), published by now defunct Multisim reacting to Structuralist and Poststructuralist systemic readings of society, establishes a Secondary World that is literally a strategy boardgame played by unnamed Powers. In *Agone* (1999), also by Multisim in Cartesian and rationalistic France, inspiration, the arts and dream are the weapons used to battle a divine being and master of Realpolitik about to make the entire world a stage and humanity mere actors in his dramas.

Examples like these show that RPGs are not only Postmodern artefacts on a formal level, but also on the level of content, unashamedly drawing elements from a rich network of intersemiotic relations, favouring marginalised perspectives and questioning master-narratives. They are hotbeds of the Cultural Wars between progressive and conservative forces that have been waged more openly since the conservative backlash of the Reagan/Bush years in the US.

**Conclusion**

Role-playing games or RPGs were created as a new medium during the 1970s, at about the same time the radical shift in the perception and construction of reality initiated by World War II in western societies was described in a diverse body of theories – Postmodernism.

The textualisation of experience and the resulting »incredulity towards meta-narratives«\textsuperscript{34} at the core of the Postmodern condition echo in the cooperative story/game-hybrid of the RPG that dislocates authorial power from the centre to disperse it in an improvised, oral and plurilogical narrative situation. From its origins in war gaming the medium has grown in diversity and complexity and eventually exploited the possibilities of information technology, evolving into a serious and experimental platform for the reflection of socio-political issues, while still retaining its entertainment impulses.

Since the 1990s, RPG-theory has analysed the complex interplay of the social contract, the written and oral textualities produced, as well as player agency within the Secondary World. Thus gamers and academics have tried to come to a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted narrative situation RPGs develop from the interaction of participants’ creative agendas with the various frames of reference involved.

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RPGs seem to answer to core concepts of Postmodern literary and cultural theory. The renaissance of oral storytelling, the production of ephemeral textual potentialities, the active co-creation of meaning in a plurilocal communication situation defined by constant renegotiation of content and frame-switching, all these formal aspects convene to create a medium that overcomes the Modernist separation between art and life, thematising the power of discourse and the construction of meaning as well as subjectivity. The content of RPGs shows a dense network of intersemiotic relations, a rich pastiche of pre-texts beyond genre and media boundaries. It often favours de-centred, marginalised perspectives in a setting of controlled transgression reminiscent of the Bakhtinian Carnivalesque, and in its deeply rooted distrust of power explores the fault-lines of cultural, national and political master-narratives, making it a battleground of the Cultural Wars.

Yet, a series of questions pose themselves. Are RPGs a symptom of a fundamental change in the culture of meaning-making in our societies, an expression of Postmodern voices in all their ambiguous, marginal and fragmented nature, or are they just virtual Bohèmes, spaces that contain and disperse dissent in a manner tolerated by the system? Is the process of textual production in RPGs a self-organising narrative system oscillating between creative freedom and restrictive structure, or is this agency the players experience only an illusion? And if RPGs can be understood as a liminoid activity according to Turner\(^{35}\), can the strong orientation towards religion, mythology and magic in the medium’s contents be seen as a hint to a ritual function hidden behind the entertainment aspect? Could this liminoid activity and its reflection of the values and rules of our societies lead to a new understanding of Postmodernism itself?

But this brief introduction to RPGs is not the place for such deliberations, which I will focus on in my dissertation »Joyful Games of Meaning-Making – Role-playing games and Postmodern Notions of Literature«. I hope that those previously unfamiliar with RPGs now have a clearer image of this complex new narrative medium, and that I could offer new perspectives to those that have already played one. For only through participation in an RPG-session can one truly experience the power and enjoyment the medium has to offer.