

R a f a e l B i e n i a

Role Playing Materials

ROLE PLAYING MATERIALS



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Rafael Bienia
„Role Playing Materials“

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ROLE PLAYING MATERIALS

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Rafael Peter Bienia

Promotor:

Prof. dr. Sally Wyatt

Copromotor:

Dr. Karin Wenz

Assessment Committee:

Prof. dr. Renée van de Vall (chair)

Dr. Marinka Copier (HKU University of Arts Utrecht)

Prof. dr. Maaïke Meijer

Prof. dr. Frans Mäyrä (University of Tampere)

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INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of his commencement speech at the University of Arts in Philadelphia, author Neil Gaiman shared a trick that reminded me of role playing:

Someone asked me recently how to do something she thought was going to be difficult, in this case recording an audio book, and I suggested she pretend that she was someone who could do it. Not pretend to do it, but pretend she was someone who could. She put up a notice to this effect on the studio wall, and she said it helped. (2012)

Gaiman's trick is similar to role playing, because it involves a task and two specific stages in how to solve it. If the example was a role-playing game, the audio book would be the goal of the game. At the first stage, the player would imagine a character with the necessary production skills. At the second stage, the player would pretend to be the producer recording the audio book.

The difference between Gaiman's trick and role playing is that role playing does not necessarily aim to solve creative tasks or to make art. Role playing is a hobby for people who enjoy imagining and exploring characters who are challenged with invented tasks in fictional worlds. Imagine a person dressed up as a wizard running through thorn bushes at night. On his trail, a group of yelling cultists. They chant in an unearthly language to call upon their foul god. *Iä! Iä! Iä!* The wizard character tumbles, because I as the player want the situation to escalate. Quickly, he is surrounded by three men and women in gray robes – actually the color is green, but it is dark. I cannot read their faces, so I have to expect the worst. What would you do in the shoes of this wizard? Cast a spell of attack? Cast a spell of protection? Surrender? Run again? If you stop reading this book for a second and imagine the situation to decide what the wizard would do, you are role-playing, because you pretend to be someone else and act according to this character.

This wizard example is one role-playing situation that I have experienced in the past five years of research. The fictional world was a fantasy world inhabited by wizards, cultists, and magic spells. My character's task was to escape the three robed figures. As it was a game, the game rules offered several ways in which my character could interact with his

world. What happened then? I decided to attack one of the cultists with a spell, but at the moment when I was casting the words, the cultists beat me down. I let my character fall and lie for an hour on the spot until my fellow players found me. This happened back in 2011, but I still tell the wizard's story.

This example resonates with the definitions of role playing in the field of role-playing game studies. Heliö (2004) defines role-playing games as “games that offer implied motivation for creating narrative experiences,” such as the task of recording an audio book, “and encouraging players to tell stories about them” (p. 72). Role playing is a mindset, a mental process, which players can add to any game (Heliö, 2004). Heliö's definition explains Gaiman's trick as role playing, because the elements are the same. Role playing is an activity that includes the following elements. Narrative elements, such as character and world, describe what happens. Goals and rules are ludic elements that structure how it might happen. Together, narrative and ludic elements set up the activity as a game that challenges the character in the imagined world.

Gaiman's trick hints at a third group of elements that definitions of role playing miss (Heliö, 2004; Hitchens & Drachen, 2009; Montola, 2012a). While role playing an audio book producer, she “put up a notice to this effect on the studio wall, and she said it helped” (Gaiman, 2012). The notice and the studio wall form the third group: material elements. The group includes materials, such as the paper notice, the studio wall, or game materials that are part of a role-playing game.

By taking material elements into view, this dissertation explores an alternative understanding of how role playing works, because it is insufficient to understand role playing as a mindset or a social process between players alone (Heliö, 2004; Montola, 2012a). Role playing emerges in and by a group of heterogeneous elements. The process includes social relations between narrative, ludic, and material elements. This understanding of role playing challenges previous understandings on two levels. It is not enough to merely add a further element, in this case material, and expand the understanding on one ontological level. The understanding of role playing as a process that works in and by a group of elements demands rethinking what role playing is. I have to consider multiple ontologies, because it is insufficient to examine one ontology centered on players. If role playing emerges from the working of heterogeneous elements, how do these diverse elements collaborate? This encourages an investigation of the epistemological level, too. The epistemological question of how to know what role playing is, expands preconceived notions that define role playing as a mental process caused by players, because it requires studying collaborating elements not as post hoc

phenomena but as they occur. Thus, it is necessary to examine materials in the process of relating to narrative and ludic elements.

By studying materials when and where role playing happens, this dissertation aims to solve the ontological and epistemological levels of the problem. The guiding question of this study is, how do materials make role playing work in role-playing games? I speak of guiding question, because “guidance” is in line with the methodological premise of actor-network theory, “follow the actors” (Latour, 1987). As the theoretical and methodological toolset, it helped me to solve the twofold problem and answer the questions: How do materials collaborate with narrative and ludic actors in role-playing games? What changes do materials demand for their collaboration from narrative and ludic actors? How do these inter-relational processes change role-playing game networks? The results of my actor-network studies of materials in role-playing games provide the content for the next chapters.

Structure of this book. Chapter 2 explains actor-network theory in more detail. When I follow materials in different role-playing game forms, I follow one of many elements that make role playing work. I decided to follow materials, because there is a lack of understanding on how materials work in role playing in the field of game studies in general and role-playing game studies in particular. The inclusion of narrative and ludic elements aims to expand the knowledge about role playing and bridge this dissertation with previous studies. The disadvantage of this approach is that I thereby limit one of the strengths of actor-network theory, that of entering the field with a small number of concepts. The advantage is that by using these concepts in my field work, I can bridge actor-network theory and previous studies of role-playing games. More important, the study becomes feasible in the given time frame of my dissertation project.

For the next empirical chapters, I selected three forms of role-playing games where different constellations of elements constitute role playing. These three forms are live action role play or larp (Chapter 3), mixed reality role-playing games (Chapter 4), and tabletop role-playing games (Chapter 5). The results draw on empirical data collected during field work conducted primarily in Germany from 2010 to 2015.

Chapter 3 follows the costume in German larp. I participated in larps that involved hundreds of players dressing up as characters in a fantasy world. We role-played for four days at a former military camp that was rented for this event. The wizard example above was taken from one of these larps. In this chapter, I show how the costume takes part in role playing during a larp. By following the costume, I learned that it consists of a

changing group of material elements. These changing materials have co-created German larp throughout the past 25 years and are responsible for its current shape.

Chapter 4 moves to the emerging form of mixed reality role-playing games. These games use mobile computing devices and headsets which construct augmented and virtual reality systems. For role playing with augmented reality systems, I followed the smartphone as a mobile computing device. It brought me to a larp about criminals in a darker version of the contemporary world. The players used their smartphones to access digital information in the larp world, but several things went wrong. I discuss the tensions to examine the social relations between the heterogeneous elements involved. For role playing with virtual reality systems, I followed the *Oculus Rift Development Kit 2*, the prototype of a virtual reality headset. Playing a computer role-playing game with this headset, I realized that role playing reveals relations that are necessary to make the headset work in a game. Tracing these relations not only showed how they intertwine machine, player, and role-playing game, but revealed opportunities for further relations that require work with the current prototype of the virtual reality system. On the basis of these two examples, I argue that the requirements for role playing show how augmented and virtual reality systems might merge in future technological developments.

Chapter 5 is about tabletop role-playing games where people sit around a table. The core activity for players is telling each other what the character does in the shared world. Thus, the group experiences vicariously their characters' adventures. However, tabletop role-playing games involve not only people, but also the table, sheets of paper, and more material elements. To examine how these materials participate, I take a more radical step in this chapter with a methodological experiment. I explore the actions of materials in tabletop role-playing games by letting materials speak. One result is that I am able to describe what happens between materials that seem neutral during role playing. The experiment shows how future researchers can use role playing of materials as an ethnographic method. There have been forerunners in actor-network theory, but no study of role-playing games to date has investigated materials in this way.

In the concluding chapter (Chapter 6), I present an alternative understanding of how materials make role playing work not on the basis of one element, physical or material, mental or creative, but how heterogeneous elements collaborate at specific sites of role playing.

METHODOLOGY & THEORY

2.1 Introduction, or Following Materials to Multiple Role-Playing Game Sites

This book is about role-playing games, a genre of games played and enjoyed in various forms around the globe. Games are the central unit of analysis of game studies, a field which emerged at the turn of this millennium (Aarseth, 2001). Although the field focuses mainly on digital games, more and more researchers have been asking for the inclusion of analog games in recent years. These discussions take place among members of the Digital Game Research Association (DiGRA), the largest international academic association on games. As a pun, discussions about analog games bear the tag “GRA,” omitting the “Di” for Digital in the association name DiGRA. Additionally, journals have emerged that focus on non-digital games, such as *Analog Game Studies* (since 2014). When this study includes role-playing games with digital technology (Chapter 4) as well as those without the necessary use of computers (Chapters 3 and 5), it avoids the digital/analog dichotomy with an alternative theoretical and methodological toolset: actor-network theory. As an inter-disciplinary field, game studies draws theories and methodologies mainly from the humanities and social sciences, but few studies to date have worked with actor-network theory. In Chapter 4 of this dissertation, I discuss the dichotomy between digital and non-digital games, and explain my approach that includes digital and analog role-playing games. I return to game studies later in this chapter, but I need first to explicate how this study is situated in actor-work theory, and then introduce the relevant methodological principles in more detail.

The main methodological principle of actor-network theory is to “follow the actors,” so I had to go where “the structural effects actually [are] being produced” (Latour, 2005, p. 175). Since I was interested in those structural effects that produce role playing or make it work, I followed material actors to sites where they took part in three forms of role-playing games: larp, mixed reality role-playing games, and tabletop role-playing games.

I have been familiar with role-playing games as a player since the early 1990s. The first games that I played were on an Atari computer, such as *Ultima Underworld: Stygian Abyss* (Looking Glass Studios and Origin Systems, 1992) and *Ambermoon* (Thalion Software,