

Project Title: The Formats' Significance for the Experience of Role Playing Games

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Abstract

This thesis aims to understand how the experience of role playing games (RPGs) benefits from the format. “Format” is a term borrowed by Allen Tychsen (See reference in the thesis) and is here used to describe a broadly recognized group of games that shares many characteristics. The focus will be on interactivity/interaction, features that are unique the specific kind of RPG or to the genre as a whole, and features of the media which affects the experience of RPG. For the sake of simplicity the thesis focus on tabletop RPGs (PnP), single player computer RPGs (CRPG), and live action role playing (LARP).

The thesis covers some of the existing theory on role playing games and discusses these shortly to show that the common definition of RPGs is based on tabletop RPGs. The result is that the definition does not take the possible benefits of the medium into account. To expand the understanding of the role playing game genre the theory will also be used to identify features which may be seen as either common for the whole genre or specific for one type. The final theory covers both digital and non-digital media in an effort to further improve the understanding of formats, which will form the context of the later discussions.

To further understand the formats’ importance for the experience of RPG additional data is gathered through a qualitative interview. The interview contains eleven questions which includes, but are not limited to, the interactivity and social aspect of a RPG. The six subjects who participated in with the interview are role players from the local RPG association, The Realm of Adventure (TRoA). The subjects have experience with all three types of RPGs. This data is used to determine how the medium contributes to the gaming experience, as well as to identify previously unknown factors relevant to the gaming experience.

In conclusion, the benefits of the formats are evident in how the subjects play the RPGs. In PnP the experience inherently relies on imagination and the participants’ creative abilities to contribute to a dynamically developing story. The GM’s skills as a storyteller and rule manager influence the gaming experience. Single player CRPG lacks the social aspect of other RPGs, but allows for a single player experience which makes it good for relaxation. In LARP the game is both restricted and boosted by reality as the players are limited by their own inhibitions and physical skills. The benefit is that players are in a position where they, as the character, experiences real emotions unfiltered, which adds to the immersive experience. The freedom to act in LARP is affected by how similar the imaginary world is to the real world in terms of possible skills.

All in all the benefits of the formats depends on how the participants play the RPGs, and how much the RPGs rely on the features provided by the medium on which they are played.

Preface

This thesis represents the end of my six years as a university student. My interest and motivation has always been related to games as I both enjoy playing, creating and learning about them. One thing I have learned through InDiMedia, Medialogy and DADIU, it is that both games and media are interesting topics, especially when they come together to create a unique player experience. Of the two subjects, games will always be the one I will return to both professionally and personally.

It is difficult to explain one's experience at AAU in few words, but I believe that the best way to sum it is by quoting a saying I encountered during my first year at InDiMedia: "Keep it simple, otherwise it becomes complicated" (anonymous). If the basics have become complicated, then the rest won't be simple. I believe that this saying can apply to many aspects of life, be they professional or personal, game-related or not. Another quote that also illustrates the sum of my learning is provided by Claus Rosenstand; "A design only lasts until it meets reality." This thesis is the sum of my current knowledge as a university student, and hopefully this thesis will be written both in accordance to the two quotes; Informative and easy to understand.

Even so I will tell you, the reader, how the following chapters have been structured. Most chapters contain an introduction, a summary, and a partial conclusion. The partial conclusions are used to show how I understand the covered theory and data, and will thus be the main bulk of my discussions. This spread my discussion throughout the thesis, but at the same time locates it near the material that is discussed. It is therefore advised that the thesis is read chronologically if one wishes to cover the discussions in their entirety.

For the sake of context the problem statement is placed after the theory chapters, since the hypotheses are based on the existing theory. Also due to the problem statement the analysis chapters will contain a minor conclusion on each format, which will come together in the final conclusion. This approach may seem odd but it was believed to be the best option as it allows me to cover factors which are specific for each format and type of RPG, but which are not necessarily relevant for evaluating the experience of the RPG genre as a whole.

Citations and references follows the rules of APA 6th edition.

Special Thanks

Special thanks go to my supervisor Ole Ertløv Hansen, the role playing association TRoA and its members, and my fellow students who have suffered the pressure of stress by my side.

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Introduction

The idea of this thesis is based on a personal experience. Before becoming a student at Aalborg University I was a very active role player, who played both tabletop and live action role play. Sadly these interests suffered when I became a student at the University, as I had to move away from my old friends and fellow role players. While Aalborg does have an active role playing community I never became a part of it, mostly due to the travel distance and lack of free time. I first began to play tabletop role playing games again when a fellow student started his own gaming group, which would become a fix of role play every second week the next two and a half years.

In 2010 something interesting happened. Following a session, three of us (me, a second player and the gamemaster (GM)) began to chat on a various number of subjects. This became one of those “real talks” where everyone began to pour out their inner thoughts without filters, and where you talk as friends - as real friends, having a real talk, all entering a state of flow where hours seems to fly by too quickly. To this day I cannot remember the majority of what we talked about, but it remains one of those moments that I keep recalling fondly from time to time.

Three years later I have become a 9th semester student who has to come up with a project for his final semester. The gaming group had dissolved two years prior as my friends began to peruse their own careers. I’ve always been interested in games, and role playing has been, and still is, one of my core interests. As I sat there thinking about what to investigate I began to recall that specific after-game moment. This time however it made me think rather than recall. It made me realize that this moment could only have occurred because my friends and I had been in close proximity to one another. Had we been playing a role playing game over the computer we would likely have gone our separate ways after the game, having no obligations to stick around. And had we been playing LARP we would likely have spent the after-game time packing and taking down tents, cleaning the play area for garbage, and then head for home. It would seem then that the particular moment I hold so dear could only have occurred due to the situation of the tabletop game. This is not to state that such moment cannot occurred during the other types of role playing games, however it made me wonder; is moments like these more prone to happen for players of tabletop games? Pondering the question I soon came up with a better question; what did the different types of role play add to the gaming experience?

From the memory of that specific moment came my original idea for this thesis; to investigate the difference in experience when playing different types of role playing games. This would later become a question about what the media themselves provides to the role playing experience.

The role playing game genre (RPG) exists across many different types of media, and in many different forms. Through their settings emerge the context that allows for magic, faster-than-light space travel, the existence of gods etc. All of this exists within an interactive narrative that consists of a series of choices which affects both the fictional world and characters themselves. Unique to the role playing genre is the GM, a storyteller who facilitates the fictional world, its inhabitants, and the rules that defines the game itself. The GM is also a participant, one who challenges the players through the story and who in turn is challenged by the player’s interaction with the story content. Everyone contributes to tell the story through decision making, actions, and

the luck of a die ("LARP Definition".2014; Rauff-Nielsen & Rauff-Nielsen, 2007; Tychsen, Hitchens, Brolund, & Kavakli, 2005; Tychsen, Hitchens, Brolund, & Kavakli, 2006).

There are many research papers which investigate the different aspects of role playing games. Some are detailed studies of the genre as a framework (Cover, 2005), the comparison of RPGs across different media (Tychsen, 2006; Tychsen, Newman, Brolund, & Hitchens, 2007), player types as according to a certain variant of the genre (Yee, 2005; Yee, 1999), or an examination of a feature that by some is considered unique to the genre (Tychsen et al., 2005). These papers explore one or more aspects of the role playing game genre, however one aspect appears to have been less investigated; the role of the medium. This begs the question as to what the media contributes to the players' experience of play.

Problem area

A definition of media is needed in order to investigate this field, as the RPG genre is found in many formats (a genre's use of game features and media) ranging from digital to non-digital (Tychsen, Hitchens, & Brolund, 2008). In one type of RPG the players move around in the real world while pretending to be their characters, while another type has the players sitting at a computer. It should be noted that the word "format" will be used frequently when referring to the RPGs of different media, since the term "media" is used in contexts that goes well beyond the scope of this thesis. The definition of role playing games is needed to investigate the different variations of RPGs in order to distinguish how they are played by the players.

Due to the number of RPGs it is necessary to limit the number of formats to a more manageable size. The different types of RPGs known to me personally are massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPG), computer role playing games (CRPG), live action role playing (LARP, also known simply as Live), tabletop role playing games (also known as Pen and Paper (PnP)), and text-based role playing games, just to name a few. To narrow down the focus area, three formats will be selected; LARP, PnP, and CRPG. The reason for their selection is, that each of them is played on a format that is unique to the other two; CRPG is a computer game and is played on a digital medium, whereas PnP is a tabletop game that uses artifacts such as dice and rulebooks, and where players manages the rules among themselves. The final format is LARP, which at an early glance appears to be relatively "media-less" when compared to CRPG and PnP respectively. Another difference among the RPGs is their scale, as players of LARP tend to play in a large physical area (like a forest), whereas the others are more confined.

The reason for leaving out MMORPGs and text-based RPGs is that they are played on digital media (at least according to my own experience). To keep the investigation equally favorable toward the three formats it was decided that only one digital variant of role playing would be investigated. CRPG was chosen because it had a unique aspect in relation to the other two formats, which seems to be overlooked in the existing research: single player. This allows one to investigate the importance of the social aspect in role playing.

Existing Research

Before answering the question about a format's significance in the experience of gaming, we will take a quick look on the existing research on RPGs. All referenced research found in this chapter focus on aspects that relates to RPGs. To understand the research it will be presented before its content will be evaluated. This chapter will be used as context for the later descriptions of media as well as the presentation of the RPG genre.

Anders Tychsen

Anders Tychsen Has a number of papers centered on the research of RPGs, some of which focus on the genre in relation to media. The research presented here covers the motivations for playing and the experience of play between PnP and CRPG.

Play Experience

In the paper "Cross-format analysis of the gaming experience in multi-player role-playing games" (2007), Anders Tychsen, Ken Newman, Thea Brolund, and Michael Hitchens investigates the experience of gaming in RPGs across tabletop RPG, CRPG, and CRPG with a GM. A test group of 50 subjects is divided into smaller groups who each play on all formats. To eliminate variables between the gaming groups Tychsen et al. (2007) selected the game system "Dungeon and Dragons" (tabletop RPG) and the videogame *title Neverwinter Nights 2*. The latter contains a GM toolset (AURORA toolset) which allows a player to manage the game like a GM, thus allowing Tychsen et al. to test *Neverwinter Nights 2* with and without a GM (Tychsen, Newman, Brolund, & Hitchens, 2007, pp. 2-3).

Tychsen et al. (2007) base their questionnaire on the FUN unification framework, which evaluates a player's gaming experience through five-point Likert-type questions. The questions fall into one of five categories; levels of narrative engagement, heightened enjoyment, focused immersion, temporal dissociation, and desire to revisit the game. Additional questions are added regarding the chat system of *Neverwinter Nights 2* (Tychsen et al., 2007, p. 3).

Their result reveals two key findings. Firstly the addition of a GM improves the overall gaming experience of the CRPG as it gives the players a degree of control. It also provides both participants (GM and players) with greater management of the game as they can adjust the game when needed. The significance of the GM is supported by the players' qualitative comments, although the quantitative results are insignificant. The second key finding reveals that the PnP format consistently emerges as being more immersive and enjoyable than the two computer-based RPGs (Tychsen et al., 2007, pp. 8-9). The factors which favor the PnP format include experience, age, and gender. It is argued by Tychsen et al. that the subject's preference for PnP is due to the social interaction between players and GM, as well as inter-player interaction, hinting at a preference for face-to-face interaction when socializing. Another factor favoring PnP is the interactive storytelling, where every participant can easily contribute to the narrative.

This research indicates that the ease of game management, face-to-face interaction, as well as the ability to affect the game easily, is important to the play experience in RPGs.

Play motivation

Continuing the research of the previous paper, the same authors (with the exception of Ken Newman) continues their research on user experience in the paper “Motivations for Play in Computer Role-Playing Games” (2008). The aim of this paper is to investigate the player’s motivations for playing RPG on PnP, CRPG, and CRPG with a GM. The game systems and titles are the same as before, which allows the authors to cross-reference with their previous research (Tychsen, Hitchens, & Brolund, 2008).

The gathered data is compared to the works of Yee, specifically on the subject of player types and motivations within MMORPGs. Inspired by Yee’s 10 motivation factors, Tychsen et al. (2008) defines 12 motivational factors that are investigated through 48 questions. Based on the answers, as well as cross referencing with the previous data, Tychsen et al. (2008) suggests that two fundamental drives of motivation are present when playing any kind of RPG. These are focused on socialization (Discovery & immersion, socializing, character depth etc.) and competition (PvP, tactics, mechanics etc.). A factor that links the two groupings together is escapism (Tychsen et al., 2008, p. 7).

Additional four motivational factors are scored above or below the average, indicating that they are, respectively, very significant or very insignificant. The motivational factors “Immersion & Discovery” (exploration of world and content, as well as being immersed in the world) and “Character uniqueness” (customization of appearance and clothing, matching and style of armor etc.) both has a higher score than the average, indicating that they are dominating types of motivations. In comparison the least motivating factors are “PvP” (player versus player) and “Real-Life” (talking to co-workers about real-life issues) (Tychsen et al., 2008, pp. 5, 7).

By comparing their data Yee’s research, Tychsen et al. (2008) found that motivations such as social play, immersion, and achievement/mechanic oriented play are important for all users across the three types of RPG (Tychsen et al., 2008, p. 8). They conclude that there are many individual motivations for playing RPG, and that the majority of players have more than one motivation for playing. This means that there are commonly multiple motivational at play when a player choses to play either PnP or CRPG.

Cross Media Comparison

In another research paper from 2006, Tychsen makes a comparative analysis between tabletop RPG and CRPG in relation to their respective media. He states in the introduction of the paper that “The rules and fictional worlds that form the basis for these games [RPGs] function as a vessel for collaborative, interactive storytelling. This is possibly the most important feature of PnP RPGs, and one that CRPGs have yet to reproduce.” (Tychsen, 2006, p. 1).

Tychsen continues to compare the two formats by focusing on nine sections, each defining a key feature of role playing games. His approach (which appears to favor PnP) is to treat RPGs as an information system based on their multiplayer design, and the required communication between participants. It is considered an important feature due to the RPG genre’s narrative interaction and focus on multiple users. On the other hand, the different mediums presents the information differently, meaning that many functionalities works differently - PnP requires human participation in order to manage the rules and to update the game world on the fly,

providing the participants with the freedom of changing the settings and rules. In comparison CRPGs have AIs / game engines that manage the information, which allows the players to concentrating fully on playing the game. The game engine is forced to act on player interaction in accordance to prescript events, which limits the range of player actions (Tychsen, 2006, pp. 2-4).

Tychsen (2006) defines PnPs as a game that rarely contains a definitive winning condition. Instead the sessions are fueled by the players own goals and ambitions (Tychsen, 2006, p. 2). In comparison most CRPGs have a definitive end goal which ends the main storyline, and often the game as well. According to Tychsen the main difference between PnP and CRPG is that CRPGs have limited freedom; if the videogame does not allow the player to chop down a tree, then nothing the player does will change that. On the other hand PnP allows for a greater range of meta-gaming and to chop down a tree if they so desire (Tychsen, 2006, pp. 4-5).

A final point made in his paper is that, despite what the label may imply, “role play” is not a shared feature between PnP and CRPG. According to Tychsen there are many different themes, titles, sources of inspirations etc. which means that some systems of PnPs focuses primarily on combat rather than character play, thus limiting the “role playing” aspect. This focus can also depend on the practices of a specific group of players (Tychsen, 2006, p. 6).

Tychsen concludes that PnP and CRPG fill in for each other’s’ strengths and weaknesses, for example the synchronization of the players’ perception of the narrative:

“PnP RPGs inherently feature limitations imposed by the format of the fictional world that forms the basis of the game genre. Because the game is based on a shared understanding of a fictional, imagined reality, there is a basis for misunderstandings. Uncertainties about the state of the fictional world and character actions can disrupt or delay game play. [...] By providing a virtual representation of the fictional world, CRPGs avoid the synchronization problem.”

(Tychsen, 2006, p. 8)

Tychsen concludes further that while CRPGs provides digital-based synchronization between participants, the game engine limits the overall freedom of the participants and their flexibility to impact the story. In comparison the GM in PnP provides the players with the possibility of impacting the game beyond the planned narrative. The downside is that the GM cannot provide any visual representations to aid the players’ understanding. Tychsen believes that the weaknesses of CRPGs can be limited by providing the game with a human GM (Tychsen, 2006, p. 8).

Nicholas Yee

Following Tychsen’s research for player motivation (above) the search for relevant research expanded into the research of player types, specifically the works of Yee. One of the papers is centered on the type of players in MMORPGs. While this particular type of RPG is not a focus point in this thesis, the research has been used by Tychsen (Yee, 2005). In the research paper “Motivations of Play in MMORPGs” (2005), Nicholas Yee sets out to define the different types of players in MMORPGs. He is critical toward Bartle’s player types and states that the

model does not take into account that players can be equally driven by multiple motivations. His research indicates that there are multiple motivations in play which affects the playing style. While some may be dominating, it is shown that no motivation is suppressed by another, as otherwise indicated by Bartle (Yee, 2005, pp. 34-37). Yee believes that players are motivated by too many factors for these motivations to be used as a label for player types. While interesting the focus on MMORPGs limits the usefulness of this research, meaning that it will not be used.

Before discarding the use of player type studies completely, an earlier investigation of Yee is evaluated. This research makes a similar investigation on player types, but with the aim of identifying interplay between players and their fictional characters. Yee draws his inspiration from an unpublished thesis by Jennifer Mulcahy, who sought to identify key difference among the players themselves rather than comparing them with non-players (Yee, 1999, p. 3). Looking at player personality factors such as whether they are introverted or extroverted, how they learn, the years of experience, their age and genders and so forth, Yee discovers that player-related factors influences how players play their characters. A point of critique is the paper's lack of a definitive conclusion. It presents its findings but does not appear to finalize the findings beyond this point.

To conclude, Yee's research holds relevance when exploring the motivations and personalities of role players. That said it does not directly relate with the scope of this thesis as the primary focus of Yee's work lies on a format (MMORPG) that is not investigated in this thesis. As interesting as his research is, it will not be used in this thesis.

Marc LeBlanc

Marc LeBlanc is a former MIT student who studies the design of videogames. He and his colleagues have presented taxonomy of fun in videogames. It is because of this taxonomy and its possible relevance for player motivation that his work is presented here.

The article "MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research" by Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc & Robert Zubeck (2004) centers on designing and evaluating games, including the eight taxonomies of fun. The framework is based on creating and evaluating digital games, however the eight taxonomies are general in their descriptions. The taxonomies are Sensation, which is the experience of play as a sense of pleasure. Secondly there us Fantasy, which defines games as make-believe. Narrative is used to define games as an unfolding story, while Challenge is used to define games as an obstacle course. The fifth taxonomy, Fellowship, is used to describe games as a social framework, while Discovery covers the explorative aspect of a game. Expression is the seventh and covers self-exploration (possibly character play, but this assumption is based on lacking evidence), and finally there is Submission, which is used to define games as a pastime where players play to kill time (Hunicke, LeBlanc, & Zubeck, 2004).

I have been unable to find the source in which LeBlanc defines the eight kinds of fun, thus making it difficult to evaluate the taxonomies any further. Without knowing the research behind the taxonomies it is difficult to properly evaluate their usefulness. It was initially believed that the taxonomies could be used to investigate the types of fun that may originate from the game medium itself, thus allow me to ask the subjects to select which kind of fun they associated with a certain format. From further evaluation it appears that the taxonomies are

primarily centered on the design of the game title itself rather than the genre or medium, with the possible exception of Submission and Fellowship. For this reason the taxonomies are not considered relevant for this thesis.

Partial Conclusion

Tychsen's research covers the motivations of playing RPGs and the players' experience of play and compares these between two formats, meaning that the papers cover some aspects of this thesis' problem area. What the research indicates is that the GM is important for the experience of play, be it digital or non-digital (Tychsen et al., 2007). The GM provides the players with an opportunity to affect both the narrative and fictional world, which increases their immersive experience. One can guess that the GM provides an additional layer of player interactivity as he can adjust the narrative flow according to player action. This may explain why the players of CRPG without a GM felt less immersed; their ability to affect the fictional world was limited by the programming.

The research on player motivations shows that immersion, exploration and character uniqueness are dominating factors (Tychsen et al., 2008). Exploration and character uniqueness hints at free choice, namely the freedom of movement and freedom of character customization. In comparison the least popular types of motivations are discussions of real-life and player versus player combat. One can argue that game immersion and real-life are natural opposites of one another, as the latter attempts to bring real-life subjects into a fictional reality, which may potentially break the immersion of some players. It is uncertain what would cause Tychsen's subjects to dislike PvP, but one option is that it is a matter of player attitude. This is impossible to confirm without knowing the type of players who participated in Tychsen's study.

The research does not mention the type of subjects who participated in the study, making it difficult to evaluate whether the discovered motivations are important for the average role player, or if it only applies to a certain type of role player. After all, Tychsen told the subjects to play all of the games. Had the subjects been allowed to choose between the three setups it may have been possible to evaluate the preferences of each subject, and thus the reasons behind the motivations. As it is now there does not seem to be enough information to answer these questions.

In the comparison of PnP and CRPG across media (Tychsen, 2006) it was found that the limitations of one form of RPG were the strengths of the other. Synchronization of information was brought up as an important factor, as players of PnP risked misunderstanding the situation due to lack of graphics. Another factor was the presence of end goals, as PnP allows its players to define and be motivated by their own goals. Looking at Tychsen's other works it can be argued that this is similar to the player related freedom and influence provided by the GM.

A general point of critique to Tychsen's research is his lacking attention to the single player experience, which can be seen as inherit possibility of the computer media. It is believed that the conclusions made in regard to CRPG are incomplete as they only cover multiplayer functionalities and does not account for the "single hero" experience. Because of his lack to account for this strength in CRPGs it appears as if he biasedly favors the tabletop format due to factors that are inherited in that particular format.

Summary

The existing research favors PnP from a multiplayer point-of-view. To properly explore the strengths and limitations of the format single player functionality of CRPGs should be added to the research.

The GM is an important participant in RPGs since he provides the players with a form of narrative interactivity. This allows the players to affect the narrative according to their own goals, regardless of what the end goal of the game may be. This improves player immersion and allows participants of PnP to run a game indefinitely.

The GM related interactivity is limited by the format, as PnP allows for greater independence and freedom of choice than CRPG. Due to these factors the PnP is considered more immersive than CRPG with a GM, but not in a statistically measurable manner. The social collaborative interaction seen in PnP appears to be a factor in the participants' preference for tabletop RPGs.

The key motivators are discovery, character uniqueness, and immersion. It is presumed that these motivations represent different aspects of player freedom, namely the freedom of movement, exploration, and the freedom of choice. The possibility to interact with the fictional world, which is managed by the GM, is an important factor in players' experience of immersion. This may also explain why PnP was generally preferred over CRPG. Least motivating factors are the discussion of real-life events and PvP combat.

CRPGs are better than PnPs at synchronizing information between participants thanks to the visual capabilities of the computer medium. Due to the lack of visuals the participants of PnP risk misunderstanding the situation at hand.

Models for player types are of limited use as they are based on specific types of RPGs, with the possible exception being the collection of players' personality traits. Players who are introverted socialize through a game character similar to them and dislike games that are heavily combat oriented, whereas extroverted players prefer to play a wide range of characters and tends to prefer combat oriented play.

The relevant research focuses on CRPG and PnP, however it was not possible to find relevant research on LARP. To broaden our understanding a definition of the RPG genre is needed. Defining the three types of RPGs may also reveal unique elements which are rooted in their respective media. Defining RPGs will further broaden our understandings of the existing research. The following chapter will take a closer look on the RPG genre.

Defining the Role Play Game Genre

Definitions from both academic and non-academic sources will be used to broaden our perspective. Academic works that focus on role playing in terms of learning, training, virtual reality, and morale (psychological conditions) go beyond the scope of this thesis. To better understand the three types of RPG the chapter will focus on each of them respectively.

It was discovered during the research that most definitions are based on either PnPs or MMORPGs. While MMORPGs is used by many sources as an example of CRPGs the definition of PnP is most often used by both informants and researchers as the de-facto definition of the genre, showing that it is a dominating view held by many. It has been difficult to find scientific sources on LARP unless it relates to training and education, virtual reality or pervasive games.

To broaden our understanding of RPGs as games I will occasionally rely on the theories of Salen and Zimmerman (2004).

Tabletop RPG

Because of the sources' tendency to portrait PnP as the default definition of RPG the following text will include general definitions, while also presenting features that are specific for PnP.

Cover (2005) discusses the nature of tabletop RPGs and compares it to other variants of RPGs, namely CRPGs. This separation is built on the view that unlike most interactive texts PnP is not limited by technology, but is instead bound by the confines of human imagination (Cover, 2005, p. 11). To define RPGs and the elements specific to the genre, Cover chooses to discuss the definition provided by Mackay's in his work "The fantasy role-playing game" (2001). While Cover largely agrees with Mackay's definition she considers it too generalizing as it does not define any elements which are unique for the RPG genre. She in turn considers the interaction between players and GM to be that unique feature of RPGs:

"[Tabletop] RPGs are *episodic*, but so are television shows and many computer games. They are *participatory*, but again, so are computer games. Pretty much every game, whether computerized or not, can be considered a *system* that uses *rules*. *Characters* are present in nearly every kind of narrative. From this definition alone, we can see that RPGs overlap with several different categories, including both narrative and game. One key feature does not distinguishes this genre from other members of the genre set of games, but the combination of these features and the interaction between the *players* and the *gamemaster* sets this form apart."

(Cover, 2005, p. 17)

Cover does not consider CRPGs to be true RPGs due to their lack of GM and instead uses the term to define tabletop RPGs. This distinction between digital and non-digital RPG is centered on the narrative interaction between player and GM, which is considered a key feature of PnP. Similarly Tychsen lists five features which he believes are shared across PnP, LARP, CRPG and MMORPG (Tychsen, 2006, p. 2). The first feature is "Storytelling with rules", where both GM and players shares the responsibilities of running the narrative as a

game. Other features are the “Character”, which allows the player to explore and interact with the fictional reality, and the “Fictitious reality” where a shared premise is used to set the setting, rules and starting point of the narrative. The fourth feature is the “Game Master” who manages the game, and finally there is the multiplayer aspect. This list has presented us with five points that are shared among various RPGs, but it does not present features that are specific for the different formats, for example dices:

“In a tabletop RPG you and your friends take on the roles of adventurers. Whenever there is conflict or the characters are attempting to do something difficult, the rules and dice are used to decide the outcome. As events unfold everyone in the game contributes to an exciting, unique narrative. If you can imagine it, you can play it.”

(“Learn Tabletop Roleplaying”.2013)

The quotation above is borrowed from the front page of the website learntabletoprpgs.com. As an informant the site offers information which Tychsen does not provide, namely the importance of dices in combination with the rules. Of course one has to consider that the site describes PnP as the author wishes it to be (Simkins, 2008, p. 5). The dice and rules are used to determine the outcome of specific actions and are therefore important definers of the narrative’s flow (“Learn Tabletop Roleplaying”.2013; Cover, 2005, p. 14). This shows that even if “storytelling with rules” is a shared feature between all types of RPGs, PnP makes use of randomizing measures as part of the gaming experience.



Figure 1: A session of tabletop RPG.

The participants of PnP have the possibilities to change, add and remove rules and must agree on which are in affect. This is necessary as there is no game engine to manage the rules, which means that every participant has to know them to avoid accidentally breaking them (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, pp. 132-133; Tychsen, Hitchens, Brolund, & Kavakli, 2006, p. 254). Based on personal experience, as well as the words of an informant, the GM usually has the final say when it comes to decision making because he is the undisputed center of PnP (Rauff-Nielsen & Rauff-Nielsen, 2007, pp. 14, 25).

Discussing Tabletop RPGs

Evaluating the existing definitions shows how important the GM is for the general “idea” of role playing, which holds true for tabletop RPGs where the GM manages the narrative, rules and players (Cover, 2005). Besides acting as storyteller the GM keeps track of the rules and NPCs, similar to what a game engine might do in MMORPG or CRPGs. The GM also provides a line of communication between players and the fictional world (Tychsen, Hitchens, Brolund, & Kavakli, 2005, p. 7). It would appear that the importance of the GM’s many roles depends on the type of RPG in question; MMORPGs also have GMs but they do not act as storyteller, nor do they have the same control as PnP GMs (p. 7-8).

The most apparent quality of PnP is presented above quote’s the last line: “If you can imagine it, you can play it.” This has a play-like quality to it, as it almost indicates that regardless of the rules, there is no limit – as long as all participants accepts the implicit rules set by the participants themselves (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 138). This is arguably also what sets tabletop RPG apart from CRPGs; a string of code cannot allow players to ignore or easily alter rules on behalf of other factors, as is the case in tabletop RPG. One can argue that PnP provides players with limitless freedom through the features that are the GM and imagination, though at the same time one can likewise state that digital RPGs allows more fair game since breaking the rules is more difficult. As it will be stated in the following CRPG section, the range of choices available in PnP is larger than in CRPG.

It is apparent that the players and GMs are responsible for keeping track of the rules themselves. While this may provide the participants with a greater range of freedom (since they can adjust the rules on the fly), one can imagine that this can cause the occurrence of errors and disputes. For this reason the rulebook can be considered another vital feature of PnP as it can solve disputes and instruct how to use the system most efficiently (operative rules) (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 138). The rulebooks are the pre-manufactured element in PnP which, along with the dices, represents the system of rules and actions designed specifically to support a particular space of possibility (the game universe).

Computer RPG

As previously stated only few CRPGs provide the tools that allow players to take on the role as GMs (Tychsen, 2006, p. 6-7). In another paper he comments that “the game engine takes away most aspects of rules regulation which the GM no longer needs to spend resources on, allowing a greater focus on the narrative development” (Tychsen et al., 2005, p. 5). This means that while most CRPGs do not permit the presence of a GM, those that does allows him to focus on telling and handling the development of the narrative. One can argue however that the participants are still capable of setting their own implicit rules in regard to setup,

weapons and so on as long as it occurs within the frames of the game system (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 138).

The lack of rule control makes the GM is less capable of adjusting the game on the fly, which can affect the participants' narrative freedom as well as the overall difficulty (Tychsen et al., 2005, p. 5). While there exist other ways of adjusting the difficulty of a videogames, for example Dynamic Difficulty Adjustment (Adams, 2008), such implementations are based on the player's current state of health, his kill-ratio and resources, and are rarely based on the player's actual performance.



Figure 2: The Elder Scrolls V: *Skyrim*.

A strength of CRPG is the inherit use of graphics and audio, which ensures that the players can easily follow the narrative (Tychsen, 2006). This eliminates the initial need of a storyteller although it does not necessarily provide the same level of story control as a GM. The inherit lack of a GM is considered a weakness by Cover and the main reason why she does not consider CRPGs to be true RPGs (Cover, 2005, p. 17). As stated in her abstract, “[tabletop] RPGs grants players a narrative control that is not possible in computer-mediated environments” (Cover, 2005, p. 2).

Anders Tychsen shares a similar and states that “the core element of PnP RPGs, that of actually role playing, can however be lost in the translation from the TTG format of PnP RPGs to other media formats” (Tychsen, 2006, p. 1). To Tychsen the quality of PnP RPGs (the GM) remains an unconvertible feature which is lost in RPGs on other media. He states further that few CRPGs allows a player to act as a GM (the AURORA toolset), but adds that such tools does not allow the GM to make changes on-the-fly (Tychsen, 2006, p. 7). Another

restriction in CRPGs is the limited player-to-player communication which does not support collaborative narratives to be made fluently (Tychsen et al., 2005, p. 5).

A critique of Tychsen's and Cover's definitions of RPG, it is apparent that the view on CRPGs being non-RPGs is based on the function of the GM, specifically his ability to manage the flow and changes of the narrative. As mentioned in the previous critique of Tychsen (see page 19) one should take the strength of CRPG into account when discussing RPG and media. Besides the benefits of graphics and sound CRPG eliminates the need of a GM by having a game engine managing the rules. This allows players to play CRPG by themselves without having to rely on another person.

Consequential Choices

To add to the definition of CRPGs a non-academic source will be used for the sake of argument and for providing an alternative view. I am aware of the likelihood that this informant describes CRPGs from a biased point of view, as people tend to describe something based on what they themselves wish is the optimal experience (Simkins, 2008, p. 5). That said the use of informants is considered important as only the players can fully describe what they experience when playing a game.

The blog "Sinister Design" ("What makes an RPG".2011) covers different preexisting definitions of CRPGs as RPGs. The features mentioned by the different definitions can be found in many other computer games and can therefore not be seen as a specific feature of RPG. One definition states that RPG is the progression of stats, which the blog's author disagrees with since stats are essentially meaningless numbers. The meaning depends on the character to which the stats belong. The unknown author argues that meaning does not come from the improvement of the character, but rather the significance of the choices behind the stats, as choice-making provides players with a sense of ownership. For stat progression to be considered an element of RPG, the character should be a unique hero and not a replaceable mob. As stated by the blog, "Even the most rudimentary RPG takes pains to make your characters *your characters*, and not just temporary, interchangeable instances of a particular unit type" ("What makes an RPG".2011).

While the unnamed author at Sinister Design states that many RPGs are story driven he does not consider the story itself to be the most important feature. Instead it is character driven storytelling that is the key in RPG as it allows players to improve and shape their character into their linking:

"While it is true that story is important to the RPG genre, it's a *particular kind of story* that ultimately proves central. It's about the character/party as your avatar, and your quest to shape that avatar. (That doesn't have to be the game's central plot, mind you—it just has to be part of the arc of the story, as told by you playing the game.)" [...] "It's that creative power to mold and develop your avatar over the course of the game that makes an RPG an RPG. It is, in effect, a sort of self-improvement by proxy."

("What makes an RPG".2011)

This statement correlates with the definition of cooperative narrative between player and GM provided by Cover and Tychsen et al. (Cover, 2005; Tychsen et al., 2005). Sinister Design elaborates the explanation by

defining the cooperative narrative as “choices with consequences”. While all games contains choices that can be considered consequential for future play (building of certain units, collection of a specific resource, moving a certain piece in chess, placing a certain card) (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, pp. 73-74), “consequential choices” is by the blog’s author identified as choices that a) affects the character and b) impacts on how the game is experienced by the player (“What makes an RPG”.2011). This description shares some similarities with the discernable and integrated sides of meaningful play (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, pp. 49-52).

Another way of describing consequential choices is through the process of increased specialization along one path which increasingly shut off other possible paths of development. Your character can either become physically stronger or mentally smarter, but he cannot be a master of both (“What makes an RPG”.2011). This specialization appear similar to Salen and Zimmerman’s (2004) definitions of meaningful choices (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, (pp. 73-74)), which is a result of meaningful play, particularly in relation to integrated play which tells the players how choices will affect the rest of the game (p. 51).

Finally the blog defines a videogame as a CRPG if: “... it features player-driven development of a persistent character or characters via the making of consequential choices” (“What makes an RPG”.2011). As this is currently understood, affecting the NPCs perception of the player’s character throughout the game is good for immersion, but only choices that limit the player by forcing him to specialize and grow, thus giving him a feeling of ownership toward the character, is considered a common feature of CRPG.

Discussing CRPG & Consequential Choices

The informant considers choices to be a key feature in CRPGs. This is interesting as it can be discussed that the main function of a GM is to allowing players to make choices that affects the fictional world. Looking beyond factors such as single player, graphics and audio it appears that CRPG is about making choices matter. A similar viewpoint is shared by Simkins (2008) who in his definition of CRPGs states that “the definition of RPG should lie in the playing of it, and not in the game mechanics, setting or computer logic that surrounds it.” (Simkins, 2008, p. 21). The idea of consequential choices being a key equalizer between PnP and CRPG challenges the definition provided by Cover (2005), as it indicates that the cooperative and interactive narrative between players and GM is not necessarily *the* key feature of the RPG genre. Rather it is the effects of the choices which a sensible assumption (based on personal experience) as it cannot be guaranteed that every GM is equally willing to negotiate the course of the narrative, nor willing to accept major changes to occur to the world they have spent so much time creating.

Choice is also a feature of interactivity, as seen in the paper “Interactivity” (Jensen, 1998), which describes the different dimensions of interactivity, one of which is Brenda Laurel’s three variables for interactivity; 1) “frequency”, or “how often you could interact”, 2) “range”, or “how many choices were available”, and 3) “significance”, or “how much choices really affected matters” (Jensen, 1998, p. 12). Following Jensen’s conclusion, low interactivity is the result of few choices, while high interactivity is the result of many meaningful choices. It can be argued that this definition works both for and against the notion of CRPS being a RPG, as players affects the world through the consequences of their choices. In CRPGs the range of choices is limited due to their pre-coded nature, which is not the case of PnPs. Following this argument one can say that

CRPGs lacks the same “range” of choices as PnP because it relies on the range of options available in the pre-coded events. The concept of interactivity will be further discussed in the next chapter.

Besides the ridged nature of preprogrammed rules it appears that the difference between digital RPG and non-digital RPGs are the single player option, visuals vs. imagination, possibility of unscripted consequential choices and, perhaps the most unique feature of CRPGs, the save/load-function (which has interestingly enough not been mentioned by any sources so far).

Live Action Role Play

LARP is arguably the most spacious RPG in term of physical space. The setting takes place in a fictional world that is played in the real world through the use of scenery, props, costumes, stories, acting and player interaction. Unlike PnP and CRPG the players ofLARPs uses their bodies to interact with the fictional reality (Tychsen et al., 2006, p. 5). The number of participants can be in the hundreds and a session can last a couple of days (Rauff-Nielsen & Rauff-Nielsen, 2007, p. 16). Because it is played in physical space, LARP is also the only variant that can be directly affected by external factors like weather.



Figure 3: A combat situation in LARP.

Most available information on LARP appears to come from informants, or is focused on LARP as a tool in other studies, such as pervasive games where digital media is used to merge game space and physical space. In pervasive LARP the aim is to fit in and not reveal to the bystanders that you are playing a game (Stenros & Waern, 2009). This form of illusive playing is criticized on the book’s own webpage, where Stenros states that important factors in LARP are a) that the bystanders can see, or know, that a game is taking place so that they

can avoid entering the games pace, and b) that the players can leave the game if they start feeling unconfutable (Stenros, 2009). This is not the case with pervasive LARP whereas in traditional LARP (a term used by Stenros & Waern to describe non-pervasiveLARPs) the larpers¹ always has the possibility to leave when needed. Another factor which separates LARP from pervasive LARP is that the latter is played among non-players who can potentially be pulled into the game unwillingly². In comparison, traditional LARP is transparent and it's clear that a game is taking place, thus allowing non-players to avoid entering the game (Stenros, 2009).

Aspects of LARP

The informant Larping.org takes an insider look on the hobby and defines LARP as “Collaborative pretending with rules”, which is divided into the three aspects; “Collaboration”, “Pretending”, and “Rules” (“LARP Definition”.2014). The collaborative aspect represents the social element of larping³ as the players socialize with one another during the game through their characters, and afterwards when they discuss the game. The informant identifies the social element as the dominating aspect of LARP:

“It could be said that the only true “win” in a larp is maintaining old friendships and developing new ones. This internal purpose is arguably the most appealing aspect of larps. Additionally, these friendships have an external purpose; namely the development and sharing of a fantastic space known as the game world. Players and staff work together to make the game world a real place for characters to explore, do battle in, and develop relationships.”

(“LARP Definition”.2014)

Another factor speaking for the importance of the social aspect is that even NPCs (non-player characters) must be played by real people in order to uphold the illusion. This leads us to the second aspect of larping “Pretending”, which is the participant pretending and immersing himself into the fictional world through a fictional character. As commented by the informant, “Larping is about pretending, but it doesn’t end there. The experiences we have while we pretend as we larp transfer over int[o] our real lives” (“LARP Definition”.2014). The site elaborates by stating that players gain confidence through pretended play, which they can bring with them after the game. This self-improvement through play resembles Johan Huizinga’s definition of meaningful play, as presented by Salen and Zimmerman (2004) in their overview of chapter 3, “Meaningful Play”:

¹ A name for LARP players.

² Stenros & Waern points out that there are rules that prevent this from happening, however due to the secrecy of pervasive LARP it can be difficult to prevent a non-player from reacting on an in-game scenario by mistake.

³ Playing LARP.

“[...] even in its simplest forms on the animal level, play is more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex. It goes beyond the confines of purely physical or purely biological activity. It is a significant function-that is to say, there is some sense to it. In play there is something "at play" which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something.”

(Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 47)

The final aspect of larping is the rules, which can be described similarly as in most other games in that they set a framework that the participants can follow, thus allowing them to play within the same game space (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 132). This description share some similarities with those found in PnP, specifically that all participants must agree with them:

“[...] the rules make larping possible because the integrity of group pretending is based solely on what everyone ascents to. When a group agrees on what is possible via rules, options become available in the pretend space where there were none. If there are no rules there is no balance. Where there are rules, it makes the gaming space available to everyone.”

("LARP Definition".2014)

This description shares some similarities with Johann Huizinga’s concept of the Magic Circle, as described by Salen and Zimmerman (2004). Huizinga’s definition of play is used to describe the “Magic Circle”, a concept where play “takes place in its own boundaries of time and space” (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 107). This description is appropriate when describing a live action game where players enact a fictional reality into the real world.

According to another Informant, multiple GMs are needed to organize and manage a LARP (Rauff-Nielsen & Rauff-Nielsen, 2007, p. 24). The GMs are limited in their control of the game’s flow, which makes them less influential than the players who can affect the world and story through their actions (Tychsen et al., 2005, p. 4). Unlike a GM in PnP a GMs of LARP cannot control the environment, nor manage the rules over a wide area which gives the GMs a communicative challenge.

Discussing LARP

The distinct factor in LARP is reality itself as both players and GMs are subjected to it. Coupled with the scale of LARP the GMs are generally more limited than any other type of GM, as they have to deal with external factors such as weather, illness etc. They are likewise limited in their capabilities to create new NPCs on the spot because even NPCs have to be played by real persons.

It can be stated that despite the element of imagination inherited in LARP it remains bound by the laws of reality. In comparison, a game of PnP is rooted in the realms of imagination without the same limitations to the imagination. It will therefor make sense to refer to the imagination present in LARP as “pretention” since the larpers pretend to be their character. A character in LARP cannot be physically superior to the larper himself as he is required to play out his character’s actions. This being said this may arguably be the strength of LARP - whatever the player does it is he who does it. He attacked the Minotaur, he charged against the enemy on the

field of battle, and he delivered the killing blow. In a game where there is no definitive medium standing between the player and the experience, one can presume that there will be very little that can filter that experience.

Following the theory one can summarize LARP as “physically real and physically limiting.” How much this statement holds true may depend on the player’s opinion and capabilities, but given what we have been able to find it is clear that LARP is the only format that either benefits, or suffers, from the physical nature of pretended play.

Partial Conclusion

From the above descriptions of LARP, PnP and CRPG we can attempt making a general definition. Because of their varied nature there are only a few features which can be considered shared among the RPGs, but this does not necessarily mean that the type-specific feature becomes any less important. This is important to note as there is a vast difference between all three RPGs, even between the two non-digital RPGs that relies on GMs. As a game genre RPG is defined as a combination of general game features like rules, narrative, participation, character and episodic structure (Cover, 2005). The episodic structure refers to how traditional RPGs are played as a series of smaller adventures, one for each game session that together make a campaign. This structure is also evident in many computer games where the game is divided into multiple levels (Cover, 2005, p. 17). On a personal note, many computer games allow the user to save and load his process at will, which means that unlike PnP and LARP, many CRPGs allow players to start over and take another approach on a given challenge.

Gamemaster

The GM is the key feature of RPGs by Cover and Tychsen, which is why they consider CRPG a non-RPG videogame. As seen in the description of LARP however, the GM is far less influential than in PnP which indicate that the need of a GM depends on the nature of the RPG itself. In PnP the GM is the center of the game as he manages the rules and setting, while also providing the players the opportunity to influence the narrative. All participants contribute to the narrative through meaningful choices and imagination. PnP also appears to be the only type that allows the GM to make adjustments on the fly effectively. It is evident that Cover and Tychsen prefer this type of RPG as their definition of the genre is centered on the PnP GM.

In CRPGs there are no GMs unless the right tool is available, but on the other hand the CRPG does not need GMs to function (Tychsen et al., 2005). Instead the game is facilitated by an uncompromising game engine that does not allow unauthorized changes to be made to the pre-scripted rules (such as selecting difficulty). This also means that CRPGs provides the least amount of narrative freedom, as previously stated by Cover; “[Tabletop]RPGs grants players a narrative control that is not possible in computer-mediated environments” (Cover, 2005, p. 2).

One can state that the roles of the GM are defined by the format, as he is either needed to manage the game completely (PnP), or barely needed at all once the game is running (LARP).

Choices and Narrative

The earlier definition of consequential choices found in the definition of CRPG offer us a way of defining the nature of an RPG narrative, one which can span across the three different RPGs. This argument is based on the previous statement from the same section, that the concept appears similar to the concept of meaningful play and meaningful choice (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, pp. 51, 73-74), and they may have some similarities with the three dimensions of interactivity (range, frequency and significance) (Jensen, 1998, p. 12), which is useful when determining the nature of consequential choices in each type of RPG.

Based on how the theory is understood it is believed, that the range and significance of the choices can be defined by factors such as the participants' imagination, the GM's will to cooperate, the programming of the game, or by reality itself. Based on this it can be argued that the narrative interaction between player and GM is in fact a series of consequential choices, where the range is managed by the player, but is accepted (or dismissed) by the GM. Similarly the frequency and significance may be defined by the GM or game engine; while its meaningfulness is interpreted by the players (See the following chapter, page 38). One can thus assume that what makes choices consequential is how they relate to the emergent nature of the narrative (a concept Salen and Zimmerman borrows from Marc LeBlanc and Dough Church), where an interactive narrative contains both embedded and emergent components (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, pp. 377-379).

Embedded content are scripted elements that occurrences during the narrative, regardless of the choices made by the player (cut-scene, animation, linear storyline). Opposed to that is the emergent content which occurs on the fly, often due to the choices of the player (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, pp. 377-379). Based on this description one can argue that PnP features more emergent content through the cooperative narrative between player and a cooperative GM. Emergent content is here considered important to the cooperative narrative between player and GM, as it may allow the participants to affect the fictional world, and character, through exploration and play, whereas the pre-designed CRPG likely relies on embedded content to appear emergent – a choice is only available if the option of making that choice has been programmed into the game. As the theory is currently understood the, consequential choices are specifically “RPG” if it can result in the emergence of unpredictable results.

This inherent inability to produce true emergent content is a blow against the idea of CRPG as a RPG, as it indicates that the player, regardless of the opportunities provided by the CRPG, does not experience true freedom of choice. A counter is that content that is non-vital to the main storyline (that is, side quests and random events) can be seen as examples of emergent content as they offer locations, monsters, treasures, and choices which the player can discover by himself through exploration (Cover, 2005, p. 31).

Considering this, are CRPG less “RPG” than PnP or LARP, as claimed by Cover (2005)? Probably, since the players are not capable of doing something that is not pre-scripted into the⁴. However I will argue that some CRPGs can be considered closer to the idea of the RPG than other computer games due to their perceived player freedom (open world exploration and possibility to ignore the main quest-line).

⁴ The exception to this is the modification of the original software, also known as “modding”. Mods are user-generated content which can add new content, items, quests etc.

Visualization, Imagination & Pretense

Another element in RPGs is that players play through characters to affect the fictional reality. How this is done differs between the formats.

Based on the previous theory it appears the creative freedom of PnP relies on the imagination and creativity of the participants. The world and characters are described by the GM but unless visualization is provided the players are free to interpret the information freely. This also means that both players and GMs are free to decide *how* they want play the game, as rules can be edited, added or removed through consensus. Arguably this makes PnPs a very subjective game as the experience can be heavily influenced by the imagination of the individual. Due to this reliance on the individual's imagination one can reason that PnP can be easily sidetracked by players misinterpreting the GM's description of events. This indicates that keeping the player's imagination in check and ensuring that their experiences are synchronized is an essential role of the GM (Tychsen, 2006, p. 8).

In CRPGs the players are given a visual representation of the world. This ensures the synchronization between multiple users, but this often comes at the expense of collaborative interaction between users (Tychsen, 2006, p. 8). Considering the nature of CRPG I will argue that CRPGs give the player a pre-manufactured fantasy, which forgoes the need of having to use one's imagination. Unlike the case of PnP and LARP (and possibly also multiplayer CRPGs), the player of a single player CRPG does not have to accept the provided fantasy in order to play.

Similar to PnP, LARP contains a large degree of imagination, however as mentioned previously the nature of LARP means that using the term "pretending" is more appropriate as it illustrates that the participants are bound by the physical world. This means that a character's physical skill does not go beyond the skills of the player himself. Depending on how the theory is understood, LARP relies on the players' ability merge the imaginary world onto the real one in order for the players to accept the premise of the setting (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 107).

Definition of the RPG genre

From the theory it appears that the genre is centered on the development of a consequential narrative that is affected by player choices. The exact nature of these choices and consequences depends on the type of RPG, as evident by the various definitions that often defines the genre from the PnP point of view. Using an informant's idea of consequential choices ("What Makes an RPG".2011) as the common feature of RPG is bias as it is not mentioned by scientific sources, however the interactive storytelling is mentioned by various sources above, and is considered to be the same thing.

Based on the theory we now have a set of common features spanning the three RPG variants:

1. An RPG contains an **interactive narrative** where players can affect the fictive world and its inhabitants through consequential choices.

2. **Consequential choices** are the definition of the RPG narrative. The consequence of a choice is set in relation to the context of the game and the situation. The range, significance and frequency of these choices define the degree at which the players can affect the setting.
3. An RPG contains a large amount of **emergent content** that is not part of the main storyline.
4. **Cooperative play** between players (and GM) is a key feature in many RPGs.
5. An RPG contains an element of **exploration and creativity** that is the result of the player's imagination and freedom of choice. The more freedom of choice, the more options available, and thus the more creativity.

Other important factors such as imagination and GMs depend on the format and are therefore not considered equally common.

Summary

The definitions found in research papers define RPG with a preference for PnP, where an omnipresent GM is been considered the core feature. Because of that CRPGs are not considered true RPGs by the people behind that research. An exception appears to be when a CRPG contains a toll that allows a player to become a type of GM.

The majority of the research covering LARP does so through the study of mobile technologies or through comparison with other role playing games. As such it was not possible to find actual research on LARP itself which means informants were used to provide additional details.

There are many differences between CRPG, LARP and PnP, most notable being the GM who in PnP allows narrative play between the participants. The degree of imagination is another difference, as PnP relies on the players using their imagination in order to picture the fictional world. CRPG appears as an opposite of PnP as it provides graphical visualization. In LARP the imagination is more accurately referred to as pretense since the imagination is limited by reality and the player's physical skill.

One way of looking at the interactivity of RPGs is to see it as the range, significance and frequency choices. Consequential choices is believed to be the defining feature of the three types of RPGs since relating theory supports the idea of it as being a center piece in interaction, exploration, story development, and participant cooperation. It may further be seen as the definition of the interactive narrative which is an important part of RPGs according to the different sources. Factors such as GMs and imagination can affect how a consequential choice is mediated.

Emergent content may also be seen as a factor in RPGs as it can be the consequences of player choices. Truly emerging content is considered rare in CRPGs due to their pre-coded structure. However, random events and non-quest-related material may be seen as emerging content depending on one's perception on the matter.

The next step is to find useful information on the different mediums that can help us understanding the formats.

Media Theory

Attempts at defining media revealed the term is used in various contexts, including mass media, multimedia, social media, and hypermedia. This made it difficult to narrow down a general definition that can overlap every aspect, as this would require thorough investigation of every single use of the term. The chosen approach is to focus on the definitions relating to games, as it is believed to be most relevant when looking at a game genre.

Because the various RPGs relies on media differently, and sometime a combination of different medias, the term “format” is used to distinguish between the three different types of RPGs. This will hopefully also limit potential misunderstandings related to the term “media” how diverse different disciplines use that term. The term “format” is used by Tychsen to define “a broadly recognized group of games with many shared Characteristic[s]”, including genre based (GM) or media based (digital and non-digital) (Tychsen, Hitchens, & Brolund, 2008, p. 1). The format can thus be seen as the combination of mediating methods used to support the experience of RPGs.

Lexicon Definitions

To get an understanding of media we start with a lexicon definition.

A general media definition is found on the webpage for the Danish lexicon “Medie- og kommunikations leksikon” that appears to be based on various concepts used in relation to communication and sharing of information (Kolstrup, Agger, Jauert, & Schrøder, n.d.). Selecting the word “medie” (Danish for “media”, and written by Klaus Bruhn Jensen) on the side menu provides us with a description of how the meaning of the word has changed over time, as a result of the culture and technologies at the time. This entry shows us that most modern definitions are centered on digital media. Sub-articles continue to explain the range of other definitions, ranging from biological to technical concepts, all of which adds to a larger picture. This brings us to the so-called “medier af tre grader” (“three grades of media”), which according article “medie” is the latest approach in defining media from an interdisciplinary point of view. The three grades are graded by how their effect on the culture in which they are used:

The first grade is based on biology and socially formed resources such as art, speech, drama and music. It is a creating media where the user creates the content, but does not distribute it. The creative capabilities are expressed through the human body which is a required part of the medium (like acting) alongside creative artifacts such as pencils and instruments. This grade distinguishes between speech and song as two different mediums, despite their common source of origin (vocal cords). Song and speech is further divided by the context of their use (religion, politics etc.) (Kolstrup et al., n.d.).

The second grade is a reproducing media such as books, radio, photos and film. This media distributes first grade media, but is not used to create the content itself. It represents mass media owned by a distributing center which delivers content to a group of consumers who have no direct influence on the content. This makes second grade media influential to different institutions of society, since the distribution is open and non-selective (Kolstrup et al., n.d.) .

The third grade of media covers digital media such as computers and mobile-phones. The characteristic of this grade is its multimodality of first and second grade media (mix of text, audio, video, picture etc.) and its feature of interpersonal communication such as emails and chat (Kolstrup et al., n.d.). Finally the users of third grade media are both creators and contributors as they can manipulate information between each other (chatting).

Together the three grades of media illustrate the complexity of modern media and communication. More importantly for this thesis they cover both digital and non-digital media, as well as what was previously considered “media-less” (first grade) in the description of LARP.

Digital & Interactive Media

To further define the third grade media we will look at the lexicon’s articles for digital media and interactive media. The article “digitale medier” (by Niels Ole Finnemann) describes both content and functional parts as structures represented by a binary alphabet. Another feature of digital media is the utility this binary structure provides it; it is possible to digitalize other media and content, which can be used to synchronize two different media, such as TV programs and website. (Kolstrup et al., n.d.).

Interactive media (“interaktive medier”, also by Niels Ole Finnemann) is, according to the lexicon, media that allows near synchronized communication between one or more users. Interactivity is here defined as the medium’s ability to allow a user to manipulate the mediated content (Kolstrup et al., n.d.). More specifically there are two kinds of interaction, the first being consultative interaction which covers functions such as searching and selecting specific content - No new information is generated, only chosen and used, with the opportunity to return to the previous selected content. The second is conversational interaction which covers online chatting and (video) game related actions. It is used to describe interaction which allows the user to create and manipulating content (Kolstrup et al., n.d.).

Further defining the RPG formats

What is common for the above descriptions is that they describe the distribution of information between users. The difference is how the users use the information, as they can be either be distributors or passive consumers, interactive users, or a creator distributing his own content to a limited audience. These user roles are evident when looking at the description of the three grades of media.

At a glance the concept of media grades appears broad enough to cover all three types of RPGs: CRPG fits into the third grade media since it is played on a computer, whereas LARP is arguably played through first grade media. As for PnP it appears at first glance that tabletop RPGs have a leg in both first and second grade media. The rulebooks is undeniably a second grade media, however the creative interactivity between participants fits with the idea of first grade media. One can imagine then that the format of PnP is a form of non-digital third grade medium, but that would indicate that a fourth grade of media might exist – a claim there are no supporting evidence for. The answer may be that PnP is a form of first grade media, where the rulebook is a tool similar to pencil and dice, something which is to be used creatively rather than consumed passively. As discussed in the previous chapter rules in PnP are adjustable and can be changed through consensus – a feature not seemingly associated with the consumption of second grade media. This means that for this thesis, the PnP format will be defined as primly first grade media, with second grade tools.

The lexicon has provided definitions which have led to ideas concerning the formats themselves. Further investigation is needed however, as the lexicon does not present any deeper understanding of the concepts. The following text will take a better look at digital media and interactivity, since these were described superficially in the lexicon.

Frank Lantz

On the website Game Design Advance, Frank Lantz, a director of Game Center at New York's University, defends a previous statement made at the GDC (Game Designer Conference) back in 2008. The statement is stated by Lantz himself to have been an intended provocation, where he stated that games are not their own media. The intention was to have the audience re-think the definition of games, and to rethink the common assumptions concerning media and games. Lantz's reason to provoke is based on his belief that there lacks new models and concepts which can properly explain the relationship between games and media (Lantz, 2009). Despite many attempts it has not been possible to find this statement elsewhere, so the exact formulation of it remains unknown.

He states further that he did not seek to re-define media by proving that games were not a part of it, but instead sought to provide arguments against some common assumptions that had been made regarding the subject. His leading example of such an assumption is how the word media, which suggest electronic technologies from the 20th century and onward, is used to make a conceptual gap between traditional non-digital games and computer games (Lantz, 2009). The assumption means that through an understanding of the digital media, video games have been seen as different from other games. Lantz argues that this assumption originates from how games are put into computers (CD and DVD), and how these games are played on the computer (Lantz, 2009). According to the assumption, computer games become an extension of the computer medium and cannot exist without it.

Lantz argues that this perception of digital games and digital media is lacking as the fascination of computers as an object disappears over time and is replaced by the fascination of the computation itself. In a similar manner, games is seen as something played on a computer or game console, but over time the attitude changes so that the media become a part of the game itself:

“Ubiquitous, pervasive, always-connected computation will start to shift our focus away from computers and game consoles as devices and eventually we stop thinking about games as something we put into computers and start thinking about computers as something we put into games. “

(Lantz, 2009)

Lantz base this idea on the concept that games are interactive. While they can be consumed similar to most other products (buy game, put game into computer, play/consume content, finish game, buy new game...), a lot of games are also consumed passively as hobbies. He states that “[games are] less like content that players consume and more like hobbies they acquire, languages they learn, disciplines they study, and communities they join.” He elaborates this claim by comparing videogames to non-digital games; “Soccer is a massive global industry, but you don't buy Soccer. Soccer is not content and you don't consume it. And Soccer is not media”

(Lantz, 2009). If this idea is understood correctly, then passive consumption occurs during the active interaction with the game. A game is not consumed like a TV program where the consumer has to actively watch the program in order to consume its content; instead the content is consumed through the interaction between player and game. It is played actively as a game, but consumed passively as a hobby.

A final assumption addressed by Lantz is that a medium is purely something that carries information from a source to a receiver, from which meaning is derived (referred by Lantz as “the message model of meaning”). Supposedly this model implies that stories and games are meaningful in similar ways, since they both deliver statements and meaning from a sender to a receiver (Lantz, 2009). According to Lantz this is a wrong assumption as players are not an audience nor vice versa. Instead of transmitting meaning a game become a meaning-machine where meaning emerge from how the game is designed. This makes the creators participants who are responsible for constructing the space of possibilities, while players are participants that explore and answer questions found within the game. The third participant is the system itself which brings its own material to the process:

“The meanings of a game emerge out of a process in which the game creators are one participant, constructing a space of possibilities and crafting our entry into it, and the players are participants, exploring the system and asking and answering questions about it, and the system itself is like a participant, bringing its own material reality to the process.”

(Lantz, 2009)

It is here believed that “system” is used to describe the media system due to Lantz focus on digital games and media, but it is not explained what material it brings to the experience. One way of understanding it is that the “space of possibilities” provided by the creators are puzzles, challenges, stories and quests, whereas the “material reality” is defined by the same rules that defines the system, i.e. the formal structure of operative and constitutive rules which are the underlying code that allows the game to function (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 138). If this is the case, then Lantz’s idea of the relationship between participants may be illustrated as shown in figure 4:

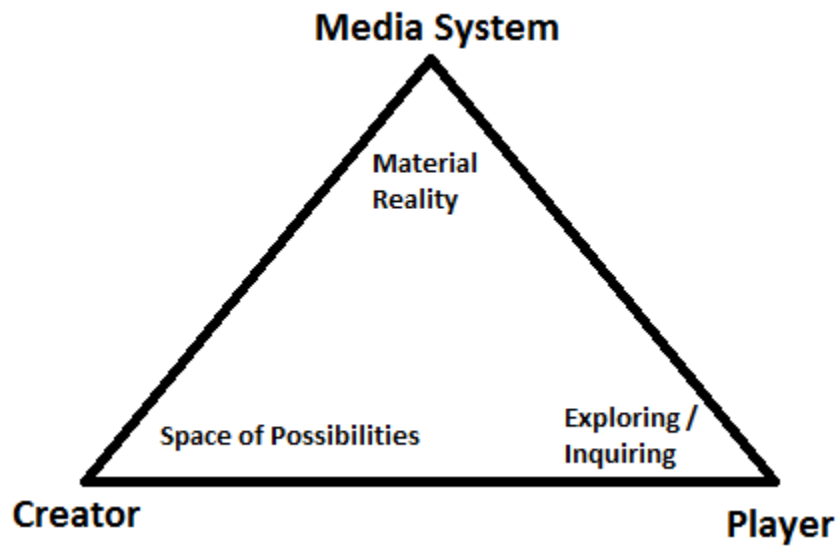


Figure 4: The perceived relationship between creator, system and player.

All three participants contribute to the experience. The creators by the opportunities and challenges they design into the game, which are supported by the media system and made meaningful by the players. The (digital) system contributes with the simulated physics, possibilities and limitations which the constructive rules permit. Finally the player contributes by exploring and engaging with the space of possibilities, by means affected by the martial reality (presumably the medium’s interactivity capabilities).

Discussing Lantz

From Lantz’s initial reasoning it appears that a medium is not a platform on which a game is played or consumed. Rather the media is part of the game experience as meaning is generated by the player instead of being enclosed in the game’s design. However the design allows meaning to emerge as a result of player interaction. Considering the previous definitions of interactive and digital media it can be argued, that this may represent the synchronized user interaction of the digital media where near-immediate manipulation of data allows a user to derive meaning from the content he is currently interacting with.

As for the supposed meaning provided by the (media) system I will argue that one will have to specify what kind of media is used and what the context of the game is to further determine the role of the system. Since Lantz defines a media as being part of the gaming experience, the media itself does not provide content or context, since this is supposedly created by the creator. It will then appear that the system sets the frame for the space of possibilities, and possibly also how the player interacts with this space.

It should be mentioned that I have had a hard time understanding what Lantz meant when he refers to the system being a participant, namely since the word “system” only appears three times in his article, two of which in the above citation. All that is known about Lantz use of the word is that it is affected by the media, and is important in games for the emergence of meaning. Lacking a sufficient description of what the media provides, and not being able to find any source in which Lantz describes his understanding of System, the

chapter about digital games in “Rules of Play” (2004) will be used as support. It is stated here that digital games have two kinds of rules; those essential to the gameplay (operational- and Constitutive rules)(Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 138) which are respectively the guiding rules for operating the game, and the mathematical rules that supports non-game features (like visuals).

One can comment that due to the complexity and features of digital media the schism between game and media is narrow, especially compared to games which does not require a computer (or even a specific version of a program) in order to be played. This viewpoint is provided by Michaël Samyn, who discusses Lantz’s ideas.

Michaël Samyn

Michaël Samyn is a designer and director of Tale of Tales, a video game company that produces art games (Samyn, 2011). He is not a researcher, but as an informant he has knowledge from a practical point of view, which he uses to discuss Lantz’s above ideas. He is therefore considered relevant as he provides additional context.

Samyn agrees with the idea that games can establish conditions for human play, and that emerging meaning is not enclosed in the game’s design, but generated by the players as they play. His counter argument is however that this is primarily true for traditional games. He argues that video games are different due to their innate ability of allowing single player gaming and that unlike many authorless traditional games (Chess & Go) that are of unknown origins, video games are designed by a team of specialized designers (Samyn, 2011). Samyn comments further that despite their young age, video games are often much more complex than their non-digital counterparts; whereas traditional games are limited in their use or presence in the physical reality, video games can simulate both reality and fictional realities where human behavior is represented through the merging of aesthetic spectacles of imagery, texts, motion, animation and sound. This description is similar to the multimodality nature of third grade media, as presented in the media lexicon (Kolstrup et al., n.d.).

Because of its complexity and ability to feature simulated realities, Samyn believes that video games are similar to the media they are played on. This is the point where Samyn disagrees with Lantz; media is more than a conduit through which messages are relayed from the creator to the spectator (the space of opportunity). In short, experiencing the media is the key. To specify, Samyn agrees with Lantz that games are not media, but believes that computer games, *unlike* traditional games, *are* media:

“The impressive graphical presentation of video games has lead to their enormous success. The promise of participating in a virtual world holds irresistible appeal. But the discovery of rigid systems of game rules underneath the seductive spectacle turns all but the most persistent away.”

(Samyn, 2011)

Whereas traditional media convey a predicted message to the users, a video game allows users “to live the fantasy,” and to “make the experience about the characters and their adventures.” However, Samyn states that “video games as media” does not replace “video games as games”, nor vice versa. A video game is considered to be both the game and the media on which it is played (Samyn, 2011).

Discussing Samyn's viewpoint

Like Lantz, Samyn believes that meaning in a game emerges when a player interacts with the content of the game. He also agrees with the viewpoint that games are not their own media. The difference between the two is that Lantz believes that no game is their own media, whereas Samyn considers video games to be the exception to the rule. More specifically he believes that the media plays a larger role in relation to video games than in traditional games given its complexity and possibility of generating simulated realities.

Based on personal experience I will state that Samyn's arguments appear valid. Most of the digital games that I have tried are unplayable without a digital media, since the information, rules etc. only exists as binary code (Kolstrup et al., n.d.). The difference between digital games and non-digital games is that traditional games such as chess, solitaire and tic-tac-toe can be played on a computer as well as on a table. In comparison most digital games contains features that are too complex to be managed efficiently without a game engine, or contains features which cannot exist outside of the simulated reality (like magic and flight). In short it appears that digital games are more dependent on their media than traditional games.

It therefor appears that Samyn's argument is valid; digital games are more inseparable from their digital media than traditional game played on non-digital media. However as stated by Samyn, it does not make video games their own media, nor the digital media the video game. Meaning is still derived by the user and the media itself mediates the game, as suggested by Lantz.

Using another perspective on how meaning is derived, games may be said to be bound by the fictional reality designed by the game creators, a reality which must be accepted by the players in order to make sense of the context - like Huizinga's magic circle, as previously described by Salen and Zimmerman (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, pp. 106-108). Accepting this fictional reality and its rules is a state of mind called a Lusory Attitude (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, pp. 89, 109-110), and it is described as the acceptance of inefficient rules that limits the player's ability to play, for the sake of playing. It is the acceptance that certain pieces in chess can only move in certain ways, and that cards in solitaire can only be moved under specific conditions. Lusory Attitude can thus be seen as the acceptance of not only the game reality (magic circle), but also its rules and possibilities. I will then argue that if a player is to use the space of possibility and be capable of deriving meaning from it, he must do so with the right state of mind; to properly explore and understand the context of the game and its rules, a lusory attitude is needed to properly explore and use the options available.

For this fictional reality to work as intended, the rules have to be properly managed by the system. A digital media is better at managing complex information and rules in the game, thus binding digital-based games to digital media more than non-digital games.

Adding to the model

Combining the ideas of both Lantz and Samyn it is assumed, that games are not their own media, nor are media the game when played. However video games are more dependent on their media due to the features unique to both of them, which are the complexity of rules, the simulated reality, single player opportunity and other similar elements that are supported by the media, and presented in the space of possibilities. Revisiting the

previous model above, which was based on Lantz's idea, one can argue that the relationship between creator, player and media is as seen in figure 5:

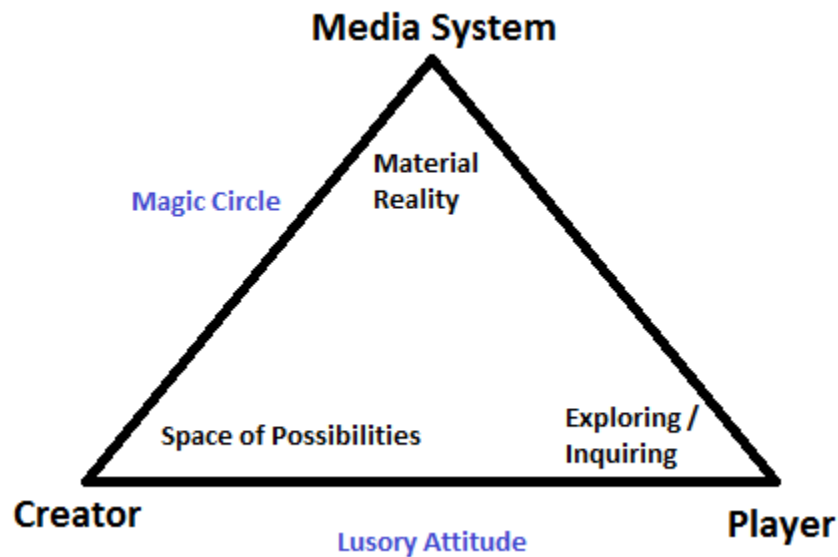


Figure 5: The relationship between participants is based on their contribution to the game.

I suggest that a game can be defined by its three participants, and by what each of them contributes with. The media system and the creators together create the game space, or magic circle (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, pp. 106-108). This space is defined by the game's rules, which are supported by the media (especially digital media and its ability to handle complex rules and simulated realities). The space of possibilities designed by the creators can only be explored properly by the player if they have a lusory attitude; if the players accept the designed reality and its rules, they can explore it and derive meaning from the context in by the space of possibilities.

There is little in Lantz's and Samyn's articles which could suggest what the relationship is between player and media system, however it is presumed that this area is covered by the interactive scheme; the player use the media to explore the space of possibilities, and the media provides the means of doing so. To investigate this assumption, the following text will take a quick look on media interactivity.

Jens F. Jensen

In the media lexicon under "medier" and "digitale medier" the third grade media was considered the most interactive as it allowed synchronized interaction between users (chat, e-mail etc.). This begs the question if sharing of information between two people, be it textual on digital media or face-to-face can be considered interactivity given that both users are actively gaining and manipulating information. An argument on this is provided by Jens F. Jensen in his discussion on interactivity, where he looks at various definitions from various fields. He focuses on interactivity in context of sociology, communication studies, and informatics (Jensen, 1998, p. 4).

The difference is illustrated in the labelling where sociological sharing of information between mutually interdependent individuals is labeled “Interaction”, whereas the mediated communication between user and machine is labeled “interactivity” (Jensen, 1998, pp. 5-6, 16). The labels are based on the approach used by the different concepts; sociology bases interaction on conversational and consultative concepts, which considers the most ideal kind of media-based interactivity to be what most closely, emulates interpersonal face-to-face conversation (p. 6). The definition of interactivity (communication and media studies) is centered on a human-machine relationship, where the user can input information in a two-way communication system. In informatics, interactivity is defined from the point of view of HCI, where the sharing process between human and machine is seen as “analogous with communication between people” (p. 6).

Jensen combines the three concepts into a shared definition, which he mentions had been previously presented at a workshop in Seillac, France (The Methodology of Interaction, 1979):

“While sociology doesn’t usually use the derivative ‘interactivity’, the concepts of ‘interaction’ and ‘interactivity’ in informatic and media studies appear to be synonymous. At the Seillac workshop mentioned above, the two concepts were connected by the consensus definition: “Interaction is a style of control and interactive systems exhibit that style.”

(Jensen, 1998, p. 6)

With a working definition of interaction, Jensen continues to discuss interactivity as types of traits labeled as prototypes, criteria and continuum, based on the traits provided by other texts. Interactivity as a prototype is focused on two-way communication, ranging from telephones, computer based communication, audio conference systems etc. (Jensen, 1998, p. 7). It also covers interpersonal communication such as face-to-face, meaning that a video conference is potentially considered more interactive than an online service accessed through a computer.

The criteria of interactivity are certain traits or features that have to be fulfilled in order for a medium to be considered interactive. Using examples derived by John Carey and Rockley Miller, Jensen presents criteria where media is considered interactive when users can control the content and has the ability to individualize it (Jensen, 1998, p. 7). The criterion is centered on the mediums’ ability to allow changes to be made to the content. It should be noted that this type of interactivity is centered on human-computer interaction and does not cover user-to-user interaction, meaning that the criterion is based on the interactive capabilities provided by the digital media.

Interactivity is further described by Jensen as a continuum of variables and dimensions, which can be modelled based on the number of dimension present in the interactive media; the more numerous the dimensions, the finer the model (Jensen, 1998, p. 16). These dimensions are the number of choices (1st dimension)⁵, access to the system (2nd dimension), responsiveness (3rd dimension), monitoring of information use (4th dimension), ability and ease of adding information (5th dimension), and users’ ability to communicate with one another (6th

⁵ Which was mentioned during the discussion of consequential choices, see page 26.

dimension). Following the description of the dimensions and various models that fits into them, Jens F. Jensen further elaborates interactivity as “a measure of a media’s potential ability to let the user exert and influence on the content and/or form of mediated communication” (Jensen, 1998, p. 17).

Partial Conclusion

Interactivity, as presumably defined at the Seillac workshop, is a style on control that is exhibited by an interactive system. To define the interactivity of a medium, three concepts were presented by Jensen; prototype, criteria and continuum. Continuum (see above) is here considered to be the most versatile type of interaction as it presents multiple models that contain various numbers of dimensions. The argument is that this type has the potential to be used broadly regardless of the medium in question, however it does not appear to cover face-to-face interaction. Interactivity as a prototype may then be more useful in cases where the medium is less rigid than digital media, such as a game of Live Action Role Play. This being said, the apparent aim of interactivity as a prototype is to get as close to face-to-face interaction as possible (Jensen, 1998, p. 7).

Speaking of interaction, LARP is the only one of the three RPGs which closest resembles the first grade media, as there are no books nor digital media to facilitate the game during play (with the possible exception of mobile phones, however depending on the setting they are only used by the GMs, not the players). However, LARP does contain some rules since it contains elements such as magic, health points and currency. As a creative medium it is presumed that many live role plays are bound by a set of rules which is intended to secure fair play. On the other hand, an orchestral assemble also follows a certain set of rules for how and when different members are to play their instrument, so rules in a first grade media is not necessarily considered to be a contradicting element.

New model

Looking elsewhere, Salen and Zimmerman defines one kind of interactivity as an explicit action chosen from a range of available actions (fitting the above first dimension of interactivity “choice”). Here the context and relationship between player input and system output results in meaningful action, and in extension meaningful play (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, pp. 69-73). Using this concept of interactivity it can be argued that evaluating the interactivity of first grade medium should be done by analyzing the context, the choice of action, and the resulting output of said action. This approach may allow an evaluation of the meaningfulness of the “medium”, and thus allow a general evaluation of the interaction/interactivity present.

This provides us with the last definition for our model (figure 6):

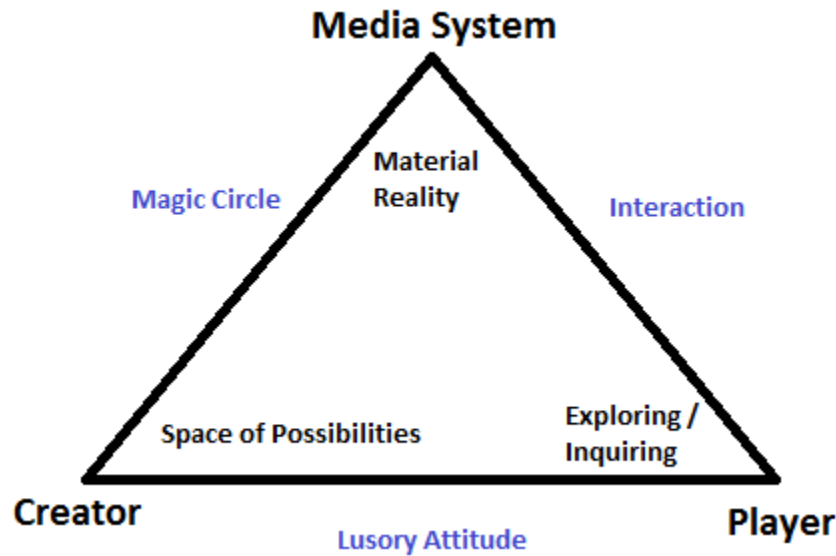


Figure 6: Interaction is a variable defined by the media system.

It is important to note that the above use “Interaction” is an umbrella label, a variable dependent on the media system. This means that the label also cover interactivity when dealing with digital media. It should be noted however that the model is centered on the writer’s current understanding of media in relation to games. Since games are interactive in nature it is not presumed that the model would be useful if used to define a second grade media product.

Keeping the previous RPG-related research in mind it can be debated that the creator in some instances is the same as the GM. These instances are PnP and LARP, where one of the GM’s many purposes is to create a story and setting. The space of possibilities may then be associated to the GM’s role as a storyteller, and the players’ ability to affect the story through consequential choices. In that case the player’s lusory attitude is important for the perceived significance of the choices’ consequences.

As indicated previously by Salen and Zimmerman, the input-output relationship between media system and player has to make sense in relation to the context of the game. Meaningful actions result in meaningful play (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, pp. 69-73). This means that the media system, and the interaction provided by it, should allow the players to interacting with the designed space of possibilities in a meaningful manner without breaking their lusory attitude for meaningful play to emerge. This could mean that the interaction of the media system is in itself meaningless unless the creators design their space of possibilities in such a way, that the media, and the interaction it provides, makes sense in relation to the game’s context. This supports Lantz’s & Samyn’s ideas that a game is not its own media (see above); however the media may provide the means by which players can derive meaning from the game’s space of possibilities.

On an unrelated note based on personal discussions with friends, it may also explain why games that are converted from one digital media to another (game console to PC) are not always successful - the new media

system has a form of interaction which does not properly support the original space of possibilities, thus leading to players having problems interacting with it. This loss of meaningful actions may then lead to the loss of meaningful play, thus rendering the converted games less successful.

Summary

There exist three different grades of media, which correlates with three different types of interaction. The first grade media is a sociological medium where the interaction is based on human-to-human interaction, possibly with the aid of artifacts such as instruments, pens and similar aids in constructing non-digital content. Second grade media describes content being delivered from a distributor of first grade content to a consumer who does not interact with the content itself. Digital media is the third grade and its interaction is centered on human-to-machine interactivity.

The three grades of media share the trait of providing content to a receiver. The main difference between the three grades is the activity of the receivers, with the users of the third grade media being the most active. Another difference is in the synchronization of information; the sharing of information is near instant between users of digital media. Digital media also provides the users with many possibilities of manipulating the content.

According to Lantz, games are not their own media. Games are interactive content wherein the medium allows the game to be played, and may add non-essential features. An example of this is how computer games can add visuals and audio, which are not essential parts of the game system or its rules. Due to the complexity of many videogames they are often closer connected to their digital medium than non-digital games are to theirs. This connection can be illustrated in a model covering the relationship between media system, players and game creators. The creator creates the context of the game, the magic circle, which is supported by the media system.

Meaning in a game emerges through the player's exploration of the space of possibilities via the medium's interactive capabilities. Interaction can be seen as a style of control, where interactive media exhibit this style. It is through the meaningful actions in relation to the content that allows meaningful play to emerge, but only if the player keeps a lusory attitude, in which he accepts the rules and content of the game.

Interactivity may be measured as a medium's potential ability to permit users to influence content. Different types of interactivity can be defined as prototype, criteria or continuum, where the latter is the definition of interactivity through a number of dimensions. The number of dimensions can be used to measure a medium's interactivity and its ability to allow users to influence mediated content.

Due to the many different uses of the word "media", the word "format" is used to describe the three diverse mediums of RPG used in this thesis.

Problem Statement

The previous chapters have covered the existing research, theories and definitions relevant for this thesis. This provides us with a better understanding of the subject at hand, specifically that much research concerning media and role playing games has been done on the digital media, CRPG and PnP. On the other hand it that not must relevant research has been done on live role play. This may not be surprising considering LARP's apparent lack of a physical media, combined with the last few years' interest on digital media.

When it comes to the definition of the game genre, it appears that the gamemaster is one of the core features that set the genre apart from others; the lack of GM in CRPGs is the main reason why some sources does not considered it part of the RPG genre. The limited possibility of affecting the narrative in CRPGs is another reason, however in this thesis the interactive narrative and the GM is considered to be two related features. The argument is that the GM provides the interactive control which allows the players of PnP and LARP to affect the narrative beyond pre-set limitations.

From a media-oriented perspective, the CRPG provides role players with a unique experience; to be the heroes of their own stories who are free from the influence of others. It could be speculated that this makes CRPGs a preferred format of RPGs for those players who prefer to play by themselves, or who dislikes sharing the control of his character's fate with other players. It may be that introverted players prefer CRPG over PnP, however such questions are not within the scope of this thesis.

In this thesis the attention remains on the media's general role in the experience of play.

The problem statement is thus:

- **What do the different formats add to the experience of role playing games?**

This question is accompanied by two hypotheses which represent assumptions that emerged during the gathering of theories and evaluation of existing research. These hypotheses are based on the previous findings:

- 1. The interactive freedom is important to the experience of tabletop RPG.**
- 2. The social factor is the main reason why subjects play live action role playing games.**

The first hypothesis is based on the previous research, where the subjects found PnP to be more immersive than CRPG (Tychsen, Newman, Brolund, & Hitchens, 2007).

The second hypothesis is based on a claim from an informant, that the social aspect is the key motivator of playing LARP ("LARP Definition".2014).

Interview

This chapter covers the chosen method for testing the problem statement. The choice of method is based on multiple factors, including the existing research on RPG, and my previous experience with interviewing subjects. The end result is an interview guide that focuses on three key factors that are found to be relevant in all three RPGs; interactivity and interaction, social experiences, and general gaming experiences. Supplementary questions are added to broaden the understanding of the subjects' answers.

Creating the Interview

It was decided at the start of the project that the role players should be included in the thesis, but it was only after the evaluation of the previous research that their exact purposes for the project was decided. The impression of Tychsen's research is, that he makes use of both qualitative and quantitative data gathering, however his data is presented as either quantitative (Tychsen, Newman, Brolund, & Hitchens, 2007; Tychsen, Hitchens, & Brolund, 2008) or qualitative (Tychsen, Hitchens, Brolund, & Kavakli, 2005), rarely both.

It is decided that this will thesis focus on qualitative data. The first reason is that Tychsen primarily use quantitative data when it comes to cross media research. Focusing the efforts on qualitative data gathering and evaluation will be an alternative approach on the problem area. The second reason is that I have more experience with gathering and evaluating qualitative data than working with statistical research methods. Additionally the timescale for the thesis did not provide the time for re-learning the proper tools for working with quantitative data. A third reason is found in the literature regarding qualitative and quantitative methods. The notion that qualitative methods allows for a broad approach when gathering data is appealing, because it is fit for gathering new knowledge (Forskkningsprocessen.2010; Rogers, Sharp, & Preece, 2007, pp. 298-308). A key factor in the creation of the interview guide was to ensure that bias based on pre-existing presumptions, i.e. questions based on my own personal experience and presumptions, was left out.

By creating an open-ended interview guide it will be possible to collect information which I would not otherwise have considered, nor have been able to prepare questions for. The choice of interviewing the subjects was affected by events pre-dating the start of the project; two months earlier I had worked as a QA Manager for the DADIU⁶ course at the university, where I had to test the other teams' games. During this course we (the QA Managers) interviewed over 100 subjects. It became the plan for this thesis that my previous experience would be used to interview the subjects.

Iterations

The structure and questions of the interview has undergone multiple iterations. One challenge was that despite the planned openness of the questions, they still had to cover aspects of the three RPGs in order to remain relevant. This meant that before the first draft was formulated, the theory on RPG, media, and existing research was re-read to ensure that the questions was based on a valid foundation. This process divided the questions into categories centered on game elements, media, and various theories based on the previous research. To reduce the number of questions, those that appeared similar was merged into one (see figure 7,

⁶ "Dansk Akademi for Digital Interaktiv Underholdning.", a course in making and testing videogames.

left side). When examining the first draft it was found that not all questions were relevant; questions such as player types and requirements of playing the games were considered beyond the scope of this thesis. The remaining 31 questions were formulated into a prototype interview, which provided a visualization of the interview's scale. The structure of this interview meant that each questions would be repeated up to three times. Estimating that each question would take at least one minute to cover, the length of the interview would range from 30-90 minutes as a minimum, not taking into account time needed for writing down the answers. This prompted the second iteration.

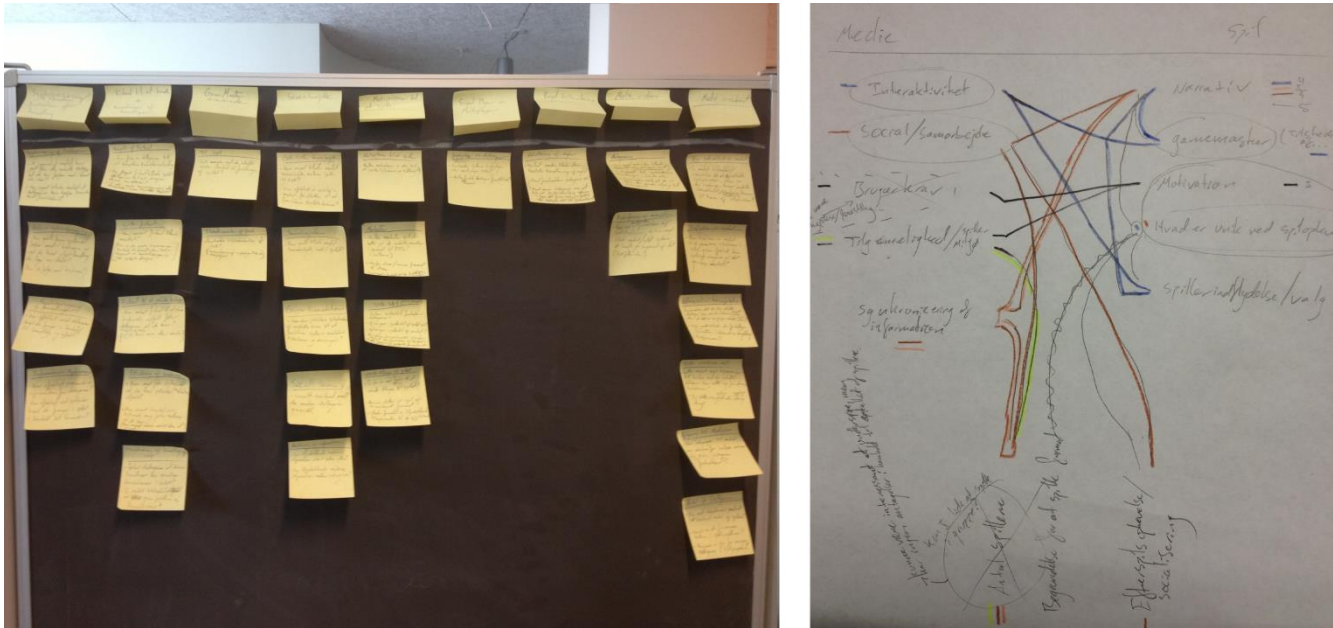


Figure 7: Left: The first iteration. Right: Questions merged across categories based on their relationships.

Second Iteration

During the second iteration the questions were inspected individually. It was found that the majority was formulated too specifically, or favored only one or two of the formats. Further analyzing concluded that the reasoning behind their formulation was my own prior experience as a game tester; as a QA Manager at the DADIU course we had been capable of asking close-ended questions and test if the players played the game as intended. In this thesis the questions are not based on any specific game title. This meant that new questions were created from scratch. Questions which were cut from the interview because they were too specific or close-ended included the accessibility of the different types of RPGs, the cost and requirements of playing the various types of RPGs and their formats, the synchronization of sharing information and gaming experiences, and post-game and meta-game activities.

The following process made the questions more open-ended and cut their numbers down to 15. They were also arranged into two new categories based on focus on media and game aspects. To keep the questions relevant to the problem area, the criterion was that the questions should cover the experience of gaming in relation to the format (see figure 7, right side).

Third Iteration

After testing the interview on myself, a third iteration limited the number of questions to ten, and rearranged the questions into four new categories based on aspects found in media and games; interactivity, social interaction, game experience, and supplementary. The interactivity category contains questions about the GM, the freedom of player actions, and the narrative freedom. The social category contains questions about player cooperation and the importance of social play. The third category covers questions concerning the gaming experience, specifically the motivations of playing the different formats, as well as the identification of factors key to the subjects' gaming experience. The supplementary questions are based on the comparison between formats. A bonus question was later added which would only be applicable to those who had experience as GMs.

Changes to the questions would be made following the test-interview of a fellow student. Finally the questions were written into Danish, since the subjects themselves was expected to be Danes, thus eliminating mid-interview translation. The questions can be found in English and Danish in figure 8 below.

Categories / Language	Danish	English
Interactivity	Beskriv med dine egne ord, hvilken effekt GM har på spiloplevelsen.	Describe in your own words what effect the GM has on the game experience.
	Hvordan vil du beskrive handlingsfriheden I disse typer RPG?	How will you describe the freedom of action in these types of RPG?
	Beskriv med dine egne ord narrativer i disse typer af RPG.	Describe in your own words the narrative in these types of RPG.
Social Interaction	Beskriv dit samarbejde med de andre spillere.	Describe your cooperation with the other players.
	Beskriv med dine egne ord dine tanker omkring den sociale side af RPG.	Describe in your own words your thoughts on the social side of RPG.
	Beskriv med dine egne ord, hvilken rolle formatet har for den sociale oplevelse.	Describe in your own words which role the format has on the social experience.
Game Experience	Beskriv med dine egne ord, hvad der motiverer dig til at spille de enkelte typer af RPG.	Describe in your own words what motivates you to play each type of RPG.
	Beskriv med dine egne ord, hvad du anser som en essentiel del af spiloplevelsen.	Describe in your own words what you consider an essential part of the gaming experience.
Other / Supplementary	Beskriv med dine egne ord, hvilken betydning formatet har for din spiloplevelse.	Describe in your own words what importance the format has on your gaming experience.
	Hvis du kunne vælge, hvilken RPG type vil du helst spille og hvorfor?	If given the choice, which type of RPG would you rather play, and why?
Bonus Question: Gamemaster	Beskriv din motivation som GM for at facilitere på de forskellige formater.	Describe your motivation as a GM for facilitating on each format.

Figure 8: The questions according to categories in both Danish and English. Only the Danish version was used.

To eliminate the need for asking the subjects the same question multiple times, the interview was structured to allow the subjects to answer specifically for each format at the same time. This meant that each question was accompanied by four answer boxes, one for each format and one for general answers. Not only did this structure turn out to be more sufficient and time saving, it also made it easier for the interviewee to remain in flow while the interviewer wrote down the replies.

The Questions

Each question is formulated with the purpose of uncovering information on the format's significance for the gaming experience. The challenge was to formulate questions which could be understood by the subjects and which were open ended, while simultaneously being specific enough to answer the problem statement and the hypotheses. It could likewise be possible that the subjects understood the questions based on unpredictable, subjective merits. It was therefore decided that the best approach would be to formulate the questions in a general manner, as this would also be the best approach for gathering new knowledge (Forskningsprocessen.2010; Rogers et al., 2007).

For the sake of the reader, the questions appear in English. The final interview is in Danish and can be found in appendix A.

1. **Describe in your own words what effect the gamemaster has on the game experience.** The purpose of this question is to investigate the importance of the GM. The role of the GM has been stated in previous research (Cover, 2005; Tychsen et al., 2005), however his roles and control depends on the format as he can have either full control over the game (PnP), be limited by external circumstances and communication (LARP), or not be present at all (CRPG). As previously argued the GM may be essential to the interactivity in PnP, which further adds to the importance of this question.
2. **How will you describe the freedom of action in these types of RPG?** The intention of this question is to investigate the freedom of choice. This is based on the apparent freedom of LARP and PnP, where the limits of player-actions appear to be based on the boundary of imagination and pretense ("LARP Definition".2014; Cover, 2005; Rauff-Nielsen & Rauff-Nielsen, 2007).
3. **Describe in your own words the narrative in these types of RPG.** Similar to the second question, the purpose of this question is to further investigate the interaction of the formats, specifically the interactive narrative, and the consequences of choices. This question was challenging to formulate, as it cannot be guaranteed that every subject values the story aspect of the RPGs, nor generally plays story-heavy RPGs. To go around this, the question is formulated to investigate how the subjects perceive the general narratives of the different types of RPGs.
4. **Describe your cooperation with the other players.** This question is one of three which is centered on the social experience. The intention with this question is to investigate the quality of the subjects' cooperation, or the lack thereof.
5. **Describe in your own words your thoughts on the social side of RPG.** Similar to the question above, this question investigates the subject's general thoughts on socializing with other players in different types of RPGs. The intention is to uncover which RPGs are preferred for their social aspects and why.

6. **Describe in your own words which role the format has on the social experience.** The purpose of this question is to investigate the format's role relative to the social experience. It is presumed that some subjects may provide an answer similar to the two prior questions, however since this cannot be guaranteed it was decided to keep all three questions.
7. **Describe in your own words what motivates you to play each type of RPG.** According to previous research the players of RPGs have many different motivates for playing (Tychsen et al., 2008). The purpose of this question is to investigate what motivations may be in play when a subject plays one of the different formats.
8. **Describe in your own words what you consider an essential part of the gaming experience.** The intention of this question is to supplement the previous question. Depending on the previous answers this may highlight something they have commented on before, or reveal something new.
9. **Describe in your own words what importance the format has on your gaming experience.** This question investigates how important the subjects consider the format to be for their gaming experience. It is realized that this question may appear similar to previous questions, especially question number six which covers the social experience. This question exists because it cannot be guaranteed that the social experience is an important factor for every subject.
10. **If given the choice, which type of RPG would you rather play, and why?** The purpose of this question is to learn which format the subject prefers. It is intended to allow comparison of preferences between subjects. It is additionally hoped that the question will highlight factors that are essential for the subject's choice of format.
11. **Describe your motivation as a gamemaster for facilitating on each format.** This bonus question is given to the subjects that are GMs of any of the three types. It is added to provide insight on the formats as tools of organizing RPGs.

Collecting Data

In Aalborg (Denmark) there is a local association of role players called "The Realm of Adventurers" (TRoA), where players of many different role playing games meet. It was decided early that the subjects for the interview should be contacted through TRoA, as this would make it easier to contact a large number of players with a limited amount of effort. Having no prior experience with the association, an e-mail was sent to the board asking permission to contact and interviewing their members. They replied that I was free to do so, but that contact should happen at the association's own address, or through their online forum and Facebook page.

To find subjects who would be interested in participating, a request was posted on both the online forum and Facebook page. The initial response was slow, but within the first week four subjects had shown interest. Three of them were interviewed later that same week, while the fourth did not reply to the e-mails that followed. No additional subjects made contact until a flyer was set up at the association's locations, and the requests on the forum and Facebook re-posted with additional information. This initiative resulted in three new subjects showing interest in the project. Two of them were interviewed that same week, whereas the third subject was unable to participate within the timeframe. A final subject made contact and was interviewed during the last week of the data gathering period. Both the flyer and online requests specified the criteria of participating. Ideal subjects were those with experience with all three types of RPG, however subjects who had experience with only two of them would be accepted as well.

In total six subjects were interviewed, all male who played all three types of RPG and who had experience as GM. The subjects were aged between 21 and 29.

Interviewing and Documentation

Based on the test interview on the fellow student it was evaluated, that each interview would last about 25-30 minutes. This estimate was repeatedly disproven as each interview took at least 45 minutes. The reason for this miscalculation is estimated to be due to the time of the interviews, as the subjects were interviewed during their free time, while the student was tested during her work hours. Thanks to the previous experience from DADIU, the miscalculation did not cause overlapping interviews; each subject were each provided with an hour for their interviews in case they were running late to the appointment, or the interview taking longer than expected. Each subject was interviewed separately.

The answers were written down during the interview, so that answers and formulations could be elaborated when needed. This proved to be troublesome in cases where the subjects provided answers quicker than they could be documented, at which point they were asked to talk slower while the interviewer finished writing down their previous statement. One way this problem could have been avoided was to use an audio recorder, however the option was not considered due to the initial assumptions about the interviews' length. By the time the option was suggested there was only one interview left to be performed. It is unsure if the option would have been used had the method been suggested at an earlier stage, due to the increased amount of work. This would have been a time consuming affair which would mean less time on analyzing the findings.

Reception of Questions

As predicted a few subjects referred to a previous reply when facing a question they believed they had previously answered. With the exception of the word "facilitating" in the bonus question, all subjects answered the questions without needing a re-formulation. Facilitating was explained as "running and managing a game". All of the subjects answered the bonus question, thereby receiving all 11 questions.

Most of the interviews were done on Nordkraft, at AAU's facilities on the 11th floor. Only two subjects had to be interviewed elsewhere, at the "Studentarhuset" (subject #1) and at TRoA's facilities (subject # 5).

Partial Conclusion of the Interview

The choice of a qualitative method holds its own problems in relation to the number of subjects; with only six subjects there are no guarantee that the collected sample of opinions reflects a common tendency among TRoA's members (which according to the board members counts about 300), let alone all of the role players in Denmark. What it can be used for is to answer the problem statement and its related hypotheses, as well as presenting new knowledge on the topic.

The questions were mostly received as expected, however the estimated time spent on each interview proved to be too low. The reason for this mishap is that unlike the test-interviewee, the subjects were not interviewed during their work hours. This mishap could possibly have been prevented if the student who acted as the test subject had been appointed a date and time, creating a situation similar to that of the subjects. However doing so would potentially have pushed the timescale of the questions' iterative process, which could have meant that the final iteration would have been less thorough. In worst case scenario this would have meant that the questions would have been too closed-ended or poorly formulated, thus affecting the quality of the questions and the received answers.

Summary

The choice of method is affected by the existing research, which contain ample quantitative data. Because of this the chosen method uncovers qualitative data. The interview is based on elements present in both format and role playing games. The questions have undergone multiple iterations to ensure that they are open-ended, yet sufficiently specific to be useful. The questions are formulated without specialized terminology to eliminate confusion. The interview aims to make the subjects describe their gaming experience in a manner which is useful in the later cross-media analysis.

Due to unpredicted factors involving the test-interviewee, the final interviews were twice as long as originally presumed. This caused some problems with the speed of documenting, as writing down the answers had proven a sufficient method during the test. The option of using audio recordings was not considered during the creation process of the interview, and was due the low number of subjects remaining to be interviewed not put into use once it was.

The post-interview evaluation of the questions indicated that they were properly formulated, with the exception of the bonus question where some subjects did not understand the meaning of "facilitating". As predicted, some subjects referenced to a previous answer when faced with a question they considered similar to a previous one.

Analyzing the Results: PnP

The following three chapters contain the analysis of each format. The initial part of the analyzing process can be found in appendix C which contains a structuration of the interviews found in appendix B. References to specific parts in an appendix is labeled by the number of the appendix followed by the page number – for example, “**C-p.2**” references page 2 in appendix C. The answers provided here are placed into similar categories as those seen in the interviews. To see which questions belong to a category, see the figure 8, page 51. Each of the following chapters will result in an analytical conclusion of the format covered in the chapter. These analytical conclusions will be used for the final conclusion.

The Interactivity of PnP

The GM is a key feature who is central for the experience of PnP, specifically because he is the centerpiece that holds everything else together. He has many responsibilities, including the management of the game system and the supervision of the players. Another responsibility is to ensure that his vision becomes the vision of the players, as this ensures a shared understanding (C-p.1). As further indicated by the previous research (see page 17), the GM’s skill at ensuring a shared vision is crucial for synchronizing the narrative between the players, which is necessary for a game that lacks other forms of visualization. Another factor that can affect the synchronization is the number of players (C-p.2), as it can be difficult to ensure that every player interpreters the vision similarly.

Beyond the synchronization of the vision, the number of players can likewise affect the players’ range of freedom. As noted by one of the subjects, the more players there are in a group, the more negotiation is needed in order to satisfy everyone. This is especially true if the characters have different alignments, making some actions unappealing to some characters (C-p.2). If the players do not share the same vision and understanding of the narrative, it will be difficult for them to reach a satisfying compromise. As a result the GM is considered essential to ensure player cooperation, especially since player participation is important for the dynamic development of the narrative (C-p.2).

This indicates that skill of the GM determines the quality of the PnP game, as the fictional world is only as intriguing as the GM makes it. If the GM is not an adept storyteller, the players will be less inclined to follow his vision. As indicated by the subject’s replies, one of the most important roles GM has is the storyteller, which includes describing the game world and the narrative dynamically and intriguingly, making the players interested and willing to engage with it (C-p.1). Similarly a GM that is a poor storyteller can make any interesting plot static and boring. If he fails at making the narrative dynamic and interesting, or if he fails at making interesting consequences for the player’s actions, the narrative will appear linear and railroaded. As indicated by one of the informants (see pages 22-23) a good GM uses the player’s action and choices to create consequences which the players does not predict, thus keeping the narrative interesting and evolving. I will presume then that the difference between a good storyteller and a poor one in PnP is the unpredictable consequences of players’ actions.

Another factor of interactivity is the game system itself. The game system can either be heavy-ruled, meaning that it contains specified rules on how consequences are calculated, or it can be light-ruled, meaning that it

allows the players and GM to draw their own conclusions (see page 19 and (C-p.2)). Considering that the GM is free to add and remove rules in his game I will argue that the only real limit is the GM's vision; if the system fits the vision, frame, and narrative set by the GM then the only variable left will be his ability at managing the rules in accordance to the narrative. I will argue that if a GM can use a system properly without using all of its rules, the lack of said rules won't affect the participants' interaction with the game negatively. On the other hand, the group of players may be a factor if their style of play does not fit the frame of the game system (C-p.4). Arguably the GM may have to either find a new game system, or change the rules to fit the vision and players. Failure of doing either may arguably affect the player's range of freedom due to lack of game control.

In short, the GM's skill as a storyteller is a key factor of PnP, since it is the primary way of evolving the narrative, synchronizing the visions of the players, and providing the freedom of action with subsequent consequences. This is coherent with some of the existing research on the GM (Cover, 2005; Tychsen, Hitchens, Brolund, & Kavakli, 2005).

The Social Interaction of PnP

As indicated above, the flow of the narrative and the players' freedom of action are dependent on their ability to cooperate and reach consensus. All players must participate in order to influence the narrative as a team (C-p.2), as it is easier to affect the narrative flow if all players share a common vision. You can additionally argue that player-based cooperation works best if they all play the "same game", meaning that everyone intends to play according to the vision - if the story focuses on social combat and development of character personalities, the one player who tries to drag the game in a more combat-grinding direction might cause conflict for doing so. That being said this is a question regarding the dynamic of a group rather than the format itself, though the option for doing this remains present (C-p.2). As stated earlier the possibility of conflicting interests naturally the more players are present.

The social part of tabletop RPGs extends beyond the game itself. While playing the game is a social activity, it is only part of the greater whole. Eating together and discussing matters outside of the game are other parts of the social experience (C-p.3). Based on the subject's replies it can be said that the social experience of PnP lasts from the moment the first two participants meet and ends when the second-last participant has left. As stated by the subjects the entire event permits the players to talk out-of-game and in-game easily, and to take breaks for the sake of being social and fooling around (C-p.3). The freedom of the format extends beyond the game and encompasses everything around it, making non-game activities such as dining an essential part of the experience. The importance of these non-game activities remains unknown since individual groups likely have their own range of activities. This social atmosphere may be a reason to play PnP, but it is not believed to be the main for playing PnP since these social activities do not otherwise have anything to do with PnP.

The Game Experience of PnP

The factors that makes up the essential gaming experiences can be contributed the presence of a good GM, such as the opportunity to affect the narrative, and the unpredictability of choices and actions as well as their consequences. Another essential part that is mentioned by the subjects is the cooperation between participants, which again relies on the GM managing a shared vision (C-p.1).

It would appear then that the subject who commented on the GM being the hub of the game has a point; not only is the GM necessary in order to play PnP, he is also closely tied to the unique features of PnP (C-pp. 3-4). We can imagine that PnP can be played without a GM, however without a shared vision to be the center point of the narrative, cooperation between players may be greatly limited due to lacking understanding of the fictional situations. This correlates with the existing research, where the GM is considered the distinguish feature of RPGs (Cover, 2005; Tychsen et al., 2005). Whether this also means that the GM is what defines RPG (Cover, 2005) is a matter of debate, but it is believed that the GM is important for making PnP an interactive non-digital game.

Considering this I will postulate that the GM is also the greatest weakness of PnP, since a game is only as good as the GM managing it. This argument is based on the importance of the GM's skills as a storyteller, his ability to share his vision with the other participants, his management of the game system and its rules (C-p.1), whether he railroads the players or allows them to be creative (C-p.2), his ability to dynamically develop the plot around their consequences (C-p.2, 4), and his aptitude for solving disputes between players. In short, a GM has many roles he needs to balance in order to facilitate a RPG, and failure to properly embrace them may lead to a poor quality game.

The above argument can be further substantiated when considering the subjects' motivations for playing PnP, such as the creative freedom that is made possible by the GM, and the motivation of playing due to the unpredictability of the consequences and narrative (C-pp.3-4). The only motivation which does not include the GM, although it does not exclude him either, is the possibility of being social both in-game and out-of-game.

It appears that an important part of PnP's popularity is due to the presence of a good GM who excel at multiple roles. That said, storytelling appears to be the most important skill of a good GM due to the provided synchronization of understanding, and the freedom of action made possible by him allowing the players to be creative. Another factor is the social atmosphere that can be considered unique to the PnP format, since the players can both socialize through and outside the game.

Supplementary questions for PnP

When asked how important the format is to the experience of PnP the subjects either referenced previous answers or provided similar answers as before (C-p.4). The replies cover the cooperation between players who shares a common vision, the company of the other participants, and how the lack of cooperation can affect a player's freedom. One subject explains that one poor player can influence the narrative negatively through poor choices(C-p.4). While the format may allow players to be creative and freely choose their actions, the overall experience can be affected negatively by those players who somehow work against the group. The social side of PnP (C-p.3) is also mentioned as an important motivational factor.

Another supplementary question covers the choice of format, i.e. which type of RPG the subjects will choose if given the choice. Most of the subjects chose PnP due to the freedom of action as well as the possibility of influencing the narrative (C-pp.4-5). As earlier stated, these elements are connected to the GM's skill as a storyteller and game manager, which further supports the claims of his importance.

One subject elaborates that he chooses PnP because it is in-between CRPG and LARP (C-pp.4-5). By this he meant that his character has fictive skills which can be improved throughout the game, but the player's success at negotiating with the GM is the primary means of acting creatively. If he can persuade the GM he is allowed to attempt an action, whereas the success is determined by the character's set of skills and the roll of a die (C-p.5). This GM-player cooperation appears to be centered on the "how and why", i.e. how the character will attempt at overcoming the challenge and what his motivation is for doing so. If the GM accepts the reasons provided by the player he can attempt to perform said action. The rules of the system are used by the participants to perform actions, albeit probably less strictly than in CRPG, as skills can be mixed depending on the game system (personal experience). The game system is another factor as it defines procedures.

It is interesting to note from the above evaluation that PnP is chosen by one subject due to the freedom it provides in relation to choices and narrative influence (C-pp.4-5), however the same subject considers the cooperation and social sphere of the format to be the most important elements of the gaming experience (B-pp. 9). It might be that the GM, along with the features he provides to the player, is considered part of the game's social element as he provides a human factor in PnP due to the required communication between participants. This makes sense when seeing that cooperation is also considered to be an important element of the gaming experience (C-p.3). One can thus presume that the answers for the two questions are connected. This leads me to make the following statement:

The reason for PnP's popularity is due to the social sphere which covers cooperation between participants, their freedom of action, and in-game/out-of-game socialization, which can be seen as elements of the format itself. The GM and his capabilities of managing the game system, to dynamically tell the narrative, and his skills at adapting to the player's input are the key element of the format which allows the other elements to exist. This correlates with existing research, see pages 15, 21-23.

Motivations of a PnP GM

The subjects' primary motivation as GMs in PnP is the freedom of the format (C-p.5). Overall there appears to be three types of freedom which sets the motivations of the GMs. The first type is the freedom of storytelling, which includes the possibility of creating a fictional reality in which the narrative takes place. The management of the rules is another which covers the ability to customize the system and its rules so that they support the setting and narrative. The third type of freedom does not center on the GM himself, but the player's ability to influence the created content. Here the GM sees how the intended audience reacts and influences the created story.

This question has provided another point of view on the GM's importance. The motivation of acting as a GM is the creative freedom of affecting the system, and to provide a positive gaming experience (C-p.5). To me the GM's motivation appears to be similar to the players; cooperation, socialization, and creative freedom (C-pp. 3-4), however it is here centered on the GM's creations and his storyteller skills.

Other thoughts

Before moving on I will discuss an interesting comment one subject made during the interview. The subject mentioned a specific variant of PnP called “Blindfolded” that does not use dice, rulebooks or character sheets (see B-p.2 and C-p.3). The game is played as a form of cooperative storytelling where the players contribute to the GM’s narrative. The players are blindfolded so that they can better imagine the scenes of the story.

As argued in the theory (see page 36) PnP contains both elements which are respectively first grade and second grade media. In Blindfolded there is no second grade medium (rulebook⁷), which leaves us with a first grade medium (storytelling). If there are any rules, then they are either unwritten operational rules, or implicit rules (see page 36).

Looking at the previous comments concerning heavy-ruled I will presume that Blindfolded is light-rule system, at least so far that there are no written material to determine the outcome of player actions. Based on this I will express that:

The fewer rules there are in a PnP system, the more freedom the participants have to formulate consequences for themselves. Also, the fewer rules dictating the game the more it relies on first grade media (conversations).

This begs the question where the boundary between tabletop RPG and collaborative storytelling lies. Where is the difference between a storytelling-based tabletop game, and a collaborative storytelling between multiple participants? More importantly, when does PnP become play instead of a game? It can be argued that PnP already contains a large amount of play due to the creative freedom which allows the participants to define the consequences of their actions without any guiding rules. If so it can be debated that the more heavy-ruled systems are more “game” than the light-ruled systems, which in turn can be considered more play-oriented. If this is the case, then games such as Blindfolded are at the edge of the light-ruled systems, at the point where the only rules left to define it as a game are the implicit rules (see page 23). If this is the case, then the grade of the media may be of little importance, as a PnP can seemingly be either a game (both first and second grade media elements) or play (only first grade media elements). The defining factor may be the freedom of action and how these are limited by the operative and implicit rules.

PnP Analysis Conclusion

The tabletop format allows a wide range of freedom because there are no rigid structures defining the game, as is the case of CRPG. Instead a game of PnP can be defined by a GM and his aptitudes as manager of the game system and as a storyteller. PnP appear to be centered on the exchange of freedom; the GM has the freedom to create a setting fitting his vision, and allow the players to freely influence the setting. The players in turn influence the universe through their choice of action, while the GM is free to define the consequences. This creates a dynamic narrative which makes the fictional universe alive and interesting.

Cooperation is another important part of the PnP format, as PnP is a group-based game. This cooperation is centered on the players working together to meet the challenges and to negotiate with the GM when doing so.

⁷It is unknown if the GM himself has a rulebook, but due to the subject’s descriptions it is presumed that none are present.

This means that the cooperation is based on the participants reaching a consensus that satisfies everyone. An important related element is the size of the player group. The more players there are in a group, the more difficult it is to reach a consensus that satisfies everyone. This is especially true if the players play a diverse set of characters whose alignments are at odds with one another. This means that there are two factors that can limit the player's freedom; the GM's willingness to allow players to define their actions creatively, and the number of players which affects the support of certain player choices.

The players are social both in-game and during the breaks which consist of non-game activities. This sets the PnP format apart from the other two formats where the players are either in-game or out-of-game most of the time. This ease of changing from in-character to out-of-character, and back means, that the players of PnP have an easier time being themselves throughout the gaming session. This particular insight was gained when I came across a group of role-players who were having a game event at my college's communal house. Observing the group showed that while the players were playing in character, they shifted from in-character to out-of-character and back seamlessly, which seemed to keep the atmosphere light hearted.

The amount of rules can determine how restricted the player's freedom is. The more rules there is to determine the outcome of player actions, the more restricted that player is, provided that the GM has not change said rules. Likewise, the fewer rules there are, the more the players can play toward a solution. Similarly, the fewer rules there are to determine the outcome, the more the GM can play with the consequences of a player's choice. Similar to the range of player freedom, the light-ruled PnP systems allows more creative play, while heavy-rules systems allow more systematic gaming sequences. Regardless of the system a GM remains the defining factor since he promotes the range of freedom and manages the rules. The more implicit rules the GM adds to the game, the more defined the frame of the game – or play – is.

It can be concluded that the quality of PnP not only relies on the GM's skillset, but also on the size of the gaming group. Both GM and players contributes to the social experience and the experience of narrative freedom, though this is a freedom with responsibility - which appears similar to the definition of meaningful play (see page 26 & (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, pp. 47-52)).

The First Hypothesis

The interactive freedom is important to the experience of tabletop RPG.

The narrative freedom, as well as the freedom of choice and action, is the cornerstone of PnP RPG because it allows the participants to use their fantasy creatively. The interactive freedom of PnP relies on the GM's abilities and his will to cooperate with the players, as well as the players' contributions. This goes beyond the game itself as it affects the overall experience of playing PnP, including dining and socializing during breaks. In short, the interactive freedom is influenced by (and influences in turn) non-game activities that occurs within the same group.

This means that the above hypothesis is confirmed, though it is only a small part of the larger whole.

Analyzing the Results: CRPG

This chapter covers the analysis of the interviews in relation to CRPG. The interviews can be found in appendix B while the presentation of the results can be found in appendix C. The structure of this chapter as well as the referential system is the same as in the previous chapter.

The Interactivity of CRPG

There are no GMs in CRPGs unless a specialized tool allows for it, as is the case of *Neverwinter Nights 2* (see pages 25-26). The player's freedom is one which is predefined, like open-world exploration of a setting, as well as the interaction with various entities that are not bound to any quests (C-pp.5-6). This type of freedom is based on the openness of the game rather than the creative freedom seen in non-digital RPGs. I will claim that the interactive freedom of CRPG is based on the game's interactivity⁸ and the possibilities found within the game world instead of the skill and creativity of a GM. As a consequence the choices and narrative are pre-defined along a course of pre-defined events, which are centered on the player character, and which does not develop without his involvement(C-p.6).

The narrative freedom of CRPG is limited by the predefined consequences, as their effect only reach as far as the designers wants them to. This means that a crucial element which is considered important to the experience of narrative and RPGs (see page 24) may be diminished by the format's digital nature.

The single player feature offers another form of interactive freedom. As mentioned by one of the subjects, the player of a single player CRPG is not forced to negotiate his actions (and their possible consequences) with other players (C-p.6). This means that he is free to play as he sees fit, regardless of whether his style of play is centered on character play, or on fooling around. This is a type of freedom not seen in PnP or LARP, where the player has to take other players into consideration as part of the game (C-p.2). This brings us to the interactive narrative, which is centered on the player being the only hero of the story. As suggested by some of the subjects this may result in improved immersion because the experience is personal instead of shared (C-p.8). One of the subjects states that the immersion relies on features such as animation, scenery design, graphics, sound and music etc. (C-p.6), and that there is a kind of freedom in allowing one self to become immersed without having to imagine the game-world yourself. In essence, the player receives more from the game than he gives to it (C-p.8).

Based on these factors it would appear that CRPGs contains more videogame features than actual RPG related features, as suggested by Cover (see pages 21-22), however stating that CRPG is not an RPG would be to claim that the GM is the only RPG feature that matters. As indicated by the previous research, the GM is a central feature of RPG due to his overall influence and as stated in the analysis of the PnP (previous chapter) the skills of the GM defines the quality of the game. As discussed on page 30, it is not the GM himself who is the key factor of a RPG, but the opportunities he permits, hence why his skills are so important. This also illustrates the main difference between PnP and CRPG, as the quality of CRPG in theory does not dependent on factors

⁸ I.e. how the medium allows the player to work with the mediated content.

besides its own design. That being said, the quality comes at the expense of creative openness and interactive freedom (C-pp. 5-6, 8).

On a personal note I will say that the interactivity in CRPG may be defined by the digital medium in that it is visualized and distinctive. The manifestation of the fictional world through both visual and audio features ensures that the subject most often knows what goes on meaning that the synchronization between player and game is near immediate (see page 32). This allows players to become easily immersed as they do not have to imagine what happens (C-pp. 7, 8).

Based on personal experience I will add, that despite the pre-defined nature of a single player CRPG, there are possibilities which are not present in PnP or LARP, for example the possibility of researching the consequences of certain choices and actions (walkthroughs) (C-pp.6-7). This may be seen as an alternative form of freedom as it allows players to prepare for upcoming events as well as guiding the progression of their character in a desired direction. Something like this is not possible in PnP or LARP where the consequence of a choice evolves unpredictably.

The Social Interaction of CRPG

Many answers to these questions focus on elements that are indirectly connected to CRPGs due to mixed confusion, as the focus point was on single player CRPGs.

As stated by some of the subjects the purpose of playing CRPS is to play a game without other people (C-p.7). As another puts it, it is a way to relax (C-p.8) and allows one to play however you want without fearing looking foolish in front of other people (C-p.7). Unlike PnP (See previous chapter) there are no negotiation between players, meaning that the player does not have to role play if he does not feel like it - he can play the game as seriously as he desires and with whatever attitude. Based on personal experience I will say, that a player can save his process before running amok among the NPCs, fooling around for a few minutes before reloading his progression and continue as if nothing had happened. This is only possible due to the save and load functionality of videogames, and the fact that a player of a single player CRPG is only accountable to himself.

What can be concluded is that the social interaction between players only exists outside of the single player game itself (C-pp.6-7). As a result CRPG fills a niche among RPGs, which is the opportunity to relax by yourself (C-p.8). This may even be seen as the benefit of digital format. Even so there remains a social element attached to CRPGs since the players can discuss the game in online forums or face-to-face. I will note that the possibility of discussing games and narratives with friends is something I believe to be a shared option for most games, and so cannot be considered unique to RPGs.

The Game Experience of CRPG

It appears that the subjects' motivations can be divided between those that are specific for the digital medium, and those which are general for the RPG genre (C-p.8). The motivations for playing RPG includes the possibility to define and shape a character through choices, and secondly to, quote, "get a fix" of the role playing experience. These motivations are based on the RPG genre, but the different formats allow these to be fulfilled in different manners (e.g. single player or group play).

In CRPGs choices and consequences, that shape the character is an element which I argue depends on the design of the individual games; if the game offers a linear story with no options of making choices⁹ then the shaping of the character is defined fully by the plot. In game titles that provide either an open world of possibilities the player can shape his character more effectively.

As previously indicated the range of choices in a CRPG is limited (C-p.6), as are the range of their consequences unless they are meant to shape the main storyline. As an example; do you sacrifice the villagers to help the knights holding the castle, or do you aid the mercenaries protecting villagers but with the chance of the undermanned castle taking heavy damage, which will make an offensive more difficult? In a CRPG the player only has these two choices while in PnP they have the freedom to come up with a third option. In short, one cannot presume that every CRPG fulfills the player motivation of shaping the character through choices as it is a question about how the experience has been designed by the developers. This is a case where the elements of RPG may be limited by the format itself (C-pp.7, 8). I can imagine that unless the motivations reflect these limitations, the player may become disappointed with the experience.

The other motivations are those which can only exist due to the medium itself, such as playing CRPG for the sake of relaxing (c-p.8), and to get immersed through the visuals, animations etc. (C-p.6). Both of these motivations are linked to the amount of effort the player wants to put into experiencing the game, and how much he receives from the game. Of the three formats, single player CRPG is the only one that provides an experience without forcing the player to imagine the world, or to be expected to actively contribute to a shared experience between players (C-p.8). This visualization of the world, the immersion through animation, graphics and sound is the basis for the immersive experience. However one subject has pointed out that the story is more important than gameplay, saying that it is the only thing that keeps him playing the same game for hours – no gameplay can cover for a boring narrative (C-p.6). Based on this it is presumed that the immersive features of single player CRPG are more effective when they support the plot of the story, i.e. aiding to the illusion.

Due to its' digital nature there is a limited number of ways a player can approach a certain CRPGs. The combat system is considered an essential part of by one subject due to it being the primary means by which players can develop their character (C-p.8). The combat system can be seen as a common feature in many RPGs as many of them revolves around adventures battling monsters and collecting treasures (personal experience). In CRPGs these features becomes prominent as they becomes the primary means of dealing with the challenges encountered throughout the storyline (C-p.8). Based on other replies it is doubtful that the combat system is more important than the story (C-p.6), although it is considered an important part of the overall experience due to its believed part in character development.

Another essential part of the gaming experience is the single player feature (C-p.6). Because the player does not have to worry about breaking character or looking silly in front of people (C-p.7), I will argue that single player CRPG provides a personal freedom which is not present in the other types of RPG. Another reason for playing a single player CRPG is relaxation (see above). Because the computer is available on a daily basis it is

⁹ As is the case is for many old games.

presumed, that CRPGs are more accessible than LARP and PnP. It is therefore believed that the relaxing factor of CRPGs is owed partly due to its everyday accessibility.

Supplementary questions of CRPG

There are various opinions on the importance of the format (C-p.8). One of them is the viewpoint that the format (computer) is easy and simple to use, while another subject comments that the format decides what kind of influence a player can have over the game reality (which he says is limited). A third subject states that a good format can enhance the gaming experience. Other factors are mentioned, but they relate to the game itself (narrative and setting).

The subjects does not seem to share a unified opinion on the format's importance, however looking at the previous motivation for playing (relaxing, C-p.8) and the possibility to play single player, I will state that the greatest benefit of the format is the ease of use. As for the player's control and influence over the mediated content it is believed that this is question about how the interactivity has been designed by the creators.

The second question of the category (See figure 8, page 51) is which type of RPG the subjects would choose if given the choice - None of the subjects made CRPG their first choice. One reason for this is the lacking freedom in character creation, as it is only possible to play a limited number of classes or types of characters (C-pp.8-9). Another subject says that he will play a certain type of RPG when the urge to play it rises. Whether this means that the desire to play CRPGs is lower than the desire to play other forms for RPGs, or whether it means that CRPG is more of an everyday game than LARP and PnP, remains unknown. Remember that a motivation for playing CRPG is the narrative rather than the gameplay (C-p.6). Taking this into account it is believed that lacking control over the story is an important factor in how the format can enhance the gaming experience (C-p.8).

Motivations of a CRPG GM

There was only one subject who had GM experience in a CRPG (*Neverwinter Nights 2*). This means that his answers are based on his experiences with that specific game rather than multiple games. It is realized that this question conflicts with the overall focus on single player CRPGs, however it provides another perspective on the format which can broaden the overall perspective.

The first motivation is the desire to tell a story and to have the player influence the fictional world (C-p.9). This motivation is common for most of the GMs regardless of format and can be seen as a motivational factor relating to RPGs rather than the format itself (C-p. 5, 9, 13). That being said it is obvious that the different formats allow the GMs to reach this goal differently. This is evident a second motivation that is the ease of managing mechanics like hit points, experience points (XP), currency, and rules concerning combat and damage (C-p.9). With the increased ease of managing the rules and mechanics of the game, the GM can spend more time concentrating on the story aspect, as confirmed by the subject. I will argue that having the system managing hit points and XP is a benefit that does not exclude the players.

Another motivation is the ease of handling multiple monsters at once. An obvious drawback is the lack of control over the monsters once the game starts, and the limited ability to create unique monsters that is not

already present in the game archives (C-p.9). Another limitation of CRPGs is the AI which can cause monsters to behave against the intentions of the GM. The AI can also be seen as the disadvantage of having the game engine managing the mechanics on behalf of the users. Finally the GM is limited in his control over the occurring events, specifically the few options available to adjust the scenario according to the players' actions. This however I will argue is the limitation of a specific game title rather than a guaranteed limitation of all CRPGs.

Other thoughts

Another factor separating CRPG from non-digital RPGs is the pacing of conversations. In some CRPGs the player can choose between a selection of replies when interacting with NPCs, and because he is the only player he can take his time before answering, giving him the possibility to investigate his options (C-pp.6-7). This is only possible due to the pre-programmed nature of CRPGs.

CRPG Analysis Conclusion

A single player CRPG is a unique type of RPG in that it lacks the same player freedom as PnP and LARP. The overall interactivity depends on the media and the design of the individual game titles, as is the case with many video games. The story is predefined which limits the player's capability to act against the narrative, unless the game intentionally allows this. That said a CRPG can feature an open world where the players can explore and interact with various entities not relevant to the main storyline. This freedom of exploration and roaming is the most similar correlation to the freedom of PnP and LARP. The range of available choices depends on the design of the specific game title, meaning that a CRPG is only appears as "free" as the designers has made it.

It is important to note that if you compare the player freedom of CRPG with that of PnP, the latter will often appear more free, more "role play" than CRPG (see page 19). Such an approach favors one format over the other, so in order to evaluate CRPG properly one must look at the strengths it has as an RPG. This strength appears to be privacy and immersion. Single player CRPGs can be played on a daily basis which is evident in its use for relaxation and as a private experience. Privacy is an integrated part of CRPGs immersive capabilities as the player does not need to seek consensus with other players when making a choice. The immersive experience of single player CRPG is protected against the intervention of other players (unless they spoil the ending). Because the experience is private the player can approach it with any attitude.

Based on personal experience and reflection (with no aiding data from the subjects), it is claimed that video games allow players to save and load their progress (see page 30). With no need to negotiate actions with other players, there is nothing that prevents a player from playing in manners that can be seen as self-destructive. The digital medium provides CRPGs with the unique freedom of experimentation, which is not presented in PnP or LARP due to their focus on multiple players.

It is apparent that the synchronization of information between player and system is better in CRPG when compared to PnP. This is partly because the vision of the game creator is presented visually and audibly to the player (See page 17). The second reason is the fact that a single player CRPG is only played by one player, which makes it easier to synchronize information. It is believed that this synchronization is partly based on the

player's limited influence over the content. The more limited a player's influence over the content is, the easier it is for the developers to design the vision as intended. This can be seen as both the strength of limitation of the digital media, as it indicates that the establishment of the vision comes at the cost of player influence.

An important motivation for playing CRPG is the story, as it provides the player with the reason for continuing playing the game.

Analyzing the Results: LARP

Similar to the previous chapters, this chapter contains the analysis of the data related to LARP (see appendix B and appendix C). It will end with an analysis conclusion that is used for the final conclusion. The analysis is divided into categories similar to the previous chapters.

The Interactivity of LARP

In LARP the player's freedom is defined by three factors; the limited presence of the GM, the nature of the setting (fantasy, medieval, sci-fi etc.), and the player's own skills (C-pp.9-10). Due to the scale of LARP the GM is unable to monitor every player, meaning that the player can act unsupervised within the frames of the setting. This lack of an ever present entity gives the player the freedom to play as he sees fit, as long as he is willing to take the consequences of his actions (see page 29). This also means that the GMs are unable to control the flow of the narrative as they cannot direct every player simultaneously, thus giving the players the freedom to define their own narrative (C-p.10). This also means that players can create quests and hire other players to do tasks for them, thus initiating new narratives. This kind of narrative influence is unique among RPGs, where the narrative is either predetermined or non-negotiable (CRPG), or negotiable but centered on a specific group of characters (PnP).

Another factor determining the freedom of actions in LARP is the player's own skills. Unlike other types of RPGs, the character in a LARP is limited by the player's physical capabilities, meaning that if a player is a slow runner then so is his character (C-pp.9-10). This makes LARP very earthy when compared to other types of RPGs where the players can easily play characters that are physically superiors to themselves. There are some skills that larpers can fake, such as dialects and postures. The quality of his performance depends on his ability to play someone he is not, especially if he plays a character who has better social skills than himself (C-p.11).

The nature of the setting determines the limitations facing a player. The more akin to the real world the setting is, the easier it is for players to reach the full potential of their skills (C-p.9-10). The freedom of action in LARP is a mix of both setting (the fictional world and the actions it allows) and the skills of the players themselves (how well they can perform fictional skills). Other than that the players are free to roam and interact with each other and the props within the boundaries of the game area.

As mentioned in the theory (see pages 36, 44) LARP relies on a first grade media, specifically acting and conversations. The limitations of this interaction is the players themselves, as they have to interact with other players through a fictive character that is bound by the nature of the fictional reality, while the players themselves are bound by the nature of the real world. This means that in order to play a game of LARP, the players must have the necessary skills, physical, mental and social, to play their own characters convincingly, as this is an important factor for immersion (C-p.11) (This will be further discussed below).

The imagination is undoubtedly a very important part of the interaction between players, especially when it comes to using abilities which can only exist within the realm of imagination (magic, gods etc.). Imagination is important when it comes to player interaction as the players have to imagine themselves being the characters. As stated by some of the subjects the immersive experience can be ruined by the lack of a convincing costume,

or by a player who does not play his own character convincingly (which can be considered a lack of acting skill). The latter is explained as the player's ability to overcome his own social inhibitions, especially of his character is supposed to be one who is socially adept (C-p.11). I will therefore argue that accepting these rules is an important for the lusory attitude to exist within the game (see page 41).

The Social Interaction of LARP

It appears that there are strict rules defining when a player is either out-of-character or in-character (C-p.11). All out-of-character socialization occurs before or after the game starts, as all social interaction during the game has to be done in-character. One can imagine that failure to follow these rules can lead to a break in the immersive experience, as players who are attempting to play the game gets confronted by players who are out-of-character within the gaming area. This illustrates the immersive responsibilities of LARP as every player is responsible to contribute to the immersive experience either actively or passively by remaining in character even if he himself is not currently talking with anyone (C-p.11). The better you are at convincing and supporting the shared imagination, the better the overall experience is for every participant. The challenge is of course to do this on account of one's own limitations, hence why convincing costumes and props are so important.

According to one subject the cooperation between larpers goes beyond strategic cooperation, as it includes everyday activities such as washing the dishes (C-p.10). This means that performing even the most minor of tasks is part of the gaming experience. One can presume that there may be incidences where the cooperation is affected by lack of cooperation. Whether this should be considered lack of cooperation between players or merely a player playing an uncooperative character can be discussed, however one can presume (though not guarantee) that if a player is part of a group, then his character is also part of that group.

A final aspect of the interaction is the direct response to ones actions, which can be considered a natural feature of the first grade medium. According to the subjects the in-character face-to-face interaction causes real feelings to emerge during play, which is felt by the player unfiltered (C-p.10). They experiences fear and get a kick of adrenaline if they are confronted by a charging opponent, even if said opponent of a man wearing a Minotaur costume (C-p.12). It is presumed that this is not only an important part the immersive experience, but also for the social experience as it gives the players a unique experience they can talk about after the game.

Looking at both the unfiltered experience of play and the previous points concerning the player's range of freedom (C-p.10) one can presume that the interactive strength of LARP is the experiences based on real emotions. This is arguably also the reason why the social interaction relies so heavily on the performance of the players, as everyone contributes to the experience as well as being affected emotionally in turn (C-pp.10, 12). This makes it a case of mutual immersion where the players have to socialize and rely on each other, as they probably not rely on the distant GM (who in PnP can make an interesting scene on the fly, see page 21).

Another aspect of the gaming experience is the opportunity to meet up with people whom they do not meet otherwise (C-p.12). It is presumed that this aspect relies on the size and rarity of LARP, as it is easier for multiple players to plan for one joint event every few months than multiple minor ones on a more regular basis.

The Game Experience of LARP

There is no arguing that the game experience of LARP is related to the aspects of reality, whether it is the rush of emotions or the physical restraints of the player's abilities. Outdoor activities, exercise, and the limitations of reality are factors which makes up the gaming experience of LARP (C-p.11-12). The game is subject to uncontrollable factors such as the weather and seasons, which may explain why LARP is the one type of RPG which is played the least frequently. Presuming that the coordinators have to time a setting between factors such as season, weather, and available manpower, holidays etc. it will indicate that the gaming experience reaches well beyond the gaming session itself.

As indicated by one of the subjects, a LARP consists of 80% preparation for a session, and 20% playing it (C-p.11). The type of preparation depends on whether the participant will partake as a player or as a GM, as it is suggested by the subjects that a lot of the GM's time is spent on planning events, and building props and scenery (C-p.13). In comparison the players will spend time on making props and sewing costumes, as well as possibly training the skills relevant for their character (C-p.11). One can presume that groups of players may prepare together, especially if they are in the same band of mercenaries or similar. The preparation period is arguably an important part of the overall LARP experience as it is a time where the players can come together as players. There is no guarantee however that every player will prepare their character together with other players, as additional information is needed to evaluate the importance of the preparation period for the overall experience. It is believed however that it remains an important aspect of the social experience as it counterweights the in-character experience of the game itself.

One subject mentioned that he found it self-motivating to play LARP because it allowed him to challenge himself by playing a character that possesses abilities that the player himself does not have (C-p.12). Similarly he gets motivated by seeing other players playing characters that are unlike themselves. Comparing these statements with the previously stated importance of player skills and the experience of real emotions (C-p.11), one can presume that a unique component of LARP is the improvement one's own skills. While the improvement of skill can be seen as a common feature in RPGs, it is only in LARP that the improvements of a character closely equal a player improving himself. This is based on the format itself, as first grade media likewise centers on the user's own skills (see page 35-36).

Supplementary questions of LARP

The rules in LARP are modest when compared to other types of RPGs.

Unlike PnP the players of LARP are rarely bound by game features such as stats (C-p.12), which may be what makes the experience of LARP more flowing than PnP (i.e. the narrative does not stop while the player calculates the success of his actions). To this end the format of LARP is an important factor as it focuses on face-to-face interaction without the aid of rulebooks or other second grade media (see page 35-37). Considering the distance between GM and players one can argue, that the rules are managed by the players themselves while in-character (C-p.10), which could mean that the rules are less complex than those in PnP and CRPG due to LARPs reliance on reality. This sets LARP apart from the other two types of RPGs where

omnipresent facilitators (GM and game engine) are necessary for the management of the rules, narrative, and game time.

Following the thoughts on game time I will argue that it is near impossible to momentarily stop a LARP as both narrative and game time relies on real time (real travel, set time for when the game starts and end etc.). One can imagine a GM telling a larper that they are frozen in time, but that will not stop time itself, or prevent players in other places to continue playing. This is probably the reason why a LARP is played non-stop until a preset end-time is reached, and why everyone has to remain in character during that period (C-p.11). This could indicate that it is easier to tailor the game around the rules of reality, rather than construct rules that contradict reality beyond the control of the participants (like stopping time for taking breaks).

As suggested by some of the subjects the physical limitations of LARP, along with the opportunity to play a character, are one reason of playing LARP (C-p.13). These comments indicates that the strength of the format is reality itself as it provides the player with real emotions (C-p.12), real limitations and action based on one's real limitation (C-p.11), which all adds to the experience of physical immersion (C-p.12). I will imagine however that the strength of the format is also its weakness, as it requires for the players to remain in-character convincingly for long periods of time. Unlike PnP and CRPG where players can shift between serious and non-serious play, LARP rely on a constantly serious atmosphere in order for the participants to enjoy the game (C-p.11). That said I find it unlikely that one poor player can ruin the experience for everyone since the apparent scale of LARP (see page 27) makes it possible for larpers to never encounter the one poor player.

Motivations of a LARP GM

The basic tasks of a GM in LARP is similar to the GM in PnP - to create a setting where the players can play. Beyond this there are no direct similarities between the two types of GMs, as each of them visualizes the vision differently. In LARP the vision is visualized by the construction of scenery (C-p.13). Besides the motivation for constructing scenery and items the physical work provides a break from everyday life, as indicated one of the subjects (C-p.13). A general motivation of GMs in LARP is that the preparation requires something else from them than what they usually encounter in their everyday lives.

The GM's task is the same as that of the GM in PnP; to visualize a vision that can be shared among the players to ensure good play. This is especially true in LARP where the number of players can be in the hundreds (see page 27-28). Considering the GMs' lacking control over the game it is interesting to see that one of their motivations are to watch how the players handle the challenges laid out for them (C-p.13). Some goes further and states that their motivation is to challenge and motivate the players in new ways, and to watch them plot against one another. From this one can imagine then at one motivation (though it is not stated by the subjects) is to see the game grow beyond what the GMs had planned.

Finally there is the fact that GMs, just like players, can develop their skills during both the preparation period (construction, planning) and during the game itself (managing multiple users, solve disputes). This is the motivation of one subject who uses LARP as a way to acquire skills that he can put onto his CV (C-p.13).

Other thoughts

Another thing that sets the LARP format apart from other PRG formats is the possible presence of non-players. Unlike observes of CRPG or PnP, non-players can move around inside the area which makes up the fictional world. Depending on how the game is played a player can interact with one another while among non-players, aka Pervasive LARP. As stated in the theory section (see pages 27-28), the possible inclusion of non-players offers some ethical dilemmas which can harm the reputation of a LARP, especially if the setting does not make it visibly clear that the players are, in fact, playing a game.

One may argue that non-players are another eternal factor that can potentially affect LARP, which indicates that LARP is the one type of RPG that can be affected by the surrounding world the most. It can be hypothesized then that one of the main challenges in running a LARP is to ensure that the players are shielded from the intervening of non-players and vice-versa.

LARP Analysis Conclusion

LARP rely on the limitations and possibilities of the real world. The free actions of the players are relies on the GM's inability to directly affect the players' actions. This provides the players with the possibility to initiate their own points of narratives as quest givers. The freedom of action in LARP exists *despite* the presence of GMs (as opposed to GMs in PnP), who are incapable of overseeing every aspects of the game at once, thus unable to direct the actions of the players. The rules of LARP are likely the least complex of the three RPGs, as they rely on face-to-face interaction without the aid of a designed, physical medium. In short, the players' freedom of action relies on the frames set by easily manageable rules in absence of an ever-present GM.

The fictional world is important when evaluating the player's freedom; the earthier the setting, the more it resembles the real world, meaning that the range of possible actions are similar to those of reality. If a setting allows magic, then the players are allowed to perform actions which do not have a counterpart in the real world. This means that players are free to use abilities which are not found in the real world, but they will be limited in acting out these abilities. In these settings every player is required to imagine the effect of magic even if they do not play a magic-user themselves (C-p.12). The effects are defined by the player's imagination and present a possible defect in the synchronization between players, as it is no guarantee that every player understands the effect of an imaginary ability similarly. This means that the freedom of actions is not only determined by the range of actions permitted by the setting (and the absence of a GM), but also by the imagination of the players; if they cannot imagine nor fake the action, then the other players will not be convinced of its effects.

The interaction between players is limited by their own personal skills. Some inhibitions may be overcome through acting while certain skills need to be improved through training. The overall quality of the game depends on how convincing all players can play their respective roles, which influences the quality of the player-to-player interaction.

Imagination is the glue that holds LARP together. Not only does the nature of the format demand that the players imagines the existence and effects of unreal abilities and wounds, it is also vital for the immersive

experience of the participants. Through his character a player gets to experience the same range of emotions. Everything the player experiences as their character feels real because the emotions are real. In this aspect, reality is the greatest contributor to the imagination as it allows the players to become fully immersed into the game experience. The uniqueness of this relationship can be seen in the fact that a player can only improve a character's physical skills by improving his own.

The social experience is strictly divided between in-game and out-of-game moments. While a game is in session the players are required to be in-character at all the time since breaking character could result in breaking of immersion for those present. The preparation for a LARP offers the most time for out-of-character socializing as other social moments occurs either before or after the game, or on an online forum. LARP appears to be a time consuming game as it relies on in-character face-to-face interaction in a real environment.

In conclusion it can be stated that the quality of LARP depends on how well the larpers play their characters during the game. Reality is a constant which challenges all participants while simultaneously providing the possibility of acting and initiating new narratives. The range of choices and the freedom of actions rely on the nature of the setting, the imagination of the players, and the GMs' (in) ability to control every aspect of the game. LARP has the broadest range of unique narratives of any RPG as no player is capable of witnessing everything that goes on simultaneously.

The Second Hypothesis

The social factor is the main reason why subjects play live action role playing games.

This hypothesis has been partially proven by the previous analysis.

While it is true that the social aspect is an important motivation for the subjects to play LARP, it is not the main reason. According to one of the subjects the reason for playing depends on the player's age (C-p.10). The younger players the more they focus on combat, while the older players prefer character play over combat scenarios. It is here the main interest in meeting like-minded players' lies, as the older players likes to show off their costumes and acting skills. Their main reason for playing is to experience the game through their character.

In short, the main reason is experiencing the game through play, where the social factor is an element of varying importance.

Conclusion

What do the different formats add to the experience of role playing games?

PnP

The format of PnP relies on face-to-face interaction, chance, and rulebooks. A defining factor of the players' range of freedom is the amount of complex rules present in the game system. Fewer rules equal a wider range of player freedom and the possibility for the GM to define the consequences of player actions by himself. The possibility to decide ones actions and to define their consequences through imagination shows PnP's creative nature. This creative freedom is the result of face-to-face cooperation between all participants.

The factor which defines the format in its entirety is the omnipresent GM. He is vital for the success of PnP, partly as a storyteller who provides a shared vision, and partly due to his ability to react to the players' actions thus allowing him to define their consequences. It is the GM's skills at managing these various roles which determines the success of a PnP.

A tabletop RPG can be played in various ways, some of which can fundamentally affect the format itself. The more a game relies on collaborative storytelling the less it relies on rulebooks and dice. Likewise the GM will become more of a storyteller and less of a game manager, which shows that the format itself can change until the rulebooks are removed and the PnP becomes purely collaborative storytelling.

Imagination is the greatest asset of the format as it is the basis of the vision, the player's choices and consequences, and their effect on the narrative. It is the greatest contributor to the experience of RPG and is enhanced by the creative cooperation between GM and player, as well as between players. Imagination may also be the format's weakness as it relies on all participants sharing the same vision and to understand the situation similarly. Players who actively work against the group's understandings of the situation can potentially ruin the experience.

Creative cooperation, creative freedom, and the dynamic progression of the narrative based on consequential choices are the greatest benefits of playing RPG on the PnP format.

Single Player CRPG

The computer provides many elements which contribute to the experience of playing CRPG, including animations and audio. Most of these elements are universal in most videogames and it is because of this that some consider CRPG to be videogames instead of a true RPGs. One reason behind this view is that everything in a CRPG is pre-designed, which takes away the creative freedom seen in other forms of RPGs. Based on reflection of the theory and data it is believed that the designed nature of single player CRPG may provide its own range of choices, such as the freedom of experimentation (by avoiding undesirable consequences). This is believed to be possible because the player only answers to himself, and because the format allows progression to be saved.

The strength of single player CRPG is that the player does not have to negotiate his choices with other participants, meaning he can play without having his influence limited by other players. The lack of creative

freedom is countered by the character being the narrative's undisputed center of attention. The possibility to influence the character is limited by the game itself as the player cannot make a choice which has not been made available by the game creators. This is the greatest weakness of CRPG as it means that it lacks the diversity and freedom of other RPGs.

The predesigned nature of CRPG allows the player to prepare for future choices by researching them on internet forums. While the experience cannot be ruined by other players it may be ruined by the design of the game itself, as the player's capabilities of manipulating the game content is determined by the created space of possibilities.

Single player CRPGs allow the player to play without having to invest any significant effort into setting up the game or to negotiate with other participants. The weakness of CRPGs is that it often offers only one narrative, whereas other RPGs allows the participants to create their own settings and narratives. The format of CRPG is great if the player desires to relax by playing a game where he is immersed through visuals, audio, and animations without having to invest large amounts of efforts setting it up. The format is very available which allows players to play at any moment without any difficulty. The weaknesses of the format make it an opposite to PnP in almost every aspect.

LARP

In LARP the players' imagination is rooted in the limitations of reality, hence why they are bound to pretend that a fictional world exists around them. This means that all aspects of LARP, including the GM and players, are limited by their own physical capabilities, which is an important factor in the interaction between players.

Interaction occurs face-to-face undisturbed by technology and in-character, meaning that the players cannot pause the game. This makes the format more physically demanding than any other RPG format as players acts as their own characters, which means that throughout the duration of the game, the player's own limitations are the limitations of the character. The physical experience brought by the format requires that the players knows, and possibly overcomes, their own inhibitions in order to contribute to the shared immersive experience. The performance is an important factor as it can either contribute to the shared experience of play, or break it through poor role playing.

The immersive experience demands much from the players in relation to both costumes and pretense, and in turn the players experience physical immersion where the characters' emotions are real. This is arguably the greatest benefit of the format as it makes the experience of role play feel real.

Another benefit of the format is that players can play unsupervised, which allows them to initiate narratives at their own device, only limited by their own performances and possibly the frame of the setting. The physical experience of play allows for the players to play their character as people; limited to their own real skills and reliant on their own real strengths.

The weakness of LARP is arguably the amount of uncontrollable factors, often external, which can affect the game world uncontrolled. Another limiting factor may be the demand for player skill and costumes, as it is

difficult to “just” join a LARP without preparing for it. Failure to do so may affect other player’s gaming experience.

All in all the formats influences how the RPGs are be played, and thus what kind of experience can be enhanced.

Perspective

In hindsight the interview should have contained a question about what flaws and weaknesses the individual formats have, as this would have covered some of the unanswered questions I was left with regarding the benefit of the formats. As it is now it is possibly to get an idea of their benefits, but it remains unclear when and where and in what areas one format becomes a burden and the desire to choose a new one arises.

There are many factors that contribute to the experience of a role playing game which has not been covered in this thesis, including whether the players are limited by the rules of the system or the tendencies of a GM. These factors are however difficult to explore without focusing on a specific game title or game system. To understand the importance of rules and participant-tendencies for the experience of RPG (and to cross reference it with other research), we would have to make a case study. Such a study would be useful to test the claims of this thesis.

In this thesis the attempt has been to offer a general understanding of the format's importance regarding RPGs, however due to the complexity of the subject only a small sample of players has been used. If given the time and resources to continue this research, then more players could be included. If an entire group of players participated it would allow one a chance to observe them during a game session and to further define the important factors of the formats in relation to the gaming experience, as well as how the subjects approach gaming. This will allow one to determine the importance of group dynamics, player fantasy and creativity, and the everyday accessibility of a game versus the amount of effort required to manage the game.

The focus in this text has been on RPG, but a similar project can be made on other genres that exist across formats, such as airsoft battles and FPS videogames. Such a study will make it possible to evaluate the importance of the different formats in relation to genre. Through comparison one may be able to uncover what beneficial aspects the formats possess for the general experience of gaming.

The understanding of the game format has been partly based on the ideas of Frank Lantz and Michaël Samyn, who offered an idea on the role of the media in relation to system, game creators and players (see pages 37-42). A project based on the investigation of these ideas may gain new insight, which may be used to understand the relationship between these three participants in RPGs. The project will have to cover digital and non-digital media respectively in order to investigate the same formats which have been covered in this thesis.

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Figure References

Figure 1: Retrieved from <http://www.rpgbooster.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Dragon-Age-Chris-Hardwick-Kevin-Sussman-and-Sam-Witwer-on-TableTop-episode-19part2-YouTube.png>

Figure 2: Retrieved from <http://cdn.culturemass.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/skyrim-dragon.jpg>

Figure 3: Retrieved from <http://hw1.pa-cdn.com/par/img/editorial/larp.jpg>

Figure 4: Own model, based on Lantz idea.

Figure 5: Own model, based on Samyn's comments to Lantz' idea.

Figure 6: Own model, updated version of figure 5.

Figure 7: Own photos of the interview's iterative creation process.

Figure 8: Own table showing the interview's questions, both in Danish and English.

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Structure

Appendix B: Subject Interviews

Appendix C: Interview Results