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On the Role of the Die: A brief ludologic study of pen-and-paper roleplaying games and their rules

by Joris Dormans

Pen-and-paper roleplaying games, like computer games, are in their essence rule-based simulation "engines" that facilitate playful interaction. These similarities make it possible to take some theoretical concepts and notions developed for computer games and use them to study roleplaying games. This article takes the concepts of "paidea" type play, game rules, simulation and agency, to discuss the rules of pen-and-paper roleplaying. These concepts are by now fairly well established within the field of game studies. I will use these concepts to examine the sometimes troublesome relation between roleplaying on the one hand and rules, gaming and gameplay on the other.

Most roleplayers will point out that pen-and-paper roleplaying games offer considerable opportunity for actual roleplaying and dramatic developments within the game, while they scorn their computer counterparts as mere "character-builders" or nicely decorated spreadsheets. However, roleplaying games are not called games for nothing; they are fictional simulations and their rules are designed with a particular type of gaming activity in mind. In this article I will examine the gaming element of roleplaying; I will try to expose the role played by dice in these games. In doing this I have drawn on the study of existing texts on roleplaying, the rule-set and descriptions of published roleplaying games, lengthy interviews I conducted with players from different groups and my own experience as a player of these games.

But first I will give a description of roleplaying as I feel that these games are usually poorly portrayed in academic literature. The existing image is usually shaped by the frantic dice-rolling and "slash and stash" type of play favoured by teenage Dungeons & Dragons players, or too much is made of the dramatic potential of these games and the narrative artistry that is involved in playing. In my experience most roleplaying should be placed somewhere in between these two extreme poles.

Four Types of Roleplaying Games

Roleplaying games are a little over thirty years old. The first edition of Dungeons & Dragons was published in 1974, although Gary Gygax and Dave Anderson were working on the idea from 1971 onwards (Veugen, 2004). Since then

roleplaying games have evolved in different directions. Particular genres of single player and multi-player computer games are among the best-known descendents of Dungeons & Dragons. However, the quintessential roleplaying game, played with friends around a table with pens, paper and dice, remains an experience shared by a relatively obscure and small circle of fans.

In general, one can distinguish between four different types of roleplaying games based on medium, means and scale:

1. Pen-and-paper roleplaying games are the oldest form of roleplaying games. The label pen-and-paper stems from the fact that most of these games use pens and papers to keep track of the game. Critical character information is recorded on "character sheets" and often locations are mapped out on pieces of paper or similar material. These games are played around the table or in a similar domestic setting. For this reason they are sometimes also referred to as table-top roleplaying games (akin to table-top strategy games). Pen-and-paper roleplaying games tend to be more told than enacted. In these games one plays a character by describing what she does and what she says. Rules are used to determine the abilities of the character and effectiveness of her action. Dice are often used to introduce an element of chance into the resolution of the rules.
2. Live-action roleplay is played with a large group of people who physically enact their roles and dress up for the occasion. They gather in an appointed place that acts as the game-world. Such places can be rented buildings, stretches of a forest, or other similarly confined areas. The groups are generally larger than the groups of pen-and-paper roleplaying games. It is not uncommon to have gatherings of a hundred or more players for sessions that might span a whole weekend or a brief holiday. Live-action roleplay generally mimics the fictional world more closely than in pen-and-paper type games. In that way it is closer to improvised acting than the "storytelling" pen-and-paper games, although unlike pure improvised acting it remains game-like in its use of rules to govern combat, magic and healing.
3. Computer roleplaying games evolved from computer adaptations of the classic pen-and-paper games. In computer roleplaying games a single player controls a single character or an entire party in an electronically simulated environment. These days the term roleplaying is used as shorthand for a typical type of gameplay of computer games: a type of gameplay where the player has to develop her character or party, with such development reflected by various statistics, typically strength, dexterity, charisma and so forth. A first person shooter that offers the player some choice for development is said to have some roleplaying elements.
4. Massively multiplayer roleplaying games (MMORPGs) are the youngest form of roleplaying. In a MMORPG thousands of players connect to a server using special client software. This software renders the fictional world like the software of a normal computer roleplaying game. I feel this type of game constitutes a separate category as the sheer number of players connecting to them on a daily basis has serious implications for the type of play that is offered by these games. Massive multiplayer roleplaying games are currently the most prominent form of roleplaying as these games have some very real economic and social aspects and effects.

Needless to say, the differences in medium and means affect the nature of the roleplaying games, the four types of games are related but sometimes can be very different. Some players will only like one particular variant and not have much interest in the other type of games. They may even dismiss the idea that one or all other types of roleplaying games are about roleplaying (or gaming) at all. For example it is not uncommon for pen-and-paper roleplayers to dismiss computer roleplaying games for lack of story, drama and actual "roleplaying."

This article focuses only on pen-and-paper roleplaying. When I use the label

"roleplaying" without further specification it is roleplaying of the first variant that I refer to.

Roleplaying

For the uninitiated roleplaying games are hard to explain. A group of players gathers for a session in a living room, basement, attic, garden or outdoor location. The room is frequently decorated for the occasion: the lights are dimmed, candles are lit and props are brought out to increase the atmosphere. They sit round a large table or place themselves in comfortable chairs in a rough circle. They bring out rulebooks, sheets of paper, odd shaped dice and pencils, arrange for some snacks and refreshments and they start telling stories to one another. Or rather, they cooperate in telling each other one single story in which they all play a role under the guidance and judgement of one pre-selected player. Frequently they roll dice and record things on their "character sheets." They may be drawing rough maps of imaginary lands and locations on blank sheets of paper, or using elaborate maps that have been bought or prepared in advance. They may be using small metal figures to represent their characters and other characters in the story to mark their locations on the maps or they might by using coloured stones, matches or spare dice to the same effect. In some groups the players may actually stay "in character" during the whole session: they act and speak like their characters the whole time, sometimes even changing their voices, adopting fake accents and wearing costumes. Most groups mix "in-character" and "out-of-character" conversation, seamlessly switching from one mode to the other, or staying "out of character" the whole time. The story is frequently interrupted to get more refreshments or snacks, for humorous intermissions or the game might stop for an hour or so to eat a communal meal. They do this once a week, once a month, infrequently or more frequently. Sessions may last for a few hours or continue for several days with the players sleeping over. They do it to play a fun game, to listen to a good story, to enact an interesting character or just simply for the opportunity to drink a couple of beers with their friends. Many stories involve elves, dwarves and goblins; they use settings adopted from fantasy literature. In other stories the players might be vampires lurking in the shadows of modern-day New York. Or they race their X-Wings through asteroid fields to deliver the plans of the secret Death Star to the Rebellion^[1].

In roleplaying games each player controls a character in the fictional world. The character is often called the player-character (or PC). Typically a player has one character in the gameworld, but she might control several at the same time. In some groups players share a pool of characters and choose a character for a session according to the needs set by the story or her personal preferences. A player declares actions for her character and often speaks "in character": she speaks as if she was the character herself. At other times she speaks only on behalf of her character ("out of character") without acting out the whole dialogue: "I tell the priest what happened last night."

Usually one player is assigned the special role of gamemaster. The gamemaster is in control of the game. She describes the setting, judges the effects of the actions of the player-character, applies the rules and plays the role of all characters that are not controlled by the players (often called non-player characters or NPCs). The gamemaster needs to prepare the session in advance it is her responsibility that the players have a good time. The responsibility of the gamemaster is a great one: much of the quality of a playing session depends on having a good gamemaster. All of the players I interviewed subscribe to this

view^[2]. The gamemaster is also known as the referee, storyteller, dungeon master and various other names among different game systems, but her role is more or less the same.

Most players will report of roleplaying experiences in character. This tendency can lead to strange situations when players chatting about what happened in last night's session ("and then "I' shot the cop") are overheard by others. This is not because they cannot differentiate between reality and fantasy, as critics of roleplaying games would sometimes have it. Rather, it is usually the most practical way of recounting what has happened in a session. Nevertheless, most players experience roleplaying sessions quite vividly. They have not just listened to a story, they have actually played a part in it, without them it might have finished differently. Some players use roleplaying games as emotional and psychological playgrounds, experimenting with their own character or acting out otherwise suppressed personality traits. However, the therapeutic value of roleplaying games remains rather limited (see Turkle, 1995).

There are many reasons for playing. One player reports that the most important reason is to be able to immerse herself in another reality. There she can experience more suspense and exciting adventures than in real life. It is a place where she can "learn what it feels like to be a true hero or a complete bastard." It provides her with space where she can be aggressive without that aggression having real consequences. She finds it releasing to roleplay after she has had a bad day at work. For this player roleplaying is a very immersive experience in which she feels a lot of the emotions of the character she plays. She even fell in love once during a roleplaying session, and reports about this affair as a very rewarding experience akin to dramatic developments of a romantic novel: "it contributed very much to the suspense of the story; because of the romance the stakes were so much higher." Her group puts a lot of effort in creating an immersive atmosphere. For sessions of *Vampire: The Masquerade* they wear costumes, special make up and fake tattoos. The background music is selected by the gamemaster to match the scene in the story and all the players get in character as soon as the candles are lit and "the light are dimmed." They stay in character until the session is over. When the same group plays *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* all this is less important: they do not wear costumes, although they always start by playing a particular CD to mark the transition into the gameworld. For this group the act of crossing Huizinga's Magic Circle is very conscious, almost ritual.

On the other hand, some players use roleplaying just as an excuse to be among friends and have some fun. When asked about his most rewarding experience one player talks about the social setting of roleplaying games and recalls the attic where he gathered with his friends for a couple of beers and game of *Shadowrun*. He stresses the fact that the game must maintain some tempo and dislikes elaborate descriptions: "for me it is enough to describe a bar as being crowded so that you have trouble finding an empty table. I do not need to know that in a dark corner a man with an eye-patch sits next to a prostitute with red hair." His group plays "in character" rarely, and he has only played with "storytelling" gamemasters, never with "acting" gamemasters^[3]. Still, he has no trouble visualising the roleplaying world. He is generally fully immersed and even has no trouble playing the game while somebody else is watching television in the same room. He enjoys stories that are like a well-produced movie: "a good story should contain a little bit of intrigue, some adventure and well-dosed action sprinkled in the mix." He likes to have an idea of what is expected of him so that he and the other players can help the story further when

it threatens to bog down.

Like computer games, roleplaying games have evolved since their initial conception in the early seventies, and their audience has grown with the medium too. Even so, Dungeons & Dragons played by a group of 12 year olds seems the most prominent mental picture in the minds of those who have only heard about the game. But that mental picture is very much outdated and is akin to mistaking the particular setting and gameplay of the early eighties arcade games as a template for all types of contemporary computer games and play. The rules of the first edition of Dungeons & Dragons are very basic and designed to facilitate simple dungeon adventures that often do come down to "kill-the-monster, avoid-the-trap and steal-the-treasure" type of play.

Today, there is a huge variety of roleplaying games. Almost diametrically opposed to the fantasy hack-and-slash play of Dungeons & Dragons are the games published by White Wolf. At the other end of the spectrum are the games of White Wolf, which advocate a very different picture:

We no longer tell stories - we listen to them. We sit passively and wait to be picked up and carried to the world they describe, to the unique perception of reality they embrace. We have become slave to our TVs, permitting an oligarchy of artists to describe to us our lives, our culture and our reality. [...] However, there is another way. Storytelling on a personal level is becoming part of our culture once again. That is what this game is all about: not stories told to you, but stories you will tell yourself. Vampire is about bringing stories home and making the ancient myths and legends a more substantial part of your life (Vampire, 1992, p. 21-22, my typesetting).

White Wolf links roleplaying to children's games of make-believe. The company states that the lessons of these games are still valuable for adults: "this play-acting helped you to learn about life and what it meant to be a grown-up. It was an essential part of childhood, but just because you have grown up doesn't mean you have to stop." In White Wolf's view the rules of the game are only there to "avoid arguments" and to "add a deeper sense of realism to the story" (Ibid, p.22). The game-rules and settings provided by White Wolf certainly are designed to facilitate the publisher's focus on grown-up themes and stories. Players of their games more often report roleplaying experiences with a strong significance or emotional impact than players who stick to games of fantasy and science fiction.

As with computer gaming, a number of hardcore roleplayers can be identified. Hardcore roleplayers spend more time and resources on playing roleplaying games, and tend to be more fluent in the various types of play. Roleplaying fans often own many different game systems, and buy many extra instalments that detail settings, monsters or treasure. One group of hardcore roleplayers can be identified as "indie roleplayers." This type of player often has an extensive knowledge of different types of game rules and uses this knowledge to create or help create new game systems. Indie roleplayers differ in focus, but many share a natural disdain for commercial systems and immature, slash-and-stash type of play. The systems and rules they come up with reflect their tastes, be they full of lavish detail of simulation or - more commonly - easy systems that facilitate narrative play. As it is fairly easy to produce and publish roleplaying games in the age of the Internet, these days one can find a rich variety of these home-made games online. One interesting online forum, one which the community theorises much about games, play and game design, is The Forge (www.indie-rpgs.com). The Forge attempts to construct a theory of roleplaying game, it

identifies three different types or styles of play called Narrativism, Gamism and Simulationism. Narrativism is obviously concerned with narrative and drama and playing in character. Gamism involves competition, balance and quality of rules. Simulationism favour realism and coherence in the way the rules reflect a fictional reality. These three types of play reflect a scope of play that extends beyond the typical artistic drama (including all attached clichés) that is commonly associated with indie roleplay[4].

Despite the pretensions of White Wolf, other like-minded publishers and the ideals of indie players, the mainstream players view their games differently. As pointed out earlier the social aspect of roleplaying games seems to be a strong motivation for playing (at least for older players). Still, many of these players find a good roleplaying session more involving and pleasurable than watching good film or reading a novel. Like White Wolf, scholars of cinema and literature generally attribute a higher level of cultural significance to films and novels than the general public does. The latter tends to regard reading or watching a film as a mere pastime and form of entertainment, and roleplaying games fit the same category. The social and cultural gains that come from playing these games are simply not immediately evident. The social skills, the particular type of creative thought and the cultural potential for expressive content remains largely unstudied. These benefits are derived from a number of aspects of roleplaying games: the social context of playing, the narrative expression and, last but not least, the challenge they offer as games. In pen-and-paper roleplaying games the same social, representational and ludic dimensions contribute to the gaming experience, that Carr et al. (2006) identified for computer roleplaying games and MMORPGs.

Rules of Simulation and Interaction

At first glance roleplaying games are a peculiar type of game, but on closer inspection it becomes clear that they share many traits with other types of games. Like all games they consist of rules that operate within virtual game worlds. One has to learn these rules to be able to play the game. But, as many rulebooks stress, there are no winners and losers in a roleplaying game. Neither is there a fixed goal. Roleplaying games seem to depend more on "playing" than on "gaming"; more on *paidea* than on *ludus* to adopt two terms popular with scholars of games. There is a clear difference between these two types of play. Games that depend on *ludus* work towards a certain final state (of victory or defeat) and rely heavily on rules to govern the ways this state can be brought about. Competitive games, such as chess, are the providence of *ludus* style gaming. On the other hand, *paidea*-like play, is exemplified by playing with toys. In this type of play there is no real goal that ends the game. Roger Caillois who introduced these terms, associates *paidea* strongly with the play of children, and for a long time it seemed that *paidea*-like play was an unacceptable activity for adults (Caillois, 2006). Today the popularity of games like *SimCity* and *Everquest* have made it more acceptable for adults to indulge in *paidea*. Roleplaying has become an important outlet for *paidea* for adults.

Sometimes people tend to think that rules set *paidea* and *ludus* apart. *Ludus* games need clear rules that ultimately define a winner, whereas *paidea* is free form. But to think that *paidea* does not depend on rules or goals is, as Frasca (2003) illustrates, a mistake. The difference is that players set these rules themselves: to play cops and robbers presupposes certain roles to be played and excludes certain things from the game. The narrative context of most roleplaying games immediately suggests some sort of narrative closure to be

reached, despite the fact that roleplaying campaigns can have the tendency to drag on for ever. In roleplaying games paidea rules can be said to made manifest in the rules of interaction and simulation that constitute the game system. These rules are designed first and foremost to facilitate the creation of a balanced and articulated game:

It is important to keep in mind that, after all is said and done, Advanced Dungeons & Dragons is a game. Because it is a game, certain things which seem "unrealistic" or simply unnecessary are integral to the system. Classes have restrictions in order to give a varied and unique approach to each class when they play, as well as to provide play balance. Races are given advantages or limits mainly because the whole character of the game would be drastically altered if it were otherwise. (AD & D 1978, p. 6, my typesetting)

Entire chapters, and even several books, provide detailed background information for roleplaying games. Some games or game systems come with several optional "settings." These descriptions include gazetteer-like entries, maps, travel guides, important people and creatures, complete dungeons with traps and monster, random encounter tables, trade routes and much more. In way these rules describe the game world formally; together they constitute a simulation of the setting. For example, a random encounter table maps the chances of encountering particular types of monsters in a particular area of the gameworld to some sort of the result of a certain dice roll. In this respect these rules are part of a world simulation, not unlike the simulation in computer games. On the other hand, these rules also dictate a particular type of play. The prominence of random encounter tables within a particular game system can indicate a particular brand action-oriented type of play where many monsters are encountered. Those roleplayers that highly value the narrative side will often refrain from using such tables and indeed shun systems that favour them altogether. In their eyes "random" encounters are not compatible with a well-crafted story where every element plays a significant role in the developing drama. Random encounter tables and similar random treasure tables (that determine what money, equipment and treasure a certain monster drops) interfere with the creative art of the gamemaster. They would not want to run the risk that a random wandering monster kills of an entire party just because the gamemaster rolled some freak dice results, or that the story is short-circuited because of the odd chance the players found a magic ring that grants them three wishes. Not all roleplaying systems use random encounter tables, but all settings incorporate hard and soft rules that make the history and geography of the fictional world more tangible (in fact, one could argue that random encounter tables are a very efficient way of making the dangers of traversing the fictional world tangible).

Focussed more on the activity of playing than on motivations for playing Glas (2006) constructs a classification of play in MMORPGs that operates on the twin axis of free versus instrumental play and individual versus group play. He argues that even though roleplaying is generally considered free group play, the activities of the players of MMORPGs can be mapped to all four corners of his model (including individual free play, individual instrumental play and group instrumental play). Players can also shift between different modes of play, opting for individual free play during one session and instrumental group play during another. Glas studies MMORPGs, but in my opinion his observations are also valid for pen-and-paper roleplaying games, although the particular distribution of preferred player activities will undoubtedly differ between the genres, as they are likely to differ between game systems.

The opposed categories of free and instrumental play (adopted by Glas from the work of Wolfgang Iser) are distinguished by the existence of a goal. Instrumental games are goal-oriented whereas free play is not. In this these recall the categories of *paidea* and *ludus*, but instrumental and free are more easily mixed and no game offers only instrumental or free play. The category of instrumental has, in this context, the beneficiary connotation of operation, as is implied by the fact that games of pure instrumental play cease to be games and become work. Every game at least part of the play consists in the instrumental operation of the game rules, in roleplaying games we will always have to roll dice (or operate other game rules and mechanics).

The transgression between group and individual play can also be observed in roleplaying. Although the default mode is group play, internal competition between player characters can inspire individualised free or instrumental play. Some roleplaying systems inspire more of this type of play. "Mature" roleplaying games such as *Vampire* or *Amber* encourages internal competition and free individual play, whereas *Paranoia* is a clear example of a game that offers rules to denounce other players as "traitors," which facilitate instrumental individual play.

The rules of a roleplaying game often imply a particular mode of interaction with the gameworld; the rules imply a certain style of play. Most roleplaying games are designed to work with one or a limited number of settings. Fantasy roleplaying games such as *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* are often ill-suited to accommodate stories in which action and combat play only a minimal role. Many games have rules and ratings to reflect concepts that are central to the premise of its setting. For *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* these are levels, combat proficiencies and hit-points; for *Call of Cthulhu*, a game of classic horror, this is "sanity rating": a sort of hit-point system that reflects the character's mental health instead of physical health. In *Vampire* the characters slowly turn into monsters as their "humanity rating" dwindles and they learn more vampiric "disciplines" while the game of *Star Wars* offers articulate rules that cover deep space combat and high speed chases. The rule-set of a roleplaying game more or less defines the possible actions for the players and their consequences on the game world. The rules that govern and detail this type of action and interaction constitute the core game mechanics of roleplaying games.

The core game mechanics vary a lot between roleplaying games but many work on the basic premises that character actions with uncertain outcome are represented by the dice-rolls of the player^[5]. In its most basic form the roll of a die directly corresponds to a certain chance of success (roll higher twelve or more using a twenty-sided dice). Usually the player character's statistics affect the chance of success (roll a die and add your strength score, you need a total of at least twenty; a character with your strength needs to score ten or more to hit the dragon). The various games have very different core mechanics. They can use different dice, some are basic variants of the basic scheme of rolling a dice comparing it to a target score, while others use elaborate rules that require the player to roll multiple dice, or consult detailed tables. A single sword stroke might be represented by a single dice-roll, or it may be split up in separate rolls to attack, defend, determine the exact location of the hit, and the damage. Other systems might reduce the whole battle to one roll of the dice to determine the winner. The available game-systems cater to many different tastes in rules and complexity, and as we shall see below the "look-and-feel" of these core mechanics play an important role in the actual gameplay.

The most creative players and game masters notwithstanding, roleplaying games are only truly open to any action in theory and advertisements - players best stick with a game system's main premise, whether this is fantasy, science fiction or high-school drama. Just as the reader of any form of fiction enters into a sort of contract that sets the conditions for her willing suspension of disbelief every roleplaying game comes with a similar, implicit contract that formulates what is expected of the player to make the package work, whether this is "Epic roleplaying in legendary Britain" (King Arthur Pendragon, 1993), "A Storytelling Game of Personal Horror" (Vampire, 1992) or "A grim world of perilous adventure" (Warhammer, 1995). These quotes are taken from the front or the back covers of core rulebooks, which illustrates that the particular promise of a game is also one of its biggest selling points (although the emphases are all mine). For some players the disposition of the rules is an important factor of their quality. "I want to have a clear idea of what would be feasible in a certain game," reports one player. He points to a four-storey building opposite the street and continues: "climbing that building is easy in Dungeons & Dragons, hard in Shadowrun and when playing MERP I probably fall to my death. It does matter a lot which one it is, as long as it is clear to the player beforehand." For the same reason he likes roleplaying games the rules of which tie into the background well, and dislikes generic roleplaying systems like GURPS that use the same rule set for many diverse settings, ranging from games set in the American wild west, to games about deep space and mythical Greece.

On the same premises that a game like SimCity has been criticised by commentators coming from both the left and right wing of the political spectrum (Friedman, 1999) the world-simulations of roleplaying games are rarely neutral. Certainly Vampire: The Masquerade makes bold claims about what is human and what it means to be human with its humanity rating that is affected by the actions and atrocities of the player-characters. Likewise, many fantasy-oriented settings have inherited an anti-technology ideology from J.R.R Tolkien. Another interesting case in point is the popular setting of Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay. In this setting the source of all evil is the corrupting influence of the "Chaos". The mutating effects of material manifestation of Chaos (or "warpstone") bear no accidental resemblance to the symptoms caused by exposure to radioactivity. Together with the punk attitude and style the original setting is a powerful image of what England might have been like during the later stages of the Cold War era: a country living under the constant threat of full-scale war and having already experienced the devastating effects of nuclear disaster. To act and make strategic choices in a world thus infused with meaning can become an act of personal expression and experimentation. This potential is laid out by the rules of the game and its setting.

Agency and Gameplay

For many narrative games the rules and game mechanics should remain what they are: an interface into the gaming world. Mastering the rules can help speed up the game and make one's play more efficient. In this case, the objective of the game is to immerse oneself into its virtual world. If the rules become too complicated, too cumbersome or if dice rolling becomes a goal in itself the game might change from a roleplaying game into a "roll-playing" game, as a friend of mine put it once. Dice rolling does, however, remain an important aspect of pen-and-paper roleplaying, not because they introduce an element of chance, but because they ideally introduce an element of chance under the control of the player. Good play should be rewarded by an improved chance of success. Hence, these rules contribute to a feeling that the players themselves will have

to defeat their opponents, survive devious traps, or track through the mountains. At least they made strategic choices that enhanced their chances, and they have picked up those dice and did what had to be done. The gameplay of a roleplaying game, here loosely understood as the way the game mechanics work, what the player does and what options she has, directly contributes to agency. Picking the right weapon to fight a special foe or rolling particularly well does make a difference. In an ideal situation it also contributes to a deeper sense of involvement: it contributes to the feeling that the characters' actions affect the game world and that the player has some control over the fate of his or her character and by extension over the direction of the game at large.

Agency is a core concept in Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. She defines agency as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (1997, p.126). According to Murray agency is "offered only to a limited degree in traditional art forms but it is more commonly available in the structured activity we call games" (Ibid, p.128-129). It is precisely the existence of rules that govern interaction and the fixed repertoire of "moves" that makes participatory agency successful not only in games, but also in music and dance. By contrast, modern participatory theatre play restricts the audience's influence over the narrative to a trivial level because it does not present such a conventional or codified structure (Ibid, p. 126-127). The paid rules of roleplaying games seem to bring about just this: as described in the previous section most roleplaying games do presuppose a particular type of play. Players are still free to change the game in every way they see fit, but, as argued above, not wanting to fight monsters and seek treasures sort of defeats the purpose of playing classic *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Agency requires a certain level of transparency of the rules. Transparency can be achieved in two different ways: by providing a certain level of realism so that players will know what to do intuitively or by making the rules easy to understand and fast to apply so that as much time as possible can be devoted to the actual roleplaying. The level of complexity and realism of the rules varies from game to game. For some games the importance of realism leads to very complex systems and to the use of elaborate tables. The game *Rolemaster* is a good example of this. The game has a separate table that describes the chance to hit and damage for each individual type of weapon against all different types of armour. Together with numerous tables that describe in gory detail the effects of many different types of hits the combat rules are printed in a book (conveniently titled *Arms Law*) that is the size of all rules of your average roleplaying game. Ironically, this level of detail bogs down the game progress and encourages in experienced players a gaming attitude that focuses on the effective application of the rules rather than immersing themselves in the game world. An attitude that causes "experienced players to see the numbers and the chances instead of the drama" as one player pointed out.

For the designers of the first edition of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* this is exactly the reason to keep the rules of the game simple:

Naturally, every attempt has been made to provide all of the truly essential information necessary for the game: the skeleton and muscle which each DM [dungeon master or gamemaster] will flesh out to create the unique campaign. You will find no pretentious dictums herein, no baseless limits arbitrarily placed on female strength or male charisma, no ponderous combat system for greater "realism", there isn't a hint of a spell point system whose record keeping would harm the heart of a monomaniacal statistic lover, or anything

else of the sort. You will find material which enables the Dungeon Master to conduct a campaign which is challenging, where the unexpected is the order of the day, and much of what takes place has meaning and reason within the framework of the game "world" (AD & D, 1978, p.6). [6]

If the rules are obvious and immediate then the rolling of dice interferes little with the actual roleplaying, but if the rules are too simple they might also erode agency. In my opinion Advanced Dungeons & Dragons and the open license D20 system suffer from this [7]. The core mechanic (roll a die, add relevant modifiers, compare the result to a target number) is so basic that they leave little control to the player: either you roll high enough, or you do not. As a player you have little options to improve your chances of success or survival. Rolling badly can cause serious harm to your character and there is little the player can do about it. Lack of control and arbitrary rules quickly lead to frustration. The gamemaster can act as a buffer by ignoring certain dice rolls or allowing the player to re-roll crucial rolls, but if she does so too often the player might feel that success and failure do not matter as the gamemaster will always bail her out.

Obviously the two positions - simple and fast rules versus complex and realistic rules - are extremes and many games try to maximise the benefits of both and minimise the disadvantages. Still, the rules of some games are more complex than others and these differences can be attributed to a different style of play advocated by the gaming systems. In my opinion a very good way to find a good balance is to design relatively simple rules that maximise the level of control of the player. "Multiple-dice systems" are a case in point. In these systems the player can typically distribute a fixed number of dice over any number of actions. In this way she can decide to invest more in defence than in attack during a single round of play. This should give her an increased chance of avoiding damage but a decreased chance of hitting her opponent. The trade-off between attack and defence is quite obvious but such a system can easily be complicated by introducing other factors such as attacking speed or power. Other systems provide the players with a number of bonus dice with which they can improve the chance to succeed in a critical task. Sometimes "re-rolls" are available. When a critical dice-roll goes wrong the player can use one of these re-rolls to roll those dice again, hopefully with a better result. Once a re-roll is spent it cannot be used again, although they might be restored at certain points during the session, between sessions or handed out as rewards for special deeds by the gamemaster. Re-rolls introduces some control of the players over their fortunes, although when to apply this control is not always an easy (and therefore interesting) choice. Another way of doing this is to design a good trade-off between the various ways a character can equip herself. In AD & D using a knife or dagger is obviously less effective than a sword. Players are encouraged to pick the weapon they can use and which deals out the most damage. That does not constitute meaningful choice [8]. Obviously, trade-offs are a good way to create control and gameplay in roleplaying games.

Interestingly, having a game system that is balanced and offers multiple valid and effective strategies actually encourages roleplaying through its gameplay mechanics. In systems without singular effective strategies, only play expression and personal style remain as valid motivation for gameplay choices made within the game world. Although, players themselves can try to refrain from exploiting loop-holes or unbalanced rules, for many this proves hard to resist. Online roleplaying games are always in danger from this, as indicated by the many forum debates about fairness, balance and the "nerfing" of too

powerful character types. Balancing a game system is by no means easy and one should be careful that not all differences in effectiveness and strategy are removed. A system with a single best strategy does not constitute meaningful choice, but neither does a system where all possible strategies are equal. The latter system reduces everything to chance and can feel arbitrary and frustrating.

The best roleplaying games exhibit the same qualities that Juul (2005) attributes to games of emergence. They make use of relatively simple rules, but these rules enter into a complex interaction that creates gameplay of surprising depth and variance. They manage to balance the game without erasing all differences and can accommodate many different styles of play. Ultimately, not everything is under the control of the player: there is always some chance that she will miraculously succeed or fail. This will keep her on her toes, and add to the sense that the gaming world is a tangible place; a fictional reality with a potential "bite". But still, as Steven Poole (2000) argues for computer games, games will never be real: how are we going to experience the "real" thrill of commanding a space vessel, executing a perfect somersault or directing a medieval battle without risk or training? A game will always remain somewhat symbolic, and there will always be some "artifice" involved. In my opinion a clever design of the gameplay (the rules of interaction, the way the dice are rolled and how these elements represent actions within the game world) is more important to the success of a game than any attempt at realism. Through its use of rules to define gameplay and its reliance on dice-rolling as core mechanic, a roleplaying game will always remain a game.

Conclusion

Playing roleplaying games is an experience that incorporates three important factors. It is at the same time narrative, social and ludic. All these factors are important, although different players might value them differently. Some play for the narrative pleasures, some play to be with friends, while others enjoy the game for the challenges it offers. The rules of roleplaying game are important in so far as these form the main interface onto the fictional game world. Rules may frustrate narrative roleplay, especially when poorly designed. Rules may destroy suspension of disbelief when they are incoherent. But on the other hand rules are important because they also provide the player with agency. Well-designed rules can facilitate and even inspire roleplaying. In this sense roleplaying games are an interesting example of structured and rule-based paidea-type games. The rules of a roleplaying game determine to a large extent the style and disposition of the game system. Game rules can drive the game in a combative direction or introduce mechanics that deal with the sanity of the player's character, making this sanity into a significant factor of the game. Although players are free to interpret any game as they see fit, it is best to choose a game system that promotes the type of play you like. This is what constitutes the role of the die.

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Endnotes

1. This is an example taken from the Star Wars Roleplaying Game. The delivery of the plans of the second Death Star is only mentioned briefly in the Return of the Jedi, but has inspired many individual roleplaying groups, including one in which I played myself. In our particular version of that episode the mention th "a lot of Bothans have died delivering these plans to the Rebellion" actually refers to the destruction of their entire planet by Imperial forces.

2. The need to have good players is less evident, but in my opinion almost as important.

3. An acting game-master is one that values in character play over out of character play, consequently she will frequently act out the roles of all non-player characters and demands more acting from her players as well. On the other hand, a storytelling game-master will focus less on the acting allowing fo more out of character play and using that type of play more herself, too.

4. Especially in online games, roleplayers can have a nasty reputation for arrogantly enforcing in character and non-competitive play.

5. Dice-rolls are the most common way to represent actions with uncertain outcomes but they are not the only possibility. Any method of generating random numbers works, one could use playing cards or rock-paper-scissors. Rare systems, such as Amber: Diceless Roleplaying, leave the resolution of actions entirely up to the player"s scores and the discretion of the game maste

6. Although the claim that there is "no baseless limits arbitrarily placed on female strength" is incorrect as there actually is a limit on female strength with the game.

7. With D20 publisher Wizards of the Coast made the basic Dungeons & Dragons rules freely available to the general public. D20 is published under a open gaming license that allows anyone to use, distribute or change these rule for private and commercial use. Many recent roleplaying games have been published using this license. Unfortunately most of them seem to be commercial spin-offs from other games, such as Everquest or World of Warcraft. These currently dominate the shelves of stores, pushing smaller games out, while I am not really impressed by their quality.

8. In AD & D different weapons might affect particular creatures differently, however. So sometimes it might be better to use a club that deals less damage than a sword. But in general a system that provides the player with obviously better choices will only result in "min-maxing": players making choices with the sole purpose of creating the most powerful and effective character as possible. This behaviour is regarded as opposite to roleplaying as the player choices are no longer motivated from within the fictional world but from an external perspective of the rules. But it must be said that min-maxing requires a thorough understanding of the rules, and can become a gaming (or puzzling) pursuit in itself: a quest to defeat the system. In competitive (board) games this type of behaviour is the norm and a valid strategic option. No one would expect a player to roleplay the Emperor of Austria-Hungary in a game of Diplomacy, for example (and when someone does, she probably does so because she thinks it gives her some sort of tactical advantage).

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Legal fictions: Copyright, fan fiction, and a new common law, of course, it is impossible not to take into account the fact that the political doctrine of Hobbes is a unconscious color.

On the Role of the Die: A brief ludologic study of pen-and-paper roleplaying games and their rules, distant-pasture animal husbandry, according to the third law of Newton, is completing the entrepreneurial risk, that is known even to schoolchildren.

The portable border: site-specificity, art, and the US-Mexico frontier, contemplation, and there really could be visible stars, as evidenced by Thucydides in parallel.

You Can't Get There from Here: Movement SF and the Picaresque, tomashevskiy in their work 1925.

Human-Nature Relationship And Faery Faith In The American Pagan Subculture, the Hamilton integral simulates the imperative calcium carbonate, where the centers of positive and negative charges coincide.

A world of difference: media translations of fantasy worlds, deposit of uranium-ore radievich gracefully flows down the press clippings and that's about it, said B.