24 Transgressive Role-play

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Play can be fun, liberating, exciting, orderly, trivial, and regenerative, but it can also be disruptive, disrespectful, unruly, serious, chaotic, and transgressive. Role-playing games (RPGs) are ordered play. They not only have rules set down by game designers, but also social rules, and cultural norms about how participation is conducted. For the most part, play and playfulness stay within the limits of the rules, but at times they overstep those boundaries. Indeed, play is prone to invite disport with norms and boundaries. These transgressions can happen accidentally, but it is also possible for players to knowingly question and ignore the numerous boundaries. RPGs, specifically, establish temporary alternative norms and rules which might be transgressive in many other situations, while providing plausible deniability for societal boundary-breaking as players are just following the rules of the game. In many ways, play is a contested space: a tension between the possible and impossible, reality and fantasy, respectability and taboo.

In this chapter, violations against role-playing games, expectations of play patterns, and cultural conceptions of role-playing are examined. To set the stage, we discuss the boundedness of play, games, and role-playing games, and explain the concept of transgression and deviancy used in this chapter. Following that, we discuss three categories of transgressive role-play: adult play and imagination as deviant; violations of game rules and the concept of 'game'; and finally, violations

of norms relating to the relationship between the player and the character. This chapter should be read in parallel with the sections on pretend play **(see Chapter 13)**, social interaction and social psychology **(see Chapter 12)**, culture and social relations **(see Chapter 12)**, and psychology **(see Chapter 13)**.

Boundaries and Transgressions

Role-playing games, as most games, are conceived as bounded phenomena. A common metaphor for this boundedness is the *magic circle* of game play. Although the concept dates to Johan Huizinga's (1938/1955) work on the element of play in culture, the concept as it is understood today comes from game scholars Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004), for whom the magic circle is "the idea of a special place in time and space created by a game" (p.95). The magic circle is entered voluntarily, is self-sufficient, is set apart from ordinary life in locality and duration, and has rules that differ from everyday life. The player in the magic circle, according to Salen and Zimmerman, must adopt a *lusory attitude* (see Suits 1978, 41) meaning that the player accepts the rules of the game simply because they make the activity of playing the game possible. The magic circle is a social contract negotiated, created, and upheld by the participants, and importantly, this "social contract can become societal as other social frameworks (law, economics) can recognize it" (Stenros 2014).

The magic circle is by no means the only conceptualization of the boundedness of game play. In relation to role-playing games specifically, Erving Goffman's (1974) concept of frames as socially shared types of situations that guide the production and interpretation of situationally appropriate action has also influenced the field, as has Gary Alan Fine's (1983) elaboration of frame analysis as applied to RPGs (see Chapter 12). It is worth noting that neither of these conceptualizations of the boundedness of play disconnects it from the world around them; the boundaries are porous. In other words, expectations of behavior in normative social frames may affect experiences within play

spaces and vice versa. Also, following Goffman, *any* type of social situation is bounded and governed by specific rules, the dinner conversation and the bus ride no less than the role-playing session. Frames or types of situations differ in *how specifically* they are bounded and ruled.

Notably, these conceptualizations of game play show there is a socially agreed-upon way to conduct the playing of a game. Playing a specific game socially is not even possible without adopting a lusory attitude and following the rules. This includes agreeing to act "as if", which is the foundation of role-play activity. However, the bounded game does not boil down to explicit game rules. The systemic rules of the game are an important part of the magic circle contract, but they can be difficult to fully identify. In digital online role-playing games, the rules are coded and the boundaries of the game environment may seem fairly self-evident, while tabletop and live-action role-playing (larp) sessions tend to be clearly marked temporally, spatially, and socially, even if rules are easier to negotiate on the spot. Yet digital add-ons, mods, wikis, and player forums, as well as metaplay between sessions (narrating, possibly with others, what a character is up to between sessions) and pervasive games (see below) certainly show that these boundaries are not easy to delineate.

Furthermore, the social contract also carries numerous implied cultural norms about the nature of play and games, and how they are conducted. Games and play are not only intelligible for the people participating in them, but are recognized by other people, and even by other cultural institutions. For example, hitting another person is illegal, except while following the rules in a boxing ring – and this rule is recognized by most judicial systems. Similarly, many games have gameplay options built into them that would be considered unethical outside the fictional context – and many players enjoy playing these evil options (Lange 2014).

Transgression is always tied to a norm violation in a specific context. Without boundaries, there can be no transgressions – and the deviancy of an outsider is always understood in relation to the norms constructed by the in-group (Becker 1963). The concept of transgression used in this chapter builds on the symbolic interactionist idea of social construction of deviance (Sandstrom, Martin & Fine 2010, 170-195). According to the *labeling theory of deviance*, rule-makers and enforcers are as involved, if not more so, in the construction of deviance, as the alleged deviant. This theory is usually used to account for larger societal issues such as the labeling of drug-users, sex workers, homosexuals, or homeless though banning (e.g. legislation), detection (e.g. police, social workers), attributing (to an individual), and reaction (e.g. social sanctioning). Aside from the moral crusaders attempting to ban role-playing games (see below and also Chapter 19) and to a much lesser degree the fear expressed relating to addiction to multi-player online role-playing games (MORPGs) in the last decade (e.g. Young 2009), role-playing games have rarely been targeted on a societal level. However, as with all social activities, there are numerous norms relating to playing, game playing, and the playing of RPGs that outline how things are supposedly done. While violating those norms, i.e. transgressing over these social or societal boundaries, does not label one institutionally a deviant, such behaviour can still result in a social punishment. The labeling theory works also on a smaller scale than of that of a nation or a city.

Connected to the ideas of a norm and transgression are the notions of threat and danger. Norms help keep us safe, and transgressions are seen as potentially harmful – to an individual, to the morale, the social fabric, or the society. Then why do people transgress? According to labeling theory (Sandstrom et al. 2010, 190), transgressions are usually rendered understandable when seen from the point of view of the alleged deviant. For example, play is not safe in itself even when fully consensual. Risk and danger are enticing; they raise arousal. It is exciting to play with danger – as

long as we feel safe (Apter 1992; Stenros 2015). Philip Rosedale, creator of the virtual world *Second Life*, had this to say about safety and virtual worlds in the 2010 documentary *Life 2.0*:

> I would say to a certain extent the virtual world must contain some sort of danger and risk and possibility of pain and loss to be interesting. I don't think that we can create worlds of any kind that are interesting without them, you know, being at least somewhat dangerous. That said, the virtual world is, at a basic level, a safer place than the real world. We do not have the ability in the virtual world to physically harm each other. And that is a very powerful change that I think that brings us closer to our aspiration about what it is to be human. I think that the fact that we are perhaps emotionally in danger but not physically in danger in the virtual world is a tremendous positive step toward being all that we can be. So, while the virtual world is not without danger, it is certainly a good deal safer than the physical world that we for the most part live in now. (Rosedale 2010)

In the larp context, ongoing debates have unfolded for years relating to "psychological safety" and the after-effects of participating in intense role-playing experiences. Author and critic Johanna Koljonen (2013), who has followed and participated in that debate for over a decade, has summed up these worries as "Larp is not dangerous … but life is dangerous". However, she talks about *community safety*, how all role-players are responsible for how role-playing is perceived in the society at large. While larp may not be significantly more dangerous than life, if being a larper is seen as deviant, then larp is dangerous as well.

Still, the possibility for unpredictable and even dangerous activities is part of the design in some role-playing game environments. Negotiations between different players who have varying expectations and ideas about where the acceptable limits are, is a part of running a fictional world.

One way to create an area where transgressive behavior is relatively safe is by transgressing as a group against wider norms.

Indeed, according to labeling theory, the alleged deviants are part of the negotiation process as to where the boundaries lie, and can challenge and transform meaning relating to behavior (Sandstrom et al. 2010, 187). One place where there is a particularly visible history of such activity is the art world. Anthony Julius (2003) has documented how artists have been breaking rules, social norms, and laws enough that there is a tradition of transgressive art dating back to mid-19th century. According to him, there are four ways for art to transgress: "the denying of doctrinal truths; rule-breaking, including the violating of principles, conventions, pieties or taboos; the giving of serious offence; and the exceeding, erasing or disordering of physical or conceptual boundaries." (19) Role-playing games are only tangentially connected to the traditions of art – although those ties are strengthening – but similar to the 'art', 'play' and 'games' are bounded domains with historical roots, governed by specific rules. They are magic circles where questioning mainstream social norms is not punished as severely. Indeed, artistic or political transgression challenging the status quo can even be celebrated. In some ways that is a societal function of these kinds of spaces. For example, in the Danish freeform role-playing scene transgressive topics and game mechanics are often highly valued (e.g. Montola 2010), and the MORPG *EVE Online* celebrates activities that in other online worlds are considered griefing (Carter 2015). However, transgressions may also reinforce cultural norms, such as individuals exploring their "dark side" in a vampire game subsequently choosing to reaffirm normative ethical values in everyday life (Beltrán, 2013). Indeed, according to the sociology of deviance, transgressions are useful in many ways. They clarify where the boundaries lie, promote social unity, and encourage change in face of new challenges (Sandstrom el al. 2010, 171).

Griefing: Anti-social behavior in a multi-player game intended to irritate, harass, or otherwise create a negative experience for others for the sake of the entertainment of the griefer. In the context of RPGs it is most commonly associated with MORPGs.

Call-out 24.1: Griefing

Play and Imagination as Transgressive

Participating in a role-playing game is transgressive in three interconnected ways that question how the world operates: play, imagination, and fiction. Play and the act of imagining have both been at times seen as suspect (Laycock 2015, 210-240). Specifically, any kind of play after adolescence can be considered transgressive, for adult play is often seen as frivolous (Sutton-Smith 1997, 201-213). There is also a worry that participants are unable to differentiate fiction from reality, that they cannot leave the meanings of the magic circle behind when they exit it. Furthermore, even when adult pretend play is accepted, there are limits as to what topics are appropriate. Frivolity and imagination, even when accepted, have boundaries.

On some level, all adult play is suspect. Adults can have hobbies, but they should not be silly on purpose. If an adult expresses creativity, they should do so under socially codified constraints, such as professional jobs in cinema, theatre, or high art. Likewise, some communities value certain games over others; playing *bridge* or *chess*, for example, are deemed more socially acceptable than private adult pretend play games not intended for an external audience or mass entertainment. Adults are expected to adhere to what Émile Durkheim (1893/1997, 38-39) called the *collective conscience:* the "totality of beliefs and sentiments common to average citizens of the same society". Individuals are expected to adhere to cultural norms regarding the scientific, cosmological, or religious understanding of how reality "works," while also maintaining a stable sense of identity.

Role-playing communities create new collective understandings of reality based upon a mixture of existing conceptions from the mundane world and fictional representations from game rules and narratives. While players involved in role-playing activities often insist that confusion relating to this layering of frames is impossible, scholars have noted that overinvolvement (Fine 1983) and shifts in how player interpret the world (Laycock 2015, 199-206) are possible. However, producing a socially shared understanding of a situation requires continuous maintenance work (Goffman 1974).

The spread of *Dungeons & Dragons* was perceived as a threat, leading to the so-called Satanic Panic in the late 1970s through early 1990s in United States and other countries **(see Chapter 19)**. Joseph Laycock (2015) details how the Christian Right, as well as some psychologists and law enforcement officials launched an alarmist public campaign against role-playing games as potential gateways to real occult activities and a loss of touch with reality (also Stark, 2012). Laycock (pp.24-25) argues they were targeting role-playing games because they perceived these leisure activities as creating a deviant religion, interpreted Christian content in *D&D* as occult, and suspected imagination in general. He locates a further, much more debilitating fear beneath: "The realization that a game of imagination can resemble a religion naturally leads to the suspicion that one's religion could likewise be a game of imagination." The secondary worlds of *Dungeons & Dragons* and other role-playing games threatened the Christian hegemony (p. 238), or put differently, they are a threat to the Durheimian collective consciousness. These cultural fears manifested in the movie *Mazes and Monsters* (1982), inspired by the disproven story of James Egbert, in which a role-player becomes confused between fantasy and reality, resulting in a psychotic break. Laycock calls the story the "first narrative of the delusional gamer" (p.25).

Finally, religion is not the only possibly taboo subject in play. There are limits to what is acceptable in the frame of a game, varying from what is tasteful to how seriously the play is taken (Goffman 1974, 49-57). Depending on the culture, taboo content might include the following: racist, sexist, homophobic, or transphobic behavior; topics such as pedophilia, incest, genocide, euthanasia; religion and blasphemy; or opinions that align with anti-Semitic or Islamophobic attitudes. However, the norms can be much more specific. The depiction of Nazi symbols is not legal in Germany; norms relating to touching and personal space vary between cultures; and attitudes towards nudity and violence are different on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Indeed, games and play are often expected to be escapist fun (cf. Mortensen 2003, 215). Tackling complex real-world matters can be seen as unfit for role-playing games. The extreme manifestation of this perception is the idea that games are – and should be – trivial; hence, using games to explore sensitive issues is seen as trivializing (cf. Chapman & Linderoth 2015). When the perceived assigned function of role-playing cannot fully be reduced to recreation and enjoyment, for example when games explore ideas, survey history, or aim to educate, they often need to be framed in another way. While play and imagination can be transgressive in and of themselves, play that is not just frivolous is even more suspect.

Violating the Concept of Game

'Game' as a concept is a socio-cultural artefact (cf. Stenros 2016). In order to play games together, participants need to trust that they share similar enough ideas about how games are played, and, for example, how involved one should become while playing (Sniderman 1999). In this section we consider violations of the concept of game, specifically transgressing game rules, trust amongst players, issues with involvement, as well as boundedness and separation of the playing from the quotidian.

The most obvious violation against game play happens against the shared rules of play. In cheating (cf. Consalvo 2009) a player breaks the explicit rules of a game. This an obvious transgression and a serious threat to the play activity. In role-playing games the fictional world and the game are constructed through working together intentionally and by upholding the rules for shared enjoyment (e.g. Montola 2008; Linderoth 2012). If these rules are broken, the shared activity is at risk. Sometimes, participants will try to maximize their outcome regardless of the other players' enjoyment or the spirit of the rules, something that has been called *gaming the system* (Stenros 2015). Thus the participant plays the system instead of the game; role-players have a number of words for this behavior from *min-maxing* to *munchkinism* and there are guides devoted to this topic such as *The Munchkin's Guide to Power Gaming* (Desborough and Mortimer 1999). Similar behaviors are seen in computer role-playing games (CRPGs) and MORPGs when players look for ways to "optimize" their game play (e.g. fastest way to level up). While some play groups accept aggressive rule negotiation as normative and even laudable, other groups view such behavior as disruptive, as it can cause conflict between organizers and members of the community (Bowman 2013, 13-14). However, as Huizinga (1938/1955, 11) noted, it is easier to cope with a *cheat* who rejects the rules to achieve the goal of faring better in the game, than with a *spoil-sport* who rejects the game. When a participant ignores or changes the goals, but leaves the rules untouched, we encounter an *explorer*, often a troll, an artist, an appropriator, a hacker, or a trickster (Stenros 2015, 163-165; see also Bartle 1996).

Play also requires a certain amount of trust, for players should hope that their actions are interpreted in the right frame of reference, and that all participant are genuine in their intentions towards working towards the shared goal of upholding the game. This trust can be betrayed, for example by adopting aberrant goals. MORPGs are particularly susceptible to this since even if work to maintain the game (e.g. Linderoth 2012) has ceased, the appearance of the virtual world is still upheld by the

computer, although large scale larps can also offer such spaces. The most visible type of exploration is grief play aka *griefing*. Multiplayer online worlds have a long and rich history of disruptive play practices already noted in Richard Bartle's (1996; 2003) player typology. Bartle identified a player type, *killers*, who enjoys upsetting other players. Nowadays such activities are called *griefing* (e.g. Mulligan & Patrovsky 2003, 218). In griefing, a player rejects the official goals of a game and instead starts playing at the expense of the other players, usually with the goal of provoking a visual emotional response in another player (Foo and Koivisto 2004).

Different virtual worlds have varying approaches to grief play; some see it as aberrant behavior to be thwarted, while others, such as EVE Online, incorporate all play activity enabled by the rules, even scamming, stealing, espionage, and blackmail (Carter 2015). The social norms relating to what is considered a transgression vary. There are numerous terms for specific acts that are seen to fall under griefing, such as harassing, scamming, *ninja looting* (taking loot one is not entitled to), and *ganking* (killing a character to disadvantage them e.g. by a gang, see Goguen 2009). A challenge in tackling griefing analytically is that there is an element of intentionality in its conceptualization. Trying to learn the game, get ahead in the game, or amass a fortune (*greed play*, according to Lin & Sun 2005), are usually not seen as griefing, but the actions that a player takes to achieve these aims maybe indistinguishable from griefing (Stenros 2015, 178). A playing style that many players interpreted as griefing was even used as a research method by David Myers (2009), who conducted a breaching experiment in an MMORPG called *City of Heroes*.

Larp hacking: When an individual or group actively creates their own game within the existing larp or derails the plans of the organizers for their own enjoyment (Hansen 2012). While players can "hack" a game with good intentions and a lack of malice, the overall effect may negatively impact the experience of others. Hacking can also become a productive transgression for players

if a game experience is considered unenjoyable in its unhacked state by the majority of the participants: a form of play mutiny.

Callout 24.2: Larp Hacking

In the context of MORPGs the concept of *counterplay* is used to describe "disruptive potential immanent in gamer culture", especially when contesting "hegemonic power relations" (De Peuter 2015). Greig De Peuter (2015) outlines three types of counterplay. First is to play against the grain, by rejecting the player position, goals, and values a game offers. This varies from game-specific rejection of goals such as *gold farming* (accumulation of wealth in game to sell for real money, see Heeks 2010) to game platform spanning guilds that seek to reveal racialized marginalization (Gray 2012). Second is gamer interventions that use the game as a platform for protest. Examples include pacifist runs on *World of Warcraft*, gay weddings on *Star Wars Galaxies*, political machinima created using a game, and critical modding of a game. De Peuter's (2015) third category is tactical games, which refer to activist oriented standalone games that "experiment with nontraditional game themes, mechanics, and applications, and tend to openly support political causes, expose injustice, and promote social transformation."

Let us now return to the element of trust and safety. Following the rules and norms brings predictability – and fosters a feeling safety. Transgressions shake those foundations. While play always carries the possibility of danger, it is also connected to safety; it is hard to be in a playful state of mind when feeling threatened. For example, non-consensual turns during play – such as enforced rape narratives or the murder of one's character without explicit player consent – can make players feel unsafe, even if their bodies are not physically at risk. If an action is possible for a character to enact in the game world, then some groups expect participants to accept the "narrative repercussions" of existing within that fiction, even when such repercussions feel like an abuse of

power (Donovan 2014). Other groups offer opt-out mechanics, e.g. larp safe words such as 'cut' (stop) and 'brake' (reduce intensity) (Koljonen 2013) and the X-card, a method for disallowing certain types of content in tabletop games (Stavropoulos n.d.).

Yet, playing with taboos, as discussed above, can feel exhilarating precisely because they are outside the norms. It is not uncommon to have groups play with such topics in ways that, in a wider cultural context, would seem insensitive, disgusting, or even illegal. Yet such play does take place, as play offers "a step apart" from the everyday life where players can toy with wider norms. This kind of play is called *brink play* (Poremba 2007), a term for activities in which the socially recognized act of playing is used as an alibi for conduct that would otherwise be difficult or unacceptable. In brink play, norms are played with, but there is at least an appearance that they are not actually broken in reality.

Brink play requires trust in the group so that everyone present understands that the activity is "just play." Of course, brink play can be used to get away with actions that would not be permissible otherwise. Examples from outside RPGs include *Twister* (physical intimacy), *Truth or Dare* (actions and intimate queries), *Cards Against Humanity* (gross-out humour, opinions), as well as many college hazing rituals and theme parties. A role-playing example is *Dudebros and Douchebags*, a tabletop game in which players enact stereotypically male misogyny in an ironic manner. Sometimes, though, participants might play games that are designed with transgressive aims 'straightly,' unconsciously reinforcing norms rather than challenging them, which is a possibility whenever exploring oppressive structures in games. Also, the line between what feels authentically and playfully transgressive versus uncomfortable and offensive becomes more difficult to navigate without ways to opt out of play or social rules to communicate discomfort with certain content, e.g. safe words. Yet this very ambiguity is central to brink play.

Brink play: Using the alibi and 'as-if' status of play to engage in conduct that would be otherwise difficult or norm-breaking.

Callout 24.3: Brink play

The next aspect of cultural expectations relating to game play to consider is exhibiting the correct amount of involvement in a game. Usually, groups expect that the player takes the playing lightly, but not so lightly that the playing no longer matters. A player should manifest *disinvolved involvement* (Deterding 2015). Not caring about the outcome of the game can manifest in not putting enough effort into playing; caring too much can manifest as being a sore loser, gloating after winning, but also as having too strong an emotional commitment to the dramatic events or characters depicted. Fine (1983) discussed overinvolvement, indicating that too much investment into a game or character may cause a psychological imbalance in the player that negatively impacts their life. In his discussion of online role-playing games, Karlsen (2013, 4) uses the term *excessive playing* to address playing that "exceeds what it regarded as normal or that playing is done in immoderate measure."

Different communities have distinct standards with regard to expectations of involvement. Members of a community may become self-conscious about overinvolvement, pointing to the behavior of others as "going too far" to avoid drawing attention to their own investment of time and emotional energy. For example, in the documentary *Second Skin* (2008) about MORPGs, one highly involved gamer claims with a laugh, "I don't get all into it when I'm running around talking like an elf or something like certain people do. I think people that role-play got more of a problem than other people". This behavior works to establish a *third-person effect hypothesis*: the notion that

individuals other than the self are more greatly impacted by messages or play activities and are, therefore, more transgressive or abnormal (Smith and Wood 2005, 107).

Brink play is not solely an issue of trust, but one of boundedness. The line between the quotidian and the ludic is blurred. Another game type that muddles the separation between game and the rest of life is *pervasive games*. They are games that have "one or more salient features that expand the contractual magic circle of play spatially, temporally, or socially" (Montola 2005a). In, say, a session of *Dungeons & Dragons* it is clear where the gaming takes place (spatial), when it starts and ends (temporal), and who are participating as players (social). Pervasive games blur one or more of these notions; they can be played all over a city, around a country, or even globally; they can go on indefinitely without pausing, and it can be unclear who is playing in them. One genre of pervasive games is pervasive larps. They run the gamut from vampire larps played all over town amongst people who are unaware that a game is underway to ones where players stay within the fiction for five weeks, do techno-occult rituals outside the US embassy in Stockholm, and have a police strike force show up (Montola, Stenros & Waern 2009).[1]

Negotiating the Player-Character Divide

Just as there are norms and expectations relating to the concept of 'game', there are hegemonic ideas about what role-play is and how role-playing games should be conducted. An important aspect of role-playing games that many gaming traditions have norms for is the performance of the connection between player and character. In this section we discuss transgressions against this separation.

The performative distinction between the player and the character as separate entities is one of the building blocks of role-playing (cf. Montola 2008) **(see Chapter 23)**. A particularly clear formulation of this norm comes from larp:

> After the player makes a decision regarding the discontinuation of self in the beginning of immersion, it is no longer justified to draw conclusions on the player from the actions of the character. It is difficult to fully establish the role-playing contract – familiar faces and memorable characters leave their mark on players. The core of the contract is trust. When a player trusts the contract, he dares to immerse even in activities the player would consider awkward or strange. (Sihvonen 1997, 7, translated from Finnish by Stenros)

This is the *role-play agreement* as defined by Toni Sihvonen (for similar norms in online roleplaying, see Montola 2005b): one should not make assumptions about the player based on the character, and vice versa. The contract is not a description of what happens, but a social agreement. Without the contract, it is hard to carry out actions as a character if the player is reluctant to perform them outside of the fiction. The role-playing contract is important in establishing trust between players. Furthermore, it gives the players an *alibi*; a player should not hold another personally accountable for actions their characters take (Montola and Holopainen, 2012).

Alibi: things that enable a player to act in ways unacceptable outside the role-play context. A player can pretend to be stupid, violent, or lustful, without that performance influencing their everyday persona. Numerous legitimization strategies provide alibi, such as playing ("It's just pretending") and game rules ("These are the options the game offers me").
Callout 24.4: Alibi

However, role-players do make assumptions, even judgments, about the player based on the character, about the character based on the player, and about one character a player enacted based on another that they have played in the past. Indeed, according to Goffman (1961, 68-75), games give a possibility to "exhibit attributes valued in the wider social world […] [t]hese attributes could even be earned within the encounter, to be claimed later outside it." He further argues that it is possible to use games as a site to display attributes that one could not display out-of-game. Thus, the player is obviously responsible for the acts of the character – and, for example, MOPRG end user license agreements make no distinction between the two.

There are role-playing cultures where the player and the character are not strictly separated. The character the player portrays is akin to the player, except situated in a fictional world and usually equipped with a different name. For example, in the Amtgard larp tradition emphasis is on combat, and there is a thin separation between player and character, noted by a new name, costume, or in-game social rank (Budai and Hammock 2014). Many of these larpers experience the game as a sport in which they play versions of themselves in an ongoing fiction.

On the other end of the spectrum, Nordic larpers often immerse themselves in intense scenarios intended to evoke strong emotional reactions in both the player and character. While the character may have different personality characteristics and live in a world unlike the player's own, these intense moments can produce instances where performing the boundary between character and player become less distinct.

The phenomenon of the thoughts or feelings of a character influencing those of the player is called *bleed* (Montola 2010). The influence need not be direct; bleed does not occur only when a character's emotion moves to the player, but also when, for example, a player feels remorse over

what a character did. Bleed is sometimes understood as a counter to alibi; if a player is experiencing bleed, they may no longer benefit from the distance afforded by the defense mechanism of alibi, particularly when exhibiting strong, authentic emotional reactions (Bowman 2015).

The concept of bleed emerged as a descriptive term in emic discussions among tabletop and live action role-players. Most instances of role-playing probably result in some degree of bleed since the player enacts that character and hence the two are experientially connected. However, the term is not usually used to include all emotional states a player feels as a result of a game.

[Box insert 24.1 near here.]

Designing for bleed means purposefully affecting the player through the character. It happens, for example, by making the players inhabit characters in a particularly emotional context. Another possibility is to encourage players to enact *thin characters*, or Doppelganger Selves, that are similar to how they perceive their self outside the fiction (Bowman 2010).

While there are norms that underline the separation of the player and the character, there are also norms relating to continuity between the two. In some role-playing cultures there are expectations that certain aspects need to remain the same between the player and the character. Some tabletop groups and game systems discourage *crossplay*, the enactment of a character whose gender is different from the player's (Stenros and Sihvonen 2015). Players can also be uncomfortable with non-conforming gender presentation (Boss 2007), and in larp, crossplay is at times confused with trans players playing characters of their own gender (cf. Koski 2016). Furthermore, some larps feature rules, often implicit, on the matter – e.g. stipulating fantasy race related norms on players, like only thin and tall people can play elves, or requiring that real world ethnicities be portrayed by

people who have lived experience as part of that group. Where there is a rule, there is a possibility for transgressing – and even for using that transgression as a design principle. Some larps encourage crossplay for the sake of inclusivity. Similarly, attempts have been made to find ways of portraying different ethnicities in culturally and socially sensitive ways.

In online role-playing games a further complication exists. A participant can play a different sort of a *player*. This is called *masquerading*: pretending that the person sitting at the keyboard is someone else. Individuals may engage in crossplay, for example, leading other participants to assume that their mundane gender identity is the same as their character's, a common phenomenon in online role-playing games (Turkle 1995, 212-214; Pearce & Artemesia 2009; 240-255). Masquerading may afford players certain benefits they might not otherwise experience, such as an escape from objectification, harassment, or discrimination based on body shape, sex, gender, or race. Benefits may also include access to in-game resources, protection, or emotional support. While masquerading is a common activity in online gaming environments, some players feel betrayed when a member of their community is revealed to look different in the "real world" than they present on-screen, particularly if non-diegetic intimate bonds were established.

The diegetic boundary of fiction separates the player from the character, but also the player from the characters of other players and from NPCs. During play, the player, through their character, can develop relationships with other characters. When the game is over, these bonds may cease to exist. Yet the player may still feel strong emotions towards these characters, such as longing for people who no longer exist or who are "just NPCs." This phenomenon has been described in CRPGs as *pixel crush* (see Waern 2010; **Chapter 25**).

The interactions and relationships developed in role-playing games feel real, and indeed are real, even if they are also fictional. Although such relationships are not deviant from the point of view of social psychology, they can still feel somehow wrong and transgressive. Indeed, some players establish strict rules with their partners prohibiting in-game relationships with others or may reproduce their off-game relationship diegetically as added protection (Bowman 2013).

Summary

This chapter discussed the bounded nature of role-playing games as playful fictional spaces inhabited by alternate identities enacted by players. Enacting characters in a fictional world as an adult is considered a transgressive act by many people in and of itself; it alters temporarily the player's perception of the social reality. Thus, play itself is understood as potentially deviant, as are games that are designed to transgress cultural taboos, play with serious topics, and activities within play cultures that transgress against the notion of what a 'game' is. In role-play cultures there are further norms, particularly relating to the correct performance of the relationship between the player and the character. While play requires safety and trust to manifest, it always contains element of unpredictability, unruliness, and danger.

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Box inserts

Box insert 24.1: Bleed

Bleed describes the phenomenon when a player's thoughts and emotions influence the thoughts and emotions of the character they are role-playing (bleed-in), or a character's thoughts and emotions influence the player (bleed-out). The term was first used in this sense in a popular article on the effects of relationships on larps (Olmstead-Dean 2007, 204). Current usage comes from designer Emily Care Boss' keynote (2007) at Ropecon 2007. Tobias Wrigstad and Thorbiörn Frizon of the freeform collective Vi Åker Jeep adopted and elaborated on the term (c.f. Jeep games *Doubt* (2007), *Fat Man Down* (2007)). The term crossed over to academia when Markus Montola (2010) studied players of *Gang Rape* (2008) and *Journey* (2010). In further academic work on the topic, Sarah Lynne Bowman has studied bleed as potential source of conflict in role-playing communities (Bowman 2013). Whitney "Strix" Beltrán (2012) has theorized the possibility of ego bleed, where ego identity contents bleed. Additionally, Maury Brown (2014) has explored the relationship between bleed and psychological triggers.

List of keywords defined in callouts at the end of the document

Alibi, Brink play, Bleed, Griefing, Larp hacking.

[1] Pervasive game design pose numerous ethical questions. When the boundary between the ordinary life and the game is blurred, players may find it difficult to understand the consequences of their actions. Their actions may result in effects that are not restricted to the game world. Who is responsible for player actions in a pervasive larp? Is it always the player, or does the game organizer share some of the accountability, especially as players may not be able to give informed consent about participating? Furthermore, there are numerous questions relating to how to play with bystanders, who can end up being unaware participants or victims. (Montola et al. 2009, 193-213)