

Edward Choy

# Tilting at Windmills

## The Theatricality of Role-Playing Games

*It is apparent to most role-players that role-playing games involve performance. But can we go one step further and posit that they can be considered a form of theatre as well? This paper analyses the player's role as both an actor and a spectator, based on the works of Augusto Boal and Erving Goffman.*

The figure of Don Quixote<sup>1</sup> charging towards a group of windmills, lance in hand, is an enduring literary image. Quixote is the quintessential escapist – dissatisfied with the mundane ‘real’ world, he decides to reinterpret, and in doing so, reinvent reality for himself. It is my opinion that theatre does much the same for its audience. Given the difficulties of providing an answer to the question of ‘What is theatre?’ perhaps it would suit this paper to instead identify the elements that serve to designate something as theatre. Alain Rey offers a succinct definition:

It is precisely in the relationship between the tangible reality of speaking and acting human bodies, such reality produced by a performance construction, and a fiction thus *represented*, that what is specific to the theatrical phenomenon lies. (Pavis 1998, 397, italics in original)

Thus, for Rey, theatre is the presentation of fiction through the interaction of actors, or simply put, stories told through the performances of actors. By studying various forms of theatre, it is not difficult to find parallels with the traits manifest in role-playing games, such that the games can themselves be considered theatre. The aim of this essay is showing that role-playing games are a form of theatre is to examine the significance of this similarity for the understanding and practice of both RPGs and more traditional forms of theatre.

## Playing Role-Playing Games

In theatre, actors take on different personas depending on the roles assigned. Similarly, a role-player can play a German sniper officer on one day and a mafia Don the next

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the protagonist of Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* throughout this paper is testament to my personal belief that the character’s spirit lives on in the RPG players of today, quite separate from the social commentary that was Cervantes’s novel. I write as if he actually existed, but only insofar as the characters in any RPG can be said to exist.

day in another game. Stephen Lortz's simple and accurate definition of a RPG as "any game which allows a number of players to assume the roles of imaginary characters and operate with some degree of freedom in an imaginary environment" (Lortz 1979, 36) broadly sums up what gamers do when playing a RPG, as well as what Cervantes's Quixote was going through as he traipsed across Cervantes's version of Spain. In fact, there are numerous parallels between the documented exploits of Quixote and what gamers regularly encounter in their games.

From Lortz's general definition above, one finds that just as in theatre, the possibilities for characters in role-playing games are essentially endless: the options are theoretically infinite, limited only by one's imagination and interpretation of the rules of character creation in a given RPG. The persona assumed by a role-player is called a player-character. It is important to note that the word is hyphenated – the player and the character form a composite identity. Thus, players often take great care when creating their characters; the characters are extensions of them.

The participants of a role-playing game work to weave an illusion together through the use of their imaginations, creating fantasy scenes through the interaction between the participants. How then, can RPGs be called theatre, and what is the appeal of this theatre?

## The Theatre of the Mind's Eye

I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged. (Brook 1990.)

Bear with me for a moment, and follow what I ask you to do. Visualise an empty space. Now visualise a man walking across this space.

Was that theatre?

I think there is reason to doubt that that little sequence could have been anything but a simple exercise of the imagination. Yet, there is lingering doubt: when one considers that you could add another man to the image, then another, then another, then visualise them dressed in suits of armour on a plateau surrounding a gigantic red-scaled dragon, which then proceeds to engulf the lot of them with gouts of fiery breath, it becomes much easier to see how role-playing works. RPGs engage the imagination, and it is the imagination that is the key to the appeal of the RPG. I propose the name "Theatre of the Mind's Eye"<sup>2</sup> because the performance happens only in our minds and not in front of our eyes. The RPG is entirely dependent on the vividness of the imagination.

While conventional (naturalistic) theatre does engage the imagination of the audience, when actors meet onstage, it is the playwright's and the director's imagination

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<sup>2</sup> The subsidiary of White Wolf publishing calls the larp version of *Vampire: The Masquerade Mind's Eye Theatre*. Needless to say, it was the source and the inspiration for the name I have chosen for role-playing games.

at work, interacting with itself. Though it is through the actor's imagination that a character is presented, the actor's imagination is supposed to be invisible. What is made visible is the interpretation of the script, the work done in rehearsals, and thus it is the director's and the playwright's imagination that the audience engages with. But there is no direct interaction – the audience is passive, the audience watches, the audience does not participate. The audience cannot participate. The audience can only receive, and is either entertained or not. This is elaborated in the section on Boal.

A character is not defined by the character sheet alone. Any character, whether in theatre or role-play, is defined by its interaction with other characters. In the conventional theatre, we often know how these interactions are going to turn out because we may be familiar with the script, or the plot may just be very predictable. But in RPGs, one can never predict the outcome – its uncertainty is omnipresent. Though the conventional actor could conceivably play a German sniper in one performance and a Mafia Don in another, it is wholly unlikely that the actor would do so because the actor is limited by the script. The actor has to adhere to and memorise the script. The actor thus appears onstage with pre-determined meaning and intent. The best the actor can do is obfuscate this knowledge and perform: aiming for psychological realism, weaving an illusion of ignorance. This is especially vital if the audience already knows the script. An audience already familiar with the script cannot be surprised by the plot, and is restricted to deriving pleasure from the actors' interpretations and performances. But in the theatre of the mind's eye, the audience can only expect to be surprised. The lack of a script results in unpredictability that sets apart RPGs from conventional theatre, and this genuine unpredictability can be more appealing than the patterns we have become familiar with in the stories told onstage and onscreen.

The appeal of role-playing is not limited to its freedom from the script. There is also the interaction factor. R.D. Laing writes:

*Your experience of me is invisible to me and my experience of you is invisible to you*  
[...] We are both invisible men. All men are invisible to one another. Experience is man's invisibility to man. (Laing 1967, 16, italics in original)

Laing calls this invisibility the 'no-thing' (ibid, 34). This no-thing is the gap in our understanding of the experience of others and vice versa. Laing posits that when we interact, we do so because of our inability to experience what others experience. There is a need to fill this gap in understanding. Hence, it is the no-thing that motivates interaction. This is absent when watching conventional theatre because the audience-performer relationship is neither dyadic nor dynamic. The audience is resigned to the fact that there can be no interaction between audience and actors that can be used to fill any gaps in understanding, and thus the audience's interpretation must be taken as is. However, in the theatre of the mind's eye the players can fulfil their need to close the gap in experience through directly interacting with the imaginations of others. Players are not only allowed to do so, they are required to do so – the role-playing experience is defined by the interactions between the players' imaginations.

I have offered arguments as to why role-playing can be classified as a form of theatre, though quite separate from conventional theatre. RPGs are performances, but these performances are created through the interaction of imaginations, and acted out on the stage of the mind's eye. Having no script, and non-professional actors, RPGs are a sort of everyman's theatre, where even the layman has the opportunity to undergo the experience of living as another. The appeal of this vicarious experience is part of the basic human need for interaction, a need that the theatre of the mind's eye can fulfil.

## Boal and Role-Playing Games

Theatricality is this capacity, this human property which allows man to observe himself in action, in activity (Boal 1995).

For Boal (1995), the actor exists in all of us. Boal's theories are influenced in large part by his own belief that power belongs in the hands of the people, the majority, rather than the privileged few. Boal asserts that theatre can be created or is created as long as there is an actor. He believes the dichotomy between actor and spectator to be false, an artificial creation forged and reinforced in the very conception of a stage. Where there is a stage, a platform, or any space set aside for a performance, there is a clear division between actor and spectator: between the one who acts and the one who observes. Where there is a stage, the actor part of every member of the audience is de-activated and suppressed. The audience is aware that they are there as spectators, not as actors.

Given this, one could perhaps argue that many theatre performances involve a great amount of audience interaction, blurring the division between actors and audience. Boal would probably reply that interaction enhances the division instead of diminishing it – the audience is very much aware that the interaction is initiated only by the performers, and participation is often minimal because the audience is used to watching passively. As long as there is a performance space, there is a division. Boal seeks to defeat this division, and argues that theatre can exist without stage or spectator. To reiterate, as long as the actor is present, there can be theatre. Hence his reasoning makes all people actors and equates actors with theatre:

Theatre does not exist in the objectivity of bricks and mortar, sets and costumes, but in the subjectivity of those who practise it [...] It needs neither stage nor audience; the actor will suffice. With the actor is born the theatre. The actor is theatre. We are all actors: we are theatre! (Boal 1995, 19)

But awareness that one can be an actor is insufficient. There must be the ability to see the self in action as well. Boal's ideal of the 'spect-actor' is not a simple synthesis of the spectator and the actor: the concept of the actor as the one who acts remains, but the spectator is transformed. Boal believes that all of us can see ourselves acting, but that is passive watching – we are only spectators, unable to change the course of action, even

when it is our own. When we become spect-actors, we are empowered because we are able not only to see the course of action, but guide it and change it if necessary. The spect-actor is active, not passive. Through this transformation, Boal hopes that when people *see* a problem, they will also *act* to solve it. Forum theatre achieves this by allowing people to see that the outcome of a performance does not have to be fixed and can be changed, which is analogous to social activism.

Generally, Forum theatre works like this: a short play is staged once, and at the end of this first performance the audience is encouraged to offer their opinions on how they disagreed with the protagonist. From here on, Forum theatre becomes almost entirely improvisational. The performance can be restaged with the actor playing the protagonist taking into account the opinions offered, or if audience members are dissatisfied with the actors' interpretation they can take over the role of the protagonist and act out their reactions to the antagonists and the decisions the audience would have made. The latter is what Boal hopes to achieve: by allowing people to act out their opinions and disagreements, not only the one(s) who took over the protagonist's role but all of the audience members can see that common people can be actors rather than just spectators. This realisation helps them to become spect-actors.

In role-playing games, players create characters that are often entirely different from themselves. A gamer is able to experience as another, while viewing the character in the mind because there is a duality of player and character. The character may be called a creation or an extension of the player, but is never the player proper. RPGs are thus mirrors that reflect a fantastic self to the player, a self that is controlled and can be watched by the player. In a way, it also closes the gap of Laing's no-thing by allowing players the experience of living and acting as another being, albeit in a dimension of reality separate from our own – the player is actor and spectator simultaneously. RPGs make possible this transformation without all the seriousness of the social injustices typical of the plots in Forum theatre, and without the active awareness of the need to defeat the actor-audience dichotomy. This is because the experience of the self in the RPG is distinct from the mundane. Even the simplest RPG creates a game world where players are spect-actors from the outset: the players observe themselves as their characters and are aware that they are able to affect the game world and change it.

RPGs can seem to make spect-actors out of people with much less effort than that required by Forum theatre, yet most gamers remain generally apathetic with regard to social issues. The reason for this is probably the frame of presentation. The archetypes and patterns in the stories told through RPGs are more identifiable with fantasy rather than reality. Traditional storytelling places the hero in a domain where nothing is predictable, and society in a state of flux:

Plot [...] exposes the daily order of our lives to chaos. Communal structures are of no avail to a hero who is alone and face to face with forces he cannot control or comprehend. (Roemer 1995, 47)



The institutions that fail society in turn elevate the common man to greatness as he or she steps forward to confront the unknown – he or she becomes a hero in our construction of mythology. Though this parallels what Boal seeks to achieve through the transformation into the spect-actor, Boal's work is located in cultural and political contexts specific to every audience that receives the performance. Boal's work is real, it is immediate, and it is easily identifiable with reality and the tribulations of the audiences' everyday existences. In our construction of fantasy and myth, our cultural unconscious invariably discounts the relevance of something that can be readily identified with fiction, thereby relegating its significance to our own lives. This is why the stories we tell through RPGs do not actually convert the players into true spect-actors: the action is often too far divorced from reality for the players to take seriously.

However, role-playing based on our primary frame (the real world, as it were) and with a high degree of emphasis on simulation and realism is an entirely different prospect. In these games, I propose that not only can the players all become spect-actors, they probably do so completely unconscious of the fact. The game master is probably unaware that the game he runs for them is actually akin to a session of Forum, and similarly, the Forum Theatre facilitators are probably unaware that they are running a larp. It is not so much a thin grey line between the two; more of them being two sides of the same coin.

## Engrossment in Role-Playing and Theatre

Goffman's *Frame Analysis* (1974) introduces the concept of 'frames' of meaning in which individuals operate – Goffman's theory posits that one action can have different meanings depending on the 'frame' within which it occurs:

Actions framed entirely in terms of a primary framework are said to be real or actual [...] [but] these actions performed, say, onstage provides us with something that is not literal or real or actually occurring. (Goffman 1974, 47)

Goffman's conception of the frame as a sort of bracketing tool shows how an action can be recognised as something other than its literal manifestation: in that it can show the nature and purpose of an action and consequently, how the action is supposed to be interpreted. The primary frame of meaning refers to the 'real world', the reality in which we exist. Accordingly, everything in the primary frame is taken for real. All other frames of meaning exist within and in relation to the primary frame, through 'keyings' (ibid, 45). The 'key' is defined as 'the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else.' (ibid, 43–44) The concept of the frame and the key together inform us how people derive meaning from actions. For example, the phrase 'I'm going to kill you' means impending harm in the primary framework but is understood as harmless when keyed as a

statement made by a friend in jest. The frame in which an action is interpreted can be 'miskeyed', or understood in a different frame than was intended. These miskeyings are either 'upkeyings' or 'downkeyings'. Upkeying happens when something is taken less seriously than it ought to be, that is, to be attributed layers of meaning that diminish its true seriousness of intent. Downkeying is the opposite. The example of the phrase above can be said to be upkeyed if understood as a joke when there is indeed deadly intent, or conversely, downkeyed when interpreted as intent to harm when spoken in jest.

A theatrical performance is understood to be an event that is 'bracketed' in reality. It is as if performances are created within parentheses that inform us of the difference in frame. Within this frame, everything that happens is upkeyed – when we talk of something as theatrical, its meaning is upkeyed because it is dissociated from reality. Hence, the frame of meaning through which we interpret any performance is upkeyed, allowing us to understand that what happens on stage is not real.

But frames do more than just organise meaning, they organise the degree of engrossment. Engrossment is essential for the stability of the theatrical frame. Most performances are created with the aim of providing an engrossing experience in mind.<sup>3</sup> We normally call the maintenance of the theatrical frame's stability the suspension of disbelief. This happens when the upkeying is concealed such that the frame of the performance seems real enough for the audience to accept the reality of the theatrical frame. The theatrical frame itself remains upkeyed, otherwise audience members may rush onstage to intervene. However, things that can remind the audience of the primary framework are purposely hidden. For example, only the actors are lit so that the rest of the audience cannot distract individual audience members. The audience is also prohibited from speaking, so that the only speech audible is the actors'. In this way, while the audience is aware that the performance is keyed differently from the primary frame, they are able to access it as they access their primary frame because it is the only frame available to them. This is the reason for theatre etiquette: rules of etiquette render any actions taken by the audience in the primary frame entirely separate from the theatrical frame to be breaches of protocol. For example, to talk during a performance is rude because it is distracting, but to cheer and laugh at a particularly entertaining bit of a show is acceptable.

The frame of meaning in RPGs is somewhat different. In Cervantes's story, Don Quixote is a man whose primary frame is entirely different from everyone else's: Quixote's is populated by fantastic monsters and governed by the code of chivalry. Thus, Quixote's primary frame is the fantasy frame. It is the fantasy frame rather than the theatrical frame that gamers upkey to when they play. Yet, etiquette still applies. For example, it is rude to interrupt when the referee is describing the setting or when players are interacting in-character except if the interruption is relevant to the fantasy frame, or involves critical occurrences in the primary frame.

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<sup>3</sup> Non-naturalistic theatre usually seeks to break the stability of the theatrical frame, downkeying instead of upkeying for effect. This is typical of Brecht's concept of the *Verfremdungseffekt* and the genuine terror often evoked by Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty.

Larping is an extraordinary example of how close to the primary frame a game can become. Because larp is a version of RPG that is acted out rather than described, players interact in a manner that could easily be miskeyed as the primary frame – instead of saying ‘I scream at him’, players actually do scream at other players. Larp participants have to be aware that the line between the performance frame and the primary frame is extremely thin, and actions done in-character could be downkeyed and taken seriously instead. Frame analysis offers us a unique perspective on how meanings can change with the frame presented. What we see onstage is usually upkeyed to prevent us from taking it too seriously, yet this upkeying is concealed so that it appears to be real, or occurring in the primary frame. The stability of the performance frame depends on the engrossment of the audience, which in turn depends on how adept the illusion of the upkeyed frame is as the primary frame. Downkeying, whether by the audience or actors, can disrupt the engrossment and in turn the stability of the frame. This is true of both RPGs and conventional theatre, and conventions of etiquette are necessary in both forms of performance to maintain the engrossment of those who are participating and watching.

Engrossment is essential to the suspension of disbelief, and larp is the RPG type that promotes the greatest degree of engrossment. There is less of the sense of vicariousness typical of tabletop in larp – players do not merely create their characters in their minds, they actually act as their characters. And just as engrossment is vital to the stability of the theatrical frame, engrossment is also vital to the stability of the larp frame. When one player is observed to switch frames or break from character, the effect often seems to multiply itself across the larp area: players tend to relax visibly, and start to talk as themselves, rather than as their characters. Quite simply, when a character you are interacting with addresses you as a fellow player, rather than as a character, it is impossible to do anything but answer out-of-character. This multiplying effect is also true of theatre audiences. It is difficult or even embarrassing to take a show seriously when the rest of the audience fails to do so. But when players are in-character, interpreting everything in the performance frame of the larp, they have effectively achieved Stanislavski’s psychological realism – they are living as their characters. This is also possible in tabletop, but much easier to achieve in larp because there is greater ease of engrossment due to protocols of etiquette and conventions of behaviour and costuming.

## **Goffman on Performance**

In *Frame Analysis*, Goffman offers his definition of performance:

A performance [...] is that arrangement which transforms an individual into a stage performer [...] an object that can be looked at in the round and at length without offense [...] by persons in an ‘audience’ role. (Goffman 1974, 124)



Like Boal, Goffman notes the division between performer and audience:

A line is ordinarily maintained between a staging area where the performance proper occurs and [...] where the watchers are located. The central understanding is that the audience has neither the right nor the obligation to participate directly in the dramatic action occurring on the stage. (Goffman 1974, 124–125)

Unlike Boal, however, Goffman does not lament the inability of the audiences to participate in the performance. This makes his definition appear somewhat more neutral than Boal's – Goffman has no vested interest in theatre, as it were. Focusing on the first part of the definition, we find that RPGs are performances, yet not directly so – because of the fluidity of the roles taken on by the referee and the players, it is difficult to pin down exactly when one is audience and when one is actor in a RPG. What is clear however is that in RPGs, there are 'object(s) that can be looked at in the round and at length without offense by persons in an 'audience' role.' RPGs thus fulfil Goffman's definition of performance because players are constantly observing or being observed.

Goffman goes on to distinguish performances in a unique manner: according to the 'purity' of the performance. This refers to the 'exclusiveness of the claim of the watchers on the activity they watch.' (Goffman 1974, 125) A 'pure' performance then, would be one entirely dependent on the presence of an audience – if there is no one watching, there can be no performance. Goffman ranks various types of performances on their purity:

- A conventional theatrical performance would be considered pure. These are intended for the entertainment of the audience, and if there is no audience, one might as well cancel the show.
  - Next would be contests or matches, where the contestants involved perform not just to entertain the audience, but for some greater prize or title. This is less pure because some matches can be held without audience, though the presence of a paying audience often justifies the existence of a contest.
  - Slightly less pure are personal ceremonies, like weddings and funerals. Audience here are usually invited guests, not paying watchers. While the above are ostensibly entertainment, as the performance becomes less pure, it also becomes more serious.
  - Work performances, actual work like the construction of a building or a rehearsal by theatre students ignoring the fact that they are being watched openly, are most impure. This is due to the open disregard for the dramatic elements of their labour by the 'performers'.
- (Goffman 1974, 125–126)

Goffman's theory is a formalising of society's attitude towards 'work' and 'play' in that it serves to distinguish between entertainment and work performances. Goffman's normative theory establishes that pure entertainment is 'play' thereby detracting from

its value – play is associated with lack of seriousness, seriousness being a positive value. Work is serious; hence it is valued over anything that is play. Society assigns value to performance based on its usefulness. Work performances are useful, hence valued over entertainment (play), which is not perceived to have any usefulness. But this judgment of utility is based on the assumption of the value of seriousness, and work is always assumed to be more serious than play – this is blatantly circular reasoning.

Purity was intended as a study of the relationship between the roles of audience and actor, but when the roles are combined, we discover that there is no work/play distinction in role-playing. The common perception of role-playing games is as play, a condemnation of the RPG because entertainment is the primary motivation of most gamers. But RPGs are impure because the actors function independent of the need for an audience. Impure performances are work performances, according to Goffman's theory. But role-playing games are not work, nor can RPGs be generally considered serious. All this raises questions about Goffman's formalisation of social attitudes toward performance – purity's work/play dichotomy fails to provide an account of RPGs as performance, and serves to show the fallacies in society's attitudes towards work and play.

Looking at role-playing in light of structural relations casts light on the attitudes of people to performance that theorists have attempted to formalise. For example, Boal merges the actor and spectator for a social function while RPGs merge the roles for a purely personal imaginative function. Goffman's theory reveals why RPGs are seen as irrelevant and play while at the same time showing society's attitude towards pure entertainment as being irrelevant and dismissed as play. The RPG exposes the vulnerabilities of these theories and establishes its unique position in helping us understand theatre and performance.

## Conclusion

In this study, I have offered role-playing as a form of theatre that has so far been overlooked. I believe that the theatrical aspects of RPGs warrant its consideration as a form of theatre in itself, and that the recognition of this opens new corridors of research for theatre academics and practitioners alike.

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