

## Extended Abstract:

This paper proposes to look at the phenomenon of Actual Play content—live-streamed or recorded audio or video of Tabletop Roleplaying Games (TTRPGs)—and how it provides a window into the study of emergent narrative and structural narratology, using the example of *Marielda*, a season of the Actual Play podcast *Friends at the Table*. In this particular season of the show, the cast play two different TTRPGs, and through the narrative that unfolds listeners are given easy-to-understand examples of relevant pillars of narratological scholarship. Uri Margolin’s concept of character types; Genette’s concepts of narrative levels, narrative movements, and the functions of the narrator; Barthes theories of functions; and the differences between narrativization and truly emergent narrative as posited by Richard Walsh all have clear expressions in this relatively new media form. This is partly a function of TTRPGs in general, and partly a unique element of Actual Play media.

The examples that *Marielda* provides are particularly valuable for introducing or teaching foundational narrative theory to new learners and for crystallizing the understanding of emergence. Walsh suggests that emergence in narrative “refers to phenomena or behavior produced by a system but not apparent from an inspection of the elements of the system and the laws governing it” (73). The nature of the rules of the games played over the course of the *Marielda* episodes, but the approach of the cast really solidifies *Marielda* as emergent narrative. The cast are committed to a general principle of “play to find out what happens” – a mantra of TTRPG play popularized by D. Vincent Baker and Meguey’s *Apocalypse World* TTRPG ruleset. The story of *Marielda* truly unfolds blow-by-blow, creating an engaging, emergent narrative that the listener can hear unfolding as a talented group of actors and improvisors interacts with the rules of the game they play. This is categorically different from the kinds of so-called emergent

narratives that emerge in digital games, particularly narrative sandbox games (as discussed in Grinblat et al.), which might more accurately be considered narrativizations rather than truly emergent. Thus, by looking at the ways in which Actual Play media constitutes an emergent narrative, and by examining the various elements of that narrative, one finds in a single piece of narrative media the perfect subject for understanding the relevance of and current issues in structural narratology.

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Author's Statement:

Michael Veenstra (B.A. McMaster; M.A. University of Waterloo) is a Ph.D. Student at the University of Waterloo in the Department of English. His MA Major Research Project, titled "Power and Madness in Fantasy Fiction", was published in *The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 35.1. His current research focuses on the uses and techniques of lore in various media types and the conversations, critiques, and secondary media that focuses on it.

# Playing Jane: 'Austenland' and the adaptation of transformative fan engagement

Evgeny Kuznetsov

'Austenland' is a 2013 film directed by Jerusha Hess (of 'Napoleon Dynamite' fame), based on the 2007 novel of the same name written by Shannon Hale. Its protagonist, Jane, is an American woman obsessed with the literary works of Jane Austen and their film adaptations, especially the 1995 BBC mini-series 'Pride and Prejudice'. Disappointed in the mundanity of her life and the ordinary cruelty of yet another failed romantic partner, she travels to a British resort that advertises itself as an immersive recreation of the Regency era – a LARP for Janeites – in the hopes of turning her escapist fantasy into a transformative experience.

In the analysis of modern Austen adaptations this film is usually given a very peripheral role – that of a meta-parody. For example, Janice Wardle considers it a satire on the filmic genre of biopics, while Maddalena Pennachia compares the Austenland resort to a theme park, akin to Disneyland. However, the scenario portrayed in the film – that of an “immersive Austen experience,” where participants are invited to take on the roles of Austen heroes for entertainment – has many genuine real-life counterparts: such as, for example, the (tragically shut-down back in 2020) massively-multiplayer online game 'Ever, Jane', the table-top role-playing system 'Good Society', or live-action regency balls, such as, for example, events organized by the Edmonton-originating company Regency Encounters, in which I myself have participated in the past. The founder of Regency Encounters has, in fact, attempted to seek out Kickstarter funding to buy residential property in the English countryside and make Austenland a reality (CBC News).

In my proposed paper I would like to analyze 'Austenland' the movie and its portrayal of its namesake resort from the theoretical perspective of game studies, treating the events of the movie as a romanticized representation of genuine developments in the Austen fandom, rather than a spoof of the ubiquity of Jane Austen in popular culture. In particular, I'm interested in the following aspects of role-playing games portrayed in the movie:

- the film's discussions of emotional bleed – the spillover of emotions between player and character,
- the film's portrayal of different types of players, interested in different aspects of the experience,

- the explorations of class differences between participants, which are translated into the game's mechanics, providing an authentic procedural representation of themes present in Austen's novels.

I believe that such an analysis can reveal 'Austenland's unique adaptational representation of the cultural and thematic importance of games in Jane Austen's texts – something that is frequently commented on by Austen analysts (Chwe; Fron; Braithwaite), but is rarely translated to the screen, possibly because of the enduring cultural stereotype of games as a largely masculine medium.

As part of this exploration I would also like to look at the arguments 'Austenland' is making about immersive ludic participation by virtue of being a cinematic adaptation of a book, a narrative portrayal of an interactive experience (adapting an imaginary LARP into a movie), and a metamodern parody typical for Jerusha Hess as an artist. Whether accidentally or on purpose, the film, unlike its literary counterpart, provides a uniquely positive portrayal of participatory fandom, making strong arguments for the enjoyment of theatricality and performativity in its dialogue with Jane Austen's novels that inspired it.

Marilyn Francus points out the connections between 'Austenland' the novel and Austen's 'Northanger Abbey' in the way they formulate their main takeaways. Both stories deal with heroines obsessed with a particular genre to the point of it being detrimental to their judgement, Catherine Morland – with gothic fiction, and Jane – with Regency romance. Francus argues that the arguments the two novels are making about engagement with fiction are also somewhat similar, being criticisms of “immature, unwise readers, as well as readers who fail to maintain the boundaries between fiction and reality” (p.2). By contrast, the film, through its quirky ensemble cast and rich visuals teeming with references, embraces both the absurdity and the transformative power of being a passionate fan. In other words, instead of asking “which ways of reading Austen are wrong and silly?” the movie tries to ask “which ways of \*playing\* with Austen are productive and fulfilling?”.

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## Author Statement

Evgeny Kuznetsov is a games scholar working on the intersection of game production studies, neuroqueer studies, and crip theory. He is also a full-time Academic ADHDer. As behooves someone of this status, he constantly splits his attention between being a PhD student in Cultural Studies and Digital Humanities at the University of Alberta; teaching critical game analysis to coders and coding to digital humanists; helping organize events for the Canadian Game Studies Association; fixing 3D printers at the university library;

making Twines in place of writing essays; and (thinking about) trying out new TTRPGs. His (presently dormant but never former) research hyperfixations have included: ludic representations of psychological trauma; romance mechanics and romantic bleed in roleplaying games; relationship and intimacy literacy education; gamification (but good); participatory-action and arts-creation research; trans embodiment in games; and finding every single Jane Austen-inspired game he can get his hands on.



## Approaches to Adapting Rituals for Tabletop Role-playing Games.

My presentation compares different approaches to adapting rituals for tabletop role-playing games (TRPG) as a way of enhancing the quality of games as well as their potential to increase cultural literacy. The study includes both ritual conducted, diegetically, by player characters, as well as extradiegetic game elements resonating with the idea of a ritual included in the structure of the session in some TRPGs.

There have been a number of studies on the influence of rituals upon role-playing games, primary LARP (e. g. Bowman 2023; Leon et al 2024), however, the role of a ritual in TRPG specifically remains a somewhat understudied topic. To rectify this, I offer a comparative study of the ways that rituals are presented in three different TRPG rulebooks: *Ten Candles*, *Dungeons and Dragon 5th edition* and *Legacy: Life among the ruins 2nd edition*. All of them are commercially successful and critically acclaimed games dealing heavily with the subjects in question.

The main concept for organizing the data is affordance (Linderoth 2011) – a possibility for making specific actions as part of the game. Two other important notions are resonance (Apperley 2010) – feeling of recognizing something in-game as resembling something outside of it, in that case, a resonance between element of the game and an idea of a ritual, and simulation, a system whose behavior resembles another system (Frasca 2003, Simpson 2011). I follow the definition of ritual as an act involving performative uses of language (Austin, 1975; Searle, 1969) and a formal pattern of behavior either closely or more loosely followed (Smart 1996).

The main research question is – what affordances games provide for engaging with ritual behavior? In principle, TRPGs rules include two types of rituals involving players: diegetic and extradiegetic. *Extradiegetic rituals* make players themselves participate in a formalised pattern of behavior as part of the more rigid game structure. We see the example of this approach in the game *10 Candles*, where the game session itself is organised around activities clearly encoded so they would resonate with the notion of rituals, in order to maximise the emotional impact of the story on players. However, despite this example, extradiegetic rituals, at least those included in the rules and not emerging in the local culture of particular gaming groups, are relatively rare (Leon et al 2024).

Much more widespread are *diegetic rituals* involving player characters in the secondary world of the game conducting or taking part in either magical or social rituals: the example of magical rituals can be found in D&D, starting with the very first edition of the game, while social rituals abound in *Legacy*, the game with a strong focus on the social dimension of life in the post-apocalyptic world. However, despite the different metaphysical status of those rituals, they share one common trait: the game rules strongly favors attention toward pragmatic results of the rituals over the process of rituals themselves. Games provide few affordances and incentives for players to role-play or even describe actions and words of their characters during a ritual – instead, players simply make a statement indicating they conducted a ritual and focus on the result.

Thus, despite often addressing rituals as a topic, TRPGs often do not include rituals as a process, instead simply signaling that it took place to encode the game world as a pre-modern one (Saler 2012), without giving players an opportunity to gain experience of participating in a ritual. This, in turn, makes a procedural statement (Bogost 2007) about role and attitude toward rituals among believers and overemphasizes the pragmatic side of ritual behavior, and may influence players' understanding of religious behavior in general.

However, the precedent of successfully including extradiegetic rituals in games means that the experience of participating in a ritual is not something unwanted among players. Drawing more attention toward diegetic rituals can be used by game designers in order to include more detailed, nuanced and interesting representation of ritual behavior, and, importantly, to provide players with more opportunities for identity experimentation (Cooper 2016) as part of the game.

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## Author Statement

My name is Leonid Moyzhes. I am a PhD student from Charles University, Czech Republic. My primary focus of research is the representation of religion in games, in particular in role-playing games, both digital and tabletop, which I approach as a potential vehicle for playfully experimenting with different identities, including the religious one. I have presented at numerous conferences, including DIGRA, CEEGS and Ropecon academic seminars, with presentations focused on the topic of religions and RPGs. Currently I am trying to write a tabletop role-playing game focused on the life of small nomadic communities governed by ritual and religious imagination, an ambition that directly inspired my submission for ICGaN 2025.