

Role-Played Identities: Adapting the Tools to Forge Our Narratives

Players and Dungeon Masters alike are turning to improv and unrehearsed stage time to get the most out of their performances around the table. This research explores how improvised theatre reshapes the practice of tabletop role-playing games and allows players to take a more active role in campaigns, constructing their own narratives and not accepting anything short of the diverse identities they bring to the literal and figurative table. For that, this project asks: How can games and narratives benefit from improvised theatre? What limitations do we have as game scholars when studying improvised rules of gameplay? Which rules can be adapted before the game is considered an entirely new one?

To answer these questions, I will be limiting myself to the fifth edition of *Dungeons and Dragons* and the first edition of *Girl by Moonlight* to study both traditional games that are published by a big company and more recent ones that are self-published or published independently. To supplement my findings, I will conduct a review of the literature about role-playing games, player contribution to game development and how identities fit in it all. I will also be looking at literature conducted on the role of theatre on gameplay.

In “Productive Play” (2006), Celia Pearce introduces her argument by stating that the line between media consumption and media production is blurring, and the general public is starting to participate in what is offered to it. Giving the example of the *Sims* franchise, Pearce (2006) posits that game developers that give their players autonomy to customise relatively everything in the game potentially “mitigate spiraling game development costs” by making players do part of the labour. While you can choose to play a preset *Dungeons and Dragons* campaign that either comes with the base handbook or is sold separately, many players prefer to run homebrew campaigns that allow them to bend the rules.

Scholars place a large emphasis on rules or conditions that dictate the games’ gameplay mechanics and win/lose outcomes. In “The Rule Book” (2024), Jaako Stenros and

Markus Montola draw on what Kenneth Goldstein (1971) calls an “ideal game” to say that the rules set by designers are there to make up an ideal version of gameplay, but not necessarily the only version: the rules “are rules by which people *should* play rather than the ones by which they *do* play” (Goldstein, 1971). In the end, designers are not always aware of what gets left out of their rulebooks at the time of play, especially when it comes to analogue games that don’t digitally track unlocked achievements.

The rules that are left out are sometimes left out on the spot, after an argument between the players and the game master who ultimately decides on his own version of them. Such is the case on stage: “Theater unfolds ‘live,’ an unrepeatable stretch of events and experiences here and now, at a particular juncture of time, space, and people, with some opening to the unexpected and spontaneous. [...] Theater shares this with RPG play. No matter how many times a piece or game is played, it will never be the same because players never interact exactly the same way” (Hoover, et al., 2018).

This brings the question of rules to Huizinga’s Magic Circle (1944). The Magic Circle is the defined space in which people play that creates an experience that is separate from the real world, with its own rules, limitations and freedoms (Huizinga, 1944). In this case, it is the table around which players gather with their compendiums, rule books, dice trays and character sheets. Not only is it game-dependent, but if we take away the predetermined stories in the campaign books, everything else involves at least one form of meddling from the players within the limitations set by their game master.

Whether it is explicitly stated or not, when players sit around the table, they automatically start improvising: “Role-play is a form of performance. We take on roles, speak and use body language to represent our characters - our own or through avatars. We engage in verbal storytelling, and take actions in the characters’ worlds” (Hoover et al., 2018).

Additionally, many players choose to dress up as an extension of their role-play.

It didn't take long for marginalised identities all over the world to realise that if they aren't getting what they want from the people in control of the narrative, be it representation in media or beyond, they will have to take up the reins and get it done themselves. Games like *Girl by Moonlight* are a great example of this manifesting. There is a good amount of self-published games, on itch.io or otherwise, crowdfunded and made possible by players when they started as homebrew campaigns for larger TTRPG titles. Marginalised identities deserve a seat at the table.

Works Cited

Goldstein, Kenneth S. (1971). "Strategy in Counting Out: An Ethnographic Folklore Field Study." *The Study of Games*. Robert K. Krieger Publishing Company, Huntington.

Hoover, S., Simkins, David W., Deterding, S., Meldman, D., and Brown, A. (2018). "Performance Studies and Role-playing Games." *Role-playing Game Studies: A Transmedia Approach*. Edited by José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding. New York, Routledge, 213-226.

Huizinga, Johan. (1944). *Homo Ludens*. London: Routledge.

Pearce, Celia. (2006). "Productive Play: Game Culture From the Bottom Up." *Games and Culture*, vol. 1, issue 1.

Stenros, Jaako & Montola, Markus (2024). *The Rule Book: Building Blocks of Games*. The MIT Press.

Author Statement

Full Name: Hanine El Mir

Affiliation: PhD Student at Concordia University

Description of selected research, publications, and presentations:

- Custodio, A., El Mir, H., & Iantorno, M. (2024). “The Sun Is in Your Hand(held): mediating solar imaginaries and technological ambivalence.” *Digital Creativity*, 1–14.

This publication explores the modding of gameboys through a solarpunk lens.

- Hoebanx, P., French, M., & El Mir, H. (2024). (Un) Lucky Designs?: What Game Jams Can Contribute to Critical Gambling Studies. *Critical Gambling Studies*, 5(1), 76-83.

This publication recounts the findings of a gambling-themed game jam.

- El Mir, H. & Custodio, A. (2024). “Cannibal Crossing: Why Eat Some and Greet Others” presented at the Canadian Game Studies Association conference.

This presentation was part of a bigger CGSA panel about our relationship with animals in games. Our part was focused on the presence of edible animals in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* that resembled the species of villager NPCs.

Christine Tomlinson
School of Arts, Media, and Engineering
Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts
Arizona State University

Playing for Love: Experiences with Romance in Video Game Narrative Design

Video games can be deeply emotional experiences, particularly when it comes to games that include romantic possibilities for players (Chowanda et al., 2016; Song & Fox, 2016; Tomlinson, 2021; Wu et al., 2023). In fact, romance is becoming an increasingly popular element of games (Brierley-Beare, 2023). In some games, this is an offshoot of the primary purpose of play, but in others, this is the main goal of the game: to explore and establish romantic relationships with pre-programmed characters. In the former style of game, often explored as part of role-playing games (RPGs), romance is a smaller piece of the role-playing experience. In this style of game, players often find that romance gives them a better sense of the gameworld and it allows them to feel like things are more “realistic” (Tomlinson, 2021). In the latter example, such as dating simulators or many visual novels, players forge relationships with one or more characters as the primary point of the game. Like many games, these types of game offer players escape and, for some players, they can even become a replacement for physical world relationships (Wu et al., 2023).

In these ways, games can adapt the emotional experience of human connection in a virtual setting, whether this means deepening a story for players or becoming a personal focal point. Players can develop an interest in another person, become close to them, and even fall in love. This qualitative project explores how different games approach this in their design and how this is received by players, where this works well, and how the approach of adapting this experience falls short in game design. This project focuses on two romantic mobile games and two RPGs with romantic elements, drawing data from direct gameplay and online forum discussions among players.

Choices (Pixelberry, 2016) is an ongoing interactive text-based mobile game offering many romantic stories for players to explore, with analysis based on approximately 781 hours of gameplay and approximately one year of online forum observations. *Love and Deepspace* (InFold, 2024) is an ongoing otome game featuring a female protagonist and four current male love interests, with analysis of approximately 525 hours of gameplay and approximately eight

months of online forum observations. *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios, 2023) is a fantasy role-playing game with romantic elements, with data drawn from approximately 221 hours of gameplay and approximately one year of online forum observations. *Dragon Age: The Veilguard* (BioWare, 2024) is another fantasy RPG and the most recent release, meaning that data collection is ongoing, but is currently based on approximately 23 hours of gameplay and one month of online forum observations.

Experiences with romance in these games and their explorations of love through their mechanics and narratives are complex for players. The narratives that they encounter draw them in and often make them feel deep and genuine attachment toward characters. Their expectations for these adaptations of emotional experience – what they expect from virtual romantic partners, how identity should map on to their experience, the types of representation that should be available to them, and so on – all impact how these romances are ultimately interpreted by players. What becomes impactful? What falls flat for players?

Identity is one element that influences play and attachment when it comes to romantic narratives, with representation within a game's design offering opportunities for or limiting players' immersion and the possibility of developing parasocial relationships (Song & Fox, 2016) with the characters in the game. Beyond this, however, is what the characters within the narrative can do for the players emotionally. How is the bond presented and explored? How much time do the players get to spend with their chosen virtual person (or people)? Beyond being able to see themselves in these stories, and across these genres, players appreciate a feeling of being swept of their feet and being doted on by their in-game interest. While this is a factor for a specific subset of players of specifically romantic games (Wu et al., 2023), this is also true for players of more genres and from more backgrounds. They also, however, express desires for this to be reciprocal within the narrative. This is not merely a fantasy of being the romantic center of the universe, but a desire to make one another happy – even in a virtual context.

As romance becomes a bigger selling point for players, and increasingly an expectation, these emotional adaptations become a larger element of narrative and game design. How romance is implemented and what makes an impactful romantic story – and a good virtual romantic partner – need to be bigger considerations as part of the development process. As video games continue to change and reshape themselves with changing technology, audiences, and expectations, this adds another layer and element to the shifting landscape.

References

- Brierley-Beare, A. M. (2023). Representations of optional romance in AAA role-playing games: Love, lust and limerence [Doctoral dissertation, University of Adelaide].
- Chowanda, A., Flintham, M., Blanchfield, P., & Valstar, M. (2016). Playing with social and emotional game companions. In *Intelligent Virtual Agents: 16th International Conference*, Los Angeles, CA, USA, September 20–23, 2016, pp. 85-95. New York: Springer International Publishing.
- Tomlinson, C. (2021). Priority pixels: the social and cultural implications of romance in video games. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(5), 717-732.
- Song, W., & Fox, J. (2016). Playing for love in a romantic video game: Avatar identification, parasocial relationships, and Chinese women's romantic beliefs. *Mass Communication and Society*, 19(2), 197-215.
- Wu, Y., Cai, W., & Mensah, S. A. (2023). "We found love": Romantic video game involvement and desire for real-life romantic relationships among female gamers. *Social Science Computer Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08944393231217940>

Author Bio

Christine Tomlinson is an Assistant Professor in the School of Arts, Media, and Engineering within the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts at Arizona State University. Previously, the author has worked as a lecturer in the School of Social Sciences at the University of California – Irvine, as a postdoctoral researcher with the SDU Metaverse Lab at the University of Southern Denmark, as a game studies specialist with the Digital Democracies Institute at Simon Fraser University, and as a user researcher with Activision. Christine's research explores game design and mechanics, player experiences, identity, video game content, narratives, and representation. Christine's work on video games and online streaming has been most recently featured in *Information, Communication, & Society*; *Acta Ludologica*; and *Convergence*, with recent presentations in the 2024 Antiquity in Media Studies Conference, the 2024 Middle Ages in Modern Games Conference, and the 2023 International Communication Association Conference.

Abstract:

This paper will examine how the game *Pentiment* (Obsidian Entertainment 2023) uses medieval manuscript aesthetics and a complex system of various fonts and visual cues to complicate our ideas of “historical accuracy”, especially regarding the Middle Ages, in video-games. By setting the game within the pages of a manuscript, it is self-reflexively commenting on the ways in which we selectively write, omit, and rewrite history to appeal to specific audiences and ideas. *Pentiment*’s use of writing is not just done for aesthetic purposes, and when analyzed through this lens of medieval paleographic studies, it allows insight into information about a character’s social position, education, and emotional state that might otherwise go unnoticed. This focus on the physicality of writing extends beyond just a deeper understanding of characters – it also contributes to the game’s overall message about the ways in which our understanding of the Middle Ages, and history in general, is never truly “accurate”, but instead informed by contemporary values and references to earlier texts and their attempts to add and omit to history too. The title of the game even speaks to Kline’s description of adaptation as “palimpsestuous ... revealing the hidden layers of earlier texts, but also providing a fresh gloss on already-known narratives” (Kline 2014, 5). The idea of “historical accuracy” to the Middle Ages comes loaded with assumptions of the period as “a dystopia in which violence always wins, women are oppressed or have to suffer through rape and violence for ... agency, while war, chaos, and destruction are constantly on one’s doorstep” (Brandenburg 2022).

These assumptions come with the sense of a political neutrality – the presenting of “fact”, and anything that falls outside the white, cis-male, heteronormative lens ends up being labelled “inaccurate” (Copplesone discusses the problem of “remediation – cultural-heritage has traditionally been portrayed and consumed through specific media forms in specific ways [Copplesone 2016, 434]). In other words, there are certain long-standing cultural ideas about the Middle Ages that continue to inform media, especially as they continually reference other neomedieval works. In attempting to confront these ideas about medieval life, Esther Wright suggests that *Pentiment* is embodying a “deconstructionist approach to historical engagement” (Wright 2024); viewing the game through this lens can help clarify how it challenges the conventions of “historical accuracy” in terms of the Middle Ages. Challenging these all-to-familiar ideas of what the Middle Ages are “supposed” to look like is especially important, as “fantasy media was (and still is) used to reinforce gender ideals” (Stone, Kudenov, and Combs 2014, 110). Games that examine the life of medieval women outside of their sexual appeal, or without using them as props for shocking the audience to demonstrate the cruelty of the time period are important contributions to the rewriting of our understanding of medieval history.

By focusing on the writing system as a primary game mechanic, *Pentiment* engages in a reflection on the nature of historical storytelling. The game’s manuscript culture is used as a tool for reflecting on how history is constructed – what gets written, what is erased, and how narratives are shaped by power and perspective. Ultimately, *Pentiment* encourages players to rethink the very foundations of historical narratives through its themes, story, and mechanics.

References:

- Brandenburg, Aurelia. 2022. "There is No Such Thing as 'Historical Accuracy' of Fiction." *LanguageAtPlay* (blog), April 22. Accessed November 30, 2024. https://languageatplay-de.translate.google.com/2022/04/22/there-is-no-such-thing-as-historical-accuracy-of-fiction/?x_tr_sl=auto&x_tr_tl=en&x_tr_hl=en-US&x_tr_pto=wapp.
- Copplestone, Tara Jane. 2016. "But That's Not Accurate: The Differing Perceptions of Accuracy in Cultural-heritage Videogames Between Creators, Consumers and Critics" in *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 21(3): 415-438. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2017.1256615>.
- Kline, Daniel T, ed. 2014. *Digital Game Re-imagines the Middle Ages*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Stone, Jennifer C., Peter Kudenov, and Teresa Combs. 2014. "Accumulating Histories: A Social Practice Approach to Medievalism in High-Fantasy MMORPGs." In *Digital Gaming Re-imagines the Middle Ages*, edited by Daniel T. Kline, 108-118. New York and London: Routledge.
- Wright, Esther 2024. "'Layers of history': History as Construction/Constructing History in Pentiment." *ROMchip: A Journal of Game Histories* 6(1). Accessed November 29. <https://www.romchip.org/index.php/romchip-journal/article/view/191#link-fn-ba5cc5d0e865f363d8c3f408f0fb6ec4>.

Author Statement:

Morgan Pearce is a master's student at the University of Lethbridge and a part of the institution's "Humanities Innovation Lab". Her thesis combines medieval literary studies and game studies to look at how non-linear narratives in various genres and mediums are used to convey the experience of depression and loss, specifically through the use of the symbol of the labyrinth. Her research combines studies of the history of the book, medieval literature, game studies, and digital humanities. Her most recent conference presentations include an analysis of how women's experiences are presented as horror in *Silent Hill 3* and *Haunting Ground*, as well as a study into the scribal evidence for a performative usage of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. She has two collaborative publications in consideration regarding the use of AI in the classroom and methods used to teach paleography in a modern classroom setting.