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A TRI-HEURISTIC ONTOLOGICAL APPROXIMATION OF TABLETOP RPGS

Cristo León, Edgar Meritano, & Miguel A. Bastarrachea-Magnani

Abstract

This article aims to renew the theoretical framework surrounding the guiding question: *What are role-playing games?* In other words, setting up the propaedeutics for an ontology of RPGs or a discourse of their essence and existence. Despite the apparent simplicity of the query, it is elusive and intricate. Addressing it is not only prompted by the inertia RPGs are gaining in popular culture but also a need for an integral view of the advancements produced by each discipline dealing with the phenomenon. The ultimate goal is to contribute to developing a genealogy and taxonomy (classification) of RPGs that distinguishes between different manifestations (such as tabletop RPGs and live-action RPGs or LARP).

Keywords

TTRPG, ontology, worldview, cosmovision, heuristics, philosophy, theory

1. Introduction

Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TTRPGs) have emerged as a fertile and novel research field across various disciplines. They are behind numerous manifestations of popular culture in different societies, including video games, literary works, series, movies, and other art expressions. The phenomenon is so complex that it integrates features relevant to a wide range of academic and practical fields, such as communication, cultural studies, game design, philosophy, aesthetics, and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics).

This article aims to renew the theoretical framework surrounding the guiding question: *What are role-playing games?* In other words, setting up the propaedeutics for an ontology of RPGs or a discourse of their essence and existence. Despite the apparent simplicity of the query, it is elusive and intricate. Addressing it is not only prompted by the inertia RPGs are gaining in popular culture

but also a need for an integral view of the advancements produced by each discipline dealing with the phenomenon.

RPGs encompass the theoretical realm of RPG Studies, groups focused on their design and creation, and the gaming communities engaged with them. Hence, we require a pair of touchstones as a starting point for our work. First, it is necessary to discern whether it is possible to establish a *worldview* (*cosmovision* in Spanish) of RPGs. The concept arises from the intersection of several disciplines and is associated with K. W. von Humboldt's *Weltanschauung* and *Weltbegriff*.¹ From an intercultural communication perspective, it refers to those deeply ingrained cognitive structures and belief systems shared by cultural members that affect and transform the individual and collective spatiotemporality. It is "what transpires when people engage in communication with others whose experiences, assumptions, sense making, and behaviors are different."² As a mental, metaphysical, and holistic map, it influences thought, action, communication, and the perception of others, Nature, and oneself. The *cosmovision* allows us to explain how we organize and share interpretations of the past, recent experiences, and future predictions.

However, *cosmovisions* are not fixed: they are "shaped by the values created from experiences in the family, the community, education, religion, and other contexts that socialize individuals into the world within which they live. Used collectively in a community, these worldviews are employed to construct meaning from experience."³ While the *cosmovision* is necessary for making sense of our world, it is also subject to change and can be constructed. In this context, we believe RPGs play a dual role. They are cultural products that reflect the *cosmovision* of those who play them; simultaneously, they possess the potential to actively and rapidly modify the *cosmovision* of their participants, thanks to their interactive, collaborative, and narrative nature. We know that RPGs are not played solely for winning but rather to produce new experiences and strong community bonds, even though the "table of players" is a small group. As J. M. Bennett explains, "New experiences may bring new understandings to past encounters as one rethinks and reinterprets those past experiences to refine meaning."⁴ Inside an intimate, simulated, and productive environment, RPGs can redefine meaning, generate unique experiences, and give rise to new *cosmovisions*. Thus, there cannot be a single, absolute *cosmovision* unifying RPGs because each community develops its own.



Figure 1: Individual tabletop groups form their own community and cosmovision of the RPG medium. Photo provided by the authors.

¹ Carley H. Dodd, "Worldview in Intercultural Communication," in *The International Encyclopedia of Intercultural Communication*, edited by Y. Y. Kim, (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), pp. 1-9.

² Janet M. Bennett, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Intercultural Competence* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2015), pp. 450-451.

³ Bennett, p. 58.

⁴ Bennett, p. 58.

Exploring this plurality of cosmovision that can be generated daily presents itself as one of the central challenges for RPG studies but one of the phenomenon's most uplifting features.

Furthermore, one has to consider the Postmodern character of RPGs,⁵ which makes them activities that both draw from and enrich other disciplines and arts from their inception. Therefore, more than a purely disciplinary approach is required to capture the phenomenon's *being*. Instead, each aspect is studied from the perspectives and filters that serve disciplinary interests. An ontology of RPGs should promote contact between disciplines, enriching all the investigations into the phenomenon. A second touchstone is to approach the being of RPGs from a trans-disciplinary perspective.⁶ Moreover, it is worth noting that gaming communities and networks comprise members of society at large, further emphasizing the need for a comprehensive approach.

2. The Boundaries of an Ontology of RPGs

Once we have our touchstones, we have to determine the limits and possibilities for a discourse on the being of RPGs. Generally speaking, ontology is a philosophical discourse seeking to locate abstract and concrete, universal, and particular figures that manifest within the world. Each ontological system proposes a categorial framework that attempts to circumscribe everything within that world.⁷ To achieve this, it defines universals that typically revolve around seven categories: individuals (simples), properties, relations, structures, sets, quantifiers, and facts.⁸ Notably, an ontology seeks to account not only for essence but also for existence. Developing a discourse of the being of RPGs, therefore, requires an ontic foundation and the identification of explanatory principles that, as ontological postulates,⁹ that aligns both essential elements, as well as cultural and historical accidents.

However, expanding the discourse beyond the essentialist ontology commonly practiced in the Western tradition is necessary. By essentialist or causal ontology, we refer to those approaches that seek to discover what a specific phenomenological variety one wishes to describe shares in common, i.e., the essential, to develop a definition. Typically, this strategy involves asking questions to isolate the necessary and sufficient elements for creating a universal conceptual representation that works as a definition. This is not an easy task, especially when expressing phenomena that are difficult to represent or have a predominant historical context, such as art, play, or role-playing games. A paradigm of this ontology is the search for *beauty* in Plato's dialogue "*Hippias Major*."¹⁰ The discussion highlights the challenges of establishing a definition, as its outcome is an *aporia*, or insurmountable difficulty.

⁵ René Reinhold Schalleger, *The Postmodern Joy of Role-Playing Games: Agency, Ritual and Meaning in the Medium* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2018).

⁶ This encompasses both multi-disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity as well.

⁷ Ted Honderich, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁸ Reinhardt Grossmann, *The Existence of the World: An Introduction to Ontology* (London: Routledge, 2020).

⁹ Carlos Vidales Gonzales, "Theoretical Relativism in Communication: From Communication as a Principle for Explanation to Communication as a Practical Discipline," *Comunicación y Sociedad* 16 (2011): pp. 11-45. http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0188-252X2011000200002&lng=es&nrm=iso.

¹⁰ Plato, *Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

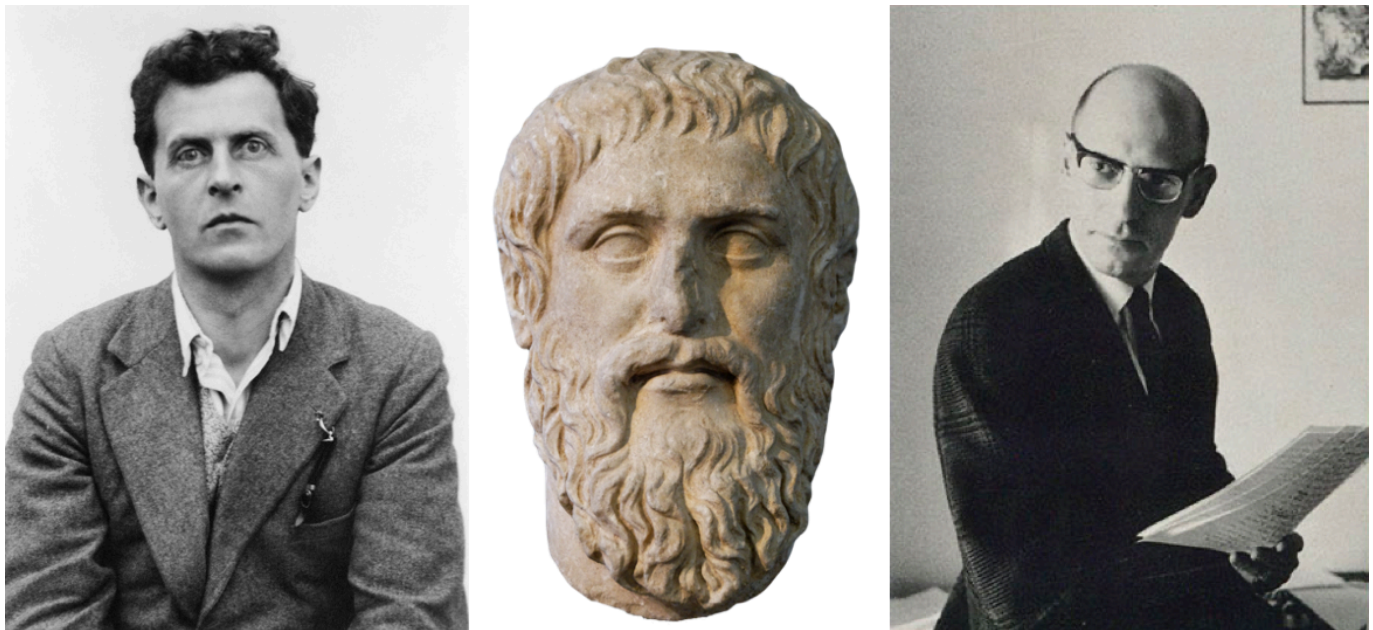


Figure 2: Philosophers, left to right: Ludwig Wittgenstein, Plato, and Michel Foucault. From Wikipedia, public domain.

The modern world has re-evaluated strategies for capturing the being of things. Two perspectives seem vital in complementing the traditional ontological approach. Applied to RPGs, the first perspective is indicated by Carl Ehrett and Sarah Worth in their text "*What Dungeons and Dragons Is and Why We Do It*," where they discuss Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.¹¹ The philosopher argues that concepts generally do not point to an essential something of those things they represent, but rather indicate a set of shared characteristics, sometimes present, sometimes absent, and at times overlapping. Wittgenstein calls this a *family resemblance*.¹² The concept becomes more flexible, arising from our identification of the being of things through their relationship with other things. In fact, the example he uses to discuss the problem is that of games themselves. Wittgenstein concludes that what card games, sports, and board games have in common is that they belong to the same family. The second perspective is *genealogy*. It involves incorporating the historical dimension of a phenomenon into its pragmatic view, including in ontology the process that has led to identifying and naming the activity as such. Michel Foucault proposed this approach based on the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche.¹³ It also invites a flexible notion of concept, as it questions the naive perspective considering historical events as isolated points in time with a determined origin. It makes it evident that the emergence of an event is a phenomenon that can be explained by the forces at play in that historical moment.¹⁴ The genealogical method reminds us that most phenomena have a multi-causal aspect that we must recognize to capture their being.

¹¹ Carl Ehrett and Sarah Worth, "What *Dungeons and Dragons* Is and Why We Do It," in *Dungeons and Dragons and Philosophy: Raiding the Temple of Wisdom*, edited by Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox (Chicago and LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 2012), 194-206.

¹² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations, 4th Edition*, edited by Joachim Schulte and P. M. S. Hacker (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

¹³ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited by D. F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

¹⁴ Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History."

The tabletop RPG phenomenon covers various aspects that have evolved over the decades since its creation in the United States in the 1970s. Given the plurality of game systems, play styles, and *worldviews*, both the ideas of family resemblance and genealogy are necessary to integrate ontic elements of RPGs. Just identifying the essential aspects of RPGs using the traditional approach would lead to elaborating long lists of properties. Instead, we do not pretend to reach a general definition from this ontology. To us, definitions of RPGs are means, not ends.¹⁵ Our challenge lies in questioning whether aspects we may consider fundamental—e.g., the game's rules, typically found in extensive manuals—can be dispensable in practice (becoming accidental). For example, on the one hand, it is common for game masters and players of role-playing games to break the rules to maintain fun and continuity of narrative.¹⁶ Likewise, some tabletop RPGs make using *props* such as miniatures and maps more or less obligatory, among other things. On the other hand, recent RPGs experiment with removing various elements that may be considered fundamental, such as the Game Master and the dice.

3. Heuristics for an Approach to the Ontology of Role-Playing Games

Is there an essential or central aspect in the phenomenon we call tabletop RPGs? There are a plethora of answers. Ehrett and Worth, for example, identify it as the purpose of the game (for them, the creation of a collective story).¹⁷ For us, it will be a set of explanatory principles. The effort is similar to recognizing the role of each aspect in the art composition. While a work of art may employ various material or mental resources such as sound, words, technological elements, concepts, pigments, textures, space, time, mathematical calculations, actions, other artworks, etc., all serve the composition, which is nothing more than a good arrangement of the above. Thus, when a composition is successful, without questioning why, our subjectivity is moved either by the way the artist intended *or* because something elevated is expressed through that arrangement. Similarly, RPGs combine diverse elements to present themselves as the phenomenon we recognize.

Next, we attempt to develop a set of tools for a discourse unifying those elements and based on them, recognizing the families of activities that manifest as the phenomenon we call tabletop RPGs. However, instead of specific methodologies, we establish a set of heuristics. From ancient Greek *εὕρισκω*, *heurískō* ('I find, discover'), a heuristic is an approach to problem-solving or self-discovery that employs a practical method that does not guarantee optimality, perfection, or rationality but is nevertheless sufficient to achieve an immediate goal or approximation in the short term. Heuristics help to address complex and changing problems that occur in multiple dimensions, as with RPGs. Three heuristics are proposed for the ontology of RPGs: 1) Identifying what RPGs *are not* by discriminating their most common metaphors, 2) Determining the sufficient elements for the phenomenon to be an RPG (along with proper historical contextualization), and 3) Addressing the diversity of its dimensions by recognizing the "meta" nature of RPGs. We will describe each of these approaches and their consequences in the following.

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion of contemporary RPG definitions, see Zagal and Deterding's insightful analysis. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding, "Definitions of 'Role-Playing Games,'" in *Role-Playing Game Studies: A Transmedia Approach*, edited by Sebastian Deterding and José Zagal (London: Routledge, 2018), 19-51.

¹⁶ Ehrett and Worth, "What *Dungeons and Dragons* Is and Why We Do It."

¹⁷ Ibid.

4. Metaphorical Critique: Use and Disuse of Metaphors in Role-Playing Games

The first heuristic is a negative approach to the existence of RPGs. It involves delimiting what RPGs are by disentangling them from the common metaphors we use to explain them, including theater, performance, storytelling, board games, children's play, and others.

As mentioned earlier, finding a definition is equivalent to formulating a concept that eliminates ambiguities and allows us to think with clarity about phenomena. However, we generally need representations to capture the essence of things because we don't always have direct access to manifest objects, or they become difficult to grasp. When dealing with realities that are hard to represent, we are forced to abandon the conceptual perspective and approach them through partially appropriate representations, namely allegories (metaphors, parables, emblems, etc.).¹⁸ The truth is that, although we are accustomed to thinking that these figures exist only as resources of imagination or poetry, our thought is fundamentally metaphorical.¹⁹

The obstacles arise when we realize that "the same systematicity that allows us to understand one aspect of a concept in terms of another (...) necessarily hides other aspects of the concept in question."²⁰ Approaching a phenomenon with metaphors risks compromising meanings and experiences that do not belong to it but to the simile, i.e., contingent features. For example, taking a discussion as if it were a "war" of some kind.²¹ Here, the expressions and ways of thinking are imported, so the exchange of arguments is perceived as a power struggle with losers, winners, and war-like elements. But a discussion is not necessarily like that. We could also think of it under the auspices of another metaphor, e.g., as if it were a dance: a collaborative effort with aesthetic motives. Metaphors give structure to the way we approach the essence of things, but we also run the risk of making wrong ontological substitutions (the as-if). Although metaphors may be operationally necessary, they eventually become obstacles and mere euphemisms when not treated carefully. In fact, according to C. I. Lehrich, in RPG studies, the "discourse of analogy" as a theory has become a kind of typical sin.²² To think that *metaphor* is *identity* is to fall into absurdity.

Hence, our first heuristic involves elucidating and examining the metaphors used to teach, promote, and disseminate RPGs and those employed by specific disciplines. We acknowledge the need for metaphors as a quick approach to the universe of meaning in RPGs,



Figure 3: The act of playing games transcends the metaphors we use to describe them. Photo by the authors.

¹⁸ Gilbert Durand, *L'imagination Symbolique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France (PUF), 1968).

¹⁹ Georg Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

²⁰ Lakoff & Johnson, 42.

²¹ Lakoff & Johnson.

²² Christopher I. Lehrich, "Ritual Discourse in Role-Playing Games," *The Forge* (blog), October 1, 2005, http://www.indie-rpgs.com/_articles/ritual_discourse_in_RPGs.html.

both in colloquial and academic contexts. The aim is not to banish the realm of the metaphor, as that may be impossible, but rather to use metaphors critically. This means being aware of which aspects of the phenomenon may be left out and what foreign meanings we may compromise in discourse due to the metaphor. There is a wide variety of metaphors used to refer to RPGs. RPGs are often heard *as if they were* dramatic art, a story told around a campfire, a performance, a ritual, a board game, and so on. By doing so, we confuse the nature of role-playing. For example, the intention of performance involves actions for aesthetic expression, but while RPGs may have performative elements, they are not determinative of them. Similarly, one could argue that RPGs are *as if they were* rituals. However, the thinness of their magic circle and the relationship between the profane and the sacred in the activity may not be comparable to, for example, traditional initiation rituals. Instead, it is necessary to acknowledge that RPGs have ritual aspects. They are also metaphorically thought of *as if they were exquisite corpses* (from the French term *cadavre exquis*), but this carries the risk of believing that RPGs do not require intersubjective action. These examples are numerous, and analyzing each would need extensive work.

Since we intend to establish ontological foundations of RPGs, we acknowledge the necessity of a metaphorical critique of them. The metaphorical analysis allows us to be flexible in our discourse and expand the scope of any conception of RPGs to incorporate the previous notions of kinship and genealogy within the phenomenon of role-playing games. Simultaneously, it enables us to establish the limits and possibilities of our search for explanatory principles so as not to fall into the absurdity of believing that, because we say that RPGs are like board games, then the activity ceases to be an RPG when props such as miniatures, a gridded map, or a game master's screen are not used.

5. Epoché of the Necessary: The Essential Elements of Role-Playing Games

The second heuristic we propose approaches the traditional process of searching for definitions. It involves understanding RPGs through their essential attributes. Initially, here, we know 'essential' to mean everything attributable to an object, without which the object is not, in essence, the object itself.²³ Traditionally, determining these attributes allows us to recognize the existence of the thing itself, as they universally and necessarily belong to it. However, as mentioned before, the essentials we recognize here must be situated within the context of the kinship and genealogy mentioned above. Consequently, we will consider them as minimal (theoretical and practical) components that enable the execution of RPGs in each historical moment. Each essential, therefore, requires a historical-genealogical exploration, which we intend to address in detailed analyses in future work. Once this starting point is considered, the heuristic consists of suspending (*ἐποχή*, *epoché*), a philosophical term from Greek meaning 'cessation' or 'suspension of judgment', which entails bracketing essential elements to realize what type of phenomenon remains concerning us, similar to the process of phenomenological reduction.²⁴ In other words, it involves answering the question: What elements can we remove without the RPG ceasing to be an RPG?

What would these essentials be attributable to the phenomenon we have called RPGs? Here, we consider simulation-simulated, narrative interaction, diegesis, organic-autopoiesis, ephemerality, ludic character (Stenros 2015), self-regulating jurisprudential mechanisms (Ehrett and Worth 2012), what we will call *pentimenti*, and finally, the meta, although the latter will require its own heuristic.

²³ Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle, Volumes I and II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

²⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy – First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1982).

It is important to note that this task does not entail an unlimited list; we aim to establish a finite series that can develop as a set of explanatory principles. In other words, we mention the essentials that we believe should be addressed and discussed to create a general theory of RPGs concerning their historical moment. For example, how was interactive narrative conceived in RPGs in the 1980s? How was the ephemeral nature of RPGs conceptualized during the indie boom of the 2010s?

We will now provide a brief outline of each of them, as studying them in detail will produce a longer text, and we will reserve it for future work. Hence, next, we briefly focus on one aspect that we believe has often been overlooked and that, although it is closer to the Hispanic and Latin-American spirit of RPG making, seems to be an essential element.

5.1. The Simulation-Simulacra

That RPGs involve a simulation is not new: they are played using imagination, where characters unfold and come to life in a fictional world. However, the mere idea of simulation is not enough as an essential element of RPGs. Instead, we opt for a polarity concept: the simulation-simulacra. Here, thoughts on the relationships between reality, symbols, and society by J. Baudrillard help us understand this essential element of RPGs.²⁵ The French philosopher revisited the meanings that culture and media involved in constructing an understanding of shared existence.²⁶

5.2. The Ludic Nature

The ludic nature of RPGs is an essential feature because, from a simplified point of view, the game's purpose is to have fun, not necessarily to win (or even to compete). Here, we agree with Jaakko Stenros: When an RPG ceases to be enjoyable, the activity doesn't endure because players lose the

²⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production* (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975); Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983); Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

²⁶ Jean. Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, 2016); Jean Baudrillard and Jean-Louis Violeau, *The Ecstasy of Communication* (Los Angeles CA: Semiotext(e), 2012). A central thesis is that our postmodern society depends so much on models and maps that we have taken distance concerning the natural world preceding them. Baudrillard distinguishes between the *simulacra*—the copy without an original— and the *simulation*. The simulacrum would be what shapes fantasy as the basis of fiction and imitation. For example, the act of pretending to engage in combat, the operations of a campaign, and ultimately, war. Meanwhile, simulation is the action and effect of simulating, the standard agreement to represent something, pretend that we are, or imitate what is not. Being two poles, there would be a continuum between simulacra and simulation, traversing four stages. The first is where there is a faithful image/copy. The second is where the perversion of reality occurs. The third is where the absence of a profound reality is masked, and the sign intends to be a faithful copy but lacks an original. In the fourth, there is a pure simulacrum without any relationship to reality. We believe a similar model can be applied to RPGs. Their participants immerse themselves in fictional realms, engaging in simulated experiences where the connection between representation and actual reality progressively diminishes. RPGs would be closer to a state of the third degree “where the simulacrum precedes the original and the distinction between reality and representation vanishes. There is only the simulation, and originality becomes a meaningless concept” (Hegarty 2004). However, throughout the game, players would undergo the four stages of simulacra, resulting in a definitive dissolution of the link to reality. The boundary between fact and fiction becomes increasingly blurred as the narrative unfolds and the game progresses. Players and their characters may find themselves in situations where reality becomes distorted and perverted. Without this essential, RPGs could not unleash their potential as purely simulated experiences, where notions of originality and authenticity with respect to the everyday world become irrelevant.

motivation to participate.²⁷ According to Huizinga's idea that "the category of 'play' is one of the most fundamental in life,"²⁸ RPGs are typically enjoyable activities without rules, relevant to the interactions that occur within them and result from the act of gathering to play. Katie Salen Tekinbas and Eric Zimmerman analyze game design through several conceptual frameworks, adding the perspective of systems where players engage in an artificial conflict defined by rules, resulting in a quantifiable outcome.²⁹ They state that "playfulness" is a fundamental aspect of games and game design. By exploring various playful dimensions, they emphasize the importance of understanding the playful elements of games and how they influence the player's experience to create enjoyable and engaging game experiences. In RPGs, the tension between free play (playfulness) and regulation revolves around the fact that participants assume roles and adopt personalities guided by duties, material sources, agreed-upon norms, and other rules from both the game (the imaginary and fictional worlds) and the sociocultural group to which they belong (the real world). Therefore, the playful nature of RPGs is essential because, without the tension generated by negotiating between unregulated enjoyment and the organization of a regulated system, the fun would be lost, nullifying the RPG itself and its capacity for experience production. In this sense, playfulness guarantees the game itself.

5.3. The Interactive Storytelling

Next, we address RPGs' narrative dimension. Evidently, RPGs constitute a narrative activity. However, they are not limited to the metaphors that approximate them as mere oral stories like those of ancient times; they possess more complex nuances. Much of the game occurs through dialogue and co-creation, resulting from interactive storytelling. In this sense, the narrative is pragmatic, as it emerges contextually through the interaction among the participants as a collective cognition of fiction. It occurs by and for the community that generates them, in this case, the "gaming table." The intimate dominion of the "gaming table" validates what transpires in RPGs and gives rise to the phenomenon, not the community or the companies that publish the games. Interactive storytelling, therefore, is an essential element because without narration, there is no fiction, and without interactions between the storytellers, there is no collective imagination, a condition for the manifestation of the imaginary and fictional worlds where players and characters unfold.

5.4. The Diegetic

The next essential deals with the very actions that occur when players participate in the co-creation of the narrative that guides the game. We refer to diegesis, i.e., what Nikolaidou calls "a story told by a narrator, colored by their voice."³⁰ A diegesis is a fundamental tool that manifests at the point of contact between players and between the game director and the players. The phenomenon of collaborative co-creation transforms RPG participants into both senders and receivers alternately. If

²⁷ Jaakko Stenros, *Playfulness, Play, and Games: A Constructionist Ludology Approach*, Doctoral Dissertation, Acta Universitatis Tamperensis, No. 2049 (Tampere University Press, 2015), <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-44-9788-9>.

²⁸ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, reprint from the German edition 1944 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 28.

²⁹ Katie Salen Tekinbas and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003).

³⁰ Dimitra Nikolaidou, "The Evolution of Fantastical Storyworlds: A Study of Tabletop Role-Playing Settings," *Ex-Centric Narratives: Journal of Anglophone Literature, Culture and Media* 1, No. 2 (2018): 218-29, <https://doi.org/10.26262/exna.v1i2.6741>, here p. 221.

there were no diegesis at play in the game, it would lack the necessary transversality to maintain cohesion between narrative and interaction. A panorama without diegesis is challenging to linger, even in the case of very abstract arts, since human beings tend to create stories even where there are none. In other words, diegesis is essential because all participants contribute to coloring the voice of the narrator and, therefore, what is being narrated. The diegetic component of RPGs shapes the poietic source coming from each player.

5.5. The Organic (Autopoietic) Nature

RPGs are organic in the sense that they are autonomous, meaning they have their finality within themselves. As a category, the organic opposes the mechanical. While the latter is judged by an external drive (*telos*) beyond itself (a chair is good if it is suitable for sitting), the organic is self-teleological.³¹ In this sense, organisms and artworks are autonomous because they only serve to and strive to maintain their existence. Similarly, RPGs possess a self-referential nature where they become independent of the players to some extent thanks to shared and collaborative storytelling. It seeks to sustain itself through the resulting imaginary and fictional worlds. It is born, lives by constantly creating itself (autopoiesis), and incorporating the fantastical elements that players bring with them,³² and dies at the end of the session, leaving behind only an anecdotic (mythical legacy) that allows it to be revived or to be passed on to other sessions. When playing RPGs, we create experiences because we interact with something alive, resistant, and ever-changing. This feature connects it strongly with its artistic dimension. The symptom that RPGs are a form of art lies in the autonomy that encourages player interaction with something that possesses deepness. Thus, its creation is self-contained at a general level but continuously self-referential at the particular level of the playing group. The organic nature goes beyond the ludic character of RPGs, making it a distinct essential attribute. All of the RPGs' elements end up organized to maintain continuity and provide cohesion between sessions and stories.³³ Without this essential aspect, RPGs would be reduced to finite and discontinuous ludic events.

5.6. The Ephemeral Nature

The ephemeral quality (*fugacidad* in Spanish) is another essential attribute. A game session occurs in a specific moment and circumstances, involving only the participants as co-creators. This temporary nature leads to metaphorically thinking of RPGs as a sort of performance. The difference lies in the fact that there is no need for an audience in RPGs. They constitute a phenomenon by and for its participants, not for spectators (if there were any). Evidence of this transience is that those recording RPG sessions (through audio or audiovisual means) can only capture the outcomes of the interactive storytelling alone. Still, it only allows participants to live the experience partially. In contrast to other art forms where the result (the artwork) is the experience, in an RPG, the experience is the game itself, as long as it lasts. Therefore, considering the historical character temporality of RPG sessions is of vital importance.

³¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

³² See Daniel Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2001).

³³ Miguel Angel Bastarrachea Magnani, "Hacia una estética de lo simbólico en los juegos de rol," in *Memorias del segundo coloquio de estudios sobre juegos de rol*, edited by Alain M. Arriaga Rangel (México: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2017), 46-53.

5.7. Jurisprudential Self-Regulation

We know that games require a set of rules to define a specific space-time framework, such as a game session. Even though RPGs have some permeability to everyday life content in terms of time, space, and meaning, their autonomous nature requires conventions and individual arbitration. This allows the fictional world, where characters unfold, to emerge. Jurisprudence refers to the set of decisions and judicial rulings that accumulate over time and guide future legal resolutions. In RPGs, jurisprudential self-regulation is also based on individual experience and the interpretation of the law in the specific context of each case, just as the game experience is ephemeral and fully lived in the moment. RPGs exploit their interactive narrative nature to resolve differences of opinions and wills at all levels and roles of the participants (the person, the character, and the player). In other words, for the activity to evolve and be transmitted, arbitration is represented by a system of valid rules only while the RPG is being played. Although, in many cases, these rules originate from pre-established manuals, the set of rules results from a preconceived convention by the group, where the game director is the one serving as the final arbiter of what transpires in the game. While the game system is configured based on a random mathematical algorithm expressed through devices such as dice, digital algorithms (in online platforms), or even cards, the game director is constantly there for self-referencing. The result of randomness must be interpreted for the active regulation of the game and the determination of fictional reality within it (the fantasy world). Therefore, in line with the organic nature of the role-playing game, its jurisprudential self-regulation is an essential aspect of RPGs

5.8. Palimpsestic Nature

Finally, we propose an essential feature we believe has been overlooked in the literature. We call it the “pentimenti,” or the palimpsest nature of RPGs. “Pentimenti” is an Italian term meaning “repentance.” It was used during the Renaissance to indicate a visible alteration in work.³⁴ At that time, it was common for authors to revise their results, adding or removing things. Similarly, the palimpsest is a practice in which another author alters and intervenes in a previous work.³⁵ For example, in photography, photo retouching gave rise to the entire pictorialism movement, and in cinematography, there are specific cases of pentimenti, such as the original *Star Wars* trilogy, where the author revisits and edits them, not in their syntax but in the form of the frame.

We recognize a phenomenon of pentimenti in the evolution and practice of RPGs. This occurs not only through the continuous revision of their universal approaches or their legal framework (their rule systems) but also through the palimpsestic intervention by both the authors and others. Ehrett & Worth state that “because role-players very commonly break or bend the rules of *D&D*. Not only do players adopt house rules that add to or even contradict the official rules, but many groups adhere to the unofficial ‘rule 0’: that the DM has the power to alter or suspend the rules at will.”³⁶ In this sense, the so-called “golden rule” is a condition for the palimpsest in RPGs. The case of *Dungeons & Dragons* is paradigmatic because it is recognized as the first RPG. Based on this notion of pentimenti, *D&D* can be seen as a primordial form of the RPG, much in the sense of a type of artwork. Starting from there, revisions and different editions of the game, as well as other role-playing games, can be thought of as “pentimenti” and “palimpsests” of *Dungeons and Dragons* itself,

³⁴ Ángel Escobar, *El palimpsesto grecolatino como fenómeno librario y textual* (Zaragoza: Institución «Fernando el Católico», 2006).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ehrett & Worth, 200.

enabling the creation of both genealogy and genetics of RPGs. From this seed, RPGs have subsequently been divided into series that revolve around their thematic universes with their legal foundations. A future direction would be to explore the consequences of the *pentimenti* in RPGs and how it has been historically expressed.

6. The Multidimensional: The “Meta” Character of Role-Playing Games

Having seen the different essentials, it is time to discuss the feature that grants them cohesion. As a third heuristic, we propose the analysis of one attribute that serves as a central aspect in RPG dynamics: the phenomenological capacity to cross the boundaries of both the game³⁷ and cognition.³⁸ We call this the game’s *meta*, from the Greek beyond (not to be confused with mere *metagame*). In turn, this essential feature requires the treatment of three dimensions to establish itself as a heuristic: meta-actions, metacognition, and the metagame itself.

Let’s start by considering that RPGs do not occur solely in the shared imaginary world where the narrative unfolds. Still, they also involve the ordinary world, continuously engaging the magic circle. Here, we call upon the model developed by Dennis Waskul in his essay “*The Role-Playing Game and the Game of Role-Playing*,” where he describes the three figures into which a participant in a role-playing game is decomposed: the person playing, the player, and the character.³⁹ The person inhabits the real world (their everyday experience), the player the imaginary world (the co-created interactive narrative), and the character lives in the fictional or fantastic world (the setting or scenario that has its own rules and internal coherence). In the typical process of RPGs, the person remains in the ordinary world, setting themselves aside so that the player can enter the magical circle of the RPG (the imaginary); from there, the character explores the fictional world. However, we must highlight that “Role-playing games obligate participants to occupy a liminal role located in the boundaries of persona, player, and person.”⁴⁰ In RPGs, participants assume the role of a character with a specific personality. Still, simultaneously, they are responsible (as individuals) for making necessary decisions and actions, as players, for the co-creation process to be completed at each moment. This



Figure 4: An example of *pentimenti* is Diego Velázquez’s 1639 painting “*El bufón* ‘*Calabacillas*,’ erroneously called ‘*Bobo de Coria*.’” The artist painted over the original version, revealing changes made during the creative process. From Wikipedia, public domain.

³⁷ Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux, *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

³⁸ Nicholas Shea, “Concept-Metacognition,” *Mind & Language* 35, No. 5 (2020): 565-82, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mila.12235>.

³⁹ Dennis Waskul, “The Role-Playing Game and the Game of Role-Playing: The Ludic Self and Everyday Life,” in *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games*, edited by J. Patrick Williams, Sean Q. Hendricks, and W. Keith Winkler (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2006), 19-38, here p. 31.

⁴⁰ Dennis Waskul and Matt Lust, “Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing,” *Symbolic Interaction* 27, No. 3 (2004): 333-56, <https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2004.27.3.333>.

aspect can vary greatly depending on the level at which participants take on roles to authentically embody the style and personality of the player character, non-player character, and game director. For example, the conversations a game director has with the other players to establish what dice rolls, abilities, or feats they will use and why are not separate from the game, despite being outside the imaginary and fictional world; they are part of the ludic experience. Similarly, general descriptions of a landscape or situation, including what a character perceives, even if not in the form of dialogue, contribute to the narrative and the game. We refer to these necessary communications among participants that traverse their roles as individuals, players, and characters as a *point of contact*, which includes different perspectives, voices, and reasons.

Colloquially, the practice in RPGs where information restricted to a single dimension is nevertheless exchanged between individuals, players, and characters is called a “metagame.” A typical example occurs when a character acquires knowledge about something in the plot or an internal aspect of the fictional world that only the person knows. It also occurs when a conversation between individuals, which should occur between players, somehow affects the characters, and so on. “A player is metagaming when they use the knowledge that is not available to their character in order to change the way they play their character...In general, it refers to any gaps between player knowledge and character knowledge which the player acts upon.”⁴¹ Because these moments break the fiction and tend to disrupt the game, it is always controversial whether to allow them, especially when a player modifies the ruling to achieve beneficial outcomes (cheating).

Similar phenomena arise in various instances, e.g., when the game director differs from players on particular assumptions about concepts, rules, or mechanics or when a participant contributes information to the game context or engages in a dialogue between the game director and another player when it is not their role. These situations point to the game’s complexity that we are trying to grasp via the heuristic build around the concept of the RPG meta. It is a broader notion that also includes mere “metagaming.” We recognize that RPGs require enabling role-players to cross between the ordinary, imaginary, and fictional worlds, back and forth, to exchange information and that these exchanges occur mainly through meta-actions and metacognitions.⁴²

“Meta-actions refer to those elements associated with the conditions and factors that influence the decision to take action, considering the initial and subsequent state of the entities connected to said actions.”⁴³ “Actions” in RPGs take on a dimension of “meta-actions” when we consider that, while a player may know how to run in real life, they may not necessarily know how to use a medieval crossbow. On the other hand, their character can learn how to run and operate a crossbow. Because communication about an action occurs through cognitive discussion and narrative but does not explicitly describe the action, we consider that not only do RPGs involve meta-actions, but also they are a fundamental part of the representation in RPGs. Even if I, as a person, have no idea what a parsec is, my character is capable of piloting the *Millennium Falcon*.

⁴¹ “Metagaming,” *Xbox Wiki*, 2008, <https://xbox.fandom.com/wiki/Metagaming>.

⁴² Cristo Ernesto Yáñez León and James Lipuma, “Analyzing the Meta Dimensions in TRPGs: Meta-Action, Metacognition, and Metagaming [Artículo en conferencia],” in *El papel del rol para el fomento de la cultura y la lectura*. Vol. 5 (Baja California, México: La Red de Investigadores de Juegos de Rol (RIJR), 2021), <https://digitalcommons.njit.edu/stemresources/13/>.

⁴³ Hakim Touati, Zbigniew Ras, and James Studnicki, “Meta-Actions as a Tool for Action Rules Evaluation,” *Studies in Computational Intelligence* 584 (2015): 177–97, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-662-45620-0_9.

The second dimension of the RPG meta is metacognition. It “generally refers to knowledge of and control over one’s cognitive processes.”⁴⁴ Similar to meta-actions, metacognition has an additional level of conceptualization because there may be concepts that the person knows (e.g., dragons) but the character does not. The player’s ability to operate the character’s metacognitive subsystem always becomes “context-sensitive.”⁴⁵ The interaction between players and the game director, related to teaching and learning concepts within the game, depends significantly on it. For example, when the narrator tells a player, “The basilisk gives you a look,” a player might smile at it and try to pet it unless they have the metacognition that a basilisk petrifies with its gaze. Even then, we need to clarify whether their character has enough context. This additional level of contextualization leads to situations where the player knows that their character is, for example, about to be petrified, but the character is not aware of it. The collaborative exploration of cognition among people, characters, and players leads to metacognitive dialogues in which the context and perspective of the narrative must be clarified. This aspect is hardly found in other ludic and narrative activities.

Lastly, the third dimension is that of the metagame itself, going beyond those merely disruptive moments of ludic dynamics and expanding the experience between these worlds that the participants navigate. R. Garfield offers a broad definition focused on collectible card games: “what you bring to a game, what you take away from a game, what happens between games, [and] what happens during a game.”⁴⁶ Instead, for Boluk and LeMieux, it revolves around playing and not competing: “The metagame expands, as a truly broad label for the contextual, site-specific, and historical attributes of human (and nonhuman) play.”⁴⁷ Metagame’s distinctive feature does not lie in the narrative of the game itself but in the narrative of the act of playing.

A fundamental notion within semiotics is a *representamen*. It can be understood as a sign used to represent something beyond its immediate form. It takes on a tangible or perceptible form through which a particular sense or message is conveyed to the interpreter or observer. It serves to explore the intricate connections between signs, their associated meanings, and the interpretive processes at play. C. S. Peirce comments that “A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in that person’s mind an equal sign, or perhaps a more developed sign.”⁴⁸ In RPGs, the game occurs within a symbolic *representamen* in the cognition of each player, who identifies this imaginary fiction while simultaneously being aware of the explicit reality around them. That is, they know and are conscious of the actual space where the game is taking place, such as a table, a room, or a designated location, and the events in the game are understood as fiction. For example, external observers who are not participants in a game and the participants themselves can become part of a metagame outside the game session. Thus, what identifies the metagame is not the history of the game itself but rather the *representamen*: the history of the act of playing.

Each meta-dimension (action, cognition, game) has different implications for the activity, so they are neither identical nor exclusive. For example, when concepts such as the use of polyhedral dice are explained to the players, there is metacognition; when a person asks the game director about the

⁴⁴ Bruce B. Frey, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Measurement, and Evaluation* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018), 1055.

⁴⁵ Joëlle Proust, *The Philosophy of Metacognition: Mental Agency and Self-Awareness*. Reprint edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁴⁶ Richard Garfield, “Metagames,” 2013, p. 3, <https://ed210gamestechsociety.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/2000-garfield-metagame.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Boluk and LeMieux, 17.

⁴⁸ Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Volumes I and II: Principles of Philosophy and Elements of Logic*, edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1932).

context or when players narrate adventures that happened on different days, even with other groups of people, there is the metagame. It goes in all directions, e.g., it doesn't matter how much the other participants explain to the player in the former example what a basilisk is if she doesn't know the concept of petrification. A metagame becomes necessary.

The RPG meta exists as a requirement based on the practice of RPGs. It is the practice that makes it possible for meta-actions to occur and for metacognition to make sense. In many cases, playing an RPG requires an initial session in which agreements are established to build the necessary context, e.g., "What will be played?", "What rules will be accepted?" This is evidence of the meta. Although the meta serves as a cohesive element between different game sessions, it always starts from a fact that will be discussed. Ultimately, the imaginary and fictional worlds rest on the ordinary world of the people who play.

7. Conclusions: Explanatory Principles

This contribution is far from constituting an ontology of RPGs itself. We intend to plot an ontic and epistemological path. We aim for a specific ontological approach: to develop a falsifiable transdisciplinary vision based on the three heuristics we have presented and the combination of a causal and genealogical foundation. In other words, we seek to establish RPGs as an ontological object first, then as an epistemological one so that we can provide a fresh starting point for future research on their praxis and taxonomy. As a starting point, we have observed that an ontology of RPGs requires, to some extent, the abandonment of definition as an objective. This does not mean that a discourse of RPGs' being cannot provide definitions that serve a general theory. Instead, the search is oriented toward explanatory principles establishing a paradigm for studying RPGs.

Thus, we have departed from the assumption that different essentials in RPGs present themselves as an epistemic requirement, i.e., they demand to be treated within the transdisciplinary and disciplinary study of RPGs. The aim is to explore and question each essential separately under the three heuristics and identify their existing relationships in each historical period of RPGs. Future work is necessary to achieve this end. The ultimate goal is to contribute to developing a genealogy and taxonomy (classification) of RPGs that distinguishes between different manifestations (such as tabletop RPGs and live-action RPGs or LARP). The authors hope this work sheds light on understanding the phenomenon and helps the promotion of these heuristics as starting points for future research on the being of RPGs.



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