

A stylized teal graphic resembling a rocket plume or a bird in flight, positioned on the right side of the slide. It has a curved, flame-like shape at the top and a long, trailing plume below it.

ROCKET

What are Role-Playing Games?

An Erasmus+ Higher Education Cooperation Partnership
Göttingen University, Uppsala University, Groningen University

What is a Role-playing Game?

Three Main Types of Role-Playing Games (RPGs)

- **Virtual/Digital Role-playing:** Text-based or graphical interface often played on a computer or console, single-player or multiplayer
- **Tabletop:** Usually played sitting at a table, sometimes with dice, character sheets, and miniatures, less physical and more verbal
- **Live action role-playing (larp):** Physically embodied role-playing, sometimes with costumes, props, and special locations

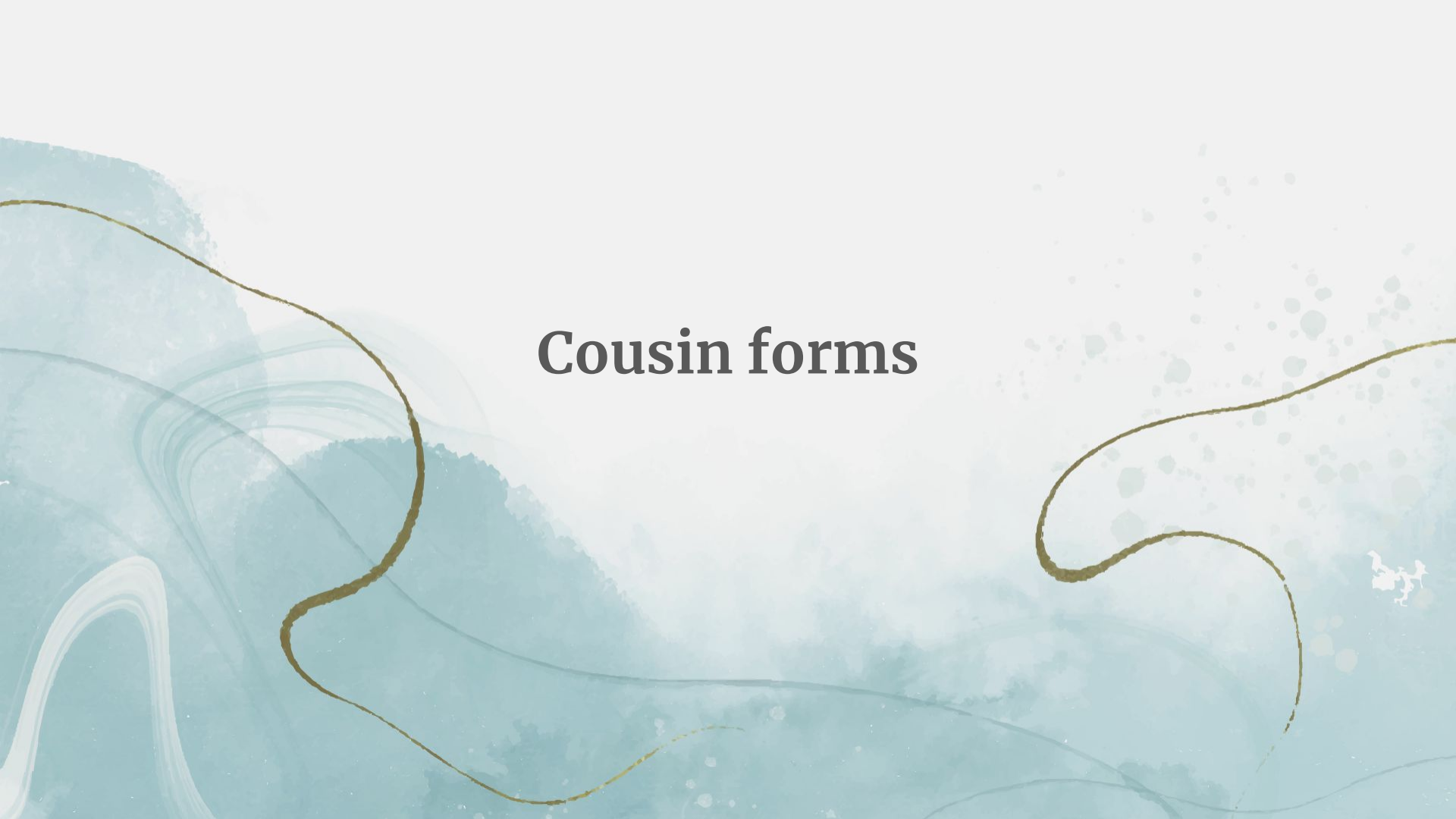
What is a Role-playing Game?

- The **enactment** of a **character** in a **co-created fictional world**
- The creation of a **magic circle** of play in which the social and physical rules of reality differ from daily life (Montola 2008)
- While props and costumes may exist, the fiction exists mostly in the minds of the participants, e.g. **subjective diegesis** (Montola 2003)
- The audience members are also its participants and co-creators, e.g. role-playing has a **first-person audience** (Sandberg 2004; Stenros 2013)
- While fantasy, science fiction, and post-apocalyptic fiction is common, role-playing games can be **any genre, setting, or theme**.
- Games can vary in length from a few minutes to weeks, with or without breaks.



You have probably played a role-playing game.
(Or something like it)

Cousin forms

The background features a soft, painterly style with teal and light blue washes. Two prominent, flowing gold lines swirl across the composition, one on the left and one on the right. In the bottom right corner, there is a small, white silhouette of a dog, possibly a dachshund, facing right.

Cousin Forms of Role-playing Games

Childhood Pretend Play: Spontaneous co-creative expression based on emergent playfulness, sometimes including role-enactment

- Tends to involve comparatively loose frameworks for rules and characters, focusing on emergent imagination
- **Sometimes enacted alone**
 - **Imaginary Friends:** Interacting with beings arising from the imagination (Carlson et al. 2004)
 - **Transitional Objects:** Imbuing inanimate objects with magical powers, consciousness, personality traits or other special qualities (Winnicott 1971)
 - **Paracosms:** Creating imaginary worlds (Cohen and MacKeith 1991)
 - **Identity Play:** Imagining the self as someone else, e.g. Batman (White et al. 2017)

A child playing with a doll in a red stroller.



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Cousin Forms of Role-playing Games

Childhood Pretend Play: Spontaneous co-creative expression based on emergent playfulness, sometimes including role-enactment

- **Sometimes enacted in groups**, often enacting roles in specific social circumstances
- **Social games:**
 - **Chase play**, e.g., Tag, Hide and seek
 - **Domestic play**, e.g. playing House
 - **Professional play**, e.g. playing School
 - **Cops and Robbers:** Chase play + professional play with moral connotation
 - **Dark play**, whether consensual or non-consensual, e.g. bullying (Stenros 2015)

Kids playing Cops and Robbers.



Photo: Seattle Municipal Archives, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Cousin Forms of Role-playing Games

Board Games/Card Games: Strategy games usually played at a table

- Can be **collaborative** (e.g., Pandemic) or **competitive** (e.g., Monopoly)
- Sometimes use **randomizers** like **dice** in order to add an element of chance
- Often have **objects to physically represent** characters, items, and locations
 - Cards, miniature figurines, tokens, terrain
- While extensive role-playing is not common, **may have a role associated** with the player's actions, e.g.:
 - **Miss Scarlet** in the murder mystery *Clue*
 - **Russia** in *Diplomacy*
 - **A Green Planeswalker wizard** in *Magic: the Gathering*
 - **A trainer** in *Pokémon*

Proposed card for Wikipedia trading card game.

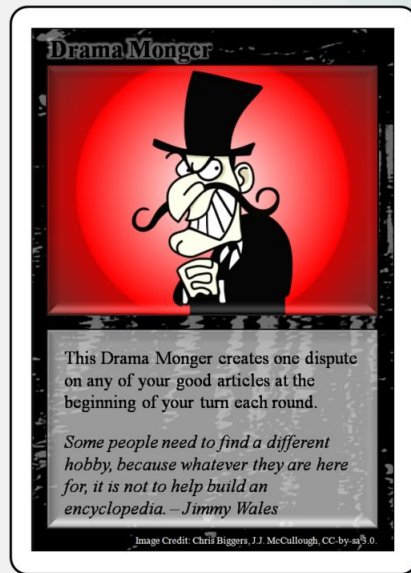


Illustration: Big_sur_river102206.jpg:Cbiggers at en.wikipedia(Original text : Chris Biggers) Villianc_transparent_background.svg: Zzyzx11derivative work: Bob the Wikipedian, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Cousin Forms of Role-playing Games

Board Games/Card Games: Strategy games usually played at a table

- **Skill-focused games:** Emphasize displaying skills, such as
 - **Remembering facts**, e.g., *Trivial Pursuit*
 - **Solving puzzles**, e.g. *Mahjong*
 - **Improvising communication with a partner**, e.g. *Pictionary*
 - **Counting cards in a deck**, e.g. *Bridge*
 - **Socially maneuvering**, e.g. *Werewolf*
- **Resource gathering games:** Focus upon gathering resources, such as **land, wealth, treasure, allies**, e.g.:
 - *Settlers of Catan*
 - *Game of Life*

Board game Castles of Burgundy.



Photo: Mshuang2, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons

Cousin Forms of Role-playing Games

Simulations/Educational role-playing: Spontaneous expression based on specific learning goals or parameters as a form of experiential learning

- May include more or less creativity depending on structure
- Often used to train **specific skills** or **competencies**, whether technical or social or both
- Often connected to some form of **professionalization**:
 - **Military**
 - **Education**
 - **Government**
 - **Health Care**
 - **Therapy**
 - **Business**

Military simulation



Photo: Javier Chagoya, Public domain,
via Wikimedia Commons

Cousin Forms of Role-playing Games

Improvisation: Spontaneous co-creative expression based on emergent playfulness

- Sometimes for the group itself (**first-person audience**)
- Sometimes for an audience (**third-person audience**)
- Often enacted for comedic purposes
- Usually involves short scenes and characters
- **Long-form improv:** Repeated enactment of certain characters in new settings and situations
- **TheatreSports:** Game-like improv where improvisers gain points based upon their ability to entertain

Improv



Photo: Frankie Fouganthin, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Cousin Forms of Role-playing Games

Therapeutic role-playing: Spontaneous expression based upon specific scenarios intended to evoke a certain response or practice a skill related to emotional growth

- May include more or less creativity depending on structure
- Embodied role-playing is used in many therapeutic modalities, including:
 - **Psychodrama and sociodrama**
 - **Drama therapy**
 - **Gestalt therapy**
 - **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy - CBT**
 - **Internal Family Systems, etc.**
- Is also used as a form of community activism, including:
 - **Theatre of the Oppressed**

Expressive Therapy



Paul Newham, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons

The background features a soft, painterly style with teal and light blue washes. A prominent, dark gold line swirls across the frame, starting from the left and looping towards the right. In the bottom right corner, there is a small, white, stylized icon of a dragon or a mythical creature.

Role-playing Games

In short...

Role-playing is a human activity that takes many forms.

It may include:

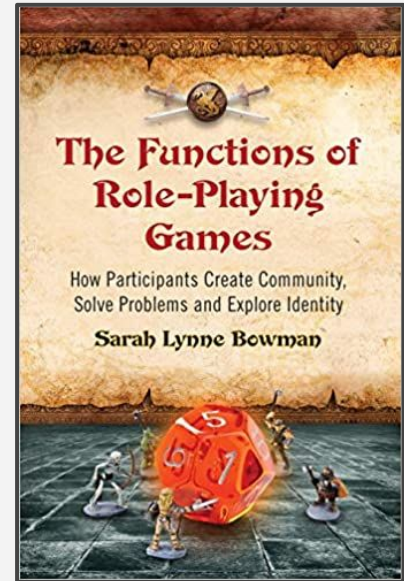
- Character embodiment
- Community-building rituals
- Interactive storytelling
- Fiction writing
- Puzzles and problem solving
- Symbolic enactment



At Their Core

Three Functions of Role-playing Games (Bowman 2010)

- **Community Creation**, e.g. ritual enactment
- **Skill Training**, e.g. scenario building, problem solving, and practicing prosocial behaviors
- **Identity Exploration**, e.g. alternative gender expression



At Their Core

Role-playing games create space for participants to experience:

- Agency
- Empowerment
- Internal locus of control
- Experimentation with social rules
- Collaboration
- Perspective taking
- Empathy
- Playfulness
- Meta-reflection (Lukka 2013, 2014; Bowman and Hugaas 2021).



Take-aways

Role-playing games are:

- Similar to other forms of playfulness, games, simulations and sometimes also embodied artistic expressions
- Widely varied in terms of themes and mechanics
- Tends to defy concrete definitions
- Always evolving into new, experimental forms.



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Thank you!

The ROCKET team