GENDER PLAY? PLAYING MAN AND WOMAN IN ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

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Presented at Gender an Power in the New Europe, the 5th European Feminist Research Conference
August 20-24, 2003 Lund University, Sweden

I am going to introduce you a very special form of youth culture, playing role-playing games. I have studied players in Finland (all over the country) for many years by observing, photographing, interviewing and making questionnaires, and this paper is mostly based on my licentiate study in folkloristics in the university of Turku (Leppälähti 2002). The question of gender has not been the main topic of my research, but an interesting part of it. Now, after my licentiate work, I’m researching the part of folk tradition in game fantasy. Now, I will try to describe some interesting features of role-playing games, but first I will tell about role-playing games themselves and their origins.

Role-playing games
Playing role-playing games started properly in the USA in 1974 when a company called TSR Hobbies published the first commercial set of rules for role-playing, called Dungeons&Dragons (at the very beginning it was called simply The Fantasy Game but the name was soon changed). The rules of the game were largely based on earlier, relatively popular war game rules, which had been already sold commercially from 1953. The interest in fantasy literature and especially J.R.R. Tolkien’s fantasy novels had created the basis for fantasy role-playing games. The Lord of the Rings was published in three parts already in the 1950’s, but the pocketbook editions published in the USA in 1965 caused a wave of Tolkien enthusiasm among students. Some of the first players of role-playing games were those who had played war strategy games, but more of them were Tolkien fans. The Dungeons&Dragons -game has became very well known and popular and it is often seen as the icon of all role-playing games, although several other sets of role-playing rules were published very soon after it.

Role-playing games arrived in Finland already in the late 1970’s. The first players encountered role-playing games when they were in the USA as exchange students, or through their interest in war games or science fiction. People played mostly Dungeons&Dragons but also used some other game systems brought from the USA. The first Finnish role-playing system, Miekka ja Magia [The Sword and Sorcery], came out in 1987, and the D&D rules were translated into Finnish around the same time. At first, playing role-playing games was very rare, but it became more common in the second half of the 80’s.
In a role-playing game the players assume the role of their character and try to think and act as the character would. The very first games were all tabletop games, in which the whole adventure took place in imagination, when the players seemed to be just sitting and talking. But it is still a game, there is a game master, who designs in advance some features of the game world and the adventure, and during the game describes the world and events to the players, and the game is controlled by a set of rules. The elements of chance and luck add excitement to the game, that is throwing dice, making scissors-cut-paper-wrap-stone or other such methods to determine the outcome of situations of characters.

Another way to play role-playing games is LARP (live action role-play). After knowing tabletop role-playing games, some people wanted to play more realistic games, not only sitting and talking, but also taking the role of their character physically. They wanted to wear the clothes of their character and use its equipment. That was the beginning of live action role-playing games. Live-action role-playing games are partly based on the tabletop role-playing games, but they are also connected to the role plays of childhood, like the ‘cops and robbers’ or games where children play at being heroes of popular fiction, like Tarzan, Batman, Biker Mice from Mars or Charlie’s Angels. In the year 1981 in the USA there was grounded probably the first society for live role-playing, it was International Fantasy Gaming Society, and British Treasure Trap came next year. Some groups, unaware of each other, played games similar to the live-action role-playing games in different parts of Finland already in the late 1980’s, and this form of role-playing is becoming more popular all the time.

It is also possible to play role-playing games in other ways, like by letters or e-mails. Defining role-playing games is not always a simple matter. The players themselves can intuitively distinguish what is clearly a role-playing game and what definitely is not. At the perimeter area, there can be problems: the boundaries shift and there are various interpretations. Playing role-playing games is a very creative pastime, So it is possible to consciously seek new things in the games, and new ways to play.

Typical tabletop role-player in Finland is a young man aged between fifteen to twenty-five, but there are also younger players, even under ten years (mostly taken along by older brother) and adult men over thirty years, who maybe have played for ten or fifteen years. In tabletop games, there are also female players, but only about twenty or thirty per cent of all. In LARP games, this is different: there are both male and female players, about half-and-half.

Playing role-playing games is often a part of a network of hobbies, which may include playing tabletop role-playing games or live-action role-playing games, or both. In addition, there may be interest in fantasy literature, movies and comics, which often also includes producing own texts or drawings. There is often
interest in history, most usually Middle Ages, and that can make people to prepare historical style costumes and other requisites for the games. Interest in science fiction is often part of the hobby network, and it can be linked to the interest in science facts, like geography and astronomy. Japanese animation (anime) has also become popular in Finland lately, and this can be linked with wider interest in Japan and its history. These hobbies give the players also new information they can use in new games. The network of hobbies and the activities included in it are an important part of the communication network of role-players, and playing role-playing games can be regarded as a part of a certain life style. Shared hobbies can keep someone in the group of role-players, feeling to be a player of role-playing games, even if she/he isn’t actually playing very often.

Choosing the character
Tabletop role-playing games are usually played in quite small playgroups consisting of two – five persons. One of them is usually a game master, and the others have one playing character each. In live-action role-playing games, there is much more variation in groups. There can be small games with under ten participants, but also games with hundreds of players. When I am now telling about player, I mean a real human being playing role-playing games (including the game master), and talking about character is talking about a creature inside the game, the creature controlled by a player.

In role-playing games, every player repeatedly takes different roles and different positions. They must try to be and act like the character in every game. The players often say, that playing role-playing games makes one more tolerant. If one can put oneself in a position of somebody else in game, so she/he can perhaps do it also in real life.

In tabletop role-playing game, the physical body of the player has very little to do with the body of playing character. In these game the playing character can be quite different from the player. The same player can play as a small hobbit, a giant warrior or an invisible spirit without a body. The character can do many things, which are impossible to the player of the character. For example, even if the player doesn’t know anything about using a sword, the character can gloriously fight with a robber gang. The playing characters often have talents, impossible to real human; perhaps it can use magic, fly, turn invisible or read the minds. In LARP-games (live action role play), where the players take the roles of their playing characters physically, too, they are in a way acting for themselves and each other. In this kind of game, the real body of player can limit the choose of the character, because the player usually has to look like his/her character.

Masculine entertainment?
Especially the very first tabletop role-playing games have been very masculine. That was probably because those older war games were mostly played by man. That’s why the first role-playing game adventures were
planned for young men: where was fighting, attacking, seeking treasures, researching and conquering wild lands with the group of other male characters.

In old role-playing games, female characters were curiosities. They could be nameless, be there just for decoration, or they were asking male help. Like in video and computer games according to both Gillian Skirrow and Eugene Provenzo, the place of a female character has usually been to become kidnapped and to wait for (masculine) rescue (Provenzo 1991, 99-114, Skirrow 1986, 115-142). Also in older American science fiction the job of the woman of the story was usually to make coffee and scream in suitable situations, while the man is really acting and solving the problems (e.g. Sinisalo 1987, 142-158). This can be seen also in the illustration of some role-playing games’ rule-books: they showed us female characters as curvaceous young women smiling in small bikinis and male characters as active men, often with some weapons, looking around carefully and ready to act fast. The same phenomena is quite common in fantasy pictures (e.g. Leppälähti 1999, 23). In some early role-playing games, reported by Gary Alan Fine, the destiny of female characters was mostly even to be raped (Fine 1983, 69). In that light you may think, that for a woman, playing either male or female character in a role-playing game like that, that would not be very enjoyable.

Newer role-playing games are not reproducing old models. The adventures have extended from dungeons and fighting to human relationships and solving different problems. In the group of adventurers, there are very often female characters as equal actors, too. That can be seen also in some new computer games, where women can be fighters, like Lara Croft. (In computer games, they still wear small bikinis and are made more for looking at than to identify oneself. Unlike computer games, in role-playing games the players cannot really see the playing characters, they can only imagine them in their mind.) In role-playing games, it is possible to repeat old models, stereotypes and prejudices, but also create new ways of thinking and acting. Old customs how to think and do things can be questioned and made ridicule or just a joke.

Male woman, female man
I asked the players to describe their playing characters. Some of the answerers told about one or two favourite character, many described shortly all they could remember. In fantasy games, the name of the character doesn’t tell very much about it, but usually the players told the “race” of character, that means for example elf, dwarf, hobbit, human etc., and its “profession”, like fighter, mage, thief etc. Male answerers didn’t very much underline the sex of their playing characters, it was usually worth mentioning only when differing own. We can see here the matter even Simone de Beauvoir has argued: being a man, it is a norm, being a woman, that is the sex (de Beauvoir 1993, 11-13). Almost every one of the players has also played characters with opposite sex. (It isn’t perhaps nowadays quite correct to speak about “opposite sexes”, but I need this term for making understandable the difference between player’s biological sex and the visible sex
of the character she/he is playing.) The answers telling about playing the opposite sex can be divided up in three groups.

One group of the answers includes male players just made a list or described male and female characters they have played without other comments about playing opposite sex. The sex of the playing character has seen only one little part of the character, and not very important one. What the character does and how it acts are more important things than what it is like. Sometimes in games, the characters can be made beforehand almost ready: the player only chooses its name and its sex. In some feminist theories in 1980’ and 90’, the human body has been seen as a changing outline or surface, where cultural meanings can be drawn or written. Sex is just one of these meanings produced on the surface of human body (e.g. Palin 1996, 225 - 244). Here you can think that is really true: you just choose, if you will be a man or woman in this game. In some role-playing games (mostly cyberpunk), it is possible even to change sex during the game. However, it is not always easy to draw any conclusions from games. For example, in one role-playing game adventure book there was an interesting setting for a game: The characters seemed to be women, but in fact they were male, princes, whose bodies and minds has been manipulated. They could not remember anything about being male, but during the game, they supposed little by little find out the truth. (more about it, Leppälahti 1999, 84-85.) When playing this kind of game, the players can practice how to be a man and a woman. Alternatively, you could perhaps think, that in this case the male sex is in the matter of fact the treasure of the dungeon: the best prize for the (male) players?

In the second group, there were men and women, who usually wanted to play the sex of their own. They all had played also opposite sex, but found it somehow difficult. A man played female characters told he couldn’t get a good touch to these characters, so they usually died quite soon in the game. (After that the player could choose a new character and continue the game with it.) One female answerer told she had played some years ago sometimes male characters, which all has been very stereotypical jerk fighters. Now, more adult, she thought she could perhaps play a male character more ”human” and believable, but playing a woman is what she felt best. In addition, sometimes one needs to show that a girl can manage, both in game and on playing, she said.

In the third group of answers, the players told about characters they have played, but they also considered on the easiness or hardness of playing opposite sex. Many of them thought it is difficult to play a believable woman, if you are a man and, and vice versa. They thought, that to be a man or a woman is much more than outer appearances. There are some special inner traits for men and women, which are not very easy to imitate. Some of the answerers think that could be very expanding, and they planned to try sometimes to make a good character of opposite sex, and then really learn what it’s like to be a woman/man.
Some stereotypes

A role-playing game can be set in any kind of world. In spite of that, I have divided the types of role-playing games up in four main groups, game genres. At first, there is fantasy. That means often illustrated (European) middle ages, but it can be a past time world in every time and place on the earth or outside the earth. Ancient and modern history can be used as well as fairy tales, but usually in fantasy games, magic really works and there are some creatures, which don’t exist in real world. (Like elves, dragons, goblins or orcs.) The second group consists of horror games in two different subgroups: those like ghost stories, with frightening elements and those using horror creatures as playing characters (for example vampire and werewolf games). The third group of games is set in future. In this group, there is also many kind of games mostly using science fiction or cyberpunk themes. The fourth group can be called ‘other games’, because it is possible to make a role-playing game from whatever anyone can imagine. There are games dealing alternative history, games of secret agents and spies, Wild West games, games, where different themes are combined (like vampires in Wild West or as spies) and many kinds of parody games. (Leppälahti 1999, 58-82.)

In spite of some oppositing voices, in real world there is still a clear division in men’s work and women’s work. The possibilities can be the same in theory, but in practice there are different codes to act for men and women. (e.g. Bradley 1995, 150-158.) In role-playing games, the game genre affects, how the part of persons can be organized. For example, in some role-playing game systems placed in medieval time, the actor is clearly a man, who tries to raise his might and reputation. Perhaps he can have a mate and children at home, far away from the adventures. There is no one playing those wife and children because they are not needed in game, they are just a part of background. In games, the world can always be designed. There isn’t very much domestic work in games (no one has to clean the rooms or do the laundry after a fight) and in any case boring everyday routins are usually jumped over. In role-playing games, the parts of men and women are depending on the game system, but mostly on playing group. If the players really want to have female knights in game, they can do it. In many games, a female character can be a fighter, but in practice, she works more usually as a healer. The leader of the group can be a man or a woman, but the leader of the soldiers is usually a man (even if there were many female soldiers in group).

In telling about games, some answerers told that in their playing group sexual jokes were often used in games. Sexuality was mentioned quite seldom in my material. In two or three cases, the player told about some named playing characters, that this character was bi- or homosexual. Heterosexuality was also mentioned in some special cases.
In role-playing games, there is also a possibility to brake stereotypes and play with them. In one parody-type game, the playing characters are “macho” women with big guns. The characters are emphatically women, and they run around with their high heel shoes and shoot men. It is also said, that in this kind of games the “women” characters are, in the matter of fact, men with tits. (Parviala 1993, 12-16.) Therefore, they only look like women, but act like men. Sometimes, in some groups, stereotypical things can be used in helping the characters. For example, if they need some supplies they forgot to take with, they can decide to find those things in a handbag of a female character.

For the end

In role-playing games, there can be seen the human need for alternative worlds—you may call it escapism or creativity. These games are played for fun, not for learning, but in a game there can be such situations, which make the players think and perhaps afterwards discuss about good and evil, right and wrong, the ways of being a human and the borders of human acting. The imaginative adventures and settings of persons in role-playing games are not coming from outer space, but they are grounded on everyday thinking, beliefs, values and habits. Role-playing is an interesting topic for observing and studying, but sometimes quite difficult in making conclusions and interpretations. Inside the game, there are many levels of reality, and many levels of fiction. In role-playing games, fact and fiction are mixed – with a lot of humour. It is possible to create new models to be and act as human. On the other hand, it is also possible to repeat prevailing customs, notions and stereotypes – even until to parody.

References:


