

Introduction to the study of analog role-playing games

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In this paper, an introduction to the study of analog Role-Playing Games (RPG) is made in four sections in order to promote its research in Japan. The first section presents the definition of Role-Playing Games, Table-top Role-Playing Games (TRPG) and Larp. In the second section, some justifications for the research on analog role-playing games are made, especially the application on game design and educational environments. This section also gives an overview of the analog RPG studies field in English and some works in Portuguese. Due to the objective of this paper, the third section describes the academic production on role-playing games specifically in Japan. The fourth section describes some unique characteristics of analog RPGs in Japan, such as the organization of the Japanese TRPG community and the publication of *doujin*, as a rich field for further research.

Key words: Role-playing games, game studies, Japan, TRPG, larp

This review paper seeks to promote more research about analog Role-Playing Games (RPG) in Japan, such as Table-top RPG (or Table talk - TRPG) and larp¹⁾. Compared to other countries, like Brazil (Schmit, 2008), the United States of America (Mason, 2004) and Finland, Japan has few academic works on the subject, with only a handful of papers, despite having a lively TRPG community and a large video game industry and culture. It is not the objective of this paper to discuss why this happens, but to help create a bridge between analog game studies in the world with willing researchers on analog RPGs in Japan²⁾.

In recent years we have seen the constant

advancement of communication technologies through computers and the internet, and with these technologies comes new manners for humans to interact with each other and with machines. Especially in virtual environments, like the internet, we see the emergence of "profiles", "virtual personas", "avatars" and so on. To understand this phenomenon, and its impacts on human psychology, it is necessary to look at its origins. As in biology, it is important to look at one species ancestors to understand its present morphology³⁾.

1 What are Analog RPGs?

First, what are these RPGs to be discussed in this paper? They are like a grown up version of the children's pretend games, but with more complex rules and seem to share the same cultural roots as

1) The word larp comes from the initials of "live action role-playing", but as it happened with the words laser and modem, it is now usually used as a word both as a substantive and a verb in recent publications.

2) It is important to note that a high level proficiency of Japanese language is required to do this kind of research, since analog RPG is a heavy language dependent game, and some of the Kanji used in TRPG books are unfamiliar or even unknown for many Japanese according to our interviews.

3) At the time this paper was being written a book came out about the cultural impact of RPGs called *The Role-Playing Society: Essays on the Cultural Influence of Rpgs* by Andrew Byers (Author, Editor) and Francesco Crocco (Author, Editor).

the improvisational theater and the educational role-play. Although there is a long discussion on the definition of RPGs (Hitchens & Drachen, 2009), we will not describe them all in this work, instead for the purposes of this work we will take into account the critique made by Arjoranta (2011), regarding these definitions. Arjoranta (2011) treats them as a Wittgensteinian "language game", so we will describe the nominal definition of RPG as having the following defining characteristics: a "game world", an imaginary setting where the fictional actions happen; "participants" in the form of players or the organizers of the imaginary world through computers or books, and "shared narrative power", where all participants have agency over the actions and events on the game world through various forms of "interaction" (Arjoranta, 2011, p. 14).

If the world of the *Harry Potter* were to be the base for a RPG, the setting of the books would be the game world, with its locations and mood. However, the story would not be pre-determined by the narrator, instead it would be determined by the interaction of the characters between themselves and the game world, and those characters would be controlled by more than one player, shaping the narrative through their actions. In this sense, characters could choose to just leave *Hogwarts* and explore other parts of the world. In addition, if the game were to be played again, the actions and results would not be the same, resulting in a different history and a different experience, so Harry could choose to go to the *House Slytherin*, and from this point on everything would be different.

We will not write about research on Digital RPGs (DRPG), usually played through a visual interface in video games and computers, but focus on TRPG and larp instead, with their definition in the following section. As the previous paragraph suggests, however, this division is also arbitrary, since the games are more a spectrum rather than a group that follows such a clear division. For example, there are many TRPG players nowadays that play through the internet using a computer to communicate. Further websites like *TRPG Online*⁴⁾ in Japan and *Roll20*⁵⁾ for the medieval fantasy *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)*,

cater especially to this demographic, while many players of the vampire larp *One World by Night*⁶⁾ have long character interactions by e-mail.

1.1 Table-top RPG

TRPGs are the oldest and most traditional form of RPG, with the first commercial title, *Dungeons and Dragons*, released in 1974 (Tresca, 2011, p. 62). The TRPG nomenclature derives from the fact that a small number of players (usually ranging from 3 to 7) normally gather around a table to play (Figure 1) from two to six hours, using pencil and paper to track the game. The most important information of the player's character is recorded in sheets (Figure 2). In these games, the representation of the player's characters is usually more spoken than staged. One player, the Game Master or Storyteller, describe the game world, the other players describe what their characters think, feel and do. Rules are used to determine the characteristics of the character and effectiveness of their actions, and polyhedral dices (Figure 3) with varying number of faces are generally used as a probability element in character's actions resolutions (Dormans, 2006, p. 1; Schmit, 2008, p. 39). It is important to emphasize the significance of negotiating the rules of the game as an important element of the gaming experience (Vasques, 2008, p. 19).

1.2 Larp

A larp can be played with a very small number of players, like a TRPG, up to thousands of players⁷⁾ and last from a couple of hours in short larps up to around a week in Sweden (Fatland, 2005, p. 17; Stenros & Montola, 2010). In these games, players physically represent their character roles through clothes, speech and gestures. The venue for the game resembles and/or is decorated with elements of the game world (Figure 4). The experience in larps is closer to the fictional world experience than in TRPG because of the embodiment of the character and the physical role-play like an improvised theater play, but the differences in

4) <https://ssl.fujimi-trpg-online.jp/>

5) <https://roll20.net/>

6) <http://www.owbn.net/>

7) The German larp ConQuest can have 6000 players according to their website: http://www.live-adventure.de/ConQuest_english/informationen.php

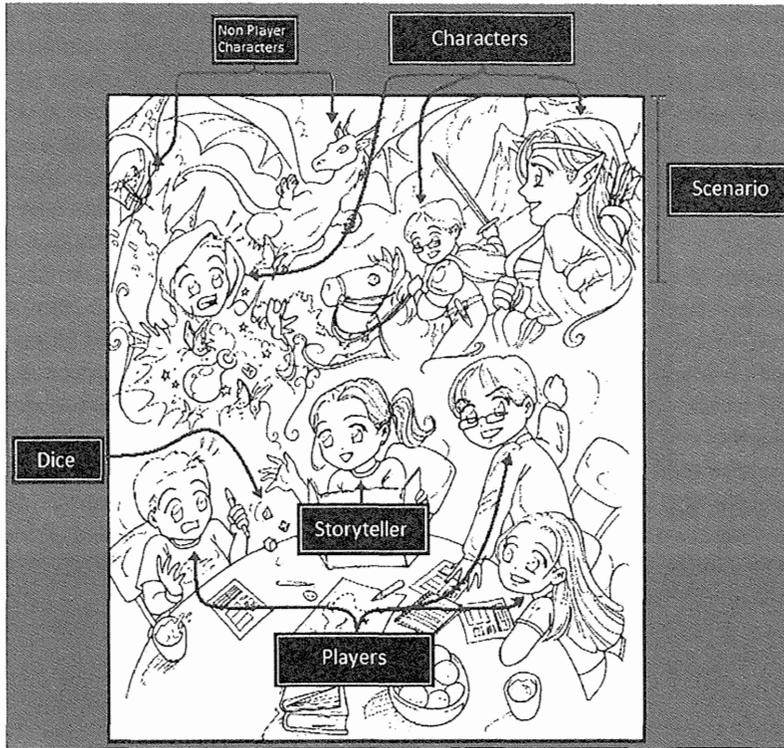


Figure 1. Illustration of a TRPG game (Art by Nagomi Kishino).

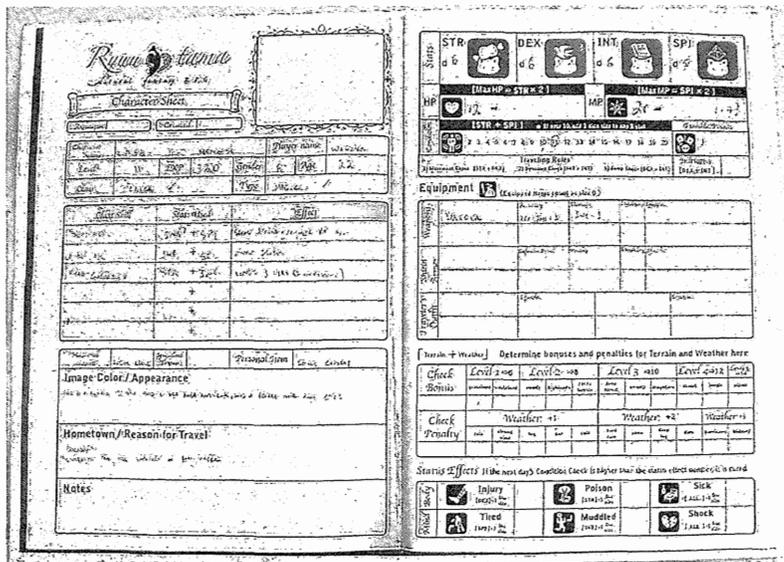


Figure 2. Ryuutama TRPG character sheet (Photo by the Author).

experience between TRPG and larp are still under investigation. However, unlike a purely improvised scenario, most larps still have TRPG features such

as rules for combat, magic, healing and a character sheet (Dormans, 2006, p. 2). The popularity and literature on larp has been increasing in the last

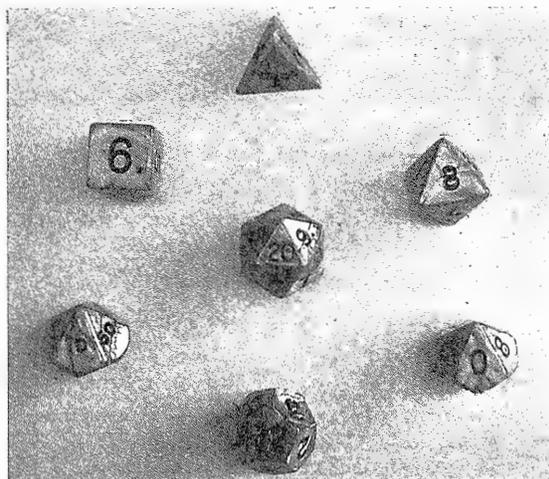


Figure 3. Analog RPG dice (Photo by the author).



Figure 4. A scene from the medieval fantasy larp *Fallen Fane* (Photo by the Author).

decade, especially in the European Nordic countries like Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway (Saitta, Holm-Andersen, & Back, 2014).

1.3 Other analog RPG

These definitions are more like colors in a diverse spectrum of games rather than precise categories, and there are many games that fall between TRPG and larp. For example, in the "freeform" game *Until*

*we sink*⁸⁾ the players describe their character actions on the day seated around a table, like TRPG, but the table is a part of the game world the players are "in character", like in a larp. Another example are the "Jeepform" games⁹⁾, a mixtur

8) https://norwegianstyle.files.wordpress.com/2007/07/until_we_sink.pdf

9) <http://jeepen.org/games/>

freeform and psychodrama techniques.

There is also another type of analog RPG: the gamebooks like the *Fighting Fantasy* book series that were more popular in the USA, and Brazil, in the 80's and 90's. In these books you could choose the actions of the main character and have different stories with different endings, some books even had rules for combat and a character sheet. Nowadays, those books are difficult to be found and almost not played anymore, with digital games of the "Visual Novel"¹⁰⁾ genre taking their place, but usually with different themes and topics. Still, we bought a *doujin* gamebook *Thief Swordsman*¹¹⁾ (Sugimoto, 2011) on the 2014 *Comiket*¹²⁾. A *doujin* is, according to Tamagawa (2012, p. 108), a self-financed, self-published work, created by an individual or collaboration among individuals and sold through alternative channels outside the professional commercial market.

2 Why study RPGs?

Among the reasons to study the analog RPG are its influence in today's culture, in game design and even in education.

2.1 Influence of analog RPG

We can see one of the "ancestors" of today's "avatars" in Table-top Role-Playing Games characters, since it was in RPGs that we see those characters as representations of the player in the imaginary world, with defined characteristics and development over time through experience. Today this concept is present in many electronic virtual worlds, such as games and social media, but it started with TRPGs (Barton, 2008, p. 19; Schick, 1991, p. 18; Tresca, 2011, p. 62). In Japan, the content of TRPGs made its way through other mediums like manga, anime, video games and novels, in what Mackay (2001, p. 29) defines as an "Imaginary-Entertainment Environment", where fictional settings evolve across connected mediums beyond the control of a single

author. TRPG also generated a unique genre of books: the "Replay"¹³⁾, which consists of transcriptions of TRPG sessions¹⁴⁾. Lately these "replays" are not limited to the printed medium like books, but also some are published in the form of simple animations and broadcasted in websites like *Niconico*¹⁵⁾ and *YouTube*¹⁶⁾.

2.2 Analog RPG and the design of DRPG

In games like TRPG and larp it is easier to see the relationship between players and between players and their characters, than in a Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) like *World of Warcraft* or electronic RPGs like the *Pokemon* and *Final Fantasy* series. Because of this, the studies on analogic RPG can help to improve our understanding of gaming and game design.

This has a cultural and economic relevance, since the gaming industry is getting bigger and bigger, had passed film industry some years ago¹⁷⁾ and sold over \$15.4 Billion dollars just in the United States in 2015, and of those, almost 10% where of RPG, the third most sold game genre¹⁸⁾. There are even some initial studies on the use of TRPGs to help develop digital games by studying their structure and narrative (Delmas, Champagnat, & Augeraud, 2009; Velsen, Williams, & Verhulsdonck, 2009).

2.3 Analog RPG and Education

Another reason for the study of analog RPG is their use in educational environments. There are

10) We will present the names used by Japanese players in Katakana in the notes. In this case ビジュアルノベル
11) 盗賊剣士
12) コミケット Official site: http://www.comiket.co.jp/index_e.html

13) The term in Japanese is リプレイ, and seems to be "wasei eigo", since it is not exactly a way to play the game again as the word suggests.

14) Although many English TRPG books and magazines have transcriptions of game sessions, they are usually only a couple of pages long with the purpose of giving an example of play, while most replays in Japan have hundreds of pages with transcriptions of full game campaigns.

15) <http://www.nicovideo.jp/watch/sm22933081>

16) <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLoLYNekgzH13p0kYqns4Qip-I6n8D0NA3>

17) See this report from the Guardian. <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2009/sep/27/videogames-hollywood>

18) According to the Entertainment Software Association. <http://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/ESA-Essential-Facts-2015.pdf>

many stories of use of RPG in education since the 80's, with one of its first studies about the use of the game *Dungeons and Dragons* to promote social skills (Zayas & Lewis, 1986), and even one of the designers of D&D, Dave Arneson, used it in education, according to an interview¹⁹⁾.

Both TRPG and larp are used in several diverse aspects of education, such as development of social skills (Bowman, 2010), imagination, creativity, motivation, abstract reasoning (Schmit, 2008); traditional curricular content as biology (Fujii, 2010), chemistry (Hyltoft & Holm, 2009), history, literature (Schmit, Martins, & Ferreira, 2009), physics (Amaral, 2008), second language acquisition (Quijano, 2007), trans curricular content such as environmental issues (Schmit et al., 2009), and even issues like norm criticism (Westborg, 2016), politics, refugees and gender (Kangas, Lopenen, & Särkijärvi, 2016). Bowman (2014) conducted an extensive literature review on the educational use of larp, tracing relations of educational larp with educational role-play and psychodrama, while Harviainen and Savonsaari (2014) presented an overview of the principles of educational larps such as preparation, briefing, debriefing, assessment and two case examples. The Danish *Østerskov Efterskole* is a middle school that uses games, primarily larp, as a teaching method since 2006²⁰⁾ (Hyltoft, 2008). It is interesting to note that Bowman (2013) describes potential problems within role-playing communities, such as how in-game intrigues, backstabbing, secrets and scheming present in games like *Vampire: The Masquerade* can lead to out-of-game conflicts.

2.4 Studies on analog RPG

The studies on analog RPG began with the sociological research of Fine (1983) about "fantasy role-playing game", Fine's nomenclature for TRPGs (Fine, 1983, p. 6), in the USA from 1977 until 1979, through participant observation and interviews; a methodology still in use by other analog RPG researchers like Bowman (2010), Montola (2014) and

our own current research on emotional experiences. They passed through a phase of dispersed and ephemeral publications (Mason, 2004, p. 10), but lately is consolidating itself with a growing influx of books and papers in English like those quoted above. It is also important to note that some recent books on games studies research methodology approaching the study of analog RPG (Lankoski & Björk, 2015; Mäyrä, 2008) that may be of help for new researchers and improving current researches. In psychology, we have different theoretical approaches to analog RPG, such as applying Piaget's formal operational stage characteristics (Martins, 2000), Vygotsky's Zone of proximal development (Braga, 2000) and Jung's archetypes (Bowman, 2010).

3 Brief Description of Academic Production in Japan

Despite the fame that Japanese gaming industry and culture have, in Japan there are few studies on TRPGs that we could locate through our university main library, search engines, like google scholar, or searching for references in the works that we had access. This is not an exhaustive description, but rather an initial mapping of the filed.

We were able to locate and access four papers from Kato et al. about the study of the use of TRPGs with teenager kids with High Function Spectrum Disorder, showing increasing communication skills (Kato & Fujino, 2015; Kato, Fujino, Itoi, & Yoneda, 2012), consensus making (Kato, Fujino, & Yoneda, 2013), and quality of life (Kato & Fujino, 2016); all in Japanese, but with abstracts in English. Kato also has a master's dissertation on TRPG and High Function Spectrum Disorder (Kato, 2011) and a TRPG rulebook for children (Kato & Yasuda, 2016).

We have also located three, and accessed one, papers by Namisaki (2006, 2008, 2010), accessed one paper by Endo (2000) and one paper by Yamazaki, Ito, and Terada (2004), all in Japanese and without English abstracts. Miike (2015) conducted research similar to ours in our fieldwork²¹⁾ by interviewing four TRPG players about the possibility of the use of TRPGs in education in Japan, and received

19) <http://pc.gamespy.com/articles/540/540395p4.html> but it seems the interview may have been tempted with according to the Dave Arneson website http://jovianclouds.com/blackmoor/media_01_News.php.

20) According to their website <http://osterskov.dk/kontakt/in-english/>

21) Details of this in an upcoming paper.

comparable responses to our present research, that TRPGs can be useful to promote communication skills. We further located the papers of Yoko (2006) and Ni (2009), also about TRPGs. We were also able to access an undergraduate thesis about what kind of people are attracted to playing TRPGs (Takasu, 2005) and a conference proceeding about the possibility to use TRPGs in social skill training (Sasaki, 2013).

Only one paper (Kato & Fujino, 2015) refers to a paper on analog RPG published outside Japan, stating that an overseas school uses TRPGs in education based on the work of Hyloft (2008).

Kamm has written four papers on Japanese analog RPG to date, one in English (Kamm, 2011), on why there was no larp in Japan at the time²²⁾, and it is the only academic paper on Japanese analog games published in English to date, with another paper, also in English, forthcoming (Kamm, forth) and two works in German (Kamm, 2015, 2016) .

4 Possibilities of research

Through our current observant participation in the field, we unveiled a diverse, lively and interesting Japanese TRPG community with many unique characteristics, providing a fertile field for research on analog games and/or Japanese popular culture. Most of this variety was noticed because of the great number small TRPG events advertised in stores in Tokyo²³⁾.

Some of these characteristics could be related to the "otaku culture", such as the "Replay" explained above, found both as *doujin* and professional publications on specialized stores and events like the *Comiket*, *Japan Game Convention*²⁴⁾ and *Game Market*²⁵⁾. The organization of this TRPG communities

are usually in "Clubs" or "Circles" in schools, universities and community centers, with its fanzines and regular meetings, along with the traditional organization found in other countries, like game stores, monthly magazines²⁶⁾, internet forums and social media²⁷⁾.

The "DIY" (Do It Yourself) culture expressed through *doujins* of various qualities, from fanzine to professional looking ones, is another unique characteristic of the Japanese TRPG culture, with many rulebooks, "replays", fanzines and so on. There is even a *doujin* on how to make larp character props with 100 Yen shop products (Kamm, 2015).

More research is needed to describe and understand those characteristics better, but analog RPG in Japan is a field where some effort is required in order to locate it. Some examples of this difficulty to enter and reach the field are: In our research to explore how widely is TRPG known, we applied a questionnaire to a class of 73 undergraduate students, and the answers showed that only 14% have heard of TRPGs and only 3 students had any experience playing, despite the fact that the university of those students had two active clubs with TRPG activities, one of them active since 1996, and with a big collection of TRPG books in Japanese; Some Japanese Tokyo resident TRPG players who we encountered in our field work did not know about the existence of a more than 10 years old TRPG Cafe near Kanda Station called *Daydream Cafe*²⁸⁾; Our exploratory online questionnaire had only 146 answers, but from 24 of the 47 prefectures in Japan; Furthermore, at the August *Comiket* of 2014 we encountered a couple dozen TRPG *doujin* publisher stands.

At the present time it is not clear what is the size and importance of the analog RPGs in Japanese

22) There is now two active larp groups in Japan, one English speaking group in Nagoya called "Underworld LARP Japan" and one Japanese speaking group in Iruma called "Laymun".

23) Like the Daydream Cafe in Kanda (<http://trpgtime.hobby-web.net/first/>), the Yellow Submarine (<http://www.yellowsubmarine.co.jp/shop/shop-059.htm>) and Role and Roll Station in Akihabara (http://www.arclight.co.jp/r_r_s/).

24) Official site: <http://www.arclight.co.jp/jgc/>

25) Official site: <http://gamemarket.jp/>

26) There are currently two magazines about analog games in Japan that has TRPG content also, the *Role & Roll* and the *Gamers Field*.

27) It is interesting to note that in Brazil most players use Facebook as main social network, while in Japan players use more Twitter.

28) Lately this Cafe is gaining popularity thanks to some "replay" animations on *Niconico* and *Youtube*, and one TV program called *The last train bye bye* [終電ノバイバイ] which the café owner was a consultant and presented a similar, but fictional, café.

popular culture, but we believe that the study of analog RPGs can contribute to the understanding of imaginary-entertainment environments and to game design theories. We also believe that the characteristics of analog RPGs match those required in a globalized information society, such as cooperation and creativity, for example, and maybe it could help deal with some problems characteristic of Japanese society like the "Hikikomori" phenomenon, where people try to isolate themselves from physical social relations, since maybe analog RPGs can be a scaffolding in the resocialization process. Similarly, the use of analog RPGs in Japanese educational environments could be a contribution to the development of school education regarding social skills, creativity and abstract reasoning.

In our current research, we collected data from interviews and game sessions observant participation in TRPG and larp, both in Brazil and in Japan, to investigate emotional experiences called "bleed". According to Bowman "(...) role-players sometimes experience moments where their real life feelings, thoughts, relationships, and physical states spill over into their characters and vice versa. In role-playing studies, we call this phenomenon "bleed" (Bowman, 2015). Bleed is largely an unconscious process when it happens, and is neither inherently positive nor negative, although bleed is not something that players directly control, the conscious act of the player to alter the course of the character is known as "steering". "Therefore, a player can steer toward greater bleed by pushing factors that are likely to cause a bleed response, but bleed is not guaranteed. Alternately, players can steer away from potentially emotionally impacting factors, but end up affected by them nonetheless" (Bowman, 2015). Therefore, some players try to avoid bleed and others seem to seek it. The same can be said of some games, which are designed to induce strong emotions on players and / or to make them contemplate their own lives (ibid). Some of our preliminary data analysis suggest that "bleed" can emerge, but is not restricted to: in game moral conflict; death of important characters; close similarity between the player personal emotional past experiences and the player's in game experiences. Further research on game emotional experiences could be done in educational environments in order to develop emotional education methodologies.

Conclusion

In this review paper we described the academic production on analog RPG in Japan, alongside an overview of the field production in English with the objective to encourage new researches in and about Japan. We hope that this paper will be a map like one a hero might find in a RPG adventure, leading to unexpected places and many exciting discoveries, and a bridge between analog game studies scholars in Japan and around the world.

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