

About the Community of Role-Players

As a folklorist, I look at role-playing games as a special form of new tradition (folklore), which can be grouped into various subgroups such as fantasy, future, and horror games, or larping and tabletop games. Following this, playing the game can be seen at the same time as a reproducible act with specific rules (written and non-written) guiding the situation. On the other hand, the game itself can be seen as a one-shot event that can never be repeated identically. Furthermore, as an anthropologically oriented folklorist, I do not focus on occasional units of folklore but am interested in the wholeness, including the use of this folklore and the community carrying it.

I do not play role-playing games myself, and my interest in them is purely academic. I have studied Finnish role-playing for at least seven years by observing, interviewing, reading, making questionnaires, and collecting theme writings. I have written several academic theses on playing role-playing games. The latest is my licentiate thesis (2002), on which this article is mostly based.

Communities and Networks

Tribes can be divided into functional and symbolic ones. In a group, the feeling of solidarity can be based on concrete and continuing interaction. Pre-modern tribes and clans were these kinds of functional groups. As each member had their own place, status and duties that had to be fulfilled in order to get food and refuge for the tribe, an individual could not stay outside a pre-modern community. Unlike pre-modern tribes, post-modern tribes are based on free will. The new, post-modern *neotribes* (Maffesoli 1995) are more symbolic than functional communities. The concrete interaction is mostly ruled by the feeling of belonging, based on shared interests and experiences. Belonging to a group is a choice rather than a practical necessity.

Being a part of a group of role-players usually involves other hobbies and subjects of interest as well. Role-playing is often a part of a larger network of hobbies, which may include playing tabletop role-playing games, live-action role-playing games, or both. In addition, there may be interest in fantasy literature, movies and comics, which quite often includes producing own texts or drawings. There is often interest in history – most usually Middle Ages – that helps in preparing historical costumes and other requisites for the games and other events. Interest in science fiction is often a part of the hobby network, and it can be linked to interest in natural sciences such as astronomy and

geography. Lately, Japanese animation (anime) has become quite popular in Finland. This can be linked with role-playing and a wider interest in Japan and its history. These hobbies function as important sources of information. The network of hobbies and activities are an important part of the role-players' communication network. They also diffuse new ideas and images, which can be used as a material for new games.

How intensely an individual belongs to a group can vary. In "light" groups, individuals may be committed to the group only partially, and it is easy to leave the group. On the other hand, there are groups that demand a firm commitment from their members. Such groups can expect their members to dress in a certain way and can restrict the time a member can use for other activities. Groups that do not allow leaving the group – and punish anyone doing so (like criminal gangs) – can be seen as an ultimate form (Lähteenmaa 2000). The groups of role-players seem easy to leave. The activities in the group may be regarded as hobbies, and a player often plays in more than one group, leaving and returning time after time. On the other hand, some players talk about role-playing games as a lifestyle. In my material, some people told they feel a strong commitment to the group even if not playing role-playing games any longer (Leppälähti 2002).

Weird People with Many Lives

Role-playing games are played in temporary or fixed groups, with players often playing in several different groups at a time. The game groups and players moving from one group to another are the most central parts in the role-players' communication network. Initiation to the tribe of role-players happens in the game groups, in which the beginners learn from the others the ways of playing the games and how to be a role-player.

I noticed in my research that many role-players, when telling about themselves, pointed out that role-players or role-playing is or is not *normal*. Some of the participants of the inquiry emphasised that they were completely ordinary people despite of playing role-playing games. Some of these answers emphasised partying, success in studies, or having hobbies anyone else (a non-role-player) could have. "Normality" was also seen from the opposite angle; some portrayed, with humour, role-playing games as a hobby of loonies, and role-players as weird.

Sheldon Ungar, an American sociologist, has argued that people nowadays do not necessarily need to present themselves in a positive light, but can instead describe themselves in a way that is meant to be funny. The usual way to do this is to tell about a mistake or an embarrassing situation from one's past, or (over)emphasise a characteristic or trait seen as negative. Humorous description of a person's weaknesses can actually be a way of emphasising "good" characteristics (Ungar 1992). In spite of saying they are peculiar, weird, or odd, the descriptions in fact have the meaning: we are different from the masses in a positive way. The American role-players researched by Gary Alan Fine repeatedly pointed out that "the average Joe from the street" does not play role-playing

games, but instead gains his experiences through passive means like watching television (Fine 1983). Also, some Finnish role-players claim that playing role-playing games is a part of *wanting to be something else than stiff-mannered, eight-to-four-working guy, who is ageing too soon* (male informant, 25, in Leppälahti 2002). To be weird is seen as a positive thing. It is an individual way of distinguishing oneself from the mundane people (the ones who do not play role-playing games) although this difference can be humorously depicted as negative.

Choosing and playing different characters, an essential part of role-playing games, is often compared to living many lives. According to many respondents, this gives the player a diverse and extensive view to the world. When taking a character, the player has to become someone else for a while, making the player understand differences and, as a result, become more tolerant. Sometimes it is said that the players in role-playing games (both in larp and in tabletop games) can immerse in the character so deep they can't get off it. Many players think that this couldn't happen to them: just the continuing repetition of changing the character makes it easy to separate out of one character for taking another.

Mundane Attitudes

Playing role-playing games is quite unknown to those who do not personally know any role-players. Because the outsiders do not know exactly what is going on in role-playing games, there are some prejudices concerning them. Perhaps this is not very surprising, as searching for 'role-playing games' in Finnish libraries will probably result in only finding (in addition to some games) the book of Pat Pulling (1989), in which she connects role-playing games to Satan worshipping. Among role-players, the outsiders' negative attitudes can be seen as either disturbing or ridiculous. The players can sometimes joke about the imagined relation between role-playing games and Satan worshipping. This may be an attempt to break free from the ordinary and to distance the players from the conventions of everyday life. In addition, the dark gothic appearance (with the occult signs and accessories) favoured by the players of *Vampire* games sets role-players startlingly apart from the "ordinary" world.

According to my research (Leppälahti 2002), the role-players' assessments of the outsiders' attitudes towards tabletop role-playing games and live-action role-playing games varied depending on the focus of their own interests. Players of tabletop role-playing games estimated the attitudes towards larps to be quite positive but supposed that the "mundanes" have prejudices towards tabletop role-playing. This was thought to be based on the positive publicity of fantasy larps in media and the possibility to compare larps with amateur theatre. Tabletop games were thought to be unknown and hard to understand and therefore dubious in nature. In comparison, larpers thought that tabletop role-playing is seen as more harmless and that there were heavy prejudices towards larping. This was said to be based partly on the larpers' dark frocks and other

odd clothes and partly on the possibility of too complete identification and following remaining the character while larping.

Laughing Together

The humour of role-playing games can be seen characteristically as insider humour, an essential part of a group's sense of belonging together. Usually, the humour of role-players requires knowledge of fantasy novels and role-playing games in general, sometimes also requiring specific information about a certain game or game world. This humour can create kinship even between role-players who do not know each other and distinguish them from the outsiders, the mundane people. According to Michel Maffesoli, laughing together (or to the same things) can be seen as the kind of emotional cohesion that creates the sense of associating together. (Maffesoli 1995.) In addition, Ted Cohen argues that telling jokes that require specific background information to be understood creates deep feelings of kinship. Knowing the background information unites those who understand the joke and separates them from the others (Cohen 1993). A role-player can display belonging to the tribe by wearing humorous badges, which can tell about participation in specific games and events or contain signs pointing to role-playing, fantasy or science fiction.

Laughing together is an important part of the fun of role-playing games. Sometimes the point is a certain incident that happened in a game, making the joke understandable only to those who were playing the same game. The same sense of humour can be seen as to connect players who play specific types of role-playing games. For example, black humour – laughing at death and the seriousness of life – is said to be typical to those playing vampire games.

Spoken language has an important role in supporting the sense of community. For example, in Finland, Airi Mäki-Kulmala has studied youth groups and described the use of language within those groups. She has noticed that the groups can have words and expressions that were avoided in the presence of outsiders while some were used on purpose in public, and the group members took delight in the outsiders' confusion or misunderstandings (Mäki-Kulmala 1994). The latter case was also often mentioned by my informants as humorous incidents. Knowing and using special inside expressions strengthens the sense of belonging to the group. The feeling of tribal kinship can develop between people who play similar games even if they do not know each other personally. The constructs and clichés of a familiar game system form a frame for an unending supply of shared topics of conversation and jokes.

Conclusion

Constructing post-modern clans or tribes (neotribes) is a very typical method of making communities in our days. These kinds of communities have some connecting features but no specific rational grounding. They are based on choice and the desire to be with people who are supposed to think the same way and who have the same lifestyle.

People belonging to the tribe of role-players share some special interests, and the community is grounded on a network of hobbies linked to role-playing games. Shared hobbies can keep a person in a group of role-players even if she does not actually play often. Playing role-playing games is regarded as a special pastime and is regarded very differently than e.g. playing football or collecting stamps. Playing role-playing games can be considered a part of a certain lifestyle.

The members of the tribe have a feeling of belonging to the group. A role-player can show this belonging to the tribe in her external appearance by wearing humorous badges or by favouring exterior gothic features. A role-player also shares images about role-players as unusually tolerant individuals without mundane seriousness and with an extraordinary sense of humour. In addition, role-players share the conception of the outsiders' negative attitudes towards them. They also know and use group specific language and inside humour. These features make it possible to call the subculture of role-players a neotribe.

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