Processes of Roling: Mechanisms for Adopting Subjectivities in the Gameworld

Daniel Vella
University of Malta
Msida, MSD2080
Malta
daniel.m.vella@um.edu.mt

Stefano Gualeni
University of Malta
Msida, MSD2080
Malta
stefano.gualeni@um.edu.mt

Jonne Arjoranta
University of Jyväskylä
PL 35, 40014
Finland
jonne.arjoranta@jyu.fi

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
This text focuses on what we shall term processes of 'roling' – that is, those practices, experiences, and activities by which the player is led to form an understanding of, and to internalize, a particular subjectivity or role in relation to the virtual world of a game.

This subjective existence in the gameworld is determined by a variety of factors, including the capabilities and limitations the player is given towards the gameworld– and, resultingly, the affordances available to her (Linderoth 2013), the goals she has set or has allowed to be set for herself, and the ways in which she can be affected by other entities in the gameworld. This understanding of the player's in-game subjectivity is grounded in theorizations, within existing game studies literature, of notions like embodiment (Taylor 2002; Grodal 2003; Klevjer 2006; 2012; Bayliss 2007a; 2007b; Gee 2008; Gregersen and Grodal 2009; Martin 2012; Keogh 2018), the Game Ego (Wilhelmsson 2008), incorporation (Calleja 2011), the gameplay situation (Kania 2017) and ludic or virtual subjectivity (Vella 2015; 2016; Vella and Gualeni 2019).

The subjectivity that such approaches theorize, then, has little to do with the socially and cognitively complex practices of role-playing (Bowman 2013); instead, it refers to the formally structured standpoint established for the "implied player" (Aarseth 2007) of the game – and which any actual playing individual can choose to align themselves with or react against.

However, there has, to date, been limited research upon the processes by which the player is prepared for adopting this in-game role. The majority of the discussions on in-game subjectivity referred to above, for example, commence their analysis at the point at which the player 'is' already in this subject-position, and can step into or out of it at will with little to no effort. As Keogh notes, the idea of "an effortless transferal of agency into a virtual world to take on a virtual body" has, by and large, been "the certain ground of videogame theory" (2018, 6). Despite its ubiquity, however, this is far from a tenable position. As Trevillian and Conway point out, the activity of playing a game is a cognitively complex phenomenon, requiring the player to superimpose, upon their role as a "social actor" in their everyday social world, the roles of an "operator" of the game system and of a "character" in the game's diegesis (2014).

In order to address this gap in the existing research, we shall propose a taxonomy of roling processes, dividing these into three categories – *external, threshold* and *internal* – based on the position they occupy in the customary chronological sequence of the player's engagement with the game. We argue that this tripartite division is useful for analytical purposes; at the same time, these categories are not to be understood, in practice, as sharp and clear demarcations, with the various roling processes lying on a temporal continuum in the player's engagement with a game. We shall develop and exemplify this taxonomy by focusing on one example, that of *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studio 2015), as a detailed case study.

- *External* **processes of roling** refer to contextual elements that are spatially and temporally removed from the specific experience of a virtual environment, but still significantly influence the player's horizon of expectation regarding the role(s) laid out for her in the gameworld. This accounts for any knowledge or expectations regarding this role that is obtained from sources beyond the game itself or its immediately associated paratexts. As Howell notes, when playing a specific game, the player's understanding is guided not only by *intraludic knowledge* (obtained from, and relevant to, the specific game), but also by *interludic knowledge* (obtained from specific other games that the particular game is similar to), *transludic knowledge* (that pertains to videogame play in general) and *extraludic knowledge* (2016, 1-2).

  The player's familiarity with a game's genre will establish expectations regarding its world and the player's existence within it, particularly bearing in mind that genre is a complex phenomenon in the context of games, with games – at a minimum – bearing the mark of a genre in terms of iconography as well as in terms of interactivity (Wolf 2001; Apperley 2006). In this sense, *Fallout 4* is both a post-apocalyptic work of fiction and an open-world action RPG, with both of these affiliations shaping the player's expectations. Similarly, the game's adherence to a franchise, to a transmedia world (Harvey 2015) or to a media mix could also shape the player's expectations regarding the kind of role she is to take on in the game, as can the game's provenance from a particular development team which might have a recognizable style.

- *Threshold* **processes of roling** refer to those processes that structure the player's cognitive entrance into the game's virtual world – what Arsenault and Perron termed the game's "primordial speech" (2009, 118) – providing a baseline for the player's expectations. Here, we might include paratexts (Genette 1997) such as trailers, *Let's Play* videos, previews, reviews, posters,

ads, box art, feelies (Karhulahti 2012a), manuals, online store splash screens or arcade cabinet designs – all of which could be used to establish a horizon of expectation regarding the gameworld and the role (or range of possible roles) the player is to take on within it. We might also include elements like the game's menu screens and any opening cut-scenes.

- ***Internal* processes of roling** are those which are related to, and take place within, the virtual world of the game itself, rather than its surrounding contexts, and form part of the player's engagement with the virtual world. Here, we can list verbal or interface tutorial prompts highlighting specific affordances or action possibilities, and the player's initial confinement to a limited and relatively safe gated area before being granted access to the wider gameworld (in the case of *Fallout 4,* Vault 111 fulfils this function).

  Howell et al observe that games often "present players with a simple 'starting state' to which other game mechanics are incrementally added as the player discovers them or the game introduces them," establishing a process of "*incremental accretive learning*" (2014, 2). Accordingly, we can note the incremental pattern by which new gameworld affordances and gameplay mechanics are drip-fed to the player, with each introduction of a new ability being followed by an opportunity to test out the ability. The *Fallout 4* player, for example, is first introduced to melee combat, before being given a gun and introduced to ranged combat., Relatedly, repetition with cumulatively increasing difficulty (the first combat encounter is against one radroach, the second encounter is against three radroaches, and so on) contributes to this structure of incremental accretive learning. As a result – since the capabilities or 'I can' that the player is given in the gameworld shape, to a considerable degree, her subjective existence in that world (Vella 2015, 280-283) – the player is allowed to come to a full understanding of her in-game role one capability at a time.

  Finally, formative interpellation through non-player characters' address constitutes another internal roling process. To pick arguably the most ubiquitous example, the way in which the player is constantly called upon by quest-givers to offer their assistance positions the player in the familiar role of the hero.

We argue that, taken together, these processes structure the player's heuristic and hermeneutic engagement with the game (Arsenault and Perron 2009; Arjoranta 2011; Karhulahti 2012b), allowing her to learn, practice and experiment with the possibilities for action she is granted, and, as a result, to internalize the subjectivity the game establishes for her.

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