



UPPSALA
UNIVERSITET



Casa abierta al tiempo
Unidad Iztapalapa

**MIGUEL A.
BASTARRACHEA-
MAGNANI**

Physics Department
Autonomous Metropolitan
University(UAM-I)
Mexico City

**October 20th 2022, Uppsala University
Campus Gotland, Sweden**

A COIN WITH TWO SIDES: ROLE-PLAYING GAMES AS SYMBOLIC DEVICES

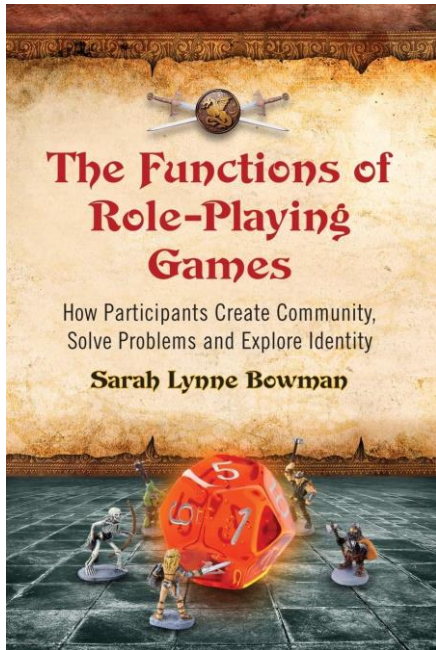


SEMINAR: ROLE-PLAYING,
CULTURE & HERITAGE



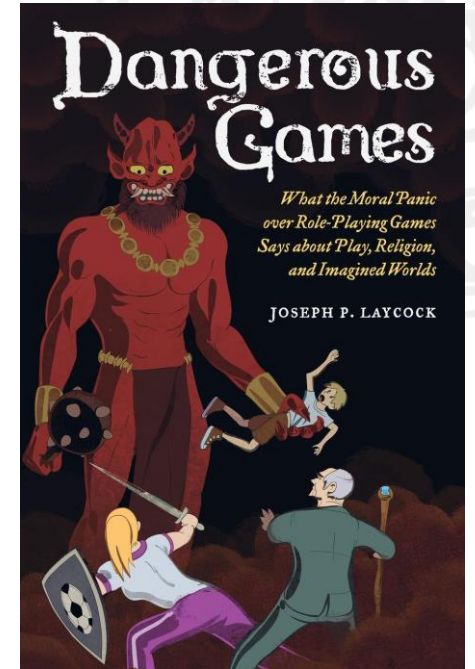
RPGs AND RITUALS

The idea that RPGs are a sort of modern form of ritual and myth is not new (Lehrich 2005, Bowman 2010, Harviainen 2012).



“Role-playing games fulfill the need for a modern-day ritual, cultivating the archetypal symbols of myth and providing a co-created social activity for the enactment of meaningful narratives.” *The Functions of Role-Playing Games* (Bowman 2010).

“Fantasy role-playing games, then, can be thought of as modern forms of ritual and myth. Although they do not have the same status as ritual and myth in world religions, these games are powerful because they utilize humanity’s most primal faculties of meaning production.” *Dangerous Games* (Laycock 2018).



However, it is often overlooked that rituals and myths are fundamentally the two sides of the **symbol**. This suggests we should treat RPGs' ritual and mythic nature on a symbolic level.

RITUALS AND MYTHS

Let's revisit some ideas about myths and rituals.

Definition of myth.

The interpretation and delimitation of the concept has been always subjected to confusion and exaggeration (Duch 1998). No definition is innocent because the concept is overdetermined both emotionally and ideologically.

Major features (Frank 1982):

1. Narrative character (as stories).
2. Use of fantasy in their creation.
3. Synthetic power.
4. Connection to the sacred.



The judgement of Paris. By P. P. Rubens.

It is usual to talk about myths in terms of their (social) function: legitimate and constitute our individual and community existence by posing a supreme value (Frank 1982).

RITUALS AND MYTHS

Let's revisit some ideas about myths and rituals.

Definition of ritual.

Less difficult to define than myth, as they are dramatic acts. They are a suspension of everyday life to establish a temporary, transient and liminal experience. In this secondary world, a new set of rules emerge that support the creation of meaning and the redefinition of objects and actions.

Major features (Durkheim 1995):

1. Onset of a magic circle.
2. Collective effervescence
3. Liminal character.
4. Connection to the sacred.



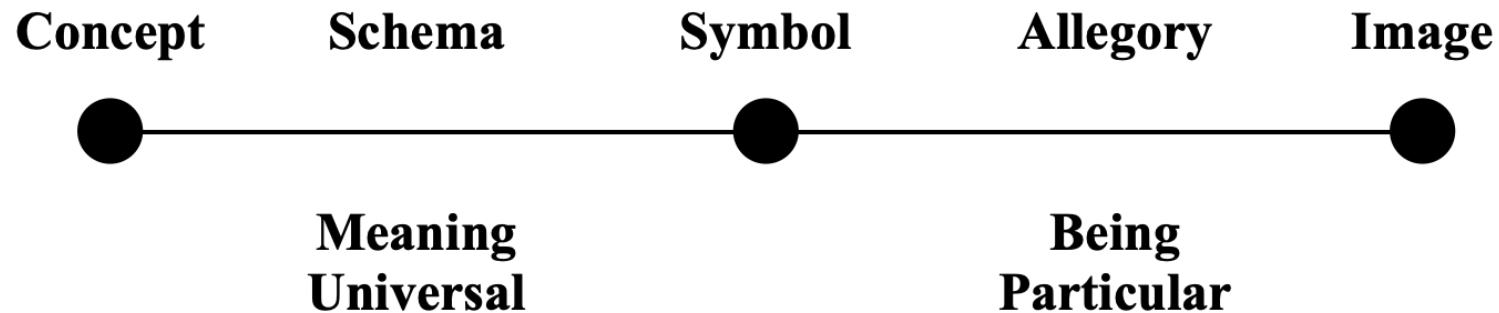
Rituals possess a major social function like it happens with myths. They strengthen social bonds and foster the creation of a community (*re-ligare*).

Also, their participants return socially transformed to their ordinary lives (Turner 1995).

THE SYMBOLIC APPROACH

The central thesis of this work is that myths and rituals find each other in the symbol.

According to the German philosopher Schelling, imagination can produce three types of representations that are 'dialectically' organized in terms of oppositions: meaning against being and universality against particularity (Schelling 1989).



F. W. J. von Schelling (1775-1854)

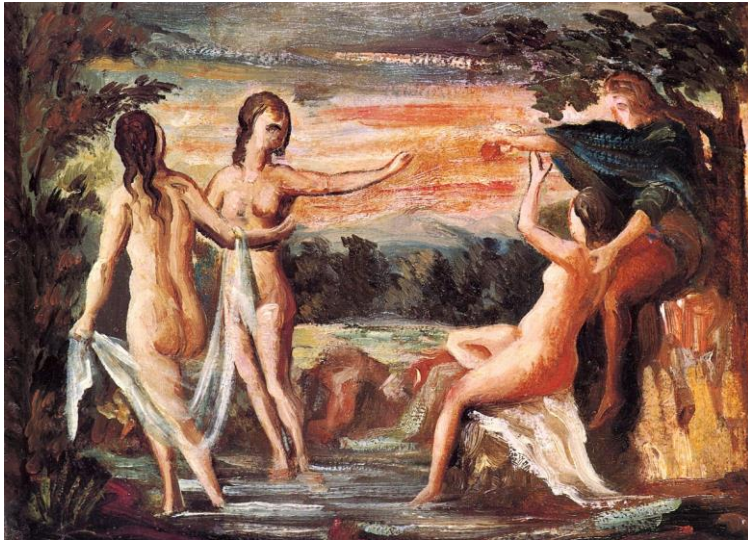
Here, I understand the symbol altogether as:

- A unique representation (sign) of human imagination (Durand 1968).
- An archetypal figure of our culture and psyche (Jung 1980).
- An element with which we can understand the metaphysical dynamics of reality as a whole (Schelling 1989).

THE SYMBOLIC APPROACH

The symbol is defined by a major property: *tautegoricity* i. e. is the identity of meaning and being. (Whistler 2013).

Symbols are while they mean and mean what they are.



The judgement of Paris. By P. Cezanne.



The judgement of Paris. By E. Antin.

The symbolic domain makes it possible to reconcile people in times of crisis, given that it contains the archetypal figures that give rise to our culture.

The symbol is an **immediate, inexhaustible, irreplaceable** testimony. However spiritually powerful they are, we access them only through **mediation**.

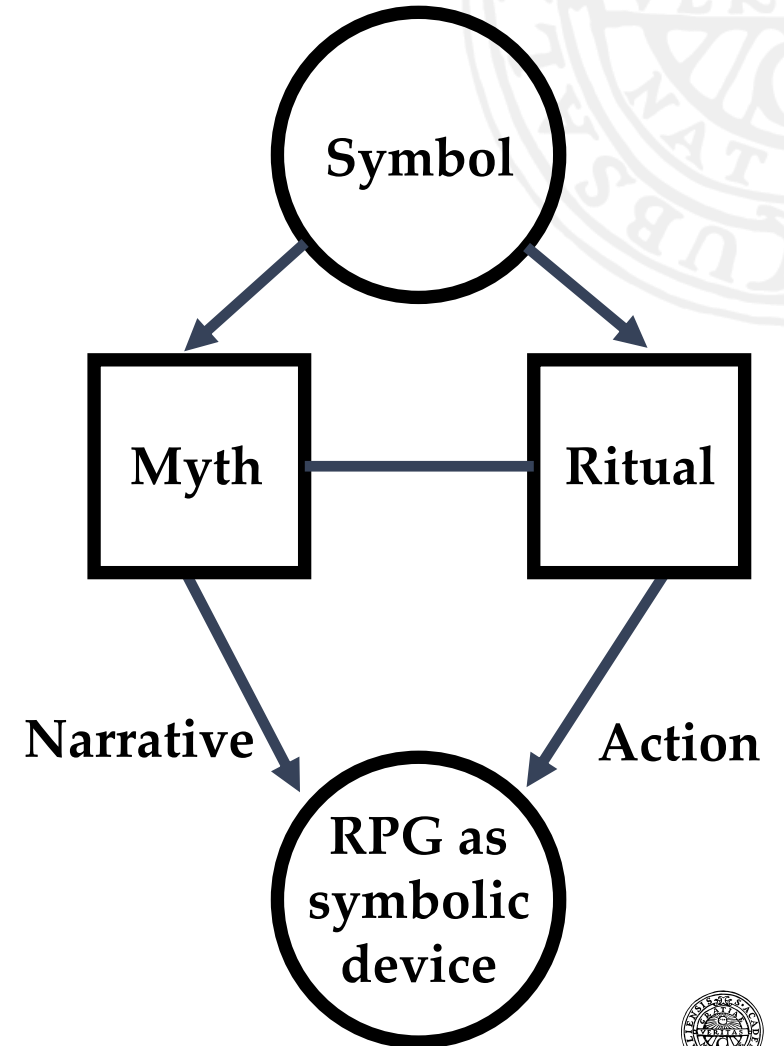
Myths and rituals gather together in the symbol as they are its **two possible exegeses**: symbols expressed linguistically and dramatically (Frank, 1982).

THE SYMBOLIC APPROACH TO RPGs

1. Given that ritual and myth are fundamentally the two sides of the same coin (the symbol), neither RPGs can be reduced to mere rituals, nor mere myths. **Ritual and myth cannot be split apart.**
2. **RPGs are essentially symbolic devices.** They are a combination of mythic narrative and ritual interpretation. RPGs are symbolic but not symbols themselves though because we cannot create symbols: just unearth them and redefine our relationship with them.

In my article I revisit three ritual elements in RPG:

- The magic circle (Salen and Zimmerman 2003, Copier 2005, Stenros 2012, Schalleger 2018).
- Collective effervescence and immersion (Durkheim 1995, Bowman 2012, Silcox and J. Cox 2012, Lehrich 2005, Bowman 2018, Schalleger 2018).
- Liminality (Turner 1995, Van Gennep 1960, Laycock 2018).



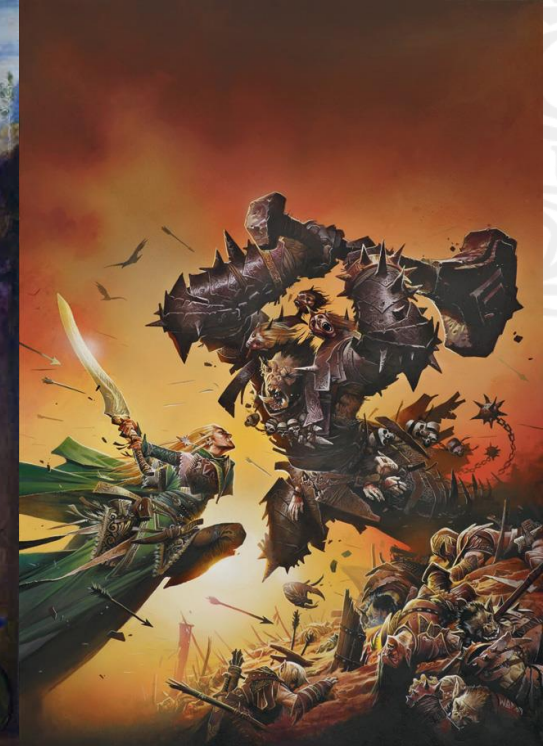
RPGs AS SYMBOLIC DEVICES

A major difference between RPGs and other kinds of narratives is that one truly experiences it (as a character) when one enters the RPG magic circle as a player.

RPGs work in the two, deeply intertwined, levels: the ritual and the mythic. The ritual part creates a space for the narrative to flourish in a mythic way; the shared narrative preserves the ritual as a ludic activity.



St. Georg and the Dragon.
By G. Moreau.

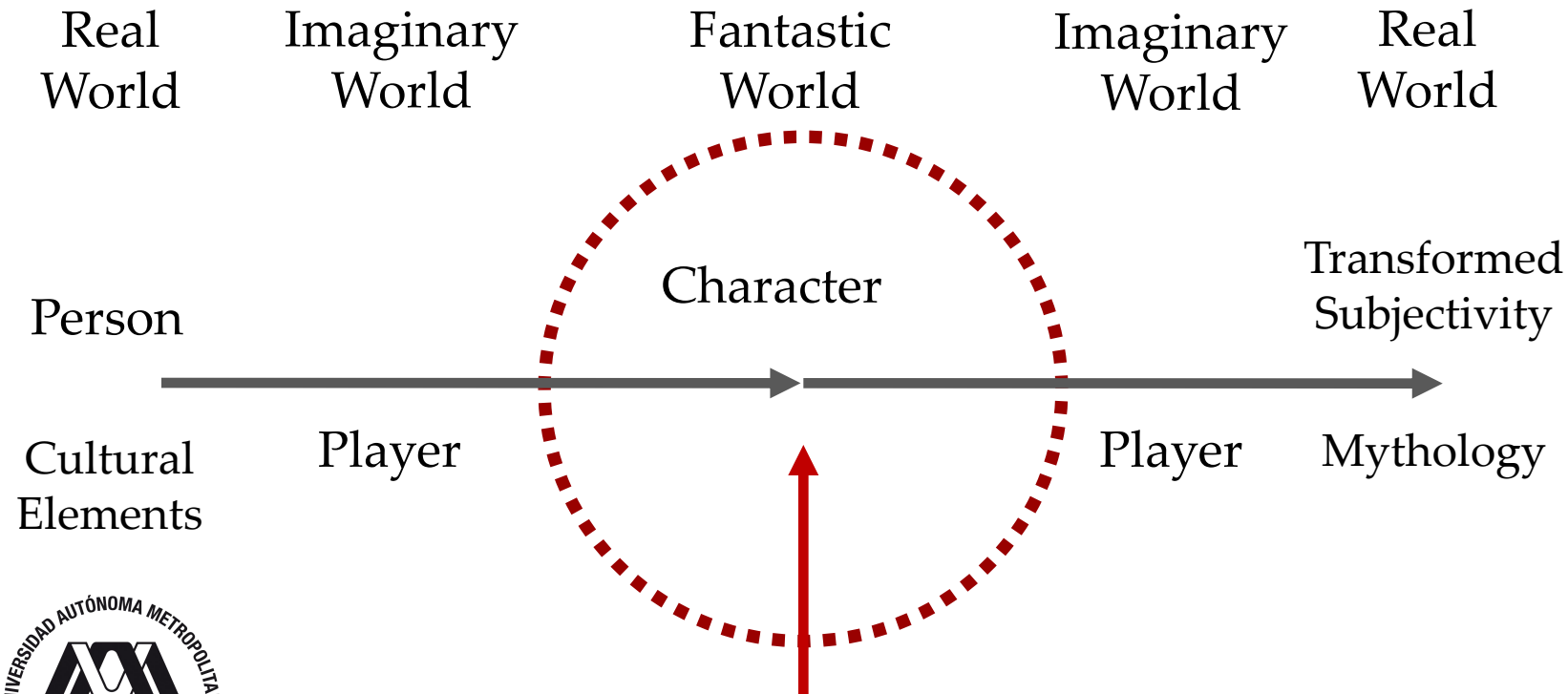


Corellon vs. Gruumsh.
By W. Reynolds.

RPGs work at a symbolic level. “On a small scale, games invoke the very mechanisms through which all human culture is created. By doing so, they create a unique mental space in which players rethink their world and their selves in order to create new worlds and new selves.” (Laycock, 2018).

RPGs AS SYMBOLIC DEVICES

They feed upon the cultural elements that the participants bring to the table (McKay, 2001). Then, in the liminal state RPGs allows us to **create, change, and re-configure our relationship with archetypal figures**, transforming cultural elements and ourselves in the process.



The result of an RPG is the testimony of the experience in the form of a **personal mythology**: strong anecdotes and bonds, and a new perspective of ourselves and others.

Symbols (Either they come from a collective unconscious, our society as a whole or metaphysical and spiritual considerations).

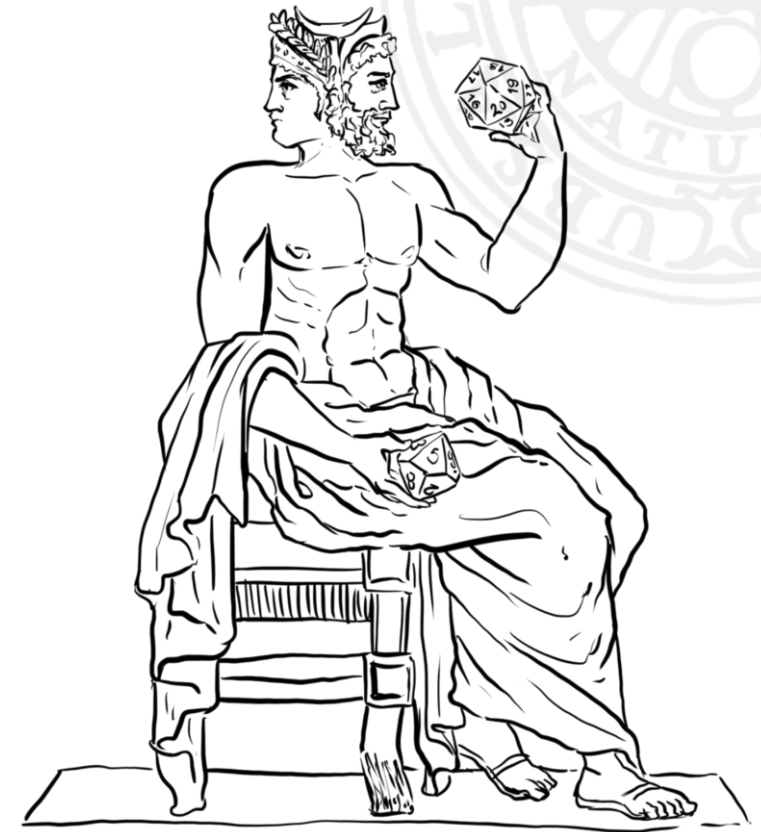
CONCLUSIONS

RPGs are recognized as a perfect combination (undifferentiated balance) of mythic narrative and ritual interpretation.

Following Schelling, art and organisms are symbolic as well: they possess a *telos* inside them. They stand by themselves and serve no other purpose than keeping themselves alive. (Schelling 1989, Bastarrachea-Magnani 2017, Bastarrachea-Magnani 2021).

**Symbolic
deepness**

“It also gives this world a kind of autonomy from us, letting us experience the world as if it is unfolding itself, even though all its elements are contributed by us.” (Wolfendale and T. Franklin 2012).



RPG Janus. By Halcabar.

From the symbolic perspective, I would define RPGs as living mythic rituals and the art of the (ironic and collaborative) imagination (Bateman 2012; Saler 2012).

CONCLUSIONS

FUTURE WORK:

- The study of (personal) mythic narrative under the symbolic approach.
- Analyzing symbolic features of RPGs taking into account taxonomic and genealogic considerations (e.g. difference between TTRPG and LARP).
- Complement the symbolic approach (philosophical) with the exploration of symbolic, archetypical, and mythic engagements (Hook 2010; Beltrán 2013; Rusch 2018), shadow work (Beltrán 2013) and soul guiding (Rusch and Phelps 2020).



THANK YOU FOR
YOUR ATTENTION!

Role-Playing Studies Researcher
Network (RIJR) (based in Mexico City)



<https://academiadelrol.org.mx/>

Journal of Role-Playing
Studies and STEAM

JRPSSTEAM

<https://digitalcommons.njit.edu/jrpssteam/>



bastarrachea@xanum.uam.mx

m.a.bastarrachea.magnani@gmail.com



www.miguelbastarrachea.com



UPPSALA
UNIVERSITET