Imagine That!

An Invitation to the Incredible World of Roleplaying Games

This article will hopefully be interesting and useful to many, but primarily it was written for those people curious about roleplaying games that have had little or no actual experience with them. My goal is to let you know what roleplaying games (commonly referred to as "RPGs", singular "RPG") are all about, and to warmly invite you into a fun, creative, social hobby that has meant a lot to me over the past decade or two. I've tried to keep my explanations as simple as possible, but if you have any questions at all or think of something I didn't cover, please feel free to contact me.

Before proceeding with my thoughts, it may be wise to define what I mean when I use the term "roleplaying game". By "roleplaying game" I mean an interactive fiction game; that is, a story told by a group as they pretend to be characters they're not, exploring places they've never been. The label "roleplaying game" is sometimes also used to describe very different things, such as computer games (like Diablo II or Baldur's Gate) or the acting out of intimate fantasies between partners. While these activities can certainly be entertaining, they don't fall under the heading of "roleplaying game" as intended here. This article is concerned only with roleplaying games of the "let's all get together and share in a grand adventure of our own imagining" sort.

All roleplaying games like this are made up of two parts, conveniently enough the "roleplaying" and the "game." Some RPGs emphasize one aspect over the other, but most have at least a little of both. For our purposes here I'll endeavor to explain each aspect separately.

The Roleplaying

Roleplaying, by definition, is playing a role. What does that mean in the context of RPGs? Remember when you were younger, the "let's pretend" games you played? Cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians, princes and princesses, I'm sure most of us can remember pretending to be someone we weren't. Roleplaying games are nothing more than a way to keep that spirit alive, to once again be able to have the kind of imaginative fun that only comes from pretending you're a secret agent or a scientist, a vampire or a professional athlete. Through the power of imagination, in RPGs the weak can be strong, the poor can be rich, the timid can be brave, and the plain can be beautiful.

Roleplaying is escapist entertainment at it's finest. You can literally be anything or anyone you want to be, if only for a little while. Sure, it's not real...but it's the next best thing. Always wondered what it's like to be a cop? RPGs can help give you the tiniest glimpse. Curious about what life would be like if you were a millionaire? RPGs can let you explore that. Intrigued by the kind of person who can suffer great tragedy and still strive to "do good", to be a hero? That's what roleplaying is all about!

I hope this sounds intriguing to you. I hope it's got you curious enough to keep on reading, and maybe even give this roleplaying thing a try. If that's the case, give the following exercises a look. Hopefully they can explain dynamically what is difficult to capture with the printed word.

One - Pretending To Be Someone Else's Fictional Character

Before you start, I should mention that roleplaying the first time might make you feel a little silly. Most of us are taught to be self-conscious and to "act like grownups". I heartily encourage you to start breaking yourself of this conditioning now. How is pretending to be someone else for entertainment any different than doing improvisational theater, or immersing yourself in a good book or movie? It's not of course, and in fact in my opinion it's even better, so if you find yourself feeling a little quirky while exploring these exercises just run with it, don't let it keep you from having a great time. After all, having fun is the whole point!

To start with, choose one of your favorite characters from a book, movie, television, whatever. Pick someone you think it might be fun to be for a couple of minutes. Once you've chosen someone, close your eyes and really pretend to be that character, as hard as you can, just like when you were a child. Picture yourself in a place that character might be, wearing what that character might wear, doing what that character might be doing. Just relax and have a little fun in your imagination, pretend to be your character for a few minutes. Try to imagine what all of your senses would be experiencing if you really were that person.

It might be easier at first to choose a character from a specific scene. For example, let's say I choose Luke Skywalker from Star Wars as my character, specifically during the climactic space fighter battle of the Death Star at the end of the film. I close my eyes and try to picture what that would be like.

I'm in the cramped cockpit of an X-wing fighter, and all around me there are explosions and laser blasts. I'm sad because I've already lost people I know in this battle, but I don't have time to think about them now - too much is at stake. My ship is screaming down the trench of the Death Star, and it's taking every ounce of my concentration to keep from smashing into the walls or being hit by a laser cannon. There are ships behind me too, but I'm only focusing on the small exhaust port I need to hit to destroy this station. Closer ... closer ... I'm almost at the port when I hear his voice. The old man Ben Kenobi. But he's dead. I saw him die...didn't I? Something inside me tells me to trust his voice, to take that leap of faith and shut off my ship's targeting computer. Just as I reach the port I take a deep breath and release my torpedoes...they go in! I quickly pull my ship up, getting a queasy roller-coaster feeling in my stomach, and fly back to my friends as the Death Star explodes behind me. I'm a hero ... I've saved the day!

So what do you think? You didn't go anywhere. To anyone watching, you didn't do anything. But in your mind you just became the hero of the day. You made one great shot that just saved the lives of hundreds, maybe thousands, of people. Are you beginning to

see the potential of roleplaying? You can walk in the shoes of heroes and kings, of beggars and thieves. For a few moments at a time you can try to experience life as they might.

Let's try another example. Let's say I choose Sir Lancelot from the tales of King Arthur. He was a brave knight and a powerful swordsman; he was also deeply in love with Guinevere, his King's wife. So I close my eyes and try to picture myself being Lancelot.

I'm in a brightly sunlit courtyard, brushing down my horse. I feel strong and muscular. A rough cotton tunic chafes my arms a bit as I rub down the horse, but the sunlight is warm on my face and I feel happy. All around me people are going about their business at the castle - stewards carrying food and drink, farmers with their wares, the occasional man-at-arms on his way to perform some duty. Over the smell of the horse I can also smell incense from the abbey; in my ears I can hear the muttering of a dozen quiet conversations, the creaking of a cart's wheels. When I happen to look up to the balcony of the main keep, there stand Arthur and Guinevere, looking out over their people. The Queen and I exchange a brief look, and suddenly I'm sad again. I turn back to brushing my mount and don't look up a second time.

This time I didn't use a scene from a movie, or specifically from the legend of King Arthur. But I used all those stories I know about Arthur and Lancelot to imagine a quiet scene that could have taken place any sunny day at Camelot. Does that help you to see the power of imagination? You can put yourself at any place, at any time, as any one. How can a movie made by someone else beat the movies you can experience in your own mind? Kick back and do this as long as you like - have some fun with it, pretend to be whoever you want to be, then when you start getting tired of it move on to the next exercise.

Two - Pretending To Be Your Own Fictional Character

Pretending to be a fictional character from someone else's work is a lot of fun, but it can be even better if you make up your own original character. Though roleplayers often spend a great deal of time "fleshing out" their fictional characters, creating the basic outline doesn't need to be overly involved. Think of the kinds of stories (books, movies, TV, etc.) or situations (war, the theater, race tracks) that really intrigue you...who are the characters that populate those kinds of stories and places? What kind of person might it be fun to become for a short time?

As an example, maybe I've had the occasional daydream of being a fighter pilot. There's no need to go looking for a pre-existing story about a pilot; just make one up! Who says any of those stories out there are any better than the ones in your imagination anyway? I decide that the character I want to be is ... hmm, let's see ... he's more or less average, just kind of blends in with the rest of his squadron. But he's deathly afraid of drowning, has been ever since a nearly fatal accident at his grandfather's farm when he was just a boy. No one in the Air Force knows about his phobia, and he tries hard to keep it a secret

because he doesn't know if it would be enough to keep him from flying, something he loves to do.

Now, that's not a particularly in depth character. In fact, I've really only defined one thing about him, his fear of drowning. But that's enough to get started, so I close my eyes and off we go!

I'm in the stifling cockpit of an F-22, just taking off from an American base in Greece. The g-force of take off is pinning me to the seat, and the roar of my engine at full afterburner is deafening. Once I reach 3000 feet altitude I lay off the throttle and begin my patrol at cruising speed. For nearly an hour all is quiet, just the hypnotic hum of the mighty jet engine under me. I'm flying over the ocean, but unafraid- it isn't water that unnerves me, it's the thought of drowning. My mind begins to wander a bit, back to that summer at the lake my thoughts so frequently return to, but then the threat warning light of my console begins flashing, followed by a piercing alarm screech. A SAM site has fired an anti-aircraft missile at me! I begin emergency maneuvers but it's too late. The jarring impact of the missile tearing up my left wing nearly shakes my fillings loose, but the plane remains in the air. I try to stay calm amidst the chaos of all those flashing alarms and horns- the F-22 starts losing altitude. What do I do? Can I make it back to base? Am I going to have to eject, out here in the middle of the ocean? My hand trembles but slowly reaches for the bright yellow ejection handle...

So then what happens? That's up to you. Maybe you decide you'd rather take your chances heading back to base; or maybe you realize ejecting and waiting for rescue is your best option. But can you overcome your fear of drowning in time? This is the heart of roleplaying: creating your own characters, people with strengths and weaknesses that interest you, and putting them in situations to explore how they might react. The character above wasn't too defined- if I liked the character, and wanted to continue pretending with him, I'd probably define a little more. What exactly did happen on that farm to make him so afraid of drowning? Does anyone in his squadron know his secret? Has he trusted any of them enough to tell them?

If you make a character and like him, he can stick around for weeks, months, even years. You can detail as much about his fictional life as you want- who his parents were, his friends, where he went to school, what his favorite food is, whatever. If you make up a character and then decide it's not fun pretending to be him - so what? Just make up a new one and go from there, you haven't lost anything except a little time and brainpower. Try pretending to be a few characters of your own, think up some interesting personality quirks, phobias or strengths they might have. Again, once you get tired of this just move on to the next exercise.

Three- Pretending With Someone Else

For most roleplaying games, you'll think up a character you want to pretend to be that will fit in to whatever the setting of the game is. If the game is going to center around infantry troops in World War I, thinking up a cowboy isn't going to be very helpful. This

isn't to say the setting should stifle creativity, or narrow the options down so much that all the characters in the game are just clones of one another. In that World War I game there are still many characters you could reasonably expect to see: enlisted, officers, chaplains, nurses, commandos, engineers, indigent civilians of all types caught in the battles, etc. The trick is to make up a character that will be fun for you to play and that makes some sense to exist in the game's particular setting.

This brings us to the third exercise, pretending with someone else. This is where you'll get your first peek at what roleplaying games can be like. With all the characters you pretended to be in the first two exercises it was just you, wandering alone through your fantasy mind. Not only did you think up the character, but also all of the people, places, and things around the character. Wouldn't it be great if you could make up your character, but then wander around with him through a world that someone else is making up?

That's essentially what a roleplaying game is: one person makes up a character, and another person (often called the GM, or Game Master) makes up the environment surrounding and interacting with that character as the game progresses. This includes everything interacting with the player's character: the weather, the sights, sounds, and smells, the other characters not controlled by the player (often called non-player characters, or NPCs), it's all made up by the GM. In the example above with Lancelot, how much more fun would it be if you didn't know what kinds of people were in the courtyard? If you could be surprised by things that happen to your character instead of coming up with them all on your own? The player would pretend to be Lancelot, but the GM would pretend to be the meat pie vendor, or a lady-in-waiting sent by the Queen with a message, or an assassin disguised as a beggar sent by Mordred.

In addition, there is usually more than one player in a gaming group; most have one Game Master and between 3 and 6 players. So the GM describes the scene, and pretends to be all the characters not made up by the players; then the players react to the GM's world and to each other's characters. The essence of roleplaying is just one big game of consensual "let's pretend"; I pretend to be this person, you pretend to be that person, the GM pretends to be everyone else, and we all interact together to create our own story.

So, let's take the first step towards that. To really illustrate what this is about you're going to need a partner, someone who's interested and willing to pretend with you. Depending on your particular situation this might be difficult, even impossible. If this is the case, reading through the next exercise should still be helpful in showing what pretending with other people can be like. But by their very nature roleplaying games are a group activity, even if the group of people is only in contact over the Internet; so if you are interested in playing a roleplaying game, sooner or later you'll need to find a like-minded group of pretenders. (Daydreaming and pretending in your own imagination is definitely a lot of fun, but it's not quite the same as pretending with others, and it's not roleplaying in the sense meant here).

Once you have a partner, you should take on the role of the GM (since you have already done the first two exercises), and your partner will be the player. After the first one or two tries you can switch roles.

First, the player needs to imagine a character he will pretend to be - this can either be an original character or an existing character from TV/movies/etc., as above, whichever is easier. The player then describes his character to the Game Master in some detail, outlining his personality, any skills he has, strengths and weaknesses, his background, until the GM feels he has enough to create a story for this character. The GM imagines a situation to place the character in, then the two take turns in a conversation: the player explains what his character is doing, the GM explains the results of that action, the player reacts once more, and the game continues in that vein, back and forth, until some resolution to the situation is reached or the participants get bored and want to try a different situation or completely new characters.

For example, let's say the player chooses to pretend to be Lancelot again, as above. The GM thinks about what might be a fun and interesting story for that character, then describes how and where the game begins:

> **GM**: "Lancelot, you are in your quarters at Camelot when a page arrives with a message from the King ... he says Arthur wishes to see you in the fest hall right away. What do you do?"

> **Player**: "Um...okay, I put on my finest armor and sword and I go to the fest hall."

> **GM**: "When you arrive at the fest hall King Arthur is standing by a window, looking out across the fields and woods surrounding Camelot. He hears you enter the room and turns to address you...

> **GM** (*as King Arthur*): "Ah, Lancelot, my friend...I'm afraid I once again have a duty to ask of you. The Queen has gone riding with one of her ladies-in-waiting, but they have been gone many hours now and I begin to grow worried. Please, ride out and return my wife safely to the castle."

> **Player** (*as Lancelot*): "Of course my lord, I am yours to command. But if you worry so, why not send a dozen knights to search for her?"

> **GM** (*as King Arthur*): "Well, I am a bit worried, but I don't want to over react either. I don't want the people thinking their King is so fretful that he'll send out an entire detachment of knights just because the Queen is a bit late returning from a ride. Much better, I think, to send a single man, my best man, to find her. If it's nothing, and she has merely lost track of the time while riding again, you can escort her home. If something has happened to her, then I trust you to deal with it."

Player (*as Lancelot*): "I shall leave immediately my king...don't worry Arthur, I'm sure Guinevere is fine, and will smile at how the King loves her and worries about her so."

Player: "I give Arthur a reassuring smile and bow before I turn and leave."

GM: "Where do you go?"

Player: "I head straight to the stables, mount my fastest horse, and ride out of the castle. Hmm...do I know where the Queen usually goes when riding?"

GM: "As a matter of fact yes, you've seen her many times riding towards the wildflower fields south of Camelot."

Player: "Okay, I ride my horse south and see if I can find any sign of Guinevere and her lady-in-waiting."

GM: "Almost immediately you pick up a clear trail of the hoof marks from two horses, along the path you know the Queen often rides. Those continue on for about a half-mile, and are then joined by the hoof marks of four more horses that came from the South. The hoof marks of all six horses then continue southward into the distance. What do you do?"

This is a fairly simple example of an exchange between the GM and a player. The player decides to play Lancelot, and the GM decides on a story, one where Arthur asks Lancelot to go looking for the Queen. They have a brief conversation about what the king wants Lancelot to do, with the player pretending to be Lancelot and the GM pretending to be King Arthur. Lancelot then leaves the castle and picks up the Queen's trail, but discovers she and her Lady were joined by another group of riders. (Note that even when describing his character's actions, the player stills says "I do this" or "I do that", not "Lancelot does this" or "He does that"...this is important in helping the GM and other players "stay in character," to make it easier for them to pretend to be their own characters).

What happens next in this story depends on what the two participants decide on. Lancelot might decide to return to the castle and ask for the king to send more knights to help him. Or, he might continue to the south, and hope to find out more about who the four riders the Queen joined are. Or, the GM might decide that Lancelot hears a scream for help from just over the next hill- Lancelot would then have to decide what to do in response.

None of the above story is from a specific King Arthur tale. The player pretended to be Lancelot, and the GM imagined a story involving Lancelot, Arthur, and Guinevere. How the story progresses is completely up to them. Was the Queen kidnapped? Will Lancelot be able to rescue her? Did she just meet some friends on the road and ride with them? Anything can happen, the only limits are the player and GM imaginations. The story is created by the combination of those imaginations, with the player pretending to be his

character, and the GM taking responsibility for giving that character an environment in which to live.

Try this exercise a few more times, switching the player and GM roles now and then. As the player imagines new characters, the GM can imagine new stories to include them in. Is the character a cowboy? Maybe the sheriff needs his help against a bandit gang headed towards town, or he needs to defend his ranch against an unscrupulous neighbor, or he wants to go to a far away city to see the "new fangled" train. Is the character a scientist? Maybe he's trying to perfect a new kind of power source, or he translates some Egyptian hieroglyphics that awaken an ancient mummy, or he accidentally creates a potion that turns him invisible. The stories you and your partner(s) play can be anything you want them to be!

The Game

Above, I explored and tried to define the "roleplaying" half of a roleplaying game; now it's time to look at the "game" half, the rules used to determine the outcome of certain actions and events. First off, why are rules necessary at all?

Strictly speaking, they're not. Many people enjoy "diceless" roleplaying, that is, roleplaying without the need for explicit rules or dice. These games are played much like the third exercise above; the GM and player(s) simply choose how things should unfold, and together form a story from their choices and conversation. If this sounds appealing to you, then you already know enough to embark on your roleplaying career. Get a group of interested friends together, make sure everyone understands the basics of pretending to be a fictional character, choose or randomly determine a Game Master, and start telling your stories. Things might start off slowly, even awkwardly, but like anything else it will get smoother and easier with practice. It will still be helpful to read the sections below, though; many players seems to prefer a little more structure than playing diceless, and after reading below you may find that you're one of them.

The game part of RPGs, rules and dice, are used to add an element of randomness to the story being created, and to determine the results of actions or situations that could go one way or the other. Going back to the example of "let's pretend" games from our childhoods, how many cops and robbers games got stalled at the point of "I shot you!" "No you didn't!" "Yes I did!"? The rules and dice help to prevent that sort of snag in the story from occurring. Also, from the example above with Lancelot searching for Guinevere, how does the GM know that Lancelot finds her horse tracks? How does he know that Lancelot can even hear Guinevere if she should scream? If the situation is clear cut, no rules are needed: if Guinevere is ten miles away, there's no chance Lancelot will hear her yell for help; if she is just over the hill, ten yards away, he will definitely hear her. If, however, she's 300 yards away, and Lancelot is wearing his armored helmet, he might hear her scream, he might not. This is another time when the rules can be very helpful.

There are dozens and dozens of different rules systems available for aiding with roleplaying games, and it's surely beyond the scope of this article to address the specifics of any one of them (even Fudge). Some are very simple, some are very complex, most fall in between. Anyone interested in checking out some roleplaying rules should go to:

- GURPS - http://www.sjgames.com/gurps/
- Fudge - http://www.fudgerpg.com/fudge/
- Dungeons & Dragons - http://www.playdnd.com/welcome.asp

At their core, almost all rules systems work the same way: any action or situation in question is given a certain difficulty level by the GM, then dice are used to randomly determine if the character involved succeeds or fails.

For a very simple example, let's say a player named John is pretending to be a Dwarf warrior named Grund. The Dwarf (that is, the player) has decided to journey alone by pony through the woods to reach his brother's castle on the other side. At one point the GM decides that a very large spider living in these woods has heard Grund coming and is hastily preparing to ambush him from the treetops above.

The GM isn't sure if Grund would hear the spider climbing up and constructing a web to drop on him- the spider is cunning and usually quiet, but needs to work quickly, and Grund is an experienced warrior likely to be on guard against ambushes. Different rules might use very different methods to determine if the spider is heard or not, but for the purposes of the example below whichever rules are used is irrelevant- it's enough to know that some system is in place for using dice to determine results.

> **GM**: "John, please roll a six-sided die" (the GM, with the help of whatever rules he is using, has determined that Grund will only hear the spider if he rolls a 5 or a 6 on a six sided die).
>
> **Player** (*rolling a six sided die and reporting the results*): "I rolled a 5".
>
> **GM**: "Grund, as you're making your way through the woods, you hear a noise from up ahead, like something large moving through the treetops."
>
> **Player**: "I stop my pony, dismount, and grab my crossbow. Can I see anything ahead in the trees?"
>
> **GM**: "Roll another six sided die" (again, the GM and the rules, in whatever fashion, determine that Grund can see the spider in the trees if he rolls 4-6).
>
> **Player** (*rolling a six sided die and reporting the results*): "I rolled a 2".
>
> **GM**: "You don't see anything out of the ordinary in the trees, and you no longer hear the noise you heard before. What do you do?"

From here the story continues to unfold, dependent on what the player pretends to do, and what the GM (as the spider) pretends to do. The rules don't need to dictate every situation- only use them when there's some uncertainty about how things should progress, or if you feel it would be more fun to let the dice randomly determine an outcome. There is no right or wrong way, and there is no right or wrong set of rules. It's all a question of your gaming style and what you enjoy- some people use the dice as much as they can, others might go for weeks without ever touching them; some prefer rules systems with thorough rules for nearly every possible situation, others prefer rules systems that can fit on two sides of a page. Find the rules that are the most fun for you and use those.

I sincerely hope reading this has given you some understanding of what roleplaying games are all about, and how much fun using your imagination can be. Most of all, though, I hope you've been inspired to give roleplaying a try!