

“I have a theme in my head, and then I start to write”

Explorative study on early stages of indie tabletop
role-playing game design

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Master's Thesis

Collaborative and Industrial Design

School of Arts, Design and Architecture

Aalto University

2022

Acknowledgements

If someone who is struggling with their thesis topic is reading this, I have one tip for you: think of something that you find interesting and then start asking questions. Worked for me.

A huge “thank you” goes to Karoliina and Nelson for listening to me whine and moan about this thesis. I bet it wasn’t easy or interesting. Also, thank you to Vilppu, Ville, Antti, Panu, Joni, Juha, Pietari, Vade, Sofia, Sape, Janne, Lauri, Jimbo, Mustikkamäki, Otto, Eetu, Jami, Sami, Helsinki X-Wing scene, Roolipelaajien Suomi, Konnichiwa and Subway Otaniemi, and all the people who I have played with. Keep the dice rolling!

Special thanks to my advisor Ville Kankainen who was an invaluable help when writing this thesis. And let’s not forget Tuuli Mattelmäki either, thank you!

And of course, my biggest and most special gratitude belongs to the seven awesome and talented RPG designers who allowed me to use their time for this thesis. Thank you!

Helsinki, April 24 2022

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Abstract

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Title of Thesis: "I have a theme in my head, and then I start to write" - Explorative study on early stages of indie tabletop role-playing game design

Department: Department of Design

Degree Programme: Collaborative and Industrial Design

Year: 2022

Number of pages: 70+1

Language: English

Today, tabletop role-playing games are a multimillion business and more popular than ever. During the past couple of years, they have also taken the digital world by storm.

This thesis explores the early stages of the design process of a tabletop role-playing game. The topic was chosen for two reasons. First, despite the continuously growing popularity of tabletop role-playing games, the design practicalities and methods of tabletop role-playing designers haven't been a subject of many major academic studies. Second, my own interest towards game design and tabletop role-playing games drove me to research the subject.

The thesis starts with a literature review that presents existing literature and definitions around the topic of game design in general and tabletop role-playing game design in particular. LARP (live action role-playing) design theory is also covered briefly. The theoretical framework concentrates on ideas, design goals and prototypes, the three main interest areas of my research. The research topic was then approached by interviewing seven role-playing game designers from Finland, Australia, Sweden and the United States. The data was analyzed in the manner of qualitative content analysis, and transformed into themes and patterns that are presented as findings. In the end, several interesting themes and design practices were recognized. All the research is conducted by following the principles and ideas of explorative research.

According to the research findings, the design process of tabletop role-playing games focuses heavily around writing. Majority of the designers describe their design work to be writing, and it seems that the act of writing and rewriting is the main tool of thinking for the designers. Another major finding was that the ideas and inspirations seem to be growing from a mixture of genre fiction, personal experiences and nostalgia, and that in the very heart of a viable RPG idea is always a certain experience or emotion. Also, the viable ideas, those that actually lead to published games are always described to be solid and "whole" from the beginning of the design process.

The findings offer a good starting point for any further research. Also, any aspiring tabletop role-playing game designer will find the findings valuable and helpful when designing their own tabletop role-playing games.

Keywords: design process, tabletop role-playing games, game design, game design process, RPG design

Abstrakti

Tekijä: Ville Yli-Knuutila

Työn nimi: "I have a theme in my head, and then I start to write" - Explorative study on early stages of indie tabletop role-playing game design

Laitos: Muotoilun laitos

Koulutusohjelma: Collaborative and Industrial Design

Vuosi: 2022

Sivumäärä: 70+1

Kieli: English

Pöytäroolipelien markkinat ovat tänä päivänä satojen miljoonien eurojen arvoiset, ja roolipelaaminen on suosittumpaa kuin koskaan. Muutamien viime vuosien aikana pöytäroolipelit ovat myös valloittaneet digitaalisen maailman.

Tämä opinnäytetyö tutkii pöytäroolipelien suunnittelua, tarkemmin sanottuna suunnittelun ensimmäisiä vaiheita. Aihe on valittu kahdesta syystä: Vaikka roolipelien suosio kasvaa jatkuvasti, ei roolipelien suunnittelun metodeja ja käytäntöjä ole juurikaan tutkittu. Toinen syy on oma kiinnostukseni aiheeseen. Oma mielenkiintoni sekä pelisuunnittelua että pöytäroolipelejä kohtaan ohjasi minut aiheen äärelle.

Opinnäyte alkaa kirjallisuuskatsauksella, joka esittelee olemassa olevaa kirjallisuutta, materiaalia ja määritelmiä pelisuunnittelusta, pöytäroolipeleistä ja pöytäroolipelien suunnittelusta. Myös larp-pelien (live action role-playing) suunnittelua ja teoriaa sivutaan. Teoreettinen viitekehys keskittyy ideoiden syntymiseen, design-maaleihin ja prototyypppeihin, kolmeen tutkimustyöni ydinelementtiin. Tutkimusaihetta lähestyttiin haastattelemalla seitsemää roolipelisuunnittelijaa Suomesta, Australiasta, Ruotsista ja Yhdysvalloista. Haastatteludata analysoitiin laadullisen sisältöanalyysin metodein ja siitä muodostettiin teemoja, työtapoja ja toistuvia kaavoja, jotka esitellään työn löydöksinä. Kaikki tutkimustyö tehtiin eksploratiivisen tutkimuksen periaatteella.

Työn tulosten perusteella pöytäroolipelien suunnittelu keskittyy vahvasti kirjoittamisen ympärille. Suurin osa haastatelluista suunnittelijoista kuvaili suunnittelutyönsä olevan kirjoittamista, ja näyttää siltä, että kirjoittaminen ja uudelleenkirjoittaminen on suunnittelijoiden pääasiallinen ajattelun väline. Toinen merkittävä löydös liittyi ideoiden syntymiseen: ideat ja inspiraatiot kasvavat maaperästä, joka muodostuu genre-fiktiosta, henkilökohtaisista kokemuksista ja nostalgiasta. Jokaisen elinvoimaisen roolipeli-idean ytimessä on myös jokin tietty tunne tai kokemus. Kolmanneksi, elinvoimaiset ideat kuvailtiin usein ilmestyvän varsin valmiina ja "kokonaisina" suunnittelijoiden päähän.

Nämä tulokset tarjoavat hyvät mahdollisuudet jatkaa tutkimusta aiheen parissa. Uskon myös, että moni aloitteleva roolipelisuunnittelija huomaa työn tulokset arvokkaiksi kun he suunnittelevat omia ensimmäisiä pöytäroolipelejään.

Avainsanat: design-prosessi, roolipelit, pelisuunnittelu, pelisuunnitteluprosessi, roolipelisuunnittelu

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1. Introduction

Tabletop role-playing games (later RPG's) started as a spin-off hobby of miniature wargaming in the mid 1970's. Since then the RPG market has evolved into a continuously expanding global business. During the past couple of years, RPG's have also taken the digital world by storm, despite the hobby's rather traditional core features like books, pencil and paper.

What, then, is role-playing and what are RPG's? Later in this thesis I present some academic definitions, but I want to start by describing what role-playing is to me. In my own words, role-playing is collaborative storytelling with rules. A very traditional setting of a role-playing session includes 2-4 players, one game master, and game artifacts like character sheets, dice and rule books. Game master describes to the players what is happening to their characters ("There is a skeleton between you and the treasure. What do you do?"), and the players then describe how their characters react ("My character attacks the skeleton!"). The conflicts and situations with uncertain end-results are resolved by using the rules of the game, which often include some sort of dice mechanics. The games are usually located in some sort of speculative world or time, like J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-Earth or a Galaxy Far, Far Away .

What I described above is the *act* of role-playing. RPG's, *the products*, come in many forms, but more often than not RPG products are books. But although the book is the traditional format of a RPG, the game can also be a deck of cards, a single page PDF or a web page. Whatever the format, the game product usually includes rules of the game and some information about the speculative world where the characters are having their adventures.

This thesis is about exploring the design birth and design process of a commercial indie RPG product. For this thesis I have interviewed seven role-playing game designers around the Western world (Finland, Australia, USA and Sweden) to find out how they approach the process of designing an indie RPG. What sparked the idea of exploring the RPG design process was the realization that, despite the current "RPG hype" and the continuously expanding sales, the creative process of designing a RPG game hasn't been researched that much, at least not in an academic manner. As Björk and Zagal (2018, 324) write: "Over the years, design knowledge has been shared via columns in magazines and books (...)

interviews, events, and online venues. Still, most RPG design knowledge resides in the heads of the professionals in the field.”

Also, it probably doesn't come as a surprise that I am an active RPG hobbyist, so the motivation to explore the subject is deeply rooted in my own interests. I have been playing RPGs for more than 20 years. It's a dear hobby of mine and I've been following the western RPG scene with a keen eye almost as long as I have played them. Lately, because of the game design studies at Aalto, I have also explored the idea of creating my own games someday, instead of “just” playing them.

This thesis gave me a golden opportunity to reach out to RPG designers and ask them all the questions that I was unsure about. In a way, this thesis is made to explore whether I have a RPG designer in me or not. I hope this thesis strengthens my motivation to try out my wings as an indie RPG designer, and I also hope that I can shed some light to the design practicalities of RPG's, and write out my results in a way that helps both the academic field but also anyone who is interested in designing RPG's.

Definition of “commercial tabletop indie role-playing game”

In the context of this thesis “commercial indie role-playing game” is characterized as follows:

- The game is not free. The designer of the game is serious about making at least some money with it.
- The game is available in both digital and physical form, or only in physical form. The game is designed to be a high quality product, not “just” a PDF file to be shared.
- The game is widely available. It can be bought from game shops and online.
- The game is “indie”, meaning it's designed by one person or by a very small team without the support of some of the industry's biggest players like *Wizards of the Coast* or *Chaosium Inc.*

This is not an academic definition. The definition is made to help the reader understand what kind of games the designers are designing and talking about when they describe their game design process.

1.1. Objective and research questions

My objective is to understand the early stages of a design process of a commercial indie RPG product. To guide my research, I have stated one key research question and a set of smaller research questions:

How do RPG designers transform their ideas into playable prototypes?

- How do RPG designers come up with ideas, and how do they evaluate them?
- What is the role of design and experience goals in the process of designing a RPG?
- What is the role of prototypes and prototyping in the process of designing a RPG?

In other words, I'm interested in what happens at the intersection of ideas, design and experience goals and prototypes. The basic idea of experience goal is that the design process starts by defining what kind of experience to design for, and take that as a starting point of generating new ideas (Roto et al., 2017, 6993). I will answer my research questions using the methods of semi-structured interviews and qualitative content analysis.

1.2. Brief history of RPG's

RPG's started small. The first RPG ever released, *Dungeons and Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson, 1974), started with 1 000 booklet copies in 1974. The game was designed and published by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, who were both enthusiastic miniature wargame hobbyists. Gygax, who was also an avid lover of fantasy and science fiction, had an idea to combine fantasy themes with rulesets that would mimic medieval wars (Witwer et al., 2018).

Dungeons and Dragons was a unique game when it was published but it didn't emerge from the void. There was already *Chainmail* and its *Fantasy Supplement* (Gygax and Perren, 1971), a ruleset that allowed players to fight fantastic battles with miniature soldiers on a tabletop in the vein of Tolkien, Robert E. Howard (the creator of Conan the Barbarian) and other fantasy authors. Also, several other wargaming hobbyists in the USA and UK had already been experimenting with more narrative game designs and game formats. For example, already in 1972 Tolkien fans in the UK had published live-action roleplay rules called *Live Ring Game* (Hill, 1973) for anyone to experience Frodo's journey to Mount Doom (Peterson, 2018).

It's also interesting that back in the 1970's, the word "role-playing game" hadn't surfaced yet. Instead, *Dungeons and Dragons* had a catchy subtitle of "Rules for Fantastic Medieval Wargames Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures" (Witwer et al., 2018, 9). During the years after the initial release people would start calling the game a role-playing game, as it was discovered that much more than just combats and battle could be played with the game. (Witwer et al., 2018)

Dungeons and Dragons invited hobbyists to create their own content for the game. And as both wargaming and fantasy literature hobby scenes had a long tradition of open collaboration, altering and expanding the rules, and creating new content, the game expanded its popularity and playerbase fast. It wasn't long until similar products came to market: Games like *Tunnels & Trolls* (Andre, 1975) and *Chivalry & Sorcery* (Simbalist and Backhaus, 1977) were very similar to *Dungeons and Dragons*, but already had their own unique takes on role-playing. (Witwer et al., 2018)

During the 80's RPG's became an industry. *Dungeons and Dragons* breached the barriers of mainstream success and instead of being just a RPG it became an entertainment brand that manifested in the form of toys, cartoon series, comics, coloring books, digital games and even beach towels (Witwer et al., 2018). By the end of 1983, TSR (Tactical Studies Rules), the original publisher of *Dungeons and Dragons*, achieved revenues of nearly \$27 million (Witwer et al., 2018, 9-15). *Dungeons and Dragons* also paved the way for others: Several big fantasy and science fiction franchises got their own RPG's during the 80's. Examples include *Call of Cthulhu* (Petersen, 1981), *Middle-earth Role Playing* (Charlton, 1984) and *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game* (Costikyan, 1987).

During the 1990's RPG's grew up. *Dungeons and Dragons* still reigned supreme but something else was happening at the edges of the RPG industry. *Vampire: The Masquerade* (Rein-Hagen, 1991), one of the biggest RPG's still today, was released in 1991 by White Wolf Publishing. *Vampire: The Masquerade* was set in our own world, but with dark and fantastical twists, and in comparison to more light-hearted and adventurous fantasy RPGs, it covered adult themes like humanity, sexuality, racism, and personal horror (Alroth, 2018).

Today the RPG field is a vast landscape of different kinds of products, very similar to the digital game scene. RPG scene has its own AAA releases and studios, indie publishers and a huge scene of underground games, stretching from humorous one page games like *Honey Heist* (Howitt, 2017) to to experimental and almost non-playable games like *Everything is Dolphins* (Weiss, 2012). Pretty much anything is available, and for any taste.

RPG's have also made a digital leap: services like *Tabletop Simulator* (Berserk Games, 2015), *Roll20* (Roll20, 2012) and *Foundry VTT* (Foundry Gaming, 2021) are enabling players to experience the hobby on virtual and remote tabletops, through their web browsers. Many game studios are also selling virtual components that can be used with most common virtual tabletop services. Today a single gaming group can consist of people from all around the world, no physical presence is required anymore. The amount of players who experience RPG's virtually is not small either, in February 2021 *Roll20* announced that they have hit the landmark of 8 million users (The Roll20 Team, 2021).

Today, RPG's like *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Call of Cthulhu* are worth hundreds of millions of dollars, to companies that own the franchises. For example, *Wizards of The Coast*, a company publishing *Dungeons and Dragons*, had their overall revenue rise 24% in 2020, topping \$816 million (Whitten, 2021). Digital RPG sales platforms like *DrivethruRPG* and *itch.io* boast of having seven figure sales every year (DriveThruRPG.com, n.d.; itch.io, n.d.).

One of the biggest phenomenons of the RPG world today is streaming. Many game groups are streaming their sessions on *Youtube* and *Twitch*, and the most successful ones have millions of subscribers (Critical Role, n.d.; Geek & Sundry, n.d.). Today we live in a world where one can make their living by playing RPG's on different video streams. To give an example of the size of the streaming business: *Critical Role*, one of the most famous RPG streaming shows, recently raised \$11.3 million to produce an animated tv show covering their adventures. The fundraiser campaign was the most successful film or television project in *Kickstarter* history, with more than 88,000 people contributing to the campaign (Whitten, 2020).

1.3. RPG's in Finland

In Finland the role-playing business is almost non-existent, at least in terms of money. Finnish games are often self-published and they sell a few hundred copies (Alroth, 2018a). Nevertheless, Finnish role-playing community, including both RPG and LARP (live action role-playing) hobbyists, is very vital and active. New Finnish RPGs and RPG content is published every year. Finland also has *Ropecon*, the largest non-commercial role-playing convention in all of Europe (Ropecon 2021, 2021.).

The exact number of RPG hobbyists is difficult to calculate because of the private and sometimes almost parochial nature of the hobby. Probably the most credible estimate was

done in 2018 by an active hobbyist and RPG designer Mike Pohjola. The estimate was based on Finnish Player Barometer from the year 2018 (Kinnunen et al. 2018). Pohjola's estimate suggests that there are around 80 000 more or less active players in Finland (Pohjola, 2018). But, this estimation was widely criticized among the hobbyists for being way too optimistic, and that the calculations were based on too small a sample size (Scheider, 2018).

2. Literature review and definitions

This chapter presents existing literature and definitions around the topic of game design and RPG design. First I discuss some examples on how RPG's are defined in an academic context. I also go through, on a high level, the basic principles and phases of the game design process. These principles and phases can be applied to any game design process, ranging from analog to digital games. In the last subchapter I go through the existing literature and materials that deal with designing RPG's.

My inclusion criteria for references was simple: I started with the books and articles that were recommended to me by (game design) teachers and researchers of Aalto, or that were part of any game design courses here at Aalto University. I also used the academic library databases of Aalto, as well as other recognized sources for academic content. Several articles and books led me to more content when I went through their reference lists. I tried to keep the references as academic, scientific and credible as possible. If I was uncertain of including something, I didn't do it.

2.1. Tabletop role-playing games

Defining role-playing games is not an easy task. In game design-studies RPG's are seen as exceptions and outliers, not-quite-a-game games (Zagal and Detering, 2018). They usually include all the features of a game (rules, statistics, strategic play) but what they lack is the quantifiable outcome. No one really wins or loses, and even the end of the game can be hard to define. (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003, 81)

I have chosen three academic definitions of RPG's from my literature material. These particular three definitions were chosen because they approach defining RPG's from different perspectives and scopes, and they are all from different era's of RPG studies. The first definition by Zagal and Detering (2018) covers the "prototypical core" of a RPG by listing certain characteristics of a game and game sessions. This list is very concrete and even strict in nature. The second definition, by Hitchens and Drachen (2009) defines some of the most common features of RPG, and it's much more loose and high level than the one by Zagal and Detering. The third definition, the so-called Meilahti Model (Stenros and Hakkarainen, 2003) approaches defining RPG's by listing four requirements that should be met for a game to be RPG.

Definition by Zagal and Detering (2018, 31):

- “A group of players sits face-to-face around a table to play together (co-located and synchronous)
- Players create, enact, and govern the actions of individual characters in a fictional game world
- A referee determines the game world, manages and communicates it to the players, and enacts all NPC’s
- Players and referee collaborate towards a shared enjoyable experience
- The game world, including PC’s and NPC’s and their action, are constituted by talk between referee and players, often with supporting props, like character sheets, miniatures, rule books, or maps
- The game world is usually some form of genre fiction: fantasy, science fiction, horror, etc. or a mixture thereof
- Attempted PC actions are limited by the imagination of players
- The abilities of characters and the outcomes of their actions are usually determined by a quantitative-probabilistic rule system, with extensive rules for combat resolution
- The game is open ended and can be played over multiple sessions
- In-game events may be guided along a pre-planned plot through the design of the game world and referee steering or emerge from player initiative
- Player characters improve over time via system for progression“

Definition by Hitchens and Drachen (2009, 16):

1. “Game World: A role-playing game is a game set in an imaginary world. Players are free to choose how to explore the game world, in terms of the path through the world they take, and may revisit areas previously explored. The amount of the game world potentially available for exploration is typically large.
2. Participants: The participants in the games are divided between players, who control individual characters, and game masters (who may be represented in software for digital examples) who control the remainder of the game world beyond the player characters. Players affect the evolution of the game world through the actions of their characters.
3. Characters: The characters controlled by players may be defined in quantitative and/or qualitative terms and are defined individuals in the game world, not identified only as roles or functions. These characters can potentially develop, for example in

terms skills, abilities or personality, the form of this development is at least partially under player control and the game is capable of reacting to the changes.

4. **Game Master:** At least one, but not all, of the participants has control over the game world beyond a single character. A term commonly used for this function is “game master”, although many others exist. The balance of power between players and game masters, and the assignment of these roles, can vary, even within the playing of a single game session. Part of the game master function is typically to adjudicate on the rules of the game, although these rules need not be quantitative in any way or rely on any form of random resolution.
5. **Interaction:** Players have a wide range of configurative options for interacting with the game world through their characters, usually including at least combat, dialogue and object interaction. While the range of options is wide, many are handled in a very abstract fashion. The mode of engagement between player and game can shift relatively freely between configurative and interpretive.
6. **Narrative:** Role-playing games portray some sequence of events within the game world, which gives the game a narrative element. However, given the configurative nature of the players’ involvement, these elements cannot be termed narrative according to traditional narrative theory”

The *Meilahti Model* (Stenros and Hakkarainen, 2003) model states that “role-playing game is what is created in the interaction between players or between player(s) and gamemaster(s) within a specified diegetic framework.” What this means is that playing RPG’s requires four things: a game master, a player, interaction and a diegetic framework. Game master and players are the roles that are given to the participants of a game session, and they can switch during the session but at least one of each is needed. The interaction happens between these participants. The diegetic framework defines what is true within the game, and the game master has the final say on this. Nothing is true unless the game master approves it. This whole process of interaction is defined as role-playing. (Stenros and Hakkarainen, 2003)

Definitions vs. reality

As mentioned earlier, defining RPG’s is not easy. Also, as the indie RPG scene is much more willing to experiment and explore new ways of creating RPG’s, the definitions above can be said to only apply to the mainstream and “traditional” RPG’s. There are tons of indie games that escape the definitions but are still seen as RPG’s.

The biggest exception to the academic definitions is the whole modern movement of RPG's that don't require anyone to be a game master. Games like *Fiasco* (Morningstar, 2009) and *Ironsworn* (Tomkin, 2018) concentrate on game masterless storytelling, and they have been proven to be very successful. Close relative to the game-masterless games are solo-RPG's where there is no interaction between players, because there is of course only one player. One of the most well known examples of solo-RPG's is *Thousand Year Old Vampire* (Hutchings, 2019).

There are also other exceptions to the definitions above. Some games have also abandoned the concept of characters, and in games like *A Quiet Year* (Alder, 2013) the players tell the story of a whole community, not the story of certain individuals living there. Also, speaking is not the de facto method of communicating and interacting anymore. There are games that use email, text messages, group chats and even sign language as the methods of telling stories.

2.2. Game design process in a nutshell

There are so many books, resources and material dealing with game design practices and processes that it is unnecessary to create an extensive review on them all. In the context of this thesis, there is only a brief and high-level explanation of the game design process presented below. I have chosen to use some of the most cited and referenced contemporary game design books.

As described by Salen and Zimmerman (2003), Fullerton (2015) and Lemarchand (2021), the design process starts with setting some sort of design goals, continues with brainstorming and creating ideas, then leads into creating several prototypes and playtesting, and finally through a continuous iterative process of testing, analyzing and refining, the game is developed into its final form. This of course is a very simplified version of the process, and the different phases can not be strictly separated from each other.

The game design process has been defined to be both iterative and playcentric or playful. These concepts are also deeply intertwined. When designing games, the process needs to be playcentric, meaning that the game needs to be played and playtested constantly during the design process. The designers need to directly experience the things they make. The process emphasizes playtesting and prototyping, and design decisions are made based on the experience of playing a game while it is in development. The early versions (i.e. prototypes) of the game can be very crude but they can be played, evaluated, adjusted and

played again. The process is cyclic, and it alternates between prototyping, playtesting, evaluation and refinement. (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003)

Iterative work process is essential when the designer tries to create a game that achieves the design goals. The designer is expected to develop the game iteratively, starting from a crude prototype and then each time improving it, until the player experience meets the designer's criteria. (Fullerton, 2015) The iterative process can also be called with different names, for example Lemarchand (2021, 112) uses the term "concentric development" to describe the game design and development process: In a concentric process the building of the game starts from the center, from the very core mechanics, and then builds iteratively outwards to support the center. This production model helps the designers and developers to solve difficult problems and make sure that they are concentrating on the right issues. (Lemarchand, 2021)

2.3. Tabletop RPG design process

The first publications about RPG design reach back to the 1980's. Since then the design knowledge has been shared in magazines, interviews, events and over the internet. Most of the RPG design knowledge still resides in the heads of the designers and other industry professionals. (Björk and Zagal, 2018) There is no centralized place for RPG theory, most of the theory debates are local, ephemeral and dispersed, and even as a lot of the older fanzines and other material has been made available, there is no central place for RPG theory discussions (Torner, 2018). This can often lead to similar debates reappearing from time to time.

In fact, when talking about design in the context of tabletop games, the words "RPG design" seem to be referring to designing content (adventures, scenarios and other kinds of supplements) for existing RPG's. If we think about RPG design from this perspective, then we have a lot of non-academic literature available. These books are usually targeted for game masters and their purpose is to help game masters to design better content for their players. Some of these kinds of books worth mentioning are *Return of the Lazy Dungeon Master* (2008, Michael Shea, 2008, independently published), *Never Unprepared* (2012, Phil Vechhione, Engine Publishing), *Hamlet's Hit Points* (2010, Robin D. Laws, Gameplaywright Press) and *Complete Kobold Guide to Game Design* (2012, Wolfgang Baur (editor), Open Design LLC). But these books, however interesting or well crafted they are, are not relevant in the context of my research.

One of the most extensive academic resources for RPG theory is *Role-Playing Game Studies: A Transmedia Approach* (Zagal and Deterding, 2018). The book covers digital, live and tabletop RPG theory and recognizes other forms of RPGs as well. It has perspectives from sociology and psychology to economics, education and design. The book is an attempt to collect previously scattered academic discussions into one textbook that would bind people, texts and ideas together. The book is an interesting read from cover to cover but it only has two articles that are more or less directly dealing with the design process and elements of tabletop RPGs. First of these, *RPG Theorizing by Designers and Players* by Evan Torner (, 2018) discusses the role of RPG theorizing, which in this context is explained as an act of someone forming a theory about RPGs. Such theorizing can be done by anyone but the article focuses on publicly available written work. Torner's article (2018) covers theory discussions from all fields of RPGs: live, digital and tabletop. In tabletop context Torner presents the brief history of RPG theories, starting from the fanzine era of the 1970's and ending at the present era of podcasts and blogs. He also introduces some of the major debates of RPG theorizing: discussions about the best practices of designing and playing RPGs, player and system typologies (categories of play preferences and motivations), task resolution and societal positioning (inclusiveness of the RPG scene). Although all of these subjects touch the topic of designing RPGs, none of them are directly about *how* they are designed and developed. The article is more about theoretical models that the designers can use and reflect on while designing.

The second article, *Game Design and Role-Playing Games* (Björk and Zagal, 2018), explores RPGs from a design perspective. The article frames RPG design to be designers considering the structural elements of the game (rules and entities on which the rules act) and how they interact with each other. In the beginning there is also an important part about one of the complications of RPG design: the game involves both the artifacts that make the game possible (the things we buy from game stores), but also the act of playing (the gameplay these artifacts enable). This is referred to as "second-order design problem" (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, 168): game designers have control over the artifacts they design, but they can't design how people *actually* play and they can't predict all the possible situations that arise during the play. So, a game designer's primary goal is to make design decisions that encourage certain kinds of gameplay.

The article continues by covering several other design challenges of RPG designers, including the choices that a designer needs to make between for example familiar and novel, licensed and original content, and rules being light or heavy. It touches other design areas of RPG design as well, these being the use of player characters, action resolution and

character development. (Björk and Zagal, 2018) However, in the same fashion as Torner (2018), Björk and Zagal concentrate on presenting different elements the game designer needs to take into consideration, but the actual concrete process and the question of *how* is not discussed. Although these two articles are very theoretical in their approach, they are good reads for anyone interested in the topic.

Another source for academic RPG theory is *The International Journal of Role-Playing*¹ that aims to act as a hybrid knowledge network, and bring together the varied interests in role-playing and the associated knowledge networks, e.g. academic research, the games and creative industries, the arts and the strong role-playing communities. The journal covers all forms of role-playing (larp, digital, tabletop) and all the content is peer reviewed. But, as the many examples above show, the journal also concentrates on theorizing upon the act of role-playing, and doesn't have articles about concrete design methods. That being said, the online archive of the journal¹ is an invaluable resource for anyone who wants to understand the components, elements and different aspects of RPG's.

There are also some non-academic books and resources worth mentioning. *Art and Arcana* (Witwer et al., 2018) is a book about the history of *Dungeons and Dragons*, but told from the perspective of art and illustrations. In the book, the development history of *Dungeons and Dragons* is told from the very beginning to this day, and the focus is on how the art of the game has developed, and how it has affected the game. Its most interesting parts are in the beginning when it covers stories about how the designers had to deal with a lot of uncertainties: no one knew what role-playing actually is, and no one knew what "orc" looked like. So the designers and artists had to come up with a lot of elements that they had no examples of. (Witwer et al., 2018) The book covers a lot of history but it's more about the art and the visual culture that the game sparked. Unfortunately, there are no insights on how some of the key concepts of RPGs have been developed. And, even though the book is very well done, it almost feels like a fan book or an advertisement for *Dungeons and Dragons*.

Another relevant source for RPG design literature is the publisher Kobold Press. Their range of RPG design books covers themes from game mastering to world building (Kobold Press Store, 2022) but two most interesting books in the context of this thesis are *Complete Kobold Guide to Game Design* (Silverstein, 2019) and *Kobold Guide to Board Game Design* (Selinker, 2012). The latter is more about mechanical elements of the game, like rules and balance, but the *Complete Kobold Guide to Game Design* includes many interesting and

¹ <http://ijrp.subcultures.nl/>

relevant articles about RPG design, from several seasoned RPG designers. For example, in *Designing RPG's: Computer and Tabletop* (McComb, 2019) the author broadly goes through the differences and similarities in designing the two media. In *Design That Matters* (Baur, 2019a) the author Wolfgang Baur writes about taking RPG design seriously: even though not every adventure or ruleset needs to be high art, they should at least aim to be something more than just entertainment. As a final example, in *Seize The Hook* (Heinsoo, 2019), the author Rob Heinsoo talks about the importance of finding the core mechanical hook of the game, and following through with the hard work that will eventually lead to a full game. Other articles include valuable insights about combat and magic systems, world building, scenario building and balance. The *Complete Kobold Guide to Game Design* is probably the best, and most concrete and approachable resource one can find about RPG design. It's filled with concrete examples and tools, and it is very approachable and easy to read.

There have also been some attempts to create common vocabulary and "info banks" for RPG design patterns. *Design Patterns of Successful Role-Playing Games* (Whitson, 2005) is a project of game designer John Whitson. The document has an extensive set of both vocabulary and game design patterns, as well as several game summaries, analyzed through the lens of the design patterns. The document also includes some advice on how to approach RPG design. Whitson states that the design patterns won't help anyone if they don't have a clear idea in their head. He emphasizes the importance of the *idea* of what kind of game the designer wants to create, and the importance of design goals. (Whitson, 2005) Phil Masters also created his own vocabulary on RPGs, listing and explaining several dozens of RPG terms in his article *On The Vocabulary of Role-Playing* (Masters, n.d.). Both of these resources are useful, lengthy and extensive but it's worth mentioning that they are not academic in their nature.

Finally, in the chapter *Pelinjohtajasta pelisuunnittelijaksi (From game master to game designer)* (Kemppainen, 2018) of a book *Seikkailuja ja sankareita (Adventures and heroes)* (Stenros and Särkijärvi, 2018) Jaakko Kemppainen reflects his road from tabletop game master to game developer, spiced up with interviews of four different game master who also became game developers and designers. The chapter, even though very subjective and personal, includes some interesting notions about the design process of a tabletop RPG: most of the first games of RPG designers are copies of their own favorite games. But also, the motivation to create own games comes from the need of creating something that fits exactly to the needs of a certain type of desired narrative. The article also states that sometimes the motivation to create one's own game can be money: as a young RPG hobbyist one necessarily doesn't have money to buy a "real" game. (Kemppainen, 2018)

Forge and The Big Model

No text about RPG design wouldn't be complete without the mention of Forge. Forge was an online discussion forum that was founded in 2001 by Ron Edwards and Clinton R. Nixon. The Forge (back then it was called Hephaestus' Forge) was three things at the same time: an online community, an independent publishing movement, and a body of analytical role-playing game theory. The online community had a strong "do-it-yourself" ethic and an interest in free sharing of knowledge. Theories crafted at Forge benefited from being derived from a mixture of theoretical analysis, critical commentary, accounts of applied play and hands on design. The work that people were doing at Forge were critiqued by the group, and ideas from them were applied to game design and tested through play. (Boss, 2008) The forums are now closed but one can still access and read all the forum posts ².

Lot of game design and play theory was created at the Forge but the central representation of these theories is a diagram called *The Big Model* which is explained in detail in Emily Care Boss's article *Key Concepts in Forge Theory* (2008). Shorter explanation is also done by Torner in his already mentioned article *RPG Theorizing by Designers and Players* (Torner, 2018).

The Big Model aims to break down the experience of role-playing into nested levels of overlapping activities of *social contract* (playing RPGs is a social activity), *exploration* (shared fiction is the result of consensus of the participants), *creative agenda* (everyone has their own preferences about desired styles of play), *techniques* (procedures and guidelines used to structure play) and *ephemera* (role-playing in action, sum of everything else). (Boss, 2008) The diagram in its mathematical format goes as following:

[Social Contract[Exploration[Creative Agenda=>[Techniques[Ephemera]]]]]

In 2020 Forge's history and its theories were collected into a book: *Tabletop RPG Design in Theory and Practice at the Forge, 2001-2012: Designs and Discussions* (White, 2020). The book covers the history of Forge, has a detailed chapter covering The Big Model and explores the discussion culture of the online forum. It also includes an RPG about the indie RPG scene. The book is aimed for game studies scholars and it also connects Forge theory to the academic investigation of role-playing. (White, 2020)

² <http://www.indie-RPGs.com/forge/index.php>

Observations from the larp side of RPG design

Larp and larp design has been studied and documented in much more detail than tabletop role-playing. There are several academic, or at least semi-academic, books about larp and larp design, including books like *States of Play* (2012, Solmukohta), *Engines of Desire* (2021, Pohjoismaisen roolipelaamisen seura ry) and *Lifelike* (2007, Solmukohta). Majority of these books can be found from the internet, free of charge. And even though larp is out of the scope of this research, the various forms of role-playing have a lot to offer each other at both the theoretical and methodological level (Montola and Stenros, 2004). That is why I'll present some observations from interesting larp design articles and books.

One burning point of academic larp design literature is the Solmukohta event³, an annual gathering of larp hobbyists from all around the Nordics. The tradition of releasing an annual book of articles about larp and larp design started in Solmukohta 2003 as the book *As Larp Grows Up* was published. The idea stemmed from a realization that the different Nordic countries had very different styles and methods of playing and designing games. (Montola and Stenros, 2008)

The major difference between designing a larp and designing a tabletop role-playing game is the temporal nature of larp: Larps cease to exist the moment they end and revisiting old games is not possible without playing them again (Montola and Stenros, 2008). This of course applies to tabletop games as well, or at least the act of role-playing (session), but in the tabletop context there's usually the product, usually the so-called core book, which one can go and buy from a game store. In tabletop context the designers design the product, but in larp context the designers design the temporal experience that happens during the game.

One example of the larp design process is an article *Frail Realities: Design Process* by Justin Parsler (Parsler, 2008). In his article Parsler takes a subjective and personal point of view on designing a larp game called *Frail Realities* in the United Kingdoms. This article is not a chronological take on the design process, instead, it examines the design process through two different angles: design philosophy and challenges of historical settings.

What Parsler describes as design philosophy can also be seen as a set of design goals, features or even requirements. Whatever they are called, they create a concrete frame for

³ Knutpunkt in Swedish, Knutepunkt in Norwegian and Knudepunkt in Danish

the designer to stay in. He names seven different aspects of his design philosophy, ranging from very pragmatic (“The Game Needs to Make a Profit”) to much more vague and experience based (“The Game Needs to Be and Seem Fair”). When it comes to challenges of historical setting (Parsler names four major challenges), these are seen as certain difficulties that may present themselves during the game. One historical challenge that Parsler names is “women”. As *Frail Realities* was a larp that is based on real history of the 19th century, it meant that women would be seen as second class citizens. But, as the game designers wanted women of the game world to have exactly the same options as the male characters, the fictional religion of the game world was designed to allow women to have equal rights. (Parsler, 2008)

Another interesting example of a larp design is the design process of a Danish larp game called *The White Road*. What makes this interesting is the design approach of strictly following the *Dogma '99* manifesto (Fatland and Wingård, 1999) of larp design. *Dogma '99* sets strict rules on how larps should be designed: they aim to strip larps of all excess and props, in order to find the true essence of larping, which, according to the dogma (Fatland and Wingård, 1999) is “a meeting between people who, through their roles, relate to each other in a fictional world”. Also, game mechanics are forbidden, everything needs to happen as it would actually happen. From the designers point of view, following this kind of strict guidelines eliminates a lot of design possibilities but at the same time it forces the designers to focus on the most important element of larping: the relationships. (Pedersen and Munck, 2008)

A third example, a bit more down to earth example, adventurous romanticism, is presented by Katri Lassila (Lassila, 2008). Lassila, with her friend Laura Kalli, has set out to write larps that are an enjoyable experience for everybody. They describe their design goals as being to create games that, by their standards, are made to entertain and liberate people. They name “every character is in a leading role” to be one of their central design principles. What they wanted to achieve with their games is the feeling they experienced in their childhoods, the feelings of joy and focus, when they imagined being pirates and cowboys. They want their games to be entertaining. (Lassila, 2008)

Conclusions on the tabletop RPG design process

Lot of the material focuses on defining and listing different elements and features of RPG's. Although this might feel boring and uninspiring, it is important for a RPG designer to understand what are the elements (both visible and invisible) of their game and how they

affect each other. This way, if the designer feels that the game fails to create meaningful and desired gameplay situations, a designer can analyze whether all the elements of their game are designed to serve the desired experience.

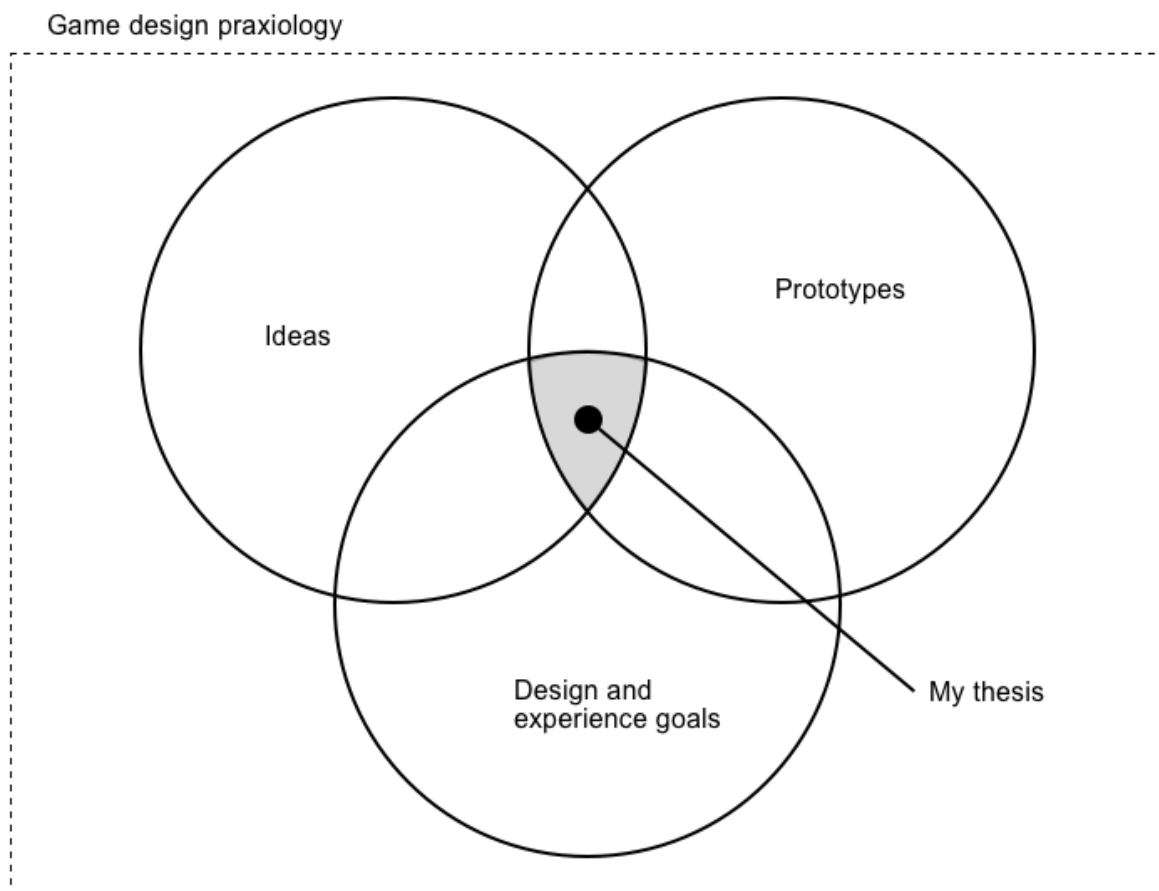
As an example, even if one's game is designed to be very simple and easy to play, there are still lots of things happening under the hood. And if the game designer is not able to identify all those factors that affect the gameplay, then they might miss on something important that will eventually break the game.

The literature review clearly shows that even though there is a lot of material about playing RPG's, RPG elements and mechanics, larp theory, design patterns, and vocabulary, the actual and concrete act of *designing* and *developing* RPG's is not extensively covered.

3. Theoretical framework

My theoretical framework includes three key concepts. As I'm interested in and studying how ideas are born, refined and then manifested into first playable versions, I'm studying my subject through three different lenses: 1) ideas, 2) experience / design goals and 3) prototypes.

I am analyzing and examining my data from the point of view of game design praxiology (Kultima, 2018). Game design praxiology includes everything that goes into the practice of creating games and the special nature of development processes and sensemaking of the creators. It also sheds light into the experiences that creators (people) go through while making games (Kultima, 2018, 156). The focus of design praxiology are the design practices and processes: how designers work, and what kind of methods and design tools they use while designing games. On the other side of this coin is design phenomenology, the study of game artifacts, and their form and function. (Lankoski and Holopainen, 2017)



In this chapter, I first present some theories about what creativity is and how ideas are born. Ideas, even though the designers often claim so, are not flashes out of blue sky, but instead the birth of an idea can be systematically broken down into different phases, and in several different ways. Second part of this chapter discusses the theories behind experience and design goals. Without a defined experience goal, the game is just a set of rules without any deeper meaning. Finally, the third part of this chapter introduces some theories about prototypes: what are they and why do designers create and use them.

3.1. Creative thinking and new ideas

Creativity is a deep and complex subject. The following summary on creative thinking and idea generation is brief and limited, but it's there to set the stage for understanding some of the creative components and processes that coming up with game ideas might include. This summary also sees creativity from the perspective of creating games, not playing them.

Human creativity is something of a mystery, a paradox. While some ideas can be new to the whole of mankind, some other ideas can be new only to the person who had them. Related to this, *creativity* can be seen as the ability to come up with ideas that are new, surprising and valuable. If a person comes up with an idea that is new to them, it can be described as P-creativity, meaning psychological creativity. These kinds of ideas are new and surprising to the person themselves, but not necessarily for someone else. But, if someone comes up with an idea that (as far as we know) no one has ever had before, then it goes into the category of H-creativity (historical creativity). (Boden, 2016)

Another way of understanding creative ideas is to see them as a combination of three conditions (MacKinnon, 1964, as cited in Valojärvi, 2021). First, the idea that emerges needs to be novel or new, or at least something that hasn't been seen too often. Second, the novelty of the idea is not enough. It also needs to address some problem or need of our reality, fit to some situation, or try to accomplish some recognizable goal. The third condition is that the idea needs to be evaluated, elaborated and developed to the full.

Someone also needs to have these ideas. One take on the key qualities of a creative person are the three conditions that are based on the work of Carl Rogers, and his article *Toward a theory of creativity* (Rogers, 1954):

1. Openness to experience. The creative individual is not limiting themselves with predetermined categories, defenses or attitudes when receiving stimulus. The

individual can receive conflicting information without forcing closure on the situation: the individual can live in the moment, so to speak.

2. An internal locus of evaluation. For a creative person, the value of their creations is judged internally, within that individual. The value of their creation is not established by anyone else but the creator, and no outside evaluation can change how the creator sees their creation.
3. The ability to toy with elements and concepts. A creative person has an ability to combine, mix and connect things in new, and even ridiculous, ways. And as the creative person creates thousands of “useless” possibilities, from that mess one or two valuable and novel ideas can emerge.

In 1924 the mathematician Henri Poincaré introduced an idea of dividing the creative process, or the process of gaining insights, into four different phases. These phases typically include a period of initial investigation of the problem (first stage), followed by a phase of mental rest and a more relaxed way of approaching the problem (second stage). What follows next is the “Eureka” moment where the idea appears, probably at some unexpected or unlikely place (third stage). And finally, the solution needs further development (fourth stage). (Lawson, 2006)

One of the most influential theories of how the creative process works, and how people come up with their ideas, is the four-stage model of Graham Wallas from 1926. This model has served and continues to serve as a basis for several different and more developed models on creativity and idea generation (Valojärvi, 2021). The four stages in Wallas’ theory are (Wallas, 1926, as cited in Valojärvi, 2021, 26)

1. Preparation: During the preparation stage, the mind prepares for the creative solution, which requires study and thinking intently on the subject.
2. Incubation: A germination period follows. The person steps away from the problem and takes up some form of activity, such as daydreaming, walking, or meditation.
3. Illumination: Often, like a flash, a brilliant idea shoots across the mind, frequently during a mundane task or while one is involved with something else.
4. Verification: The idea is tested to determine its validity.

The Wallas’ four-stage model is also expanded with the fifth stage, “first insight” (Kneller, 1965, as cited in Lawson, 2006, 148), which is actually the new first stage of the model. This stage involves recognizing that some problem exists and making a commitment to solving it, either consciously or unconsciously. The duration of this stage can vary from very short

moments to several years. It is also interesting that many creative professionals can't work creatively without this kind of clearly stated problem. (Lawson, 2006)

One important factor of coming up with insights and ideas is experience. Study by Laxton (1969, as cited in Lawson, 2006) concluded that children cannot be expected to be truly creative without a so-called "reservoir of experience". Laxton argued that learning to be creative goes through three different stages (1696, as cited in Lawson, 2004, Lawson, 2006):

1. Ability to initiate or express ideas, which depends on having a reservoir of knowledge where to draw those ideas. The reservoir needs to be well filled.
2. Ability to evaluate and discriminate between ideas.
3. Ability to interpret and transform ideas into appropriate and relevant contexts.

It's reasonable to suppose that experienced designers have simply seen more and made more connections already in their heads than inexperienced designers, resulting in more ideas: they have an ability to see some underlying patterns and themes that enable them to make a connection with some earlier event or idea from their past. (Lawson, 2004) Kneller (1965, as cited in Lawson, 2006) continues the thought by pointing that one of the paradoxes of creativity is that if one wants to have original ideas, they need first to familiarize themselves with the work and ideas of others. This knowledge can then work as a "springboard" for original and novel ideas.

According to Boden (2016), creativity can happen in three main ways: 1) as a combination of familiar ideas, 2) exploring conceptual spaces, and 3) transforming spaces. The first, combination of familiar ideas, includes making unfamiliar combinations of familiar ideas. These combinations can happen by accident or deliberately. But, in order for these kinds of ideas to have some point and value, there needs to be understandable connections and value when two or more familiar ideas are combined into a new one. This kind of creativity requires a rich store of knowledge, and an ability to see value in new ideas. (Boden, 2016)

A second way, exploring conceptual spaces, is an act of coming up with a new idea within some conceptual space. Conceptual space is a structured style of thought, one example being a certain way of writing prose or a certain way of composing music. Conceptual space can be seen as any disciplined way of thinking that is familiar (and valued by) a certain social group. If an individual comes up with a new idea within some conceptual space, they are being creative in an exploratory sense. (Boden, 2016)

The third way of creativity to happen, the deepest case of creativity, is when an individual encounters an apparently impossible idea, and transforms the whole space of thinking. This kind of idea can only come about if the individual can somehow change their pre-existing style of thinking altogether. This way the thoughts that were previously impossible within the untransformed conceptual space are now possible because the whole conceptual space has been transformed. (Boden, 2016)

When reflecting the ideas and theories of ideas and creativity on RPG design, there are a couple of noteworthy phenomena happening in the RPG design scene. First, Boden's concept of creativity being combining familiar ideas to create something new is a very close relative to a method of "hacking" a RPG game. Hacking means that a designer takes the ruleset of some existing RPG, and then combines it with some sort of new idea, world or setting. This way, two familiar ideas are combined to create something new. This is very common and some games are deliberately designed to be hacked and reused.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has also sent RPG hobbyists and designers to explore new conceptual spaces and, in a way, to change their styles of thinking altogether. This mainly happens in online and digital spaces as the boundaries of local RPG sessions have been broken: if before the RPG designers designed and created something that was meant to be played around the same table, with the same group, now game designers can design something that is meant to be played with almost anyone on this planet.

3.2. Experience goals

Setting some sort of goals for design work is not a new idea, and some sort of goals or requirements are part of almost any product development process. The basic idea of experience goal is that the design process starts by defining what kind of experience to design for, and take that as a starting point of generating new ideas. What is also noteworthy is the statement of defining "the intended experience before functionality and technology". (Roto et al., 2017, 6993) In other words, the experience goal leaves the technology solution open (Lu and Roto, 2014).

Experience-driven design aims to evoke a certain user experience. In order to succeed in this, at least two challenges need to be tackled. First, the desired experience needs to be articulated in a way that it enables the designer to work towards it. Second challenge is to design something that *actually* evokes the desired user experience. The design goal is

formulated as “target experience”, which needs to be well defined and precise. (Desmet and Schifferstein, 2011)

Putting the experience at the center of the design process is a simple way of organizing and integrating design ideas. As the experience (that the end user has with a product or service) is always personal and subjective, the designer can't design the *actual* experience. The experience itself is always affected by factors that the designer can't do anything about: people's internal states and moods, for example. But the experience is also affected by a lot of factors that the designer can control: sensory qualities, sound, smell, mass, texture and so on. All these are expressive qualities of the things designers design. For this reason it's also important that designers aim to understand as much as possible about the social, personal and cultural interpretations of different design elements. Only this way the designer can be confident that they are aiming for the right (experience) goal. (Fulton Suri, 2003)

Experience goals in game design

In game design literature, player experience goals are defined as goals that the game designer sets for the type of experience that players will have during the game. They are not features of the game but rather descriptions of the interesting and unique situations in which the designer hopes that the players will find themselves. (Fullerton, 2015) Player experience goals represent the experiences the designer wants players to have, often described as emotional experiences. These experiences and emotions are also usually the main reasons why players spend time with any given game. Experience goal can also be seen as a method of evaluating, excluding and including ideas. When the game designers focus on the experience they want the player to have, they can begin to free themselves from preconceptions about what playing a certain game is or isn't like. (Lemarchand, 2021)

A concrete example of experience goals in tabletop games can be found from Rules of Play (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003). The book includes a “commissioned essay” by game designer Reiner Knizia who describes his work with the *Lord of the Rings (Knizia, 2000)* board game. Knizia doesn't explicitly mention experience goals in his text but he clearly has the concept in his toolbox. In the essay (Knizia, 2003, 22-27), Knizia introduces three major experience goals he had while designing the Lord of the Rings. First, he wanted players to understand that cooperation is the only chance in winning in the game. Like in the books, the forces of good need to work together to defeat the forces of evil. Players who would try to win the game without the help of others, soon realized that it's too dangerous to go on without other's support. Second experience that Knizia wanted the game to convey was the

“sense of claustrophobia and impending doom - just as in the book” (Knizia, 2003, 24). This was done by adding a corruption line mechanism to the game. During the progression of the game the player characters (who were all hobbits) were inevitably pushed towards Sauron, who at the same time was moving towards the hobbits. The third experience that Knizia wanted the players to have was the feeling that the player characters (the hobbits) were not in control of events, very much like in the book. This experience was implemented to the game as a form of game events that couldn't be controlled or anticipated by the players.

A close relative to experience goal is a “problem statement” (Hiwiller, 2016, chapter 2) of a game. It's a simple way of asking what the designers want to do with their game. One way to create a problem statement is to formulate a simple “What if...” sentence. The problem statement doesn't explain what the game is or what the features are when it's finished, instead it tries to communicate what is interesting about the game. For example, a problem statement for Heavy Rain (2010, Quantic Dream) could be “What would it be like to play a movie?” The problem statement doesn't have to be what makes the game completely unique, but it needs to say what is the fundamental core of the game, and if the problem statement is poor, it doesn't get at the heart of the game. A good problem statement gets down to the design goals and so the development team or a single developer can create a unique and focused design. (Hiwiller, 2016)

To conclude, knowing where you are headed with the game is one way for a designer to focus their work. A vision, a creative or a commercial goal (or both), needs to be defined: this way the designer knows what problem they are trying to solve, and knowing the problem is knowing the foundation of your creative process. (Baur, 2019)

3.3. Prototypes

Prototype is a word that has roots in Medieval Latin (*prototypus*), 16th century French (*prototype*) and Greek (*prōtotypon*). It translates into “primitive form, original, or model after which anything is formed.” (www.etymonline.com, n.d.)

It's important to see the difference between *prototypes* and *prototyping*. Prototypes are the representations and manifestations of design ideas. Prototyping is the act of creating, using and utilizing prototypes during the design process. (Lim, Stolterman and Tenenberg, 2008)

Prototypes are representations of design ideas. The materials and tools that are used to create a prototype don't matter. What matters is how a prototype is used by the designer to

explore or demonstrate some aspect of the future design. Even a brick can be a prototype if it is used to represent the weight and scale of some future design or product. (Houde and Hill, 1997) For example, if the focus of prototyping is exploring a design space, it's important to create as simple a prototype as possible that can be used to filter out interesting qualities of the future design. Prototypes can cover just one or more aspects of a design idea. (Lim, Stolterman and Tenenberg, 2008).

Prototypes enable designers to learn, discover, generate and refine designs. They are tools that are embedded and immersed in design practice, and not just a tool for proving success or failure of some design. They are designers' collaborators, which help them to understand and examine their ideas. (Lim, Stolterman and Tenenberg, 2008) When designers externalize their ideas as prototypes, the world can speak back to them (Schön 1987, as cited in Lim, Stolterman and Tenenberg, 2008).

Prototypes can also be used to understand, explore or communicate experiences, especially the experience of what it *might* be like to engage with a product, space or system. These kinds of prototypes are referred to as "experience prototypes" (Buchenau and Fulton Suri, 2000). These prototypes use whatever representations necessary to (re)live or convey an experience that is as close as possible to the final design. In experience prototyping the core idea is to allow designers and other users to "experience it by themselves" instead of witnessing a demonstration or examining someone else's experience of the design. This is reasoned by the nature of experience, which is always subjective, and the best way to understand something is to actually experience it (or at least something very close to it). Experience prototyping is not about tools, it's more of an attitude. Experience prototyping allows designers to think about the design problem as an integrated experience instead of one or more specific artifacts. (Buchenau and Fulton Suri, 2000)

Prototypes can be divided into two categories (Lim, Stolterman and Tenenberg, 2008, 7:3):

1. prototypes are for traversing a design space, leading to the creation of meaningful knowledge about the final design as envisioned in the process of design
2. prototypes are purposefully formed manifestations of design idea

Prototype as tools for traversing design space. Prototypes are incomplete designs, and that is where their strength lies. The incompleteness enables designers to examine the qualities of some idea without building a copy of the final design. The prototypes are filters, a means of generative and evaluative discovery: they are used to discovering problems and exploring

new solution directions. Incomplete prototype reveals certain aspects of design ideas, filtering and surfacing certain qualities. (Lim, Stolterman and Tenenberg, 2008)

Prototypes as manifestations of a design idea. When a designer creates and envisions their idea, they necessarily develop it in their heads at the same time as they are moving it out into the world. When a designer is creating a prototype, they are transforming their ideas into some sort of “physical” manifestation. These manifestations can take almost any form or appearance, based on the designer's choices. The simplest form can be a sketch on a paper, and even these simple configurations of images and text can serve design purposes. (Lim, Stolterman and Tenenberg, 2008)

Prototypes in game design

Prototyping is said to be the only reliable means to evaluate the quality of design ideas. Games are complex systems and the actual game play situation is too unpredictable to be imagined by the designer. (Neil, 2012) A game prototype is a quick sketch of a game. Of course, “quick” is relative to the size of the game: a prototype of a large digital game can take months to create, but a prototype of a simple analog game can be done in minutes. (Hiwiller, 2016)

In a typical game development project, prototypes are produced in preliminary stages of the process, with intense focus on game-play and usually disregarding artistic presentation (Almeida and da Silva, 2013). Early prototypes are ugly and crude but they are still more than presentation tools - they are playable artifacts that cover at least some part of the finished game: Foundational game design questions like “Are the players having fun?” and “Do they want to play again” can not be answered by just crafting rules or writing design documents. These questions can only be answered by actually playing the game. Prototypes are also an integral part of the iterative and playful nature of the game design process as they allow designers to create, test and refine their games throughout the entire process. By creating and playing (and watching others play) game prototypes, the designers become players themselves. (Salen and Zimmerman 2003)

In game design the difference between testing the ideas and presenting them is the difference between prototypes and demos – and prototypes are not demos. Instead, prototypes should only explore and test a very small number of things, or maybe even just one thing. The most important part of the prototype building is to make sure that the designer knows what question they are trying to answer with this particular prototype. (Lemarchand,

2021). Game ideas should be prototyped and tested early and often (Fullerton, 2015; Lemarchand, 2021). It's suggested that a prototype of the game should be created and tested, at the absolute latest, 20% of the way into a project schedule. (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003)

Prototypes are produced to refine, test and perfect the simplistic model of a core mechanic into a good shape before any other people are brought into the project (Fullerton, 2015). Also, there is no standard way of creating a prototype. The designers and developers will use whatever tools they have, ranging from digital prototyping tools to simple note cards and dice. The important thing is to create materials that support the basic rules the designer has in mind. If the designer is creating a role-playing or storytelling game, the designer should limit their prototype to cover just one scenario of play (Hiwiler, 2016)

Game prototypes are valuable tools for game designers as they allow them to do several things (Hiwiler, 2016):

- They force designers to make decisions about non-obvious edge cases that happen during the game
- They allow the designer to focus on the core of the game experience without using resources for polishing the game materials and elements
- They allow designers to test the the game with impartial players, and gather feedback
- They allow designers to make big changes quickly to the game without using too much time. Prototypes are also easy to give up on because they have been created quickly and no large investments haven't been made to them.

When creating prototypes, failure is not only an option, it is expected. That is why game prototypes should be done quickly and without too much investment. One of their purposes is to show to the designer when the game experience turns unfun or suboptimal. The designer should be ready to throw away ideas that they like, in order to refine the prototype, and the game, to be better. (Hiwiler, 2016)

4. Research and analysis methods

My research is conducted by following the principles and ideas of explorative research as described by Swedberg (2020). In general, explorative research methods are used for two different purposes. First, there is no or limited scientific knowledge about some research topic, and second, to generate new and interesting theories about a subject that has already been researched. The core of exploratory study is to find something new (Swedberg, 2020).

My main reason for choosing an explorative approach is the lack of research data on the design process of RPG's. As said earlier, researchers explore when they have little or no scientific knowledge about a group, process or activity they are interested in, but at the same time they believe that there is something worth discovering (Swedberg, 2020). To effectively explore their subject, the researcher must approach it with two special orientations, flexibility and open-mindedness. Both qualitative and quantitative data may be gathered during exploratory research but qualitative data usually predominates exploratory research. But that is not to say that exploratory research is a synonym for qualitative research. (Stebbins, 2001)

I see the use of exploratory study methods more of an attitude: I don't know where my methods will take me and what kind of results they will produce. My process is to gather data, analyze it and then present the (hopefully) interesting results. All my research methods are explained in detail in this chapter.

4.1. Collecting data with interviews

Semi-structured interviews

Structured interviews are carefully planned and standardized questionnaires, usually with a lot of closed questions and some pre-coded response options. Then, on the other end of the line are unstructured interviews that only have a topic. Semi-structured interviews are somewhere between these two interview methods. They can be defined as a more systematic and more pre-planned method than unstructured interviews but they shouldn't be planned to an extent that there is no freedom in the response pattern. (Olsen, 2014)

Semi-structured interviews can also be seen as a mixture of standardized, mostly closed-ended surveys of individuals and free form, open-ended sessions with groups (Adams, 2015).

The method of semi-structured interviews was chosen because it supports the exploratory nature of the research topic. Also, semi-structured interviews are widely used across disciplines as a primary research method (Roulston and Choi, 2018). Semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to approach the interview situation with certain flexibility: the interviewer has a high-level interview structure as their backbone but they can also pursue more information by using a variety of follow-up questions, also known as probes (Olsen, 2014). The method also allows the dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee to delve into totally unforeseen directions (Adams, 2015).

While conducting semi-structured interviews, the order of questions is participant-led: the questions and probes, and their sequence are formulated based on what the interviewees have already said during the interview. This way the interviewer can have free-ranging discussions about the research topics, based on what the interview subjects have to say. (Roulston and Choi, 2018)

While using semi-structured interviews, the researcher doesn't decide on a fixed set of predetermined questions. Instead, they create an *interview guide* (Adams, 2015, Roulston and Choi, 2018), which is an outline of planned topics, themes and questions (and follow-up questions), and their tentative order (Adams, 2015). In the context of semi-structured interviews, the concept of *prompt* (Olsen, 2014) is also essential. Prompts are words, phrases and simple follow-up questions that reassure the interview subject that the interviewer is listening to them and encourages them to go on and deeper into the theme they are currently talking about. The use of actual questions should be done in the beginning of the interview and during times when the interviewer feels that it is important to move on with the interview. (Olsen, 2014)

Interview guide

While creating the interview guide (the overall structure of the interview) it's vital to identify the priority questions (Adams, 2015). In my interview guide the top questions are divided into two priorities: top and second. The second tier questions will be asked if the interview time allows it. When creating the questions and themes for my interview guide, I had a clear goal in my head: I wanted to make sure that with all my top tier questions I would be able to approach my research question from several different perspectives. I created a list of questions and themes that were likely to spark descriptions and discussions that were relevant to my research question (Roulston and Choi, 2018). The interview guide should also

always be seen as work in progress (Adams, 2015). I was fully prepared to edit my interview guide during the interview process.

The interview template had the following themes and high level questions:

Theme 1: Introduction (Top tier). The interviewees were welcomed to the online meeting. The thesis process and subject was introduced, the data handling procedure was covered, and the permission to record audio was confirmed. Also, after the mandatory greetings and confirmations, I had prepared one warm up question to break the ice and start the interview comfortably (Adams, 2015). My warmup question was: What role-playing game related stuff have you been designing lately?

Theme 2: The design process in general (Top tier). I started with a broad theme and as the interview progressed, I wanted to have more detailed and specific questions (Roulston and Choi, 2018). At the start of the actual interview, the designers were asked to broadly describe their design process. They could use their own words and start wherever they felt natural. The themes of starting the process, coming up with ideas and inspiration were also covered here.

Theme 3: Game X and its design process (Top tier). The interviewed designers were asked to walk through the whole process of one of their recently published games. Some elements and design phases of older games were also covered and compared to the newer ones. The whole process was covered, from the very first ideas to testing and prototypes and to defining the game ready.

Theme 4: Prototypes and testing (Top tier). The interviewed designers were asked to dive deeper into their prototyping and testing methods. The topics of building prototypes, finding game testers, gathering and analyzing the data and iterating the game materials were covered. Also, the definition of “ready” was discussed during this segment.

Theme 5: Design restrictions (Top tier). The interviewed designers were asked to discuss the themes of design restrictions. During what part of the process they start to think about possible design restrictions like budget, materials, etc? What restrictions do they identify, And how do those restrictions affect the design process?

Theme 6: Self reflection, growth and game design theory (Second tier). The interviewed designers were asked how their design process evolved during their years as a designer.

What have they learned and how have they grown as designers? The topics of resources and learning and studying game design theory were also discussed briefly.

Theme 7: Definition of a roleplaying game (Second tier). As a final question, the designers were asked to define tabletop role-playing games from their own design perspective.

Interviewees

I interviewed seven designers, the youngest being in their mid-twenties and the oldest being in their late forties. In this group I had four males, two females and one non-binary. All except one of the designers can be considered being caucasian, and all of the designers are part of the “Western” cultural world. They were from Finland, Sweden, the United States and Australia.

I focused on “indie” designers, who tend to work alone or with a very small team, but who are commercially publishing and/or selling their products, and aiming to make at least some money, if not the whole livelihood, with them. All of the designers had published more games than just one. This inclusion criteria of “indie” sprung out from practicality and reachability, since the designers of AAA products were probably very hard to reach and could be limited by NDA’s. I also focused on designers who are mainly working with unlicensed and original content.

The designers were given ID’s from A-G. These ID’s are used in the later part of the thesis with the quotes from the designers. Also, in the table below there are listed the years of design experience of each designer.

Designer ID	Years of design experience
Designer A	5 years
Designer B	5 years
Designer C	6 years
Designer D	20 years
Designer E	30 years
Designer F	15 years
Designer G	7 years

Conducting interviews

The interviews were conducted during January 2022. All seven interviews were done through Google Meet, a browser based online conferencing software that doesn't require anything special or downloads to work. All the interviews were recorded (audio only) with Garageband, and the audio files were stored both locally on my computer and as .mp3 files to Google Cloud (as a backup).

Audio recordings were made because without an audio recording, the analysis of interviews would have been strongly limited. The original narrative of the designers would have been corrupted if the analysis would have relied only on my personal notes made during or after the interview. It's common for important details like metaphors or idioms to change if the interviewer tries to remember them afterwards. (Olsen, 2014)

The interviews were 45-60 minutes long, depending on how chatty the day the designer was having. All the questions and themes (both top and second tier) were covered in all the interviews. It's worth mentioning that at the start of every interview session, it was agreed with the designer that the maximum length of the session is 60 minutes. This is considered as a reasonable maximum length for a semi-structured interview session for not fatiguing the interview subject or the interviewer too much (Adams, 2015).

A small adjustment to the interview guide was made after the first two interviews: the designers were asked to analyze whether and how they identify viable and non-viable ideas, and whether ideas that lead into published or ready games had something in common from the very beginning. These new questions added one more theme into the interview template: Theme 3: Identifying viable and nonviable ideas (Top tier). Designers were asked whether they have a lot of ideas that never transformed into a game. They were also asked to analyze whether there are some common elements in ideas that get finished and published, and also if there are some common elements in ideas that never go anywhere.

After the adjustment I had a total of eight themes in my interview guide. All the rest of the interviews then followed the updated interview guide structure, although the follow up questions and more detailed questions varied a lot from interview to interview.

4.2. Analyzing and categorizing data

As explained previously, my data was collected through semi-structured interviews. This data was recorded in audio format, then transcribed to text, then coded two times and finally transformed into themes.

The transcript process was done with the help of *Amberscript*, a browser application that transformed the audio files into a very rough body of text. This text file was then used as a base for the final manual transcription. After transcribing the audio files into text, there were a total of 41 117 words worth of data. The process led me into listening to all the interviews again and again, as it is a very valuable way of reminding us about the contents of the interviews (Brophy, Snooks and Griffiths, 2008).

The transliterated interview data was then coded, and re-coded, using two different coding methods as described below. The coding was done with *ATLAS.ti* software. Coding, in the context of qualitative analysis, means giving pieces of data meaning that can be later used for detecting patterns, creating categories, building theory and for other analytical purposes (Saldaña, 2016). In practice, it means going through each interview in detail and identifying themes, and labeling them so all the small pieces of data can be easily found again and the researcher can bring together all similar pieces from several different interviews (Brophy, Snooks and Griffiths, 2008). One code is often a single word or short phrase that is applied for one datum (in my case, piece of text) (Saldaña, 2016). These datums are later described as *quotations*.

As a coding example: A quote from a game designer said: *“I think what we normally look for is: Observing how the group plays the game, what they engage with, what they say during kind of like write down a lot of, I guess like qualitative data from our end. Like as we're watching the game play out. And see how it's running.”* This quotation was coded with the codes: *analyzing feedback, gathering feedback, playtesting*

First round of qualitative coding

The first round of coding the data was done by combining two methods of qualitative coding: process coding and descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2016).

Process coding was selected as a main method of coding because it's appropriate for basically any qualitative study, but mainly because it's especially good for studies that search

for routines and rituals of human life. The format of process coding is to use gerunds, “ing-” words, that are associated with action. (Saldaña, 2016)

Process coding was used to code all the quotations that dealt with any active part of the design process, describing design methods, activities and actions related to the design process. Some example codes that were used when coding the data with process coding method are: *building first versions, analyzing rewards, editing text, abandoning work, working with mechanics.*

Descriptive coding was another coding method that was used during the first round of coding. This method uses single words or short phrases to code quotations, and it describes the basic topic of a quotation that it is applied to. (Saldaña, 2016)

Descriptive coding was used to identify and collect pieces of data that didn’t describe any action, but were otherwise interesting and identified as useful for further analysis: numbers and amounts, hard facts, backgrounds, interesting quotes, etc. Some example codes that were used when coding the data with a descriptive coding method are: *playtesting numbers, genre fiction, playtesting, desire to explore some world*

During the first round of coding, the portions of data can vary from single words to paragraphs or even to full pages of data (Saldaña, 2016). In my case, I kept the quotations quite short, for both the first and the second round of coding. The quotations were 1-3 sentences long, on average.

Second round of qualitative coding

While I was approaching the end of my first round of coding, I started to notice patterns, things and facts that I had missed when coding the first interviews. These new findings and ideas were the main focus of my second round of coding. I wanted to apply these new ideas to all the interview documents, not just to the ones I had coded last during the first round.

New *process codes* were applied to quotations that were related to defining rule structures, finding playtesters and activities that happened after the game was ready and published. New *descriptive codes* were applied to quotations that were related to the backgrounds and other professions of the designers and their experience with game design.

Also, during the second round of coding many of the quotations were coded again: codes were removed and applied to several quotations to create a more coherent and robust big picture. There were also some codes that had been created by mistake or didn't have any quotations. These codes were removed. At the end of the second round I had 150 codes (136 process codes, 14 descriptive codes), 694 quotations and nine analytic memos. One quotation can be coded with multiple different codes.

Analytic memos

Analytic memo is a reflection and thinking tool for a researcher: As the researcher goes through coding the data corpus, they write analytic memos where they record their ideas on coding process, initial ideas, emerging patterns, themes, categories and concepts. The memos don't follow any particular format. (Saldaña, 2016)

When anything that feels relevant or important pops into the researcher's mind, they should stop doing what they are doing and write a memo about whatever comes to their mind. These ideas and epiphanies will possibly lead to new theories and results in the end. (Saldaña, 2016)

I wrote a total of nine analytic memos, one for each day that I spent by writing the transcriptions and coding the data corpus. The memos were my tool to record ideas, patterns, themes and conclusions that ran through my mind while working with the audio files and the coding. They were written to give initial shapes to the ideas that were to be presented as results of my study.

Categorizing the codes

After two rounds of coding the data, the codes were divided into 26 categories. This was done to create order, groups and consolidated meaning out of the data (Saldaña, 2016). The subcategories were created based on the similarity between codes: if the codes were addressing the same theme or part of the process, they were inserted into the same category. Reasoning, as well as tacit and intuitive senses were used while seeking out the similarities (Saldaña, 2016).

The 26 categories were then divided into four main categories. These main categories were created by reflecting the 26 existing categories to my research question: Each main category should have a unique approach to answering my research question.

One code, as well as one quotation, can be part of many categories and subcategories. In the listing below, all the subcategories have the amount of individual codes grouped under them in parenthesis.

Main category 1: Vocalizing the design process. First main category included all the codes that included quotations that described or discussed some part of the design process. As all the designers described their process in quite similar, chronological and even constructed ways, this category became very chronological in nature: almost all the sub-categories are related to some part of the design process.

Main category 2: Process variables. Second main category included all the codes that included quotations that described or discussed different variables that somehow have an effect on the design process and working methods.

Main category 3: Artifacts. Third main category included all the codes that included quotations that described or discussed different physical or digital outcomes, artifacts or components that were created during the design process.

Main category 4: Miscellaneous. Fourth main category included all the codes that didn't fit into any other category. These codes and quotations are more factual, concrete and quantitative in their nature.

All the sub-category codes of these four main categories are presented on the Appendix 1 table.

Content analysis and themes

Analyzing data is more than just coding and classifying it. At some point the data needs to be represented in a way that makes sense in context of the research question. And there is no one way to transform the data into a coherent text, the writing of qualitative research has never been monolithic. (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996)

As this thesis focuses on the design process of a tabletop role-playing game and the overall generalities and repeating patterns that it has, I keep the level of generality (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) quite high: I analyze the data in a way that I can make some generalizations

(themes) about the process, instead of comparing details and differences between individual game designers and their working methods.

In this thesis I use the methods of qualitative content analysis (Vuori, n.d.) to create themes out of the gathered interview data. In qualitative content analysis, the researcher focuses on the things, subjects and themes that the collected material is all about. The focus is on the content and information of the interviews, not on how the designers use language or certain words. Also, when comparing qualitative content analysis to content analysis, the biggest difference is the approach: content analysis is usually used to analyze big amounts of data with quantitative or statistical methods. Also, qualitative content analysis doesn't build on any specific theory or method, so there are no laws written in stone how analysis should be done. (Vuori, n.d.)

Qualitative content analysis is very similar to finding themes (theming), and the two terms are often used to mean the same thing (Vuori, n.d.). When creating themes, the researcher identifies patterns and conclusions that are relevant when answering the research question. It's also common practice to present direct quotes with the themes, to support and concretise the thought processes behind the identified and presented themes. It's also important to remember that the interview themes (those presented in the interview guide) are not the themes that are presented as the findings of the research. If the researcher is listening to their data with a keen and sensitive ear, they can present very different kinds of themes as findings of the study.

In research, the theme can be seen as an unifying "red thread" that is running through several categories, and as something that brings meaning to the topic. Themes can also be quite abstract, or even difficult to catch, and sometimes finding relevant themes might mean that the researcher distances themselves from the data that they have. But once the theme is identified, it appears obvious. (Graneheim, Lindgren and Lundman, 2017) The most important thing is that themes are born out of the analysis, they are not predefined: themes are the things that repeat while the researcher goes through their data (Juhila, n.d.).

To find and identify the themes, I went through all the quotations in each subcategory. As I was roaming through the data, I kept my mind open for any interesting findings but also tried to keep my theoretical framework in the back of my head to guide the pattern recognition. While reading the quotations of a subcategory again and again, I wrote down repeating patterns, ideas and words to a simple text file as well as kept a simple record of how many

times some idea or theme surfaced. After a couple of rounds reading the quotations I started to recognize insightful and interesting findings and patterns amidst all the data.

5. Findings

This chapter presents the key findings reflected through the earlier findings from literature. I present some general observations about the RPG design process, and then go through the findings by reflecting them to each key element of my theoretical framework: I make some observations about how ideas are born and what inspires the designers. I examine the relationships between ideas and experience goals. And lastly, there are observations on how the designers turn their ideas into tangible prototypes, and how they approach and utilize them.

5.1. RPG design process, as described by the designers

How do the designers describe their process, methods and tools, on a high level? What are the praxiologies of RPG design, from their perspective? In the core of the RPG design process seems to be the experience goal. Many of the designers expressed that they approach the design process experience, concept, or theme first. The mechanics and rules are mentioned and discussed, but the most important core of the whole process is an idea or theme that inspires the designers enough for them to create a game around it. Without the one solid core idea there is nothing to design, and the design work doesn't progress. This "heart and core" of the game and the ideas around it are presented in more detail in the later subchapters of this chapter.

It was also interesting to see that some of the designers wanted their process to be very structured, and to include clearly defined design phases: ideation phase, finding the theme, creating structure, refinement, streamlining, and testing materials and usability. Some of the designers had even documented their process to be a living document that they systematically updated to include all the phases, tools and methods they are using. But on the other hand, many of the designers didn't recognize or follow any specific design process, and the working methods varied a lot. Based on these findings it can be said that RPG designers are not following any common process that would be the same for everyone: some of them follow a strict process, whereas someone else works entirely differently and intuitively when compared to more process driven designers.

RPG design is writing

Majority of the designers describe their design work as writing. It seems that the act of writing and rewriting is the main tool of thinking for the designers. Many of them used the word *writing* instead of *designing* when they were describing their process: they used phrases like “writing a game” or “writing a mechanic” instead of designing a game or designing a mechanic. One of the designers even had problems analyzing at what point the game and its mechanics are *actually* designed before the ideas manifest themselves on the computer screen as text. Many times it was described that the process goes in a way that you have an idea or a theme in your head and then you start to write, like there’s nothing in between. The design happens when you write.

“I usually write in a way that I have some ideas in my head and then I just write them down to see how they look. This is how I create a certain amount of text. Then at some point I have to make a table of contents, to see what this particular book will include. At that point you can always see that half of what you’ve written is total crap and needs to be deleted, but that’s how it goes.”

- Designer D, 20 years of design experience

“I start by defining, point by point, these are the themes I want to cover and these are the initial chapters of the book. (...) And when I’m happy with that, then I usually just start writing, very systematically: Chapter 1, these and these topics here.”

- Designer E, 30 years of design experience

One of the designers said that the words, and the emotional positions that those words put the player in, are much more important than the specifics of the mechanics. They said that one of their big moments as designer was to understand that the text is the key to make the players play the game that the designer wants them to play, not the mechanics.

“I consider myself a game designer, but a lot of that is centered on my relationship to the text. (...) in tabletop, when I’m writing a book for someone else to read, the specifics of the mechanic become less important to me than the emotional position that kind of the whole text puts you in, and the mechanics are just a portion of that. (...) I think of it as being that I understand that the poetry and the emotion and the place where text itself brings you, is more important than the precision of the mechanics. And I think that’s my, that’s my game design stuff.

- Designer F, 15 years of design experience

The data shows that it is important for the designers to get the idea out of their system, so they can start to work with it. So the method of taking the first steps with the idea, and to make it into something tangible, is to write some part of it somewhere. This can start as small as writing a one sentence, a “logline” or a phrase that captures something important about the game. The designers wrote their ideas out because in many cases that allowed them to see what the ideas “looked like” when they were finally externalized from their heads. Writing out the ideas also enabled the designers to start evaluating their ideas: while writing out their ideas, the designers started to see inconsistencies and whether their ideas were viable or nonviable.

“We are rewriting quite a lot because I write, I write... It's like a flow. I write down every idea I have, put it on paper, and then I... So that's all spelled out on a paper, and then maybe I do a second round to make it flow a bit better, and make the text “alpha good” (...) If I'm working on my own, I tend to take a break for a couple of weeks, and then I come back and write and rewrite and rewrite four or the fifth time or something like that.”

- Designer C, 6 years of design experience

“I usually write in a way that I have some ideas in my head... I write them down just to see how they look while in a text format.”

- Designer D, 20 years of design experience

“Personally, I tend to be a rewriter. I'm a chronic rewriter (...) I usually start with what we've come to affectionately call the trashcan version of rules, which is just literally like the most basic building blocks of the rules. Like what are they, what do we want to be in the rule book sort of written out more or less stream of consciousness.”

- Designer A, 5 years of design experience

In relation to writing, reading was also seen as an important part of the game design process. Some of the designers sent their ideas as texts to their friends and peers, and instead of actually playtesting the material. They wanted feedback about the text, not about the gameplay it produced.

“It's very important for me to work with someone who has opinions about the text. Someone who can tell me that the text is boring, uninspiring, or something like that.”

- Designer C, 6 years of design experience

It was also interesting to notice that for some designers the *de facto* format of a RPG is a book, whereas some other designers said that they didn't even know what the final format of the game will be during their design process, even if they had already designed and produced several iterations and prototypes of the game. There was a loose correlation between the experience, age and the format of a roleplaying game: older designers talked only about books as RPG products, but the younger designers were open to other formats as well.

RPG design is (not) self-expression

One element of the RPG design process is tied with the theme of self-expression. Can designing a RPG be compared to composing music or writing a novel? Yes, and no. The balance between self-expression and creating a product that is meant to make some serious profit varies a lot, and it unsurprisingly has something to do with money. The rule of thumb seems to be that the more serious the designer was to make money with their creations, the more they thought about marketing, target groups, etc, and less about the themes of self-expression.

"When we did the core book, we never thought about the players or other people. We only thought about ourselves. And I think that shines through the text and through the layout and everything. We wanted to do exactly what we wanted to do, and that's... I think that's the key point to why it became successful."

- *Designer C, 6 years of design experience*

"I think a lot of it is just growing, being a better writer, but also changing my relationship with kind of the active writing from something that I do because I need other people's approval, to something that brings myself joy. And similarly, my games... Going from games that I think other people would like, to games that please me, no matter how weird and idiosyncratic they are."

- *Designer F, 15 years of design experience*

One aspect of this theme is tied to the behavior of whether the designers played their games after they have been released. Some of them did: they toured conventions and game stores, presented their game and organized test plays. This was usually done because the designer felt that that is a good way of marketing and sharing the gospel of their game. And it was

done usually by the designers who didn't have other incomes in their life than designing and selling games.

"I like the idea that people might play our game. So I try to encourage that, and I've noticed that people will feel more courageous to run the game themselves after they've played it before."

- Designer A, 5 years of design experience

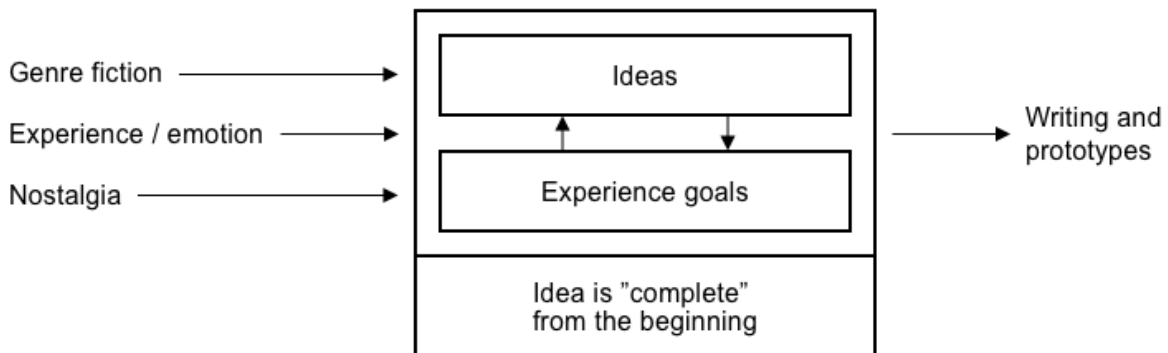
On the flip side, some of the designers had never played a single session of any of their games after the release: when they have released the game, it "evaporates" from their brain and gives room for new things to appear. They are simply not interested in their game after the release, they want to do something else. In terms of self-expression, I think this has an interesting connection to writers and musicians: once they have released their latest piece of art, they usually feel that now their idea (whatever they wanted to say) is out there, in the wild, and now they want to start with something new. A musician rarely listens to their own music. These designers, unsurprisingly, were the ones whose income does not entirely depend on the sales of their RPG creations.

When it comes to the theme of who the designers design their games for, there was a wide range of answers. Some said plainly that the games they create are not for themselves, and they think a lot about the themes, mechanics and ideas from the perspective of the potential player (and buyer). But yet again, other designers said that the games are especially made to make their designers happy, and these designers wanted to keep the games "true" to themselves and do exactly the kind of games they feel are rewarding to do for them.

5.2. Building blocks of a viable RPG idea

There was no one way the designers came up with game ideas. Some of them sat down to brainstorm with their colleagues or booked actual time slots for ideation, and some of them said to have "Eureka" moments while showering or jogging. But when it came to analyzing RPG ideas, some common nominators could be found. First, the ideas and inspirations seem to be growing from a mixture of genre fiction, personal experiences and nostalgia. These three elements are not three distinct elements, the lines are very blurry. Second, in the very heart of a viable RPG idea is always a certain experience or emotion. Third, the viable ideas, those that actually lead to published games are always described to be solid and "whole" from the beginning.

INSPIRATION → IDEAS → CREATING



Genre fiction

Without asking to do so, the designers named several different genres and works of fiction as their main sources of inspiration for certain games. The named inspiration sources varied from young adult fiction, to sports anime, and to “sword & sorcery” styled pulp fantasy. The formats ranged from digital games to movies, books and comics. The designers stated many times that they wanted to create similar experiences and situations for the players as their inspiration pieces had created for them. They wanted players and characters to do things that the designers felt were integral elements of the specified genre. From the designer's perspective, it was important to identify those inspirations and experiences, and then transform them into rules and mechanics. As an example, adventures in sword and sorcery fantasy are known to be very dangerous and action packed, so the rules of the sword and sorcery RPG should create those similar kinds of stories and situations.

“So it was about looking at the theme, looking at the kind of story I wanted to tell, which was like an emotional young adult based story about relationships, with the backdrop of something tragic that had happened and everybody trying to deal with that.”

- Designer G, 7 years of design experience

One of the designers vocalized their ideology in a manner that wraps up nicely the use of genre fiction as inspiration. They said that a movie, for example, is just a peek through the keyhole to a fictional world – but a role-playing game opens all the windows and doors to that world. In the designer's own words, a RPG is a productized tool for a player to enter a fictional world, as a fictional character, and experience situations that are related to that

fictional environment and particular genre. The designer expressed that RPG's are not just inspired by genre fiction, they *are* genre fiction. For the designers, RPG's are a way of creating genre fiction, and being a part of the genre fiction scene that they love.

"The idea for that came out of a friendship group that I had in high school who were really into sports anime specifically, and that we'd been playing games with them."

- Designer B, 5 years of design experience

Memorable personal experiences

Of course everything in a designer's past affects their work but many designers, again, without asking about them, named very personal, memorable and even painful experiences to be their inspiration for designing a specific game. The game design process, and later playing the game, gave the designers an opportunity to actively engage and deal with emotions that they have neglected or pushed aside previously.

Another way of using personal experiences as an inspiration took the form of going through something traumatic, and noticing certain behavior patterns and emotions rising during that process. Those experiences and emotions then have transformed into game ideas, mechanics, and experience goals. One example being an accident that happened to a close relative of the designer: during the time they went through the tragedy, they noticed certain things about how people communicate and reach out when something unfortunate happens, and those notions then transformed into the core mechanic of the next game the designer did.

"When you're on the water, the land feels different, it changes in quality, and it's kind of impossible to articulate. And I imagined myself on a boat, looking out at the land and land of moss and hills and these ruins. And I imagined this kind of relationship, and what it would be like to live in that world. And what would it be like to heal? Because I lived in a world that, at that moment, did not allow me to heal."

- Designer F, 15 years of design experience

Nostalgia

When discussing inspiration and ideas, many of the designers referred to some nostalgic experiences as their sources of inspiration. What separates these "nostalgia inspirations" from the memorable personal experiences, is that these kinds of elements were broader

things that the designers felt were important, joyful and influential to them when they were teenagers or in their early twenties: certain groups of friends, certain styles of music and movies, personal passions, Harry Potter, etc. The designers said that they try to evoke these same kind of feelings with their games, and the nostalgic ideas they have had also affected a lot in their views of what is a “good” RPG. Inevitably, it will affect how they review ideas.

“Yeah, that game is very much early doom metal from the UK to metal from the early nineties. And then also the early days of Norwegian black metal.”

- Designer C, 6 years of design experience

Interestingly, only one of the designers mentioned that their own “homebrewed” games were an inspiration to design a game that became an actual product. And even that specific designer told that the motivation was to capture the “playing culture” of their game group – not that they felt that their game ideas were so good that they needed to be productised.

In the very heart of a viable RPG idea is always a certain experience or emotion

All of the designers described the essence of their game design methods to be aiming for certain types of experiences and emotions. All designers wanted the players to be telling and experiencing certain kinds of stories (certain genre), whether those stories would be action-packed fantasy stories, emotional young adult stories or stories about awkward romantic situations. Designers approached this from many angles (text, mechanics, art, random encounter tables), but in the end, the discussions always ended up into the same space: certain types of emotions need to be evoked.

Here are quotes from several different designers, discussing experience goals:

“Usually when we create a game we want to, we want it to feel a certain way and we want players to do and characters to be doing certain things. And that’s usually what we call the heart of the game, is when it feels the way it should feel, the way we feel like it should and people are doing and the characters are doing things that we feel like we want them to do.”

“Actually, you know what? It comes back down to like what we want the players to be experiencing in terms of the storytelling. And I think that’s the heart of the game.”

- Designer A, 5 years of design experience

“A little bit like.... I'm not sure what you can call it? A medieval, you know, Germanic feeling. So that was the starting point.”

- *Designer C, 6 years of design experience*

“Lot of my games are about sort of finding experiences, and like really finding very specific kinds of intersections of nostalgia and experience and desire, and kind of building within that space.”

- *Designer F, 15 years of design experience*

One factor that also came up was that the designers wanted the players to understand the game's core experience easily, they wanted the players to know what kind of things they should be doing. It was important that the game feels natural and easy to dive into and understand from the start, even if there would be a lot of mechanical elements that didn't work yet. A good game idea or a concept was described as emotionally resilient, and as something that would work to a degree even without proper mechanics.

While the experience goals were seen as very important, not one of the designers told me that they actually write down their experience goals anywhere. Most of the designers said that they have a quite exact experience goal in their mind but they didn't bother to document it. They just “knew.” Closest thing to documenting the experience goal was working with loglines or key phrases as described earlier in this chapter.

“Oftentimes what it takes to grab me is just like a phrase that electrifies me.”

- *Designer F, 15 years of design experience*

“The other thing that I've done often lately (...) is that I will logline. I will logline, so like in the same way that a movie or TV show has one or two sentence thing about what it is. I will figure out what that is before I get too deep. So that I know what the scope of my game is.”

- *Designer G, 7 years of design experience*

As a researcher, I feel that it's almost impossible to make a distinction between “ideas” and “experience goals”. It seems that the ideas that the designers see viable come in the *form* of experience goals. It became evident that all the viable ideas, ideas that lead into actual games, were tightly connected to some sort of experiences or emotions from the very start. The game ideas were born out of what drove the designers on an emotional level, not mechanical level. In the heart of every viable RPG game idea are basically two things: what

the designers want the players (not characters) to *do* and *feel*. And most importantly, there were no examples where a whole game sprung out of an idea about certain mechanics or rules.

Viable ideas are solid and “whole” from the beginning

When it comes to recognizing viable ideas, there is one common theme that was repeated almost from interview to interview: the big picture of the game is clear very fast, basically from the very beginning. When the designers were talking about the games that they have finished and made into products, they described the initial ideas to be “complete” from the very beginning. There was focus from the start, and it was easy for the designers to stay inside a certain frame. They almost intuitively knew what the game still needed, and the designers could see the path forward, almost to the end of the design process, in front of them very clearly. And all this happened before the designers even thought about any mechanics or rules.

“I think that's the thing that was common from the start is that I could imagine myself having fun playing them. That is the number one thing, that's really the only thing that they have in common. And that is like before there's even mechanics, before there's even rules. Just imagining myself playing a game of that theme with that thing is usually like the test... the litmus test for me.”

- Designer A, 5 years of design experience

This ties also with the theme of “Writing is designing”. An idea that is solid from the beginning, is easy to write down and continue writing: a clear and solid idea is something the designers said they can immediately write about, whereas a nonviable idea is something that one cannot write anything about. Like said earlier, the possibility of writing about the idea is a good distinction between nonviable and viable ideas.

“The beginning is the hardest part. When you have to come up with ideas. But when the idea is there, it's just execution after that. And that is a hundred times easier than coming up with the idea.”

“Usually, when you have an unconstructed idea in your head, you can't write anything about it. Sure, you can try and work the idea through writing, but that only leads to very

bad writing (...) But when you have a clear idea, then writing becomes easy and fast. You just know what you have to write.”

- *Designer D, 20 years of design experience*

To support this theme, one of the most recurring elements of a nonviable idea was unclear theme and concept. The designers expressed that nonviable ideas often evoke feelings of uncertainty and doubt: Does this idea have an ability to stand on its own feet? If the player experience is not clear, the designers said that they are unsure about who the characters are and what they should be doing in the game. It was also mentioned that some of the designers tried to build a theme around a rule system they had designed, but that didn't lead to good results as the initial idea had only one element of a whole game. Designers expressed that nonviable ideas are the kind of ideas that don't lead anywhere, even if they feel viable in the first place. The idea doesn't inspire and create new ideas. The designers described this situation as a situation where there is nowhere to go, there is nothing to refine and the idea starts to feel “flat” very quickly after the first moments of enthusiasm.

But of course, even if the designers felt that some idea was viable, it didn't mean that everything was easy after that. The designers might have felt that they were not ready as designers for some particular idea yet, even though they recognized the viability of it. Maybe they didn't have the skillset or time to start working with it at that moment, or they felt that they were unable to combine the theme with a suitable mechanic. But, even if refining and iterating the game would have taken a lot of time, none of the designers said that the experience goal or the theme of a viable game idea was changed at all – it was always everything else that changed around the core idea.

“And then the other type of idea is where the theme is good, but the way to express the theme in gameplay or mechanics is not good. You could shut the whole thing away and start again from the theme, which is actually what we did with our latest game. We did that seven times.”

- *Designer A, 5 years of design experience*

5.3. Prototypes answer questions

When discussing prototypes in RPG design, one main theme was easy to recognize: Prototypes are created for playtesting and to find answers to certain questions. The range of questions that the designers mentioned varied a lot: some of the designers had very specific questions in their minds (“What happens during the 3rd act?”) while the others had much

broader questions (“Is this fun?”) in their heads. But the core motivation to create prototypes was clear: The designer had a question, and they created some sort of prototype to answer it. Prototypes were seen as tools to gather feedback and answers from the players.

“We tend to just go in with broad questions. Those being ‘What resonated most with people? What were people most drawn towards? What did people want to do in the game?’”

- *Designer A, 5 years of design experience*

Although everyone used the prototypes in quite similar ways, the methods of creating them varied a lot. For some of the designers, the first playable prototypes already included art, detailed layouts, several components like cards and tokens, etc, whereas some other designers said to only had a couple of flimsy Word documents as their prototype. Usually, the first prototypes were described as very rough, incomplete, and only to include a couple of key elements of the game in some form. A variety of unsurprising tools was mentioned: Word and other MS Office tools, Google’s Documents and Sheets, and Adobe’s InDesign and Photoshop.

One interesting prototype format mentioned was a table of contents. A couple of designers mentioned that one of the concrete first things that they create is a table of contents for their book. But this kind of prototype, if one can call it a prototype, was distinctive from the other prototypes: the table of contents was created for the designers themselves, and with it they could evaluate whether they were going into the right direction with their design and whether they have covered all the areas of the game. Once again, writing is designing.

One more thing about the prototypes. The common undertone among the designers was that the prototypes served also as almost like notes and physical or digital reminders that the game designer needed to create the desired experience. In a way, the prototypes were only created for the designers, and no one else. The prototypes were not given to the hands of the players to interact with, in many cases they were used only by the designers when they were testing their games.

It’s also worth mentioning that several designers created their prototypes first and foremost for the online environment: a lot of game testing is nowadays done via online tools like *Roll20* and *Discord*. Many designers mentioned that their test players are 100% online, and that when doing playtesting online they can be much more effective in it when they can reach diverse and large audiences quickly.

6. Discussions and conclusions

The aim of this thesis was to understand how indie RPG designers transform their ideas into playable prototypes. The subject was studied through three key concepts that were 1) ideas, 2) design and experience goals and 3) prototypes. The thesis had an exploratory and pragmatic approach: I wanted to examine the research question with an open mind, and concentrate on the actual and concrete things that the designers *do*. The data for the thesis was acquired through interviewing seven indie RPG designers from Australia, USA, Finland and Sweden. The data was analyzed using the methods of qualitative content analysis.

6.1 Key findings and practical implications

1. *RPG design is writing.* Most of the design process was described to be writing and rewriting. Writing was seen as the first step to take after the idea has emerged in the designer's head, and it was seen to be an important element when trying to take the players to a certain emotional state. Writing was also seen as a tool to distinguish viable ideas from nonviable ideas: viable ideas are something the designer can start, and continue, writing about.

2. *RPG design is (not) self-expression.* Lot of this is dependent on whether the designer's whole income comes from their work with RPG's or not. The rule of thumb seems to be that the more serious the designer was to make money with their games, the more they think about marketing, target groups, etc, and less about self-expression. This element of RPG design can be reflected in Rogers's theory about "an internal locus of evaluation" (Rogers, 1954) which states that one of the key elements of creativity is that the value of one's creation is judged internally, within the individual that created it. But it became evident that the more serious the designer was with creating a lucrative product, the more of its value is determined by outside evaluation and opinions, and the "internal locus of evaluation" is given less emphasis.

3. *Viable RPG idea is a combination of genre fiction, personal experiences and nostalgia.* These three elements of an RPG idea can be seen as the key ingredients of the "reservoir of experience" (Laxton, 1969, as cited in Lawson, 2006) of the designers. And when we compare the idea creation process of the designers, we can identify many connections to the

theories of creativity. For example, openness to experience (Rogers, 1954) seems to be one of their key qualities: they are able to identify, remember and vocalize complex emotions and experiences, and then turn them into game mechanics and concepts. An ability to toy with elements and concepts (Rogers, 1954) is also present as the designers clearly have an ability to understand different conventions of certain fictional genres, toy with them and combine them with suitable game mechanics.

Also, when it comes to genre fiction as an element of a game, it's there where the designers are making their choices between familiar and novel elements as described by Björk and Zagal (2018). Even if the rules of the game are quite experimental, the genre of the game needs to be something that is easy to recognize - or the other way around. There needs to be a familiar and easily recognizable element somewhere, whether it's the rules or the genre.

The designers seem to practice their creativity in two ways when we compare their working methods to the theories of Boden (2016): First, the designers created new ideas and combinations by combining old, existing and familiar ideas. For example, designers were able to combine a fairly traditional rule system with some theme or genre that is new in RPG space (or vice versa), thus creating something new out of ordinary elements. And as Boden expressed, this kind of creativity requires a rich store of knowledge (reservoir of experience), and an ability to see value in new ideas. Second, some of the designers were deliberately exploring completely new ideas within the conceptual space of RPG games, aiming to be creative in an exploratory sense. These kinds of ideas, although much more rare than the ideas of the first kind, were stretching the definition of RPG's and blurring the lines between LARPS and RPG's.

4. In the core of a viable RPG idea is a certain experience or emotion. All of the designers described the essence of their games to be aiming for certain types of experiences and emotions. designers approached this from many angles, but in the end, they always ended up into the same space: certain emotion needs to be evoked by the game. This way of thinking ties directly to the idea of "experience goals" that were presented in the theory part of the thesis. To revise, player experience goals are "goals that the game designer sets for the type of experience that players will have during the game". They "are not features of the game but rather descriptions of the interesting and unique situations in which you hope players will find themselves." (Fullerton, 2015) This finding also aligns with the concept of second-order design (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, 168), as the designers clearly try to

encourage certain kinds of gameplay, even though they only have control over the artifacts that they design and not the behavior of the players.

When going deeper into the core of the game, there is an interesting connection with Baur's (2019a) statement that even though not every adventure or ruleset needs to be high art, they should at least aim to be something more than just entertainment. None of the designers said that they are trying to design a game that is a life changing experience to someone but the interesting point is that to the designers the games seem to be much more than just games. Kempainen (2018) wrote that the motivation to create own games comes from the need of creating something that fits exactly to the needs of a certain type of desired narrative, but it can also be argued that the motivation comes from somewhere far deeper: Maybe, at some level and maybe subconsciously, the designers try to capture and conserve some important elements and memories of their lives into their games. Games can be seen as attempts to preserve something that has been an important part of a designer's life in the past. This argument is supported by the fact that many designers named past relationships, old groups of friends, relatives and memorable experiences as their inspiration to create a certain game.

5. Viable RPG ideas are "whole" from the start. When exploring the ideation process, one theme repeated almost from interview to interview: When the designers were talking about the games that they have finished and transformed into products, they described the initial ideas to be "whole" from the very beginning. They almost intuitively know what the game still needs, and the designers could see the path forward, almost to the end of the design process, in front of them very clearly. And all this happened before the designers even thought about any mechanics or rules.

To compare this finding with the game design theory, Heinsoo (2019) writes that it is important to find the core mechanical hook of the game to be able to start working with it. Based on the interviews, this is not the case at all. It is important to find the "hook" and the core idea of the game but for all of the designers the hook is not mechanical. In all cases it was something more abstract, more based on emotions and experiences.

6. Prototypes are for answering questions. Prototypes are created for playtesting and to find answers to certain questions. The range of questions varied a lot from very specific questions to much broader. But the core motivation to create prototypes was clear: The designers had a question, and they created some sort of prototype to answer it. This way of using prototypes is exactly how Lim, Stolterman and Tenenberg (2008) describe their use:

prototypes are collaborators that help designers to examine and understand their ideas. They are created so the “world can speak back” to the designers (Schön 1987, as cited in Lim, Stolterman and Tenenberg, 2008) and so that the designers can traverse design space, and create meaningful knowledge about the final design as envisioned in the process of design.

Other connections to the theory can also be found. The idea of asking questions with a prototype is the exact same idea as Salen and Zimmerman (2003) have. As cited earlier: foundational game design questions like “Are the players having fun?” and “Do they want to play again” can not be answered by just crafting rules or writing design documents. These questions can only be answered by actually playing the (prototype of the) game. By creating and playing (and watching others play) playable prototypes, the designers become players themselves (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003). And to conclude, the most important part of the prototype building is to make sure that the designer knows what question they are trying to answer with this particular prototype (Lemarchand, 2021).

Also, as described, the common undertone among the designers was that some of the prototypes were only created for the designers, and no one else. The prototypes were not given to the hands of the players to interact with, in many cases they were used only by the designers when they were testing their games. This way of working with the prototypes can be seen as an attitude of experience prototyping that was described by Buchenau and Fulton Suri (2000): while working like this, the designers seem to be thinking the whole (integrated) experience instead of one or more specific artifacts.

In general, there were no big conflicts between the literature, theoretical framework and my findings. Of course, academic theory usually deals with elements and mechanical elements of RPGs while designers seem to be giving more emphasis on the bigger picture of the game and the emotions and experiences. The game design theory doesn't seem to be that interesting to the designers: Not one design book or resource was mentioned by name, even when asked about the designers relationship to game design theory. One interesting thing was also the absolute lack of mentions about the *Forge*. Even though *Forge* was very influential during its own time, and *The Big Model* is one of the only coherent RPG design frameworks there is, none of the designers mentioned the *Forge* or *The Big Model*.

Also, when thinking about this thesis from the game praxiology point of view, it can be said that if one watches a RPG designer at work, they probably see them either sitting in front of the computer and writing, or playing their game.

Practical implications

Based on the theory and findings, I have listed a couple of practical implications for any RPG designer to consider when they are designing games. This is not a “how to design a RPG” kind of sub-chapter, but at least I have found these following ideas to help me with my game design projects.

A designer should know what emotions and experiences they are after. This can be communicated in the form of images, texts or even music, but the designer should always know what kind of experience they want the players to experience, and what kind of stories the game should evoke. It’s a completely different thing to design for one-shots of realistic young adult drama than year spanning campaigns of epic high fantasy adventures. And as the theory suggests, knowing the desired experience helps the designer to keep their scope tight and focused. It’s also worth noticing that the text and writing of the rules and other game components is one of the most essential design pieces that will lead the players to experience the right things.

A designer should know what actions they want their players and player characters to do. In relation to the first point, the designer needs to know what are the building blocks, the actions of the players and player characters, that build the experience towards the desired experience. If the desired experience is an epic fantasy campaign, then there will probably be a lot of combat, traveling, character development and danger: the stakes are high, and there is a constant possibility of horrible death looming over the characters. If this is the case, then the rules, engines and reward systems of the game are to be designed to create this kind of gameplay and narrative moments.

A designer needs to really know their genre. And they have to make sure that the player also understands what the designer is after. Role-playing games are often genre pieces and if the designer's knowledge of the genre is too shallow, it might be that the game instructs players to do “wrong” kinds of things or it doesn’t reach the right kind of atmosphere. Another problem might be that it doesn’t provide anything new or interesting to the players.

It’s important to have an understanding of the end result. If the designer can already see what kind of game they are designing, even if they still don’t know what rules the game is going to have, then they are probably on the right track. The rules and other mechanical

components should always come after the desired experience is clear: the rules are there to support the experience, not the other way around.

6.2. Validity and limitations

All research has limitations and my thesis is not an exception. The biggest limitation is the amount and diversity of designers. I interviewed seven designers, the youngest being in their mid-twenties and the oldest being in their late forties. In this group I had four males, two females and one non-binary. All except one of the designers can be considered being caucasian, and all of the designers are part of the “Western” cultural world. So, even though I’m quite happy with the diversity of the group, it can’t be said to be “global” as there is no representation from, for example, developing countries or Japan. I have to admit that I have no idea how the RPG scene in those places looks like.

Also, as the field of RPG design is expanding and evolving all the time, the interviews and ideas of seven designers, no matter how mixed the group, can only offer a limited snapshot on how the RPG designers think in general. The generalizations made in this thesis can hardly be applied to all of the interviewed designers, let alone to all RPG designers everywhere. But then again, that was never the intention either.

Something needs to be said about analyzing the data as well. Although I followed a moderately strict process while creating the themes, there maybe would have been room for even more structure and method. I also aimed to have very concrete and pragmatic results, and I think they could have been even more pragmatic and concrete. Although I didn’t try to do a “this is how you design a RPG” document out of this thesis, I still feel that there could have been some more ideas about the practical implications.

Lastly, I have a strong bias towards the subject. I have been playing role-playing games for almost quarter of a century, so I definitely have some blind spots or pre-assumptions that are facts to me but could easily be challenged by someone else. I feel that my experience with the subject helped me a lot with this thesis, and it gave me tools to go deeper during the interviews, but I also believe that it has somehow blocked me from seeing things that someone with a more open mind could have seen. My long experience might result in me being already set in my ways when it comes to RPG’s and how to think of them. But then again, the results of a qualitative study are always somewhat subjective!

6.3. Directions for future research

This thesis was written during the (hopefully) last stages of the global COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, role-playing has gone truly digital and RPG groups are nowadays often international and formed by people who have never seen each other face to face. I on the other hand come from the culture of RPG groups being groups of local friends, playing by the same table. This transition from offline to online, from local to global, has definitely changed role-playing somehow - but how, and towards what directions? There's a huge research field that begs to be explored. Also, if we think of this digital evolution through the game design perspective, one can only wonder how this online environment shapes the act of playtesting and prototypes? RPG designers can now design, test and release their games without ever playing them on an actual board.

Another research topic is the visual elements of RPG's. This idea was sparked by one of the designers as they pointed out that the even though the text of a RPG book is very important, the visual elements of a RPG are the actual "user interface" to the game: the players usually communicate with the game through some sort of visual artifacts, like character sheets, tables or dice. What kind of innovations and new ideas could we see there?

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Main categories and sub-categories of quotation codes

Main category 1 Vocalizing the design process	Main category 2 Process variables	Main category 3 Artifacts	Main category 4 Miscellaneous
Describing process Coming up with ideas Evaluating ideas Working with first versions Working with theme and concept Working with mechanics Testing the game Gathering feedback Iterating the game Turning the game into a product Working with text Defining ready After the release	Inspiration sources Ideologies Restrictions Team size Defining RPG's (designers individual point of view) Motivations and rewards Designers's background	Prototypes Documentation	Methods Quotes Playtesting numbers