

hel  
global network player authority PewDiePie guilt god Let's Play anael undead wrt fau nentie meiatization Siku PVP contest  
game rule system nameplay meta WGW ble sing nob kills deior fact body fight trope spe lingame NS discussion digital  
religion gamer analysis The Last of Us death resurrection funeral runes class tradition experience twitch rebirth rtdiscussion wedding  
simulation ludology narrative PVP discussion digital wedding



Untitled. Illustration by Gabriel Alayza Moncloa.

et  
netwc nlay r authority wDie e air re Le: s Pla inoel ndead wit) nenc m. m. m. S PV/  
a: ve -ap Se la in te death oure o ip n 0' d' e la ba p ienra w' 70 P' m' -la  
in ad p ch L. E. U. death oure o ip n 0' d' e la ba p ienra w' 70 P' m' -la  
atP

Special Issue

**Revisiting Teaching and Games. Mapping out  
Ecosystems of Learning**

edited by

Björn Berg Marklund, Jordan Loewen-Colón and Maria  
Saridaki

## Issue 15 (2021)

### Teaching and Games. Introduction to the Special Issue

by Björn Berg Marklund, Jordan Loewen-Colón and Maria Saridaki, 1

### articles

#### Towards an E-class Stimulating Social Interactivity based on Digitized and Gamified Brainstorming

by Stéphane Gobron, Corentin Barman, Artan Sadiku, Xavier Lince and Isabelle Capron-Puozzo, 19

#### Bible Games as Religious Educational Tools in Seventh-Day Adventist Church. A Ludic Inventory

by Allan Macedo de Novaes and Erick Euzébio Lima, 56

#### Still in Another Castle. Asking New Questions about Games, Teaching and Learning

by Tobias Staaby, 102

#### The Ethics of Citizen Science and Knowledge Games. Five Emerging Questions About Games that Support Citizen Science

by Karen Kat Schrier, 130

#### The Allegorical Build. *Minecraft* and Allegorical Play in Undergraduate Teaching

by Darren Wershler and Bart Simon, 197

## reports

Let the Magic Circle Bleed. Bridging the Gap Between Games and Reality

by Jessica Creane, 237

Learning to Do Fieldwork through Role-Playing. A Class Experiment

by Adele Del Sordi, 267

The Secret Chamber of Interdisciplinary Collaboration. Negotiating *OutSmart!* A Serious Game for Adolescents

by Suzana Jovicic, Barbara Göbl and Dayana Hristova, 277

*Insider* Makes the Deal Easy. An Online Speaking Class Using a Social Deduction Game

by Taku Kaneta, 298

Personas as Character Sheets. A Multipurpose Tool When Using Role-Play in Design Education

by Erik Lagerstedt and Kajsa Nalin, 306

Teaching Music Theory through Games. To Play, or Not to Play?

by Stavroula Mpoti, 323

Eastern European Courage through Game Art. The First Two Years of the Game Art Programme at University of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest (2019–2021)

by Judit Radák and Szabolcs Pálfi, 329

## The Unlucky Hans. The Difficulties of Adapting Fairy Tales as Text-Based Games for Young Readers

by Michael Schlauch, 351

## Spreading Learning through Fake News Games

by Karen Kat Schrier, 362

## Teaching People What They Already Know. Designing Game Design Courses

by Thais Arrias Weiller, 380

Report

---

## Personas as Character Sheets. A Multipurpose Tool When Using Role-Play in Design Education

Erik Lagerstedt and Kajsa Nalin

### Abstract

There are numerous examples of role-playing being adapted and included as a pedagogical technique in teaching, including in higher education. For example, teachers might simulate different scenarios, and role-play different stakeholders and users, in order to create more experiential types of learning environments. Role-playing can also provide an opportunity for students to actively explore, reflect upon and personalise the material that is studied. Similar techniques can be seen in User Experience Design (UXD), where practitioners create personas and scenarios to describe representative and typical users and use-cases. In this report, we propose an alternative use to the more traditional way of using personas and scenarios in academia as well as in industry: as character sheets and role-playing. Instead of being more analytical and descriptive tools in the design process, our role-playing approach invites exploration and personal interaction. Putting such character sheets into action allows the design team to interact with hypothetical, but typical users, thus providing a richer understanding of their context, and facilitating an empathetic understanding of the different stakeholders and their sometimes conflicting interests. This is particularly relevant in an educational context, where students are learning and training to improve as designers.

306

**Keywords:** Role-playing, Larp, Pedagogy, Higher Education, Personas, Design Research, User Experience Design, Service Design, gameenvironments

**To cite this article:** Lagerstedt, E. and Nalin, K., 2021. Personas as Character Sheets. A Multipurpose Tool When Using Role-Play in Design Education. *gameenvironments* 15, 306-322. Available at <http://www.gameenvironments.uni-bremen.de>.

In this report we want to share some experiences from using analogue role-play as a pedagogic tool when teaching service design to User Experience Design (UXD) students. Role-playing for educational purposes has a long history (e.g., Westerville 1958, Chesler and Fox 1966), and has been used in a wide variety of subject matters and for many different purposes (Randi and Carvalho 2013, Erturk 2015, Kilgour et al. 2015, Rønning and Bjørkly 2019). In this report we discuss how the method can be customised to work specifically for the needs and particularities of this subject and these students. We will therefore be introducing some relevant aspects of User Experience Design and role-playing, to set the scene for the example that we then will present and discuss.

To be able to describe the practical process of implementation in more detail, we will use an example from one of our courses on service design: we created a persona as part of a large project assignment including a fictive client. The persona represented the contact person, from the fictive client, that the students met, and the supervision meetings between students and teacher were, throughout the course, split in two parts. First a traditional supervision meeting, then a role-play simulation of a meeting with the client where the persona was used as a character sheet. The teacher went into character as the simulation started, usually aided with some props, allowing the students to interact with the client. The students were mostly acting as their future selves, as designers, thus the role-play allowed for them to explore strategies, interactions and their future work role. The exploration afforded by the unconventional practice of role-playing a persona, using the persona as a character sheet, is important in itself since it facilitates a more active, and first hand, understanding of a situation. Another benefit facilitated by these experiences is the broadened perspective on tools such as personas and scenarios. Both benefits are of pedagogical as well as practical value.

## User Experience Design

Before moving on to the example of role-playing for teaching User Experience Design, the subject itself will briefly be introduced. User Experience Design can be characterised as a systematic and iterative process to solve problems by creating appropriate artefacts. An important aspect of User Experience Design (as in all kinds of human-centred design) is to explore solutions to specific and contextual/situated problems in an empathetic way. The designer needs to be the voice of all the affected people that are not included in the design process. Although general design methods exist, they often consist of broad guidelines, frameworks or principles that still need to be adapted for the particularities of each specific instance. Two specific design tools of particular relevance in this report are scenarios and personas.

### *Scenarios*

To understand the context of the user as well as the situation in which an artefact is used, designers commonly use scenarios. Cooper et al. (2014) describe a scenario as a means of communication, the use of a narrative as a design tool. The narrative is used to emphasise particularly relevant aspects of the context to help the designer picture their artefact in use.

308

### *Personas*

Just as scenarios are used to portray the use of an artefact, the conventional use of personas in design is to portray typical users of said artefact. Personas are commonly used in design in general (Cooper et al. 2014, Nielsen 2019), but are also adopted and used for games (Medlock 2018). A common misconception is that a persona describes the average of the users of a group, but on the contrary, a persona is created to emphasise a user group's relevant and defining characteristics in relation



to an artefact. In addition, a persona is formulated as a description of an individual to make it easier to picture this group of users as a living person.

**Role-playing**

There are many kinds of role-playing games (RPGs), both digital and analogue. Two general classes of analogue role-playing games are tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) where the participants describe the scenarios and actions, and live-action role-playing games (LARPs) where the events are acted out in a form of improvised theatre without an audience (Zagal and Deterding 2018). The participants in a game typically consists of the facilitator (often called game master, GM) and players that assume the roles of characters (PCs) in the game. Role-playing games are, however, notoriously difficult to define (Zagal and Deterding 2018). Although role-playing games are generally played by a group of players, each responsible for their own playable character, refereed by a game master, there are exceptions such as single player tabletop role-playing games (e.g., *Thousand Year Old Vampire* 2020), or multi player tabletop role-playing games focused on world construction to the extent that no player plays a character (e.g., *Microscope* 2011). A sufficient definition for this report is that

“[r]ole-playing games is a word used by multiple social groups to refer to multiple forms and styles of play activities and objects revolving around the rule-structured creation and enactment of characters in a fictional world. Players usually individually create, enact, and govern the actions of characters, defining and pursuing their own goals, with great choice in what actions they can attempt. The game world usually follows some genre fiction theme and is managed by a human referee or computer. There are often rules for character progression, tasks, and combat resolution.” (Zagal and Deterding 2018, 46)

### *Characters and Character Sheets*

Usually each player plays a specific character with its own abilities and traits that tend to develop over the course of the game. As an aid to remain in character, and remember the properties of the character, a character sheet is often utilised.

Character sheets are defined as “[a] piece of paper commonly used in TRPGs that serves as a written record of the status and state of a character in the game” (Zagal and Deterding 2018, 27). Character sheets tend to succinctly collect brief descriptions and carefully selected key information in one or a couple of pages. To make it possible for the player to remind themselves of the character at a glance, the character sheet should be succinct and use a structured layout designed to facilitate rapid recognition of key information. Longer descriptions, such as back stories or diaries, can be attached as appendices.

### *Role-playing in Education*

310

Despite the bad reputation of role-playing games in the 1980s (Lieberoth and Trier-Knudsen 2016), role-playing has since then been used in several ways in education. An example of role-playing in education is creating structure through assigning roles in student discussions to facilitate deeper and more meaningful discussion, thus mandating a more active participation including perspective switching (Laurillard 2012, 154-156). Another example is to simulate an event or a situation and have the students train or explore behaviours to use in such settings, while making theoretical knowledge from literature more concrete (Laurillard 2012, 180). Given the social, creative, and adaptive nature of role-playing games, they are most compatible with constructivist and sociocultural approaches to education (Hammer et al. 2018). There are many aspects of role-playing games that have been identified as particularly relevant for the educational domain, and these aspects can be classified into five main features: Portraying a Character, Manipulating a Fictional World, Altered Sense

of Reality, Shared Imagination, and Making role-playing games. In the example introduced below, all these features except Making role-playing games are central to the pedagogic strategy.

### **An Example of Role-playing in User Experience Design Education**

To discuss how role-playing can be used for teaching design and to explore certain design tools, we would like to introduce a course in which role-playing is successfully used as a pedagogical tool. As part of a bachelor's programme in UXD, a service design course is given for second year students, at half-time pace during ten weeks. The student group is usually 20–30 students and they do this course in parallel with another course of the same size and pace.

The course is planned and given by two teachers, each responsible for one of two course parts: one mainly theoretical (four weeks), and one primarily practical (six weeks). The course starts with the theoretical part in which student groups are responsible for one out of four class seminars. This is inspired by the flipped classroom paradigm (O'Flaherty and Phillips 2015). The students are appointed to read and present a book chapter from Stickdorn et al. (2011) as well as two relevant service design papers. All students are also assigned to write an individual summary of the book chapter(s) assigned for each seminar. The intention of this initial part is twofold: the theoretical understanding of the subject is a goal in itself, and it also serves as a foundation that students can use in the second course part. However, all knowledge needed in order for the students to create all artefacts during the second course part is not given by the book or articles. The students have to find some of the methods on their own. We believe that the more active approach to search, choose

and use methods based on the students' judgement can be important experiences to hold for their future work roles.

The second, primarily practical, part of the course revolves around an assignment in the shape of a semi-fictive service design case. During the introductory lecture, the case and the fictive contact person are presented. The case is presented in the shape of a scenario: the students are told that the consulting company they work at, User Experience Ltd, has been given an exciting assignment from an external client. The case is usually semi-fictive, thus the organisation (the external client) exists in reality, although the organisation's problem to solve, and goals to meet, are made-up by the teacher. It should be noted that when referring to the end user in service design, the term customer is generally used. We will therefore use the terms customer and user interchangeably hereafter. The case is further presented to the students by explaining the primary service problem of the organisation. In this context, a problem can consist of something the teacher has perceived when interacting with the services of the organisation, or by a problem that would be likely to occur for said organisation. For example, a festival organiser might have reports of their festival being experienced as fragmented. After presenting the organisation and their problem, goals are stated, which to a various degree can stem from the problem or being a consequence of new directions for the organisation, made up by the teacher. To continue the example from above, a goal can be to create a less fragmented and more complete customer experience, usually with the help of digital infrastructure. The students are to apply their service design knowledge in consultation with the client in order to establish which is the target customer group, and thereafter find possible solution(s) to the problem presented.



has had a dialogue with the client contact person, and (2) has presented and evaluated design proposals (e.g., artefacts) with the client contact person. The role-playing is thus not an end in itself, but rather a means to an end. The criteria are assessed during the supervision sessions.

### Role-playing Aspects

The use of role-playing in this course is intended to facilitate students' exploration of service design strategies, interactions and their future work role. The client contact person is usually designed to have little or no knowledge of service design, urging the students to take on the role of an expert in relation to the client. This, and the possibility to role-play different versions of themselves, can help the students escape their student perspective and consider the subject from the perspective of a practitioner. In the preceding supervision part, the students usually ask about the artefacts and how to go about preparing for and working with them. In the role-playing part, they focus on gathering enough relevant information in order to create artefacts that fulfil the client's goals. In addition, they are to establish and maintain a consensus through an active dialogue around the artefacts and how these support goal fulfilment.

One of the desired benefits of using role-play is that the switching between conventional supervision and role-playing facilitates metacognition, by allowing the students to take on different views (students and consultants) and explicitly reflect upon their own actions and interactions. Role-playing as consultants, the students are forced to articulate their knowledge, interacting with someone who has domain knowledge but no service design experience. Making tacit knowledge explicit is a natural consequence of the role-playing, and can be seen as a kind of learning-by-teaching (e.g., Duran 2017). Deeper self-reflection is also often reported as a benefit

of using role-playing in education (e.g., Kilgour et al. 2015, Clarke et al. 2018), and the specific way of including role-playing in this course, with the switching of perspectives, in particular emphasises such beneficial pedagogical aspects.

As briefly mentioned, the case is initially presented as a scenario, using the power of narration to create a setting that allows for exploration and interaction outside the traditional boundaries governing the student-teacher relation in a supervision setting. Whereas a more conventional use of a persona is to represent a “[...] particular group based on their shared interests” (Stickdorn et al. 2011, 178), here it is used to introduce a fictive person, although this fictive person – or rather the persona – can also be said to represent some kind of group, namely client contact persons that share the characteristics stated in the persona. A desired benefit from this is the dual perspectives students can gain of possible ways to use a persona.

**Discussion**

As mentioned before, there are many previously documented benefits of role-playing in education, and Hammer et al. (2018) have compiled and classified many of those. Throughout this discussion we will point out which of those benefits are particularly relevant for our example, as well as highlight how such theoretical aspects can be expressed and used in practice.

By using role-playing, our course provides a number of different possibilities for perspective switching, which in general can be seen as different kinds of perspective- and experience-taking in the Portraying a Character category in the taxonomy of Hammer et al. (2018). Some more particular benefits related to this would be considered part of the Shared Imagination according to Hammer et al. (2018). There

are for instance benefits to the Role-Switching in itself, Social Learning Skills are associated with collaboration in the flipped classroom and group meeting, and the exploration of norms and practices of their future designer selves would fall under Communities of Practice.

In our example, the teacher can be seen as a game master in the sense that they control, judge and facilitate the scenario. They also play the non-player characters (NPCs), which in this case is the client contact person. The distinction is clear between the supervision and role-playing parts and simple props are used to visually indicate in which role the teacher is. The non-player characters played by the teacher is based on a persona, which in this case is used similarly to how a character sheet would be used in a traditional tabletop role-playing games. The role of the students is, however, a bit different since the distinction between themselves and the character they play is muddled. There is also a range of individual differences amongst the students when it comes to managing the roles.

There might be some added pedagogical value of Larping compared to tabletop role-playing games, for example due to increased fidelity and the physical embodiment and experience of the situation (Harviainen et al. 2018). Aspects like these, such as *Authentic Simulation*, *Situated Motivational Affordances* and *Narrative Immersion*, would generally fall within what Hammer et al. (2018) classify as *Manipulating a Fictional World* and *Altered Sense of Reality*. The pedagogical practice creates a space and a context in which the students can immerse themselves, and experiment with and explore the studied subject and their relation to it. Some aspects of our example, typical for Larps, are the costume and props of the game master as well as the dedication to not break character during the session (even though those aspects are possible in tabletop role-playing games as well, they are typical for Larps).



Arguably, the artefacts produced by the students in the form of customer journey maps, service blueprints, etc. can also be seen as props for the playable characters in their meetings with the non-player characters. Larping can create richer experiences, making educational role-playing less hypothetical and more immersive. This is something to consider both when including role-playing in education, but is also worth exploring in order to identify best practices.

In this report we have mainly discussed role-playing, in particular by using personas as character sheets, in design as a pedagogical tool, but we also see role-playing as a possible tool to use for practitioners. The scenarios and personas can, for instance, be the basis for role-playing potential users during the design phase and during perspective-based inspections in the evaluation phase.

**Lessons Learned and Recommendations**

In our example, students go from the theoretical first course part, there acting as teachers of theoretical aspects of service design, to the more practical second part, where they switch between student and expert roles.

For us as teachers, preparations for the practical course part consists of creating the case, that is, the scenario and the persona. This is a rather abstract work, done well ahead of the course start, in which we plan for a case which can give the students meaningful experiences and insights, including a contact person that is credible to interact with. One lesson learned from this is that it is crucial to engage at an emotional as well as a practical level whilst creating the contact person. Once the persona is set and presented, the students might form expectations on the contact person which can be hard to make come alive during the supervision sessions.

Certain characteristics given to the persona might require personality changes that can be challenging for the teacher to role-play.

It is also important to properly plan what props to use to help the persona come alive. In doing so, it is necessary to take practical considerations into account, such as making it possible to slip in and out of character fairly quickly to not waste supervision time. The props should also be consistent with the played character, and make them distinct from the teacher. In our example, this has worked out well, however, we did not always bring or check the scenario and/or persona before each supervision session. This sometimes led to the teacher slightly digressing from the characteristics of the persona, which might have caused some confusion or unease amongst the students in the interaction. What we take from this is that keeping the persona (and the scenario) close at hand for quick reference during the sessions, similar to how a character sheet is used in tabletop role-playing games, is a simple but powerful tool to stay on target.

The meandering, or drifting, of characteristics is not mentioned in the course evaluations. In fact, the interaction with the contact person has been mentioned as engaging and fun, making it possible to *dream away* in service design (a remark we take to indicate the immersion and possibility of exploring the subject). Other positive statements include the appearance of the contact person making everything (regarding the case) vivid and relaxed, and the course design to comprise a constructive mixture between individual and group work, with the addition of interesting discussions. The negative course comments concerned a lack of traditional lectures, and a desire for more meetings with the contact person. The lack of traditional lectures might be a symptom of habit, which could possibly be mitigated by clearer information on the course format and its purpose.

Although the request for more meetings is positive in the sense that the students considered the meetings meaningful, a valuable lesson for the students to learn is the importance of making the most of the opportunities they get to meet with clients. This includes carefully planning what to ask, present or evaluate, and this might also be something to more explicitly emphasise to the students.

**Concluding Remarks**

It can be hard to communicate to students that for us to be able to assess their knowledge, they have to explain things to us even though we already (mostly) have this knowledge. To some students, it seems awkward or artificial to do this, but by making the students act as teachers and experts, inspired by learning by teaching (Duran 2017), the setting forces the students to put their knowledge into words in a seemingly more natural way. The switching of perspectives give room for meta-cognition and self-reflection and the students generally express positive feelings toward the role-playing that takes place during this course. Altogether, we find two pedagogical values with role-playing the persona: an increased understanding of what a persona is, and can be, as well as a better apprehension of how a professional client meeting can play out. Although the technique requires careful planning, the benefits are numerous.

**References**

Chesler, M. and Fox, R., 1966. *Role-playing methods in the classroom*. Chicago: Science Research Associates.

Clarke, S., Arnab, S., Morini, L. and Heywood, L., 2018. Dungeons and dragons as a tool for developing student self-reflection skills. In: *Games and Learning Alliance – 7<sup>th</sup> International Conference, GALA 2018, Proceedings*. Palermo, Italy, 5-7 December. London: Springer, 101-109. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-11548-7\_10.

Cooper, A., Reimann, R., Cronin, D. and Noessel, C., 2014. *About face: the essentials of interaction design*. Indianapolis: John Wiley & Sons.

Duran, D., 2017. Learning-by-teaching. Evidence and implications as a pedagogical mechanism. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 54(5), 476-484.

Erturk, E., 2015. Role play as a teaching strategy. *National Tertiary Learning and Teaching Conference*. Tauranga, New Zealand.

320

Hammer, J., To, A., Schrier, K., Bowman, S. L. and Kaufman, G., 2018. Learning and role-playing games. In: Zagal, J. P. and Deterding, S., eds. *Role-playing game studies: Transmedia foundations*. New York: Routledge, 283–299.

Harviainen, J. T., Bienia, R., Brind, S., Hitchens, M., Kot, Y. I., MacCallum-Stewart, E., Simkins, D. W., Stenros, J. and Sturrock, I., 2018. Live-action role-playing games. In: Zagal, J. P. and Deterding, S., eds. *Role-playing game studies: Transmedia foundations*. New York: Routledge, 87-106.

Kilgour, P. W., Reynaud, D., Northcote, M. T. and Shields, M., 2015. Role-playing as a tool to facilitate learning, self-reflection and social awareness in teacher education. *International Journal of Innovative Interdisciplinary Research*, 2(4), 8-20.

Laurillard, D., 2012. *Teaching as a Design Science: Building Pedagogical Patterns for Learning and Technology*. New York: Routledge.

Lieberoth, A. and Trier-Knudsen, J., 2016. Psychological effects of fantasy games on their players: A discourse-based look at the evidence. In: Byers,

A. and Crocco, F., eds. *The Role-Playing Society: Essays on the Cultural Influence of RPGs*. Jefferson: McFarland, 46-71.

Medlock, M. C., 2018. An overview of gur methods. In: Drachen, A., Mirza-Babaei, P. and Nacke, L. E. eds., *Games User Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 99-116.

*Microscope*, 2011. [rpg] Ben Robbins, Lame Mage Productions.

321

Nielsen, L., 2019. *Personas – User Focused Design*. London: Springer.

O’Flaherty, J. and Phillips, C., 2015. The use of flipped classrooms in higher education: A scoping review. *The internet and higher education*, 25, 85-95.

Randi, M. A. F. and Carvalho, H. F. d., 2013. Learning through role-playing games: an approach for active learning and teaching. *Revista Brasileira de Educação Médica*, 37, 80-88.

Rønning, S. B. and Bjørkly, S., 2019. The use of clinical role-play and reflection in learning therapeutic communication skills in mental health education: an integrative review. *Advances in medical education and practice*, 10, 415-425.

Stickdorn, M., Schneider, J., Andrews, K. and Lawrence, A., 2011. *This is service design thinking: Basics, tools, cases*. Hoboken: Wiley.

*Thousand Year Old Vampire*, 2020. [rpg] Tim Hutchings, The Hutchingsonian Presents - PlaGMaDA.

Westerville, E. C., 1958. Role playing: an educational technique. *Marriage and Family Living*, 20(1), 78-80.

Zagal, J. P. and Deterding, S., 2018. Definitions of "role-playing games". In: Zagal, J. P. and Deterding, S., eds., *Role-playing game studies: Transmedia foundations*, New York: Routledge, 19-51.