

# The Positive Negative Experience in Extreme Role-Playing

Markus Montola

University of Tampere

FIN-33014, Tampere, Finland

firstname.lastname@uta.fi

## ABSTRACT

Fun is often seen a necessary gratification for recreational games. This paper studies two freeform role-playing games aiming to create extremely intense experiences of tragedy, horror, disgust, powerlessness and self-loathing, in order to gratify the self-selected group of experienced role-players. Almost all of the 15 interviewed players appreciated their experiences, despite crying, experiencing physiological stress reactions and feeling generally “bad” during the play.

## Keywords

positive negative experience, play experience, role-playing

## INTRODUCTION

It is frequently argued that games are supposed to be fun. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines games as activities “engaged in for diversion or amusement”. Some academics subscribe to similar views: e.g. Juul [9] claims that it is “hard to imagine” a game based on *Anna Karenina*, since players want to identify with the protagonist and feel attached to positive outcome of the game. More recently, however, Wilson and Sicart [20] have criticized game design practices for producing “monologic play” that does not challenge the player, but only aims at immediate and continuous satisfaction. They list some games that have contested the paradigm of fun, such as *Dark Room Sex Game*, *Desert Bus* and *PainStation*. However, the players of such conceptual games have rarely been studied. I argue that a demand exists for a broader expressive repertoire, as has recently been demonstrated through the commercial and critical success of *Heavy Rain*.

This paper explores gratifying but “negative” play experiences elicited by two *freeform role-playing games*. My goal is to further challenge the claims that games are, and should be, an inherently light-hearted and “fun” form of culture, by exploring other gratifications of play.

There is limited research on these kinds of games and experiences. Hopeametsä [7] studied the *positive negative experience* in the larp *Ground Zero*, by analyzing written player debriefs. This larp was an alternate history based on the Cuban Missile Crisis, where the characters experienced

an all-out nuclear war in a bomb shelter: They listen to horrific newscasts about the East Coast being devastated until they lose electricity. At some point a bomb hits the city above the shelter, with roaring sound effects. The characters are left in the darkness for countless hours, to digest the fact that the world they once knew is no more.

The player debriefs testify that the game was an intensive, claustrophobic and distressing experience, but also an experience that the players considered a remarkably good one, and one from which they have learned many positive things. [...] The players experienced very real emotions and reactions to fictional events, and they also learned from these “fictitious” experiences. [7]

This paper explores the positive negative experiences further, studying them in short and repeatable role-playing games lacking physical or audiovisual elements that support immersion. Revisiting the theme is also necessary, as Hopeametsä’s studied non-anonymous player debriefs written directly for game organizers.

## EXTREME ROLE-PLAYING AND THE BLEED IDEAL

Players have enjoyed hopelessness, horror and tragedy in role-playing games for a long time. Popular pen’n’paper role-playing games with such themes include the classic *Call of Cthulhu* (1981), and the highly successful *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991). Live-action role-playing has explored also themes such as nuclear holocaust, in *Ground Zero* [7], and tragedy in larp adaptation of *Hamlet* [10].

The games I will study need to be understood in their cultural context: these are games created by the players for themselves. Nordic Freeform is typically played in and around Danish and Swedish role-playing conventions. The games discussed in this paper were *premiered* in Fastaval, Denmark, a convention known for games that do not shy away from mature themes. For example, in Fastaval 2010 the jury awarded the prize for the best game to *Vasen* (Bækgaard, 2010), a Joseph Fritzl -inspired scenario about a community tiptoeing around implied child molestation, while *The Journey* (Axelzon, 2010), described below, was voted as the best game by the players of the same event.

Many participants of these events are “regular” role-players who come to the conventions seeking new experiences:

When I was younger I played all the games like this I could get my hands on. Now it’s more like I play one a year, and then I play bad role-playing *Dungeons & Dragons* at home. (TJ, The Mother-C)

Nordic DiGRA 2010. DiGRA © 2010 Authors & Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA). Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

Nordic freeform role-playing is a mixture of larp, tabletop role-playing and improvisational theatre: costumes are not used, play occurs in one room with a game master, and the players are the only audience of the performance [see 21, 22]. While freeform generally adheres to the *invisible rules of role-playing* [15], the form of role-playing is tailored for the needs of each particular game. Freeform *scenarios* are often written down in a replayable form.

The extreme role-playing studied in this paper aims to influence not only the character, but also the player. The two studied games were created by the Vi åker jeep designer collective who describe the *bleed* ideal as follows<sup>1</sup>:

Bleed is experienced by a player when her thoughts and feelings are influenced by those of her character, or vice versa. With increasing bleed, the border between player and character becomes more and more transparent. [...] Bleed is instrumental for horror role-playing: It is often harder to scare the player through the character than the other way around. [...] A classic example of bleed is when a player's affection for another player carries over into the game or influences her character's perception of the other's character.

Essentially, bleed play is *brink play* [18], in which the *magic circle of play* [19, 16, 1] serves as a social alibi for non-ordinary things. Bleed designs aim to simultaneously maintain a sense of alibi, and to weaken the *protective frame* [1] of play in order to explore powerful emotions.

The concept of bleed has not been psychologically defined, and has not always been used consistently. In this paper it is seen as a *design rhetoric* that has common ground with concepts such as character immersion [17], flow [7] and engrossment [5].

If play is seen as something surrounded by an *interaction membrane* [6], the aim of bleed play is to balance between safe and raw experiences. *Bleed in* occurs when a players' ordinary lives influence the game, while *bleed out* occurs when the game influences players despite the protective framing. This paper focuses on bleed out, and especially the *direct bleed* that happens when games elicit responses in players that resemble those of their fictional characters. Direct bleed is similar to character immersion [see 17].

The bleed rhetoric is sometimes used to describe strong feelings that do *not* correspond to characters' diegetic feelings: e.g. when a player feels guilt over the actions of a remorseless character. This can be called *indirect bleed*.

As bleed is based on a double consciousness: players both acknowledge and deny the nature of play, it is similar to the *this is not a game* principle [12]. However, bleed is inverse to TINAG: bleed players pretend to believe that *this is just a game*, holding on to the alibi while forfeiting some of the protection. In the design of these games, numerous

strategies are used to elicit and intensify bleed such as taboo-breaking behavior, eye contact, guilt and disgust.

## THE GAMES UNDER STUDY

This study focuses on two games, *Gang Rape* (Wrigstad, 2008) and *The Journey*. *GR* was chosen because it is considered a strong game that aims for extreme experiences through simple rules. As Aronson [2] points out in the context of planning social psychological experiments, intense experiments produce clearer results than less intense ones. *GR* plays out in some two hours. *The Journey* was chosen to complement the analysis, as it was perceived to be a much easier game to participate in. It uses similar strategies in much less stigmatized form, while still being intense enough to elicit powerful responses. The author also played *The Journey* before including it in this study.

### Gang Rape

*Gang Rape* is an intentionally repulsive short scenario that examines gang rape as a particularly ugly form of violence. It plays out in three scenes: An introduction leading to a rape, the act itself, and a short epilogue. All the scenes are played in different ways: The scene leading to the rape is played in a fashion similar to larp, the rape is played in a fashion similar to tabletop role-playing (no touching), and the aftermath is narrated or played in a larp style.

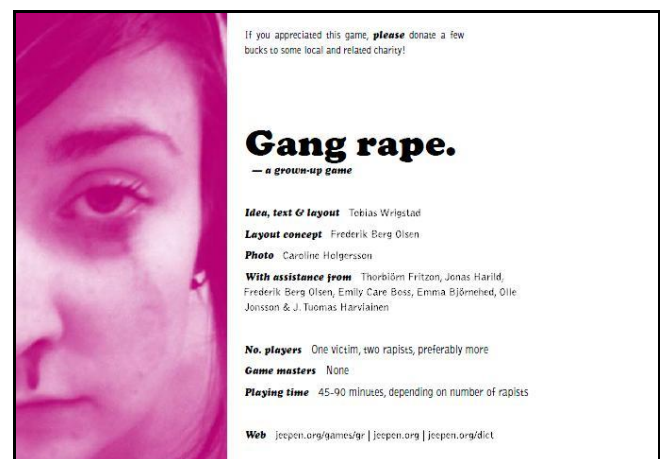


Figure 1: *Gang Rape* instructions booklet

Numerous game mechanics are used to create as intense emotional experience as possible. For instance, when the Rapists are describing their actions to the Victim during the rape, they are not allowed to hesitate, pause, or repeat themselves. Additionally they have to maintain continuous eye contact with the Victim. As another example, the players are required to choose the time and place of the rape and must also be able to personally relate to the setting. Also, the characters are paper-thin so as to discourage players from “hiding” behind them.

These design decisions aim to maximize bleed effects, making it harder for players to emotionally detach themselves from the themes of the game.

<sup>1</sup> <http://jeepen.org/dict/index.html#bleed>, ref. April 2010 [also 22].

*Gang Rape* is played without a game master, but the rules provided in the booklet (Figure 1) are precise on how the game should be managed and run. For instance, during the rape, the Rapist players are given all power over what happens in the physical world of the game, but the Victim is, importantly, provided with narrative power to dictate and describe the Rapists' feelings and reactions to the act. There are no secrets in the game; everyone must read the entire instruction booklet through before beginning. The rules also dictate that it must only be played in a serious manner.

As a critical game, *GR* is a political comment on the difficulty of obtaining gang rape convictions in the Swedish legal system, and a demonstration of the fact that "we all have the capacity to fantasize about these things".

### **The Journey**

*The Journey* is a post-apocalyptic role-playing game inspired by Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, for four players and a game master. The characters are on a journey: The Stranger guides the group, and The Man protects The Mother, who takes care of The Daughter. The three-hour scenario consists of 26 scenes. Each player receives instructions for each scene. As they play their parts, an interactive play is pieced together, with players interpreting their characters and, adding nuance and details to the predetermined narrative structure.

The characters experience desperation in a destroyed world: The Stranger takes The Mother as his reluctant lover from The Man, as a show of masculinity and a price for protection. The Daughter grows too ill to continue the journey, and she is abandoned – but as the winter grows worse, the others have to return to her. Hunger becomes unbearable, so The Stranger murders The Daughter, and she is eaten in order to survive. Later, The Man is injured and also left behind, as The Mother goes on with The Stranger.

One way of reading *The Journey* is through the ways in which The Man and The Mother deal with the post-apocalyptic horrors: The Man becomes a broken and petrified victim like The Daughter, while The Mother turns into a monster similar to The Stranger. Powerlessness is a central theme, as The Mother is unable to protect The Daughter, and The Man is unable to protect The Mother.

The GM is instructed to create a quiet, ominous experience:

The focus of the game is to interpret an ominous feeling with brusque dialogues and an ever-present silence. [...] The atmosphere should be almost poetical and tranquil but intimidating and furthermore the pressure of the omnipresent secluded silence.

*The Journey* starts bleak and keeps getting darker.

### **Similar Games**

*Gang Rape* and *The Journey* do not exist in isolation, but in a larger tradition of bleed-themed games. Two examples:

*Fat Man Down* (Østergaard, 2009) is a game about obesity in society, aiming to create bleed by casting "the fattest

male player" in the role of Fat Man. The game is about obesity destroying his life. In the game, the other players' improvised play turns into personal attacks against the obese player. However, the game is intended to be much harder for the tormentors than to the Fat Man [see 20].

*The Mothers* (Østergaard, 2007) is about two meetings of a new mothers' support group. The first meeting is about happy façades. In the second meeting, a bit later, they have become disillusioned and are trying to come to terms with their new lives – except for one of them, who was honest even in the first meeting. The game turns into an all-against-one aggression as the others vent their frustrations to the happy mother. The "new horror" game ends when the player of the happy mother decides to walk out of the game.

### **RESEARCH METHOD AND DATA COLLECTION**

As each of these games only gathers an audience of a few dozen players, it is methodologically challenging to study them. Data was collected from a variety of sources, in order to richly describe not only what these games are and how they function, but also to gain insight on the motivations behind their design, on how they are experienced, and on the reasons of playing them in the first place.

The data collection involved interviews with players and one designer, participation in a session of *The Journey*, and analysis of game materials of several games. 15 players were interviewed: five with an e-mail questionnaire with a round of follow-up questions, eight in person, using semi-structured interviews, and two as a pair interview. Ten players were interviewed on *Gang Rape*, and five on *The Journey*. With the exception of four *GR* players, who had played the game more than a year ago, all interviews were conducted within a week of play. The author of *GR* was interviewed both as a designer and as a player, but his player interview is not cited. The interviewees were given an opportunity to comment a draft version of this paper.

Interviewees were contacted in Knutepunkt 2009, Norway; Fastaval 2010, Denmark; and Knutpunkt 2010, Sweden. In the case of *GR*, every player that could be reached was interviewed. For *The Journey*, the players of The Man and The Mother were targeted, based on the hypothesis that those roles were the most likely to produce positive negative experiences. The *GR* sample consisted of two female Victims, one male Victim and seven male Rapists, *The Journey* interviewees included two female players of The Mother, one male player of The Mother, and two male players of The Man. Altogether, they had played in four instances of *GR* and five of *The Journey*.

The interviewees were aged 19-42, typically 30. Six were Danish, four Swedish, and the rest from five other countries. They were very experienced role-players, often with 10-20 years of role-playing experience. No other commonalities in backgrounds were identified.

The interview protocol, both for email as well as in-person, consisted of 20 questions designed to elicit responses

regarding the positive negative experiences as well as provide a sense of the overall experience of playing these games. Sample questions include:

- Please describe the events of the game? What happened in the different scenes of the game?
- Please describe the hardest moment(s) of the game? Why was it hard?
- How have you felt about the game afterwards?

No games were staged (or created) for this study: All informants had played them before being contacted.

## FINDINGS

The interview responses saturated quickly, partially because of the *self-selection* of the target group. This was especially the case for the *Gang Rape* players since they had all read through the entire booklet before opting to play. All interviewees were articulate and reflective of their role-playing. In addition to describing their experiences, they also suggested analyses of them. Thus, this study should be viewed as a collection of experts' insights. These insights will be grouped under different themes. All interview quotes have been edited for clarity and anonymity.

### Extreme Positive Negative Experiences

All players played these games to experience positive negative experiences, similar to those described by Hopeametsä. This goal was very explicit. Almost all players praised them as gratifying and powerful experiences. They were not considered fun, but the players described various gratifying moods and emotions.

It was cruel. And that touched something. It's the first scenario where I've actually had tears in my eyes most of the time. [...] made me feel like crap. (TJ, The Mother-A)

Having to keep eye contact was extremely scary but I think it was also a very safe thing. Noticing the reactions of the other player (not character!!!) added significantly to my own emotions. Also the fact that once you started talking you couldn't stop [...] added stress and adrenaline. (GR, Rapist-1)

Not only was I disgusted what I did come up with, I also felt very strong sense of inadequacy and impotence on not being able to come up with more shit, and not being able to perform [better and without repeating myself] [...] since this is about intercourse, and across of me is a rather beautiful girl, which I'm looking straight into the eyes, of course [...] a sense of arousal. So there's arousal, there's impotence, and there's disgust, at the same time. So you can see why that leaves you feeling rather brainfucked. And that's the [power] of that game, the simple mechanisms are able to create all these three. (GR, Rapist-4)

Players typically tried to make *Gang Rape* as intense as possible: For instance, players often chose the roles that they assumed to be the most difficult ones to play:

I thought that the Victim was going to be the hardest one for me to portray, so of course I wanted to go for the biggest challenge. (GR, Victim-8)

I think I said something like "if it'd be okay with you guys, I would like to play the Rapist because I think that would be the biggest challenge for me. (GR, Rapist-6)

A few players analyzed their immersion and detachment from the game spontaneously, saying that they could control their attachment consciously, thus regulating the intensity of the game. Two players were disappointed with *GR*, as it was less intense than they had expected: one of them expressing a wish to play it again, to make it harder.

The emotional repertoire of especially *The Journey* was wide and detailed, ranging from melancholy to grief and from relief to desperation. Exploration of dark emotions was a frequent reason to play such games.

I started playing [games with] focus on the emotional intensity and telling stories, which can be very dark and in which you can explore these darker sides of human nature and relationships, and for me it's similar to reading fiction or watching movies that bring up those same themes. (TJ, The Mother-B)

The positive negative experience is, of course, an intentional design goal.

I wanted people to feel a little bit dirty, like have a bad feeling in their stomachs. I wanted people to be baffled over what came out of their mouths. And I wanted the potential for some really raw, really rough, really scary role-playing which could essentially take you anywhere. [...] Not all games should be fun. [...] What I'm looking for is strong emotions, and whether they are negative or positive is of less importance. (Wrigstad, interview)

In light of the interviews, *GR* met those design goals better than expected.

### First Person Audience

As Hopeametsä [7] notes, role-playing produces powerful positive negative experiences through making players experience the events themselves, instead of just watching them unfold.

But you get a different relationship, because you are playing characters and interacting with characters in a way you don't when reading a story. (TJ, The Mother-B)

Both games under scrutiny drive the characters into acts that the players consider disgusting, strange or unnatural. This discrepancy causes intense *cognitive dissonance*, a "feeling of discomfort [...] caused by performing an action that is discrepant from one's customary, typically positive self-conception" [3, 2, cf. 4].

Numerous design strategies are employed to intensify the dissonance: While structures of play are used as a social alibi to enable players to commit discrepant acts, those structures are left very "thin" in order to prevent negotiating the dissonance: *Gang Rape* uses player characters as an excuse for a horrible act, but they are intentionally superficial to prevent the players from distancing themselves from their actions.

While *GR* uses taboo activities and horror to cause dissonance, the determinism and pre-defined nature of *The Journey* plays on helplessness:

I've never had such a [strong] desire to change things.  
(*TJ*, The Mother-A)

The deterministic nature of *The Journey* disempowers the players in a way that resonates with the intended feeling of helplessness. Players are left to figure out the How:s and the Why:s, as only the What:s are given.

The cognitive dissonance produced through experiencing positive negative experiences in first person is not a problem for these games: In fact it is an implicit design goal and a reason for players to participate.

### Physical Experiences

The cognitive dissonance and emotional intensity of these games elicited physical reactions in most interviewees.

I think I was shaking towards the end of the rape part and I couldn't stop during lunch afterwards (*GR*, Rapist-1)

I was wringing my hands, it was hard to sit still. [...] I almost threw up for real. [...] I had mental images of the mutilated body, because we played that scene rather thoroughly. [...] I have gagged and actually almost thrown up during other scenarios, but only when there's an emotional element. (*TJ*, The Mother-A)

[I was] perspiring for the whole game. And I get really nervous, I tend to get really cold, so I was freezing by the time the game was over. Which was great for the game. You get that nervousness where your heart starts going a little faster and your hands are really shaky and you get really anxious. (*TJ*, The Mother-B)

Such discomfort was considered a somewhat scary, but not an unpleasant thing. Many players considered them, at least implicitly, desirable indicators of a powerful experience.

It's an uncomfortable thing, but that doesn't necessarily make it bad. (*TJ*, The Mother-B)

I had witnessed how other participants of the game experienced shakings and all sort of nerve malfunctions, resulting of tension and anxiety, and waited to find the equivalents of these phenomena on myself, but could not notice any. (*GR*, Rapist-7)

Some players visualized and felt their experiences very vividly, while others commented that they do not "see things" in role-playing games.

The blood and sweat and cum and vomit felt very real [...] The smells, the taste in my mouth, the heat and fluids against my skin, all felt intensely real, even though this part was only talked through. (Rapist-1)

Some players, of both Victim and Rapist roles, reported sexual arousal in *Gang Rape*. For example:

[R]ather against my will, I found it at times arousing and sometimes even erotic. That did feel quite out of place.  
(*GR*, Victim-9)

In a fashion typical to immersive experiences, numerous players reported having lost the sense of passage of time:

[The rape itself lasted] 20 minutes maybe, 15 minutes I think. [...] It really feels like hours. (*GR*, Rapist-2)

This intensity is similar to the stress and anxiety elicited by some laboratory experiments in social psychology. For example in Stanley Milgram's [13, 14] famous obedience experiment the informants were lead to believe that they were administering painful and dangerous electrical shocks to other informants.<sup>2</sup>

I observed a mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within 20 minutes he was reduced to a twitching, stuttering wreck, who was rapidly approaching a point of nervous collapse. He constantly pulled on his earlobe, and twisted his hands. At one point he pushed his fist into his forehead and muttered: "Oh God, let's stop it." And yet he continued to respond to every word of the experimenter and obeyed to the end. [13]

While there is an obvious difference of *GR* and *The Journey* participants being keenly aware of the playful nature of their activity, a similarity exists in terms of cognitive dissonance. Even with the intense stress, however, 84% of Milgram's participants were "glad" or "very glad" that they had participated in the experiment, and only 1.3% were "sorry" or "very sorry". 74% of them felt that they had learned something of personal importance [14]. While the ethics of Milgram's experiment have been criticized, the follow-up study supports the gratifying potential of similar "unpleasant", dissonant and stressful experiences.

### Experiences of New Insights

The interviewees were generally critical towards role-playing as an accurate simulation, many felt that it would be even audacious to claim to understand how it feels to be raped or to abandon a child after playing a game.

Obviously I have no freaking clue of what rape really is.  
(*GR*, Rapist-6)

Despite the critical stance, experiences of personal insight were a common reason of playing rough games.

I want to get better at being with people. And I think a part of that is sort of also experiencing yourself better. In the terms of like discovering your limitations and where you can't go. And I also want to push myself. (*GR*, Rapist-6)

[We role-play for] the stories to tell and the skills we gain [...] every day I live my life, I go for new experience. (*TJ*, The Mother-C)

[I want to play] everything that transcends your body and will be a lasting memory. Not just a game, but will actually become something more. (*GR*, Victim-8)

---

<sup>2</sup> In a sense, Milgram's experiment could be seen as a small pervasive larp featuring *unaware participation* [see 16].

Most informants also felt they had learned something from the games, or discussed such insights.

I am most certainly happy that I played it. It was very worthwhile experience and definitely the most intense game I have ever played. (*GR*, Victim-9)

I currently think of The Man as the embodiment of the defects of character I despise in conformist people. (*TJ*, The Man-E)

I enjoyed playing it. ...yeah, it's a bad attitude to have about rape, but...you'll learn more about rape if you play this game. (*GR*, Rapist-5)

The insights of *Gang Rape* were especially about peer pressure and self-loathing, while *The Journey* gave insights on masculinity and powerlessness, and about moral dilemmas such as cannibalism and futile sacrifices. One player also felt that *GR* allowed them to reflect, in a good way, an actual experience of having been pressured to have sex.

Even the people who have opted to not play the game after reading the booklet are often inspired to discuss their personal feelings and experiences related to the theme:

I'm asked to run the game for an all-girl group [...] it takes them two hours to convince themselves that tonight is not really a good night. [...] they are all looking to me to be the person to push them. And of course I will not push them because I think it's unethical. [...] I think that was probably the most successful run of the game: Because first there was the two hours of talking about the game [...]. And these discussions all had to do with rape [...]. At some point one girl started [...] talking about situations when she felt that she had pushed men to go further in sexual actions than they were prepared. And this just went on the entire night. [...] That's for me a good run of *Gang Rape*. (Wrigstad, interview)

### Effects on Personal Relationships

Most of the players felt an intense and intimate connection with at least some of the other players. This happened regardless of whether the players were opposed (Rapist vs. Victim) or allied (The Man and The Daughter) in the game.

Afterwards there definitely is a special bond between us, as always happens in nice larp experiences, but in this case there was a horrible secret that we had shared and no-one else in the world could ever understand. (*GR*, Rapist-1)

I felt a lot closer to the other two players even though I did not know anything more about them. (*GR*, Victim-9)

I feel like there is some value to it [...] in the bonds we create when we help each other to exchange weak or dark parts of our minds, and to acknowledge and explore those sides of us. (*TJ*, The Man-D)

As Huizinga [8] already noted, play has the tendency to build communities. In the case of these extreme games, intimate bonds are created quickly.

However, the inverse also happened: In both games, a few players were also left with negative feelings towards some of the antagonists that lingered on for at least a few days.

I was afraid to look right at The Stranger's face (and still was somehow afraid of the player long after the game was over). (*TJ*, The Man-E).

The players expressed a need for mutual support to be able to play these games, and felt a need to be sure that all participants invested in the experience.

We also went through all the rules [...] before the game and that's when I started to feel a bit nervous, not sure about what I had gotten myself into. Thanks to the other players' support and the fact that they shared my feelings helped me get through the experience. (*GR*, Rapist-1)

Right before the game, one players bluntly asked about how we felt and one other quite openly admitted to being scared. (*GR*, Victim-9)

Indeed, *Gang Rape* and *The Journey* should not be seen as typical *player vs. player* games, and the cruelty was almost always discussed in the discourse of collaborative push for intensity. For instance, in a pair interview, a Victim reported using the rules-given power to control Rapists' emotions to push one of them to prolong the rape:

**Victim:** I saw you sort of struggle, and I was also forcing myself to let you be the horrible one. So I was like no, this was just way too short, this is not horrible enough, we have to keep on to get the complete feeling of it. [...] So that's why I pushed you, and I hope that was okay for you, because I could see you go "No!"

**Rapist:** Well, I'm alive so it's all good. But I sincerely hated that situation. Not because of you, but just—

**Victim:** You're welcome. (laughing)

**Rapist:** Thanks. (dryly) (*GR*)

In understanding the social dynamics of the game, it is central to note that the Victim is also an active participant who intensifies the cognitive dissonance and chips off the deindividuation of the Rapists. Another Victim even felt *empowered* by the role, being able to get back to Rapists (in a way not reflecting the reality of rape).

### The Point of No Return

The players of these games sign up for powerful experiences. The players, especially of *Gang Rape*, considered their duty to provide each other with such experiences, pushing each other and trying to intensify the game. Additionally, some players said that quitting the game abruptly might have felt worse than playing it through; they wanted to endure through the game to not be denied the feelings of completion and triumph of surviving through it. These logics make it difficult to walk out of the game, and make safeword techniques an unreliable safety valve:

This became very clear during gameplay, you might call it an insight about gang raping, that once you're in it, there is no way back, and you even stop thinking about anything that happens and just focus on getting to the end of the act and the game. (*GR*, Rapist-1)

I often felt like I did not want to be there anymore but I never felt like walking out or breaking game. On the contrary, breaking game would have caused me to face much sooner and more strongly the conflicting feelings brought on by the game. It felt like all or nothing. Play through or don't play. (TJ, The Man-D)

No-one had quit GR after starting to play: The players know what they are signing up for. It can also be speculated that the often-reported senses of completion and relief in the end of the game somehow moderate the phase where the players have to deal with the cognitive dissonance in a new way as the game ends and they step out from the protective framework of play.

No interviewee expressed regret over playing GR. However, *The Journey* is not explicit about its content and intensity beforehand: For example the intense feelings of powerlessness, submission and loss of masculinity that are poured on The Man can bleed out very roughly.

I don't regret doing it but I could have done without it. I have been asked to game master it for friends but I am not sure I want to help them feel so bad for three hours plus the rest of an evening. I think it is a brilliant game. (TJ, The Man-D)

In one instance, the player of The Man (not interviewed) quit *The Journey* quite early on, and the game master took the role.<sup>3</sup> Another player of the same character played it through, but reported an extremely unpleasant experience, not in the positive negative fashion.

I forced myself to put up with what the game was asking of me. "Forcing" [...] because it felt overall... painful. Over the course of the game, I cried a lot and had to take frequent (if very short) breaks to ease my breathing. [...] I considered walking out of the game, but couldn't resolve to – possibly out of respect for the other players, who were performing very well [...] I hated *The Journey* and still have bad feelings toward it. (TJ, The Man-E)

It is a topic for a future study to understand the elements of bleed that determine whether a player gets a negative experience instead of a positive negative one. One common denominator seems to be that the players loathe and have hard time to understand his inaction.

### Debrief and Recovery

Especially the players of *Gang Rape* made a significant point to debrief their experience properly together.

It took a lot of hugs and a lot of talking a lot of debriefing for ourselves before we could actually get down to earth (GR, Rapist-2)

We had two debriefs. The first one was immediately [...] for about 10-15 minutes. The second one happened [10 hours later]. Both debriefs were absolutely vital, the most important part of the game [...] The immediate debrief made us relax with each other, knowing that we were all

ok. The second where the author joined took place when you had had some time to reflect on the game and could provide a better analysis of your own experience. Would any of these two debriefs have been left out, we surely wouldn't have coped as well afterwards. (GR, Rapist-1)

We actually didn't have a debriefing [due to practical reasons.] I actually wanted to debrief with the other participants, and regret we couldn't. (TJ, The Man-E)

The Rapist players also needed debriefing, but one of them observed that most of the attention was in taking care of the victim. To that player, the feelings of guilt also made it hard to request attention. Another commented:

I also needed a hug, but there was nobody around that I really wanted a hug from, so I ended up protecting my space and keeping distance. (GR, Rapist-7)

Several informants mentioned that debriefing with an outsider was, or would have been valuable after the game. Many also found the research interviews a valuable opportunity to talk one more time about their experiences:

I'm really glad that I had this interview. [...] I found myself throughout the last few days continuously going back, and thinking about it. [...] It's been really good for me to be able to sit down and talk about these things, and also to think about [...] why this can be a good experience even if it's not a fun experience. (TJ, The Mother-B)

In this sense, the live interviews also served many informants in a fashion of debriefing discussed by Milgram [14] and recommended by e.g. Aronson [2]. Most email interviewees, however, noted that they had taken several breaks from the questionnaire, due to mental exhaustion.

### The Ethics and Dangers of Extreme Role-Play

Discussing the ethics of this kind of play would require much more space than is available here, but it suffices to say that especially *Gang Rape* has several rules that ensure that all participants are able to make as informed decision as possible about participation. The case of *The Journey* is more complicated, as the players only learn about the themes and intensity during play. None of the players found GR unethical, and some even found it valuable and important, encouraging this study.

The only thing that you felt when you finished it was "how can this happen", "how can this not be considered a crime", basically – even though [my character] chose not to do anything [to prosecute the rapists] because there is all the shame and the "this cannot happen to me" thinking. [...] I think the ethical problem comes when you refuse to deal with these kinds of issues, or do these kinds of games, due to "ethical considerations". (GR, Victim-10)

The serious stance and harsh style of these games were found to contribute to their ethicality:

**Victim:** And I think it's actually ethical, in the sense that it is [tough]. If we had played it and then been able to laugh at it, I think that would have been more unethical.

**Rapist:** Yes, that would've been horrible. (GR)

<sup>3</sup> In early informant recruitment, one person also declined an interview on *Fat Man Down*, due to a bad experience.

I think *The Journey* treated its kills with respect, and the whole tone of the game was very mature and respectful. (*TJ*, The Mother-C)

As the sample of the study is small, it is impossible to comment on the psychological safety of these games. *The Journey* certainly caused bad experiences, but were they harmful or merely unpleasant? The community emphasizes the need for proper debriefing. Looking for a similar precedent from social psychology, it should be stated that in a follow-up study to Milgram's experiment, an impartial medical examiner interviewed 40 of his participants afterwards, finding no evidence of traumatic reactions [14].

The controversial theme makes *GR* a stigmatizing game to play: In one instance the players even reported a social stigmatization similar to *victim blaming* from outsiders. Similarly, researching the game carries the risk of stigmatization for the author of this paper.

### CONCLUSION

The players studied in this paper belong to a subculture of gamers that is convinced of the value of non-fun games. They aim for intense experiences, regardless of their supposed emotional valence, and for them, the value of negative emotions is larger than just giving meaning to the subsequent positive twists. The fact that people enjoy things that they are not supposed to enjoy – as Apter [1] puts it – is not a revolutionary discovery. However, in the context of game studies, such enjoyment has received little attention.

As a cultural form, this kind of role-playing is not unlike movies such as *The Schindler's List*: perhaps unpleasant on a momentary and superficial level, but rewarding through experiences of learning, insight and accomplishment. The expressive power of horror, disgust, guilt and cognitive dissonance is used in a fashion not unlike splatter movies or *Fear Factor*. These games can be seen as social *bungee jumping*, as simulations of extreme experiences that can elicit physiological stress responses in a gratifying manner. Like extreme sports, they can also promote fellowship among participants.

*The Journey* and *Gang Rape* are direct and close descendants of role-playing games. In light of most game definitions [9], calling them “games” is suspect: Even though the interviewees systematically used the word, many did so with mixed feelings: *The Journey* was considered quite linear for a game – it is roughly as linear as *Lego Star Wars* – but the term was found more suitable for *Gang Rape*.

The question of gameness is secondary, however: The obvious conclusion is that the scope of playful experiences is broader than most models suggest [cf. 11], and that the digital games industry has a lot to learn in the art of gratifying through positive negative experiences.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was funded by a PhD grant from Finnish Cultural Foundation. I'm grateful to Vi åker jeep, Karl

Bergström, Jaakko Stenros, Annika Waern, Douglas Wilson, Jose Zagal and others for support and comments.

### REFERENCES

1. Apter, M. *The Dangerous Edge*. The Free Press, 1992.
2. Aronson, E. *The Social Animal*. Freeman, 1972.
3. Aronson, E., Wilson, T. & Akert, R. *Social Psychology*. Sixth edition. Pearson, 2005.
4. Festinger L. *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford University Press, 1985. First version 1957.
5. Fine, G. A. *Shared Fantasy. Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. University of Chicago Press, 1983.
6. Goffman, E. *Encounters: Two studies in the sociology of interaction*. Bobbs-Merrill, 1961.
7. Hopeametsä, H. 24 Hours in a Bomb Shelter. In Montola, M. & Stenros, J. (eds) *Playground Worlds*. Ropecon, 2008. [www.ropecon.fi/pw](http://www.ropecon.fi/pw)
8. Huizinga, J. *Homo Ludens. A Study of Play Element in Culture*. 1938, ref. Beacon Press translation, 1955.
9. Juul, J. *Half-Real*. MIT Press, 2005.
10. Koljonen, J. "I Could a Tale Unfold Whose Lightest Word Would Harrow up Thy Soul". In Montola, M. & Stenros, J. (eds) *Beyond Role and Play*. Ropecon, 2004.
11. Korhonen, H., Montola, M. & Arrasvuori, J. Understanding Playful User Experience Through Digital Games. *Proceedings of DPPI 2009 Conference*.
12. McGonigal, J. A Real Little Game: The Performance of Belief in Pervasive Play. *Proceedings of DiGRA 2003*.
13. Milgram, S. Behavioral Study of Obedience. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 67 (1963): 371-378.
14. Milgram, S. *Obedience to Authority. An Experimental View*. Harper, 1974.
15. Montola, M. The Invisible Rules of Role-Playing. In *International Journal of Role-Playing*. Vol. 1, 2008.
16. Montola M, Stenros J, Waern A (eds) *Pervasive Games: Theory and Design*. Morgan Kaufmann, 2009.
17. Pohjola, M. Autonomous Identities. In Montola, M. & Stenros, J. (eds) *Beyond Role and Play*. Ropecon, 2004.
18. Poremba C. Critical Potential on the Brink of the Magic Circle. In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference*.
19. Salen, K. & Zimmerman, E. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. MIT Press, 2004.
20. Wilson, D. & Sicart, M. Now It's Personal: On Abusive Game Design. Forthcoming in *Futureplay 2010*.
21. Wrigstad, T. The Nuts and Bolts of Jeepform. In Montola, M. & Stenros, J. (eds) *Playground Worlds*. Ropecon, 2008. [www.ropecon.fi/pw](http://www.ropecon.fi/pw)
22. Wrigstad, T. *This Might Sting a Little*. Lecture at ITU of Copenhagen, 2010. [www.vimeo.com/10030923](http://www.vimeo.com/10030923)